

The Research Commons: A Concept for the Wells Library East Tower

Within the long process of research, from discovery to dissemination, scholars rely on institutional support. Indiana University, committed to its dual mission of advancing research and teaching, now has an unparalleled opportunity to aid research in a way that positions the university at the forefront of its peers and as a leader in the nation.

Creation of the Research Commons in the Herman B Wells Library will offer support—in one central campus location—to faculty and graduate students at any point in the complex research process. By assembling groups and expertise now distributed throughout the Bloomington campus, the Research Commons will blend technology with traditional resources to serve as a center for a wide range of scholarly activities.

Perhaps most important, faculty and graduate students from all disciplines will know that whatever their research needs, they can start at the Research Commons. They will no longer have to determine where to go on campus or whom to ask even the most basic questions, from “How do I get started?” or “How do I digitize and archive this?” to “How do I copyright my work?”. By providing a space for collaboration and information-sharing, the Research Commons will help faculty and graduate students benefit from the tools and techniques already put in place by their colleagues in other disciplines. Moreover, the collective expertise of librarians and technologists will help them realize the true potential of the vast information resources of Indiana University.

The Research Commons will leverage three established strengths:

Expertise

Perhaps the greatest promise of the Research Commons will be its ability to draw together many layers of expertise in one location. Services provided by units now on campus—and other services yet to be introduced—will be combined in a singular destination. Researchers will benefit from a transparent delivery of services, whether they are looking for guidance in reference and research services, metadata creation, development of a proposal or how to manage an award, statistical analysis, or one of many other areas essential to their work. Librarians, technologists, faculty advisors, consultants, designers, and developers from many campus units will all contribute to this effort. Success will depend on the leadership of the IUB Libraries, UITS and OVPR, and build on their longstanding partnership.

Expertise will also be shared among researchers. The final report of the IU Cyberinfrastructure Research Taskforce points to the value of bringing together researchers who may be unaware of the tools and techniques used by scholars in other disciplines. “Chemists and physicists struggle with the complexity of national cyberinfrastructure efforts, such as the TeraGrid,” the report states, “while other scholars wrestle with the complexities of evolving desktop tools.” As a place for community-building, the Research Commons will address the need for scholars to interrelate, both within and across the conventional boundaries of their disciplines.

The Research Commons will increase efficiencies not only for researchers who may value a central point for sharing information, but also for the disparate units of a complex university, where one unit often recreates or duplicates what is offered by another.

Infrastructure

Just as scientists need laboratories, researchers in every discipline need environments designed and equipped to meet their scholarly needs. The Herman B Wells Library offers essential space in a prime campus location. The entire East Tower of the Wells Library, with floor space greater than 11 football fields, will be dedicated to the Research Commons.

Technology will be an essential and conspicuous component of the Research Commons, with equipment necessary to support a wide range of scholarly activity. The Research Commons will provide a scholars laboratory that will serve as a resource for digital media production and archiving. Other dedicated space will accommodate high-performance computing, statistical and mathematical services and software, database support, and visualization. Collaborative technologies that allow people separated by hundreds or thousands of miles to interact as naturally as if they were together in a meeting room are now of genuine value to scholars in any discipline.

Key to the success of the Research Commons will be balancing the space for active collaboration and computing with quiet space essential for reading or contemplation. A redesigned reading room on the first floor, for example, will provide a well-lit inspirational environment for individual work. Centers for research expertise will be integrated on floors with their complementary collections. Shared space will encourage community-building within and across disciplines. Seminar rooms will offer space for faculty to form and develop ideas.

A suite of online services will accompany these physical spaces. By accessing information and services through an online portal, scholars will not have to be in the Wells Library to experience many of the benefits of the Research Commons.

Information Resources

A research library—the traditional locus for scholars to interact among the collections they value—can offer similar opportunities in a digital age. The rich collections of the IUB Libraries will be a central feature of the Research Commons. Priority will be given to services and spaces in direct support of print and digital collections. The Wells Library is home to the books, journals, microfiche, films, and other materials that researchers, particularly in the humanities and social sciences, rely upon for their scholarly needs.

In many disciplines, electronic collections and data sets are essential. Government statistics, now available online, can be sorted and manipulated in ways not possible just a few years ago. Software, including IU-licensed software, will be broadly available. Partnering units will offer their own specialized databases, programs, and information resources.

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By investing in this concept for the Research Commons in the Wells Library, Indiana University now has the opportunity to address key needs voiced by its research faculty, leverage established strengths, and increase organizational efficiencies. Creation of the Research Commons will advance the university's core mission and signal a major commitment to researchers in all disciplines.