

Scholars' Commons: a Researcher-Oriented Library Space for 21st Century Scholarship

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In August 2012, IU Libraries-Bloomington announced plans to radically change the face of the Herman B Wells Library with the addition of the **Scholars' Commons**. Described as a "vibrant and active shared space in a central campus location," the Commons will occupy most of the first floor of the East Tower and be home to a suite of technologies and services that support new and traditional modes of scholarship.

I recently sat down with Julie Bobay, Associate Dean for Collection Development and Scholarly Communication and Chair of the Scholars' Commons Task Force, to discuss how the Commons will change library services at Indiana University.

SK: Can you describe the Scholars' Commons and the services it will provide?

JB: The Scholars' Commons will be a combination of renovated space and expanded services that together will provide a new level of support for researchers on the Bloomington campus. The Commons is really an attempt to consolidate expertise and help for faculty and students as they do their research.

The idea is that no matter where help exists in the university's bureaucracy, it can be found in some incarnation in the Scholars' Commons. For example, many kinds of library expertise will be offered in the space, such as advanced reference services with subject specialists, bibliographic management software help, and assistance with data curation, research project management, and choosing publishing options.

We will also have a big focus on both self-service and customized digitization services. In the space, we'll host consultations with experts in data analysis (text, video, and audio), metadata best practices for digital projects, and collaborations with other like initiatives such as SSRC.

SK: What's the difference between the Scholars' Commons and the Research Commons?

JB: The Research Commons was a phrase attached to planned building renovations and the repurposing of space in the libraries. Planning for the Research Commons had occurred over many years and in many different environments. As such, the Research Commons meant different things over time, depending on opportunities for funding and partnerships. The most recent iteration was a vision of renovated space throughout the entire East Tower of the Wells Library, a combination of collections and services on each floor that would work together to form a larger vision of library services.

We decided that the best way to proceed on the project would be to create a tangible example of what one part of the larger Research Commons idea could be. This example would help us to communicate with scholars and the university about the need for this type of facility more broadly conceived. And so, the Scholars' Commons came to be a piece of Research Commons both literally and figuratively, as a subset of a range of services envisioned for the larger Research Commons.

SK: Why is the Library the physical home of the Scholars' Commons? What makes Librarians/library space well-suited to host it?

JB: First, the library is by definition a gathering place and place for scholarship. These [Scholars' Commons] services fit in well with our intended mission. The Library is also an important and excellent campus space, of which there is great shortage. The Scholars' Commons also extends work that librarians have always done into a new age. It helps us to build on collections, including physical and new types of collections (data curation, text analysis, etc.) and extend them to be much more broadly conceived.

SK: Describe the role of the Faculty Advisory Board in shaping the Scholars' Commons.

JB: While it's too early to answer that precisely, we hope they will take a big role. The Faculty Advisory Board has met once so far and they are enthusiastic about the notion [of the Scholars' Commons] and are eager to engage with us. We do not yet have actual sketches of the space, concrete service plans, or confirmed events series that will likely happen in the space (such as trainings, workshops, and speaker series). The Board has indicated that they would love to be involved in such planning.

SK: What excites you most about the Scholars' Commons coming to life?

JB: For me, it's notion of finally—after all these years of planning, thinking, and struggling to make [the Research Commons] real and understanding that we're going to change but not knowing how—implementing the first step of our vision of the Commons, so all our users can see what the Libraries' space can do for scholarship.

SK: Has there been any opposition to the project from staff, faculty, or students?

JB: Amazingly, no. I think it's possible that we worked all of this out of our systems in all the previous plans we did [for the Research Commons]. There has been a surprising level of enthusiasm and anticipation among bystanders. Internally, within the Libraries, there has been a strong sense of excitement. It's been the only case of strategic planning that I can remember where people from all areas of the library have sought me out to ask how they can become involved.

SK: How will the Scholars' Commons change the current space in the East Tower?

JB: It will change the first floor completely and dramatically. The first floor, from the elevators to the Reference Reading Room wall, will be completely emptied and new structures and space will be erected in its place. These structures and spaces will include meeting rooms, a digitization lab, a new books area, an attractive and useful space for serious study, the IQ Wall and other similar technologies, an ALF "restricted materials" reading area, and public workstations. All of this will be cemented by and will surround a critical component: the reference desk.

SK: Is there anything else you'd like to share with other IU Librarians about the Scholars' Commons?

JB: One thing has become clear to me: a unique challenge faced by this project is trying to design space with a specific purpose in mind for what is perhaps the most public and commonly-owned space on campus. The first floor of Wells Library is open by definition and shared and valued by a lot of different constituencies on campus and in Bloomington.

To date, our models [for planning the Scholars' Commons] have been things like academic Digital Humanities centers and, here on campus, the Social Science Research Center. But where our project differs is that those other spaces are single-purpose spaces with target audiences and distinct missions, and ours is interdisciplinary and multi-purpose. The targeted, defined spaces will exist in floors 2-10, supposing we move forward with the Research Commons after this. Because the Scholars' Commons will be on the first floor, we will combine many functionalities into a really great shared space. So, this has been a major challenge for our project.

The Scholars' Commons is tentatively scheduled to open between January and March 2014. As Julie and I, along with the rest of the Scholars' Commons Task Force, continue planning for the Commons, we encourage you to share your questions and feedback by emailing bobay@indiana.edu.