Chapter 11
Beyond Physical Space:
Implementing a Virtual Learning Commons at an Urban Community College

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The administration, faculty, and staff at Hostos Community College strive to improve students' computer and information literacy skills while meeting the distinct needs of Millennials. In 2007, Hostos initiated a project to reconfigure physical spaces throughout the campus (areas in the Library, Academic Learning Center, Educational Technology Office, and Academic Computing Center) and establish a unified virtual space, creating a cross-divisional entity: the Information Learning Commons (ILC). This case discusses the formation of the ILC Committee, the group that envisions and manages physical ILC spaces' renovation and also develops virtual spaces; the planning and implementation of physical learning commons spaces; the web applications that unify the ILC; the benefits of reducing duplication and optimizing resource utilization; Hostos' current challenges with the ILC concept; and finally, the imminent expansion of virtual commons spaces. Hostos is an exemplar in how collaboration can creatively maximize resources through technology to meet students' needs.

ORGANIZATION BACKGROUND

Located in the South Bronx, and part of the City University of New York (CUNY), Hostos Community College serves students from diverse ethnic, racial, cultural, and linguistic backgrounds, particularly Hispanics and African Americans who make up nearly 80% of the student demographic. To date, enrollment has surpassed 6,500 students and is at a record high. Since classrooms are increasingly at capacity, the college has had to reconfigure scheduling and use of space to accommodate the unprecedented enrollment.

The organizational hierarchy of the institution includes a President's cabinet and is comprised of five divisions: Academic Affairs, Administration & Finance, Student Development & Enrollment Management, Institutional Advancement, and Continuing Education & Workforce Development.

The administration, faculty, and staff of the college—situated in one of the poorest congressional districts in the country—understand the dire need to improve students' computer and information literacy skills, requisite for lifelong success. Hostos is committed to meeting the unique needs of Millennials, a demographic cohort that increasingly represents our student body. A dramatic student population age shift occurred in the past 10 years; over 60% of current students are under 25 years of age. Having embraced ubiquitous technology at a young age, these students have a different mindset about technology and collaboration than previous generations. A recent Pew Internet report describes the Millennials:

They are history's first 'always connected' generation. Steeped in digital technology and social media, they treat their multi-tasking hand-held gadgets almost like a body part—for better and worse. More than eight-in-ten say they sleep with a cell phone glowing by the bed, poised to disgorge texts, phone calls, emails, songs, news, videos, games and wake-up jingles. (Pew Research Center, 2010, p. 1)

Despite limited physical and financial resources, Hostos is prioritizing a technology-enabled information learning commons approach to meeting its institutional needs under the direction of the Information Learning Commons (ILC). The concept was sparked in 2006, when the then Chief Librarian observed other libraries' success upon transforming their reference areas into Information Commons areas.

Prior to the creation of the ILC Committee, each venue that would later be incorporated into the ILC was managed independently. There was scant communication and collaboration among each area's respective managers and staff. This dearth of collaboration resulted in a duplication of efforts. For example, the Library, EdTech, the Academic Computing Center (ACC), and the Hostos Academic Learning Center (HALC) each had their own online calendar that was maintained and developed

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