

Chapter 6

Scholarly Learning Commons

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ABSTRACT

First, this chapter analyzes the theoretical research on the effects of Scholarly Learning Commons (SLC) in China from the perspectives of concept, instance analysis, and ideas for construction. The results can be summarized in the following three stages of SLC development in China: preliminarily integrated stage, double fusion stage, and highly integrated stage. With this structure and the concept of being “user-centered,” this chapter concludes that Chinese academic libraries mainly adopt two methods of building an SLC: independent construction by libraries, and joint construction with other units of the university. Finally, this chapter demonstrates construction strategies, elements, and service in SLCs, and it shows five typical cases of SLC construction in Chinese academic libraries.

INTRODUCTION

This chapter argues that, at present, the pace and levels of SLC construction in Chinese academic libraries are inconsistent. The theoretical study of SLC is very hot; however, in practice, SLCs are still in an early exploratory stage and have not yet achieved a breakthrough. Meanwhile, there are only a few academic libraries which have provided high-level SLC service to their users. This chapter aims to illustrate the current situation of SLC development in China and point out methods and strategies for SLC construction.

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BACKGROUND

Originating in European and American academic libraries, a commons is a user-centered service model which aims to provide a one-stop collaborative learning and research environment. Following the construction of the Information Arcade at the University of Iowa Libraries in 1992, China introduced the Information Commons (IC) (Ren & Sheng, 2008), which aims to cultivate information literacy and promote learning, communication, collaboration, and research (Xu, 2010). The Information Commons continued to develop into other models, such as Knowledge Commons (KC), Scholarly Commons (SC), Academic Commons (AC) (W. Wang & P. Wang, 2011), Learning Commons (LC), and Research Commons (RC), among others (Ren & Sheng, 2008).

The development and prevalence of all forms of commons owes to the popularity of constructivism in teaching and learning in higher education, and the rapid development of information technology in the 21st century (Ruan, 2013). Constructivism, put forward by Piaget, Kernberg, Sternberg, Katz, Vogotsky, et al., emphasizes that knowledge does not objectively exist; instead, it is obtained in certain circumstances with help, by using necessary learning materials and meaning construction (Ren & Sheng, 2008). Scholars in China introduced constructivism to their own country and apply it in the educational field; they study the principles, procedures, and content of the teaching design, and the innovation of traditional teaching methods under the environment of constructivism (He, 1997a, 1997b, 1998). In this way, they aim to transform higher education teaching modes in China from a teacher-centered knowledge instruction model to a student-centered knowledge construction model. At the same time, with the thorough integration of information technology in higher education, great changes are taking place in the information acquisition and learning methods of library users, in addition to the evolution of their library service needs. Academic libraries in China have adapted to these changes by introducing the theory of the commons in the 21st century. These libraries actively change service mechanisms and functions, build commons, and develop and innovate the commons in practice, so as to satisfy diversified user demands of library resources and services and offer strong support for teaching, scientific research, and talent cultivation.

INTRODUCTION TO THE RESEARCH AND PRACTICE OF LEARNING COMMONS DEVELOPMENT AT ACADEMIC LIBRARIES IN CHINA

The user services and function focus of each library commons are different; for example, an LC is a student-centered service which aims to meet user demand for collaborative learning, while an SC, AC, or RC emphasize building a cooperative research environment for researchers. Despite these differences, the primary reason that academic libraries choose to construct a commons is to adapt to the changing environment of teaching, learning, and scientific research at universities. Their common, core construction goal is teacher- and student-centeredness, while their general construction method is to integrate and allocate a variety of resources (staff, literary information, virtual space, facilities, etc.) according to user demand. From the perspective of current development status, components of all commons are almost identical in that they all include a physical space, virtual space, and supporting environment, among other elements, in addition to a common patron base of university instructors, undergraduate students, and graduate students. Moreover, their functions are increasingly overlapping. In the future, the commons will not only integrate learning support service with traditional library services, but it will also strengthen research support services. In terms of future development, all kinds of commons will tend to

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