

Learning Commons: Creating a Collaborative Learning Environment To Enact our Mission and Emphasize Student Success

Description of your QEP idea (600 words or less):

This proposal calls for the development of a Learning Commons (LC) within Davis Library that will be home to centralized student success services in order to leverage and expand existing resources. The LC will serve traditional undergraduate day students as well as address unmet needs of evening college students, graduate students, and students enrolled in online courses. It will feature dedicated tutoring space, house the Communication Resource Center (CRC), include small, private rooms for academic coaching and consultations, and provide other flexible space to accommodate success seminars and interactive learning opportunities. Additionally, the LC will feature enhanced technology and serve as a single contact point for students seeking academic assistance, whether face-to-face or virtually. Through enhancing and consolidating existing resources, locating them centrally, extending them across all academic terms as well as to online, graduate, and evening college students, the LC will establish a robust and flexible resource committed to student success.

Academic support services directly correlate with retention, higher GPAs, and graduation rates across undergraduate populations (Grillo and Leist, 2013). While the LC will offer academic support to all Samford students, it may be particularly helpful in promoting academic success and retaining key groups. Samford currently ranks 15th out of 16 peer institutions in six-year graduation rates for Pell Grant recipients. Samford's graduation rate for Pell Grant recipients is 46.5%; the average rate among peer institutions is 67.9% (Nichols 2015). Tutoring, especially peer tutoring, has a rich history of positively impacting student success, and that success has now been shown in retaining students who enter the university as undeclared majors (Reinheimer and McKenzie 2011). Library use correlates with higher first semester GPAs and greater retention for first-year, first-time undergraduates (Soria, Fransen, and Nackerud 2013). The LC will integrate tutoring efforts in the library to promote collaboration among tutors, library employees, and other support resources. This consolidation and expansion of resources within the Davis Library will provide students a seamless experience in accessing key services that promote success.

Samford has already established a foundation of academic support for at risk students and students enrolled in high-risk courses through tracking, referrals, and tutoring. Moving to an LC model will provide greater access and more opportunities than are currently offered, including small group supplemental instruction in addition to the existing one-on-one sessions. This dedicated tutoring space will raise visibility of the services and make it more accessible in a central campus location with the technology to allow online check-in and access to electronic resources

The CRC currently offers writing, speaking, and critical reading support to Samford students. Research supports a strong connection between writing center attendance and

retention and GPA, especially for the top students (Yeats, et al., 2010; Bielinska-Kwapisz, 2015). Moving to a co-located model would enable the CRC to expand the number and types of tutors, to transition a student to additional resources, and to better address the needs of existing and growing populations, namely online and graduate students. The LC will include face-to-face as well as online (asynchronous and synchronous) tutoring for writing, speaking, and critical reading, and may potentially offer virtual content tutoring, as need arises. The LC will be able to leverage the library's live chat for all tutoring services.

Finally, the LC will also provide space for CDC-trained peer mentors to assist students with writing resumes and interviewing effectively. The CDC's professional staff will utilize the flexible learning space to offer seminars or workshops to promote Samford students' post-graduation success.

How does your idea make a meaningful impact on learning? (200 words or less)

An LC in Davis Library will emphasize Samford's strategic commitment to student success. We have already seen growth in the number of students utilizing tutoring and academic support services over the past few years; by consolidating tutoring, academic coaching, and the CRC into a central location that is the nexus of learning on campus, we can increase visibility and make the services more accessible. This change enables us to secure better technology, share resources, and expand services for upperclassmen, graduate students, and online students. Tutoring, especially in writing and communication, has a long history in impacting student retention and academic success. Writing centers and peer-tutoring centers that have relocated to LCs in libraries note dramatic increases in patronage, from 40-100% (WCenter listserv; personal interviews; Dechert, et al. 2014).

Writing skills are critical for success in online courses because much of the interaction is through writing. Additionally, many graduate, online, and evening college students may feel uncertain about their writing skills because they may not have written in academic environments for a while (Reilly, et al., 2012). Supporting their requests for feedback and helping them develop more polished writing skills are important to promote their success.

How does your idea inspire broad participation? (200 words or less)

Creation of the LC will foster collaboration among several existing departments, such as the ASC, CRC, CDC, and Davis Library, along with other academic units. It will serve the entire student population – both undergraduate and graduate, in person and over the web. It will utilize highly trained peer tutors along with existing university staff to serve students in person and online (O'Kelly, Garrson, Merry and Torreano 2015). Student use of the LC will be tracked utilizing EAB's SSC Campus platform; retention and academic success will be tracked longitudinally and assessed at the institutional level to determine impact on GPA, retention, and employment.

Combining these services will promote collaboration and enable the consolidation of tools

to track students and assess progress in terms of GPAs, retention, student involvement, and utilization of services. Mentoring and peer support, which will be instrumental in the LC, are closely associated with retention and academic success (Johnson & Romanoff, 1999; Yarzedjian et al., 2007). The central location and robust combination of student services will raise visibility and on-campus use, and the increase in technology will extend existing services to online learners.

How does your idea build on an institutional strength or address a weakness? (300 words or less)

Samford has demonstrated a strong commitment to student success over the past few years with the establishment of the ASC, the growth of the CRC, and moving the HelpDesk to Davis Library. The LC will build on this strength by developing and sharing resources in a single location. This co-location of resources and services will be more cost effective, serve more students, and have greater impact on student learning and success.

Many of the ASC's services have been added or expanded without any increase in funding, and the current academic coaching program is being piloted using professional staff volunteers who are assisting through a release from their primary duties on campus. This collaboration highlights one of the key strengths that has led to the ASC's success in expanding and launching programs. Limited financial resources and staffing as well as the lack of dedicated physical space are critical obstacles that prevent a more robust ASC response to students' needs.

Similarly, the CRC is being asked to meet the demands of an expanding and increasingly diverse student body. In the past five years, Samford has recruited more students who are English language learners, has reorganized and prioritized its Evening College, and has created a College of Health Sciences that enrolls more graduate students, more non-traditional students, and more online learners. Each of these populations requires more specialized support and highly trained tutors.

The current space limitations as well as limited resources for the identified services are significant weaknesses the LC will address, even as it builds on the strengths of established programs and departments and strives to serve all students.

How will you measure the outcomes of your idea? (300 words or less)

Student utilization of resources is already being tracked, but centralization within the LC will allow for more efficient and standardized assessment. We anticipate growth in the number of students served given increases in enrollment, a 36% increase in door counts for the library this fall, a 67% increase in CRC appointments since 2011-2012, and a 110% increase since 2013 in referrals made to the ASC for students needing academic support. Training for all peer interactions to ensure a standard experience and data gathering would provide a range of assessment options and measures.

Our EAB SSC software uses predicative analytics to track patterns and student behavior that leads to success. Due to the current limitations of space, ASC tutoring cannot utilize the kiosk feature that allows students to "check in" for appointments, thus capturing data that

would go directly into the SSC Campus platform. Utilization of tutoring by students will be visible to the ASC and analyzed by EAB; advisors and faculty will be able to see which students access LC services. We expect an increase in the number of students using the services, more students being successful in high-risk courses, and higher satisfaction among faculty and advisors whose students are more successful. Furthermore, the data gathered and reviewed will allow for regular and timely refinement and enhancement in the services as identified in the data and feedback.

Finally, performance ratings and job satisfaction surveys of staff and peer tutors will also be used. CRC post-appointment surveys indicate that 97% of students agree to feeling more confident about their assignments; 77% strongly agree. Surveys and use of peer tutoring and mentoring services should reflect in improvements in retention, graduation rates, and GPA for each student group served: graduate/undergraduate, f2f/online, evening college.

How does your idea complement our strategic plan? (200 words or less)

Student learning is a cornerstone of Samford's strategic plan; the Learning Commons focuses directly on that key value. Writing centers, communication centers, academic tutoring programs, and libraries have well-established traditions and impacts on student learning and retention. A Learning Commons that builds on those traditions and adds essential resources through collaborative efforts with a central point of service stand to leverage all to the greatest impact. Thus, a broad-focused Learning Commons that features flexibility for meeting learning needs of our increasing and increasingly diverse student body will assist Samford in enhancing student learning.