

Queen's Learning Commons: Phase One Success and Phase Two Funding Needs

The Vision

The Queen's Learning Commons (QLC) will be at the heart of Queen's exceptional learning environment. Students will benefit from the collaboration of key academic services that foster creative inquiry and the skills needed for lifelong learning in our information-rich society. Centrally located in the largest of the University's libraries, and open until 2 a.m. in peak periods, the QLC will provide accessible, comfortable space for collaborative group work and individual study. Over 150 desktop computers and dozens of laptops will provide access to information and communications technologies that are essential in the modern learning environment. The services in the QLC will help students with the entire learning process, from getting the most out of lectures and readings to formulating research questions, finding information, writing papers and presenting their knowledge.

The QLC will be a partnership between the Library, IT Services, Learning Strategies Development, Special Readers' Services and The Writing Centre. In bringing together these separate units, the QLC will build services from a student perspective and break down traditional departmental boundaries. Instead of navigating the campus to find different kinds of academic help, students will simply go to the QLC. And while honing one type of skill at the QLC, they will also have the opportunity to acquire others. Staff will refer students to other partner units as the need arises and work together to coordinate innovative workshops, collaborative projects and individual instruction. As well, the proximity and visibility of services will raise student awareness of learning opportunities.

Each of the partner groups involved in the QLC has a reputation for delivering excellent service to students. The Library has been rated very highly in numerous student satisfaction surveys, including top rank for medium-sized universities in the 2005 Globe & Mail's University Report Card. IT Services is known for its responsive help desk service, which provides support for thousands of Queen's students seeking advice on the myriad of information technology issues they may encounter. Special Readers' Services consistently receives a high rating for all of its services in surveys distributed by the campus Disability Services Office, and has been the recipient of award and grant money from various provincial and national funding bodies. The Writing Centre offers a comprehensive program of credit courses, workshops, and one-to-one consultations that are geared to students across the curriculum, at every level of undergraduate and graduate studies.



Learning Strategies Development has been providing learning support and study skills to students at Queen's for more than 30 years. In developing the Queen's Learning Commons, these partners will be collaborating and building on their individual successes to enhance the academic experience of Queen's students.

Phase One Success

A Master Plan for the Queen's Learning Commons physical facility in Stauffer Library was approved by Queen's Campus Planning and Development Committee in 2004. The Master Plan has all the elements needed to support the overall vision, including new learning facilities, co-location of all partner units, and a central service point. With this in hand, it was decided that a phased approach would work best, both in terms of funding and staging the degree of organizational change implied in the vision. Phase One of the Master Plan was completed in Fall 2005.

Phase One is a first step towards achieving the vision of collaboration of key academic services and an enriched learning environment. Learning Strategies Development and the Writing Centre, formerly housed in non-academic facilities far from the Library, were relocated to the QLC as of September 1st, 2005. This is a much better use of prime learning space: these two functions occupy areas that previously housed microform cabinets and a staff workroom, both of which are now integrated into more appropriate spaces in the Library. Phase One did not include the physical changes that will transform the information and technical support services of the Library and IT Services; however all the units located in the QLC have found their services enhanced by new collaborative activities.

The partners' first major collaboration has been the QLC Student Assistant program, in which students from a variety of academic backgrounds introduce their peers to the services in the QLC. They help their fellow students get started with research, solve technical difficulties and inform them of programs for developing successful learning and writing strategies. They are a key referral point to the expert staff in each of the QLC partner groups. As well, they inform QLC staff about student needs and provide valuable input for program development.

For students used to studying in Stauffer Library prior to this year, the most visible improvements are the newly designed study areas with increased group seating and additional computers. The state-of-the-art desktop computers are on large workspaces that allow students to work together, and there are dozens of laptops available for loan. The intention of the Master Plan design was to create a vibrant mix of computers, study tables and soft seating and to avoid the sterile feeling of a computer laboratory. Phase One has succeeded in meeting this vision. Still missing, however, are an electronic classroom for interactive instruction and more study rooms to meet the demand for group work.



Ask students how they like the new QLC, and they use the word “awesome.” In just the first few months of this first phase, the QLC has been well established as a vibrant, welcoming, learning environment. One piece of evidence is the sheer volume of activity: the number of people coming to Stauffer Library in October was 25% higher than the same month in the previous year. As well, there is evidence that the co-location of services is raising students’ awareness of the learning opportunities available to them. For example, the Writing Centre is finding that students working on papers in the QLC will think to ask for a quick bit of advice. The Learning Strategies Development outreach program is seeing more students dropping in for help. The Library’s Information Desk and the IT Support Centre report significant increases in the number and complexity of students’ questions.

Phase Two

Phase One is an excellent beginning for the QLC, but more is needed to achieve all the elements of the original vision. Until all the partners are relocated according to the Master Plan, and there are further changes to student workspaces, the full potential of this collaborative learning environment will not be met.

The elements of the Master Plan still to be completed are described below. These could be grouped in a variety of ways and approached in several stages, depending on available funding.

- *Co-locate IT Support Centre walk-in help with Library walk-in help, at a new central help desk.* Both the Library and IT Services handle matters related to the information technologies that are essential in education today. Currently, the services are divided in ways that are not always intuitive to students. By working together at a central help desk, staff will build a joint knowledge base that will serve students better. To achieve this, a new desk will be constructed at the hub of the QLC, and the call centre and second-level support portion of the IT Support Centre will move to renovated space in the lower level. The new desk will serve as the central service point for the QLC as a whole, and the QLC Student Assistants will be included in the staffing mix.
- *Add Special Readers’ Services, in the highly accessible space vacated by the IT Support Centre.* Special Readers’ Services is a very successful, nationally-recognized program offering multiple services to students with disabilities to ensure that their information needs are met and they can successfully complete their studies. It includes an Adaptive Technology Lab with assistive devices and technologies. It should move from its





current location in Douglas Library not only because it has outgrown those facilities but also because students will benefit from the integration with other services of the QLC.

- *Add an Electronic Classroom.* In Phase One, an existing seminar room has been equipped with laptops that can be brought out for hands-on workshops on electronic resources and information technologies. This room is in high demand for all kinds of workshops, not just ones involving computers, and it is expected that the demand will continue to rise as new programs evolve in the QLC. The demand for hands-on computer classes is growing, as faculty work with librarians to incorporate information literacy into their courses. The electronic classroom will provide a full suite of software related to students' coursework, including web authoring software and other multimedia tools.
- *Add more group study rooms.* Many course assignments involve group work, and students have requested more spaces where this can take place. Phase One saw the addition of several new study rooms, but they are already in high demand by students using the services of the Writing Centre and Learning Strategies Development.
- *Consolidate IT Services, in renovated space on the lower level.* Students have a range of needs related to the computers they own, and a question that starts out in the IT Support Centre in the QLC may be referred to other parts of IT Services, including the hardware support group in Dupuis Hall, or vice versa. Combining these two service areas will save students from being bounced between buildings. As well, it will make better use of staff resources, to provide additional support for students. The IT Sales & Service group will be located with the staff who provide the second-level support of the IT Support Centre.
- *Develop the lower level of the QLC and data services.* The renovations needed to consolidate IT Services in the QLC will also bring improvements to the Maps, Data & Government Information Centre, already located on the lower level. This centre provides excellent specialized research support, but more students would benefit if it were more visible, and services would improve if the staff currently distributed throughout the lower level were brought together into one area. Renovations will include improvements to study space and the data computer lab. Plans for future service enhancements include the provision of expert advice on data gathering, statistical analysis and presentation, a service currently lacking at Queen's.

- *Further enhance the entry level of the QLC.* According to the Master Plan, many study tables should move to prime window space and a more collaborative office arrangement should be created for librarians and staff in the Learning & Research Services unit. With the reconfiguration of the floor completed, the architect has recommended new carpeting and new ceiling treatment that will provide effective wayfinding, lighting and acoustics.

Budget

The total budget for construction, furnishings and equipment for Phase One was \$1,583,000. Of this total, \$1,300,000 was provided by the Library and \$283,000 was provided by the University's Renovations & Alterations fund and the Office of the Vice-Principal Academic. The project came in on budget.

The remainder of the work needed to complete the Master Plan is estimated to be \$4,800,000. It is anticipated that completion of the remaining construction will be accomplished in stages, as funding allows.

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