LEARNING COMMONS: A Dynamic and Collaborative Environment of Student Learning and Academic Support

Project Proposal for Consideration

University of Maine System
Strategic Investment Fund

Submitted by

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STRATEGIC INVESTMENT FUND APPLICATION
UNIVERSITY OF MAINE SYSTEM

University of Southern Maine
Selma Botman, President

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Project Name: LEARNING COMMONS: A Dynamic and Collaborative Environment of Student Learning and Academic Support

Project Purpose and Overview

The University of Southern Maine requests $214,700 from the Strategic Investment Fund to support the implementation of a Learning Commons concept on its Portland and Gorham campuses. At its core, a Learning Commons is a group of partners providing collaborative services that have a positive impact upon student learning. The Commons is not just a physical space, but rather a service philosophy. Many universities are adopting a Learning Commons model, although the scope of the model differs from institution to institution. Some examples of partners include library, technology and computing, academic advising, writing centers, math tutoring, resume critique services, and media technologies. At USM, the Learning Commons concept is one of a vibrant community of learning and academic support. It will build upon existing successes, increase efficiencies and partnerships among departments, centralize academic support services, and become an extension of the classroom that fosters a culture of learning at our institution.

Universities must cultivate a culture of change based upon the needs of users. Rapid changes in technology, how information is accessed, and the ways students research and use information demand that we reassess everything that we do in the library, including how we meet the complex learning needs of students. The Information Commons model, which merges library and computer services, has been offered at the Gorham and Lewiston Auburn Library locations for the last three years. In the Google Age, as reported by one study, 87% of college students never reach beyond Google to use the academic resources provided by their college library, in large part due to the lack of a required information literacy component across the curriculum to ground students. The present Library Information Commons program supports the required
General Education requirements of an information literacy component, while teaching upwards of 150 classroom hours per year with 3,000 students. This and the library-taught FRS 197 class serve as extensions to walk-up “reference” or research skills provided at the information desk. The Learning Commons will marry staff and services within each physical location at both Portland and Gorham while extending related services to the classroom and individual students and faculty members. This represents a continued evolution of the integration of services for students.

While the establishment of the Information Commons has been well received, a student-centered focus demands more technology-rich services and inviting spaces, in which they can work individually and collaboratively while receiving the range of assistance and services that they need to be successful. This opportunity comes with the USM Student Success Center initiative, which provides students with academic advising, career exploration, basic learning strategies, and personalized goal setting and referral. The staff members of the Student Success Center take an approach of “positive intrusiveness” with the students, using a strengths-based framework to help the students learn about themselves and be intentional with their time and decisions at USM. From these ideas, the concept of a USM Learning Commons was born. The transformation of spaces in Glickman Library and Gorham Library from an Information Commons into a Learning Commons would not only reflect the continued evolution of USM Libraries into student-centered services and spaces, but would represent a significant step for USM to present its students with quality facilities and integrated services.

The academic reorganization of the university provides an opportune time to design academic assistance resources that support the work of the faculty and further student success. Providing students with a variety of academic support services along with assistance in information resources and creating new academic social spaces within the Library is consistent with national library trends as well as the USM Strategic Plan. The model includes the creation of collaborative group study/instruction spaces enhanced with technology. The cross training of Learning Commons and USM Library staff will allow for intentional guidance of scholarly research among students. Another benefit for the students and faculty is the movement towards the centralized access to academic support resources, such as tutoring for math and writing, within an environment of dynamic and multidisciplinary learning. Building upon the Information Commons as we move further along the student-centered learning continuum, students will be able to utilize the technologies that support their learning in multiple subject areas, and will receive guidance on how to use these resources. Lastly, the Learning Commons model provides students with an opportunity to be part of a learning community that spans academic disciplines, affiliation with any student group, or personal demographics. As indicated in the student success and persistence research, one of the greatest predictors of student success is whether a student makes a connection outside of the classroom. Learning Commons becomes a natural place for this kind of connection to take root.

A critical component of learning assistance at any institution is the offering of tutoring in math and writing. However, faculty report that these services are greatly underutilized at USM, and are also fragmented in the way that they are offered, managed, and promoted to students. Currently, students seeking tutoring services in writing and math can do so at the Learning Center on the Portland campus by calling or stopping by to schedule an appointment. Tutoring
for 100-level math courses and above is offered through the Math Department on the Portland campus, although some of this is offered through the Learning Center as well. On the Gorham campus, math tutoring is offered in the Math Department, and writing assistance is coordinated and offered through the Gorham Library. USM has begun to offer online math and writing assistance, but no more than a few hours per week, which are not advertised to students due to the limited availability. If students require tutoring within any discipline other than math and writing, they are instructed to go to their faculty or the corresponding academic department. These services are even more scarce and sporadic than the math and writing assistance. To summarize, some of the obstacles for students to access tutoring services at USM include lack of student awareness of the services, the limited hours and availability of these services, and the ongoing challenge of students somehow feeling “pathologized” by requesting tutoring services.

The Learning Commons concept is designed to provide direct assistance to students, and mirrors the “working with the whole student” dynamic of the Student Success Centers that were created at USM in August of 2009. By incorporating the current tutoring offered through the Learning Center and the Math Department programmatically and physically into the Learning Commons spaces, we seek to increase access and capacity while normalizing the notion of receiving academic support. Tutoring becomes one of many “learning enhancements” available through Learning Commons. Students become partners in their own learning through a variety of modalities, including individual and group offerings. Individually, students will be able to schedule tutoring meetings with tutors that receive training and oversight by the Learning Commons staff. The coordination of tutoring services becomes much more centralized, enhanced by an online scheduling software program that we are requesting as part of this proposal. Students will be able to select the subject for which they are seeking assistance, the location, and the time, as well as whether it will be delivered in a face-to-face or online modality. With USM Libraries being staffed at later hours then the existing Learning Center, students will have more flexibility of how and when they access tutoring services. Building the infrastructure for more centralized math and writing assistance would allow USM to begin to move towards the support and coordination of tutoring from other disciplines, which in turn increases student access to academic support.

A growing number of USM students speak English as their second language, and tutoring for these students has been offered through the Learning Center. Last year, tutoring for English as a Second Language (ESL) students totaled 271 hours for fall 2009, and 263 hours for the spring 2010 semester. The ESL tutoring not only provides support across subject areas, but serves as a place where the students can connect with each other and find community. According to the results of an ESL tutoring survey, approximately half of the survey respondents said they had no specific class assignment but they went anyway for tutoring to learn something useful. 56% of respondents wished they had more tutor time. The establishment of Learning Commons will improve service to these students through the expansion of tutoring hours, the access to staff who have developed expertise across disciplines, the availability of a space enhanced with multiple learning resources, and the opportunity to connect with a larger number of students, faculty, and staff within the Learning Commons facilities. This supports the University’s diversity goals.

The reach of Learning Commons extends beyond its walls through outreach and programming efforts across campus. Currently, the staff of USM Libraries and the Student Success Center
Learning Commons offer workshops on a range of topics related to academic success; these include information literacy, time management, study skills, note taking, and test preparation. Learning Commons will become a clearinghouse for these workshops to be offered in the classroom setting, residence halls, the Learning Commons locations, and other campus venues. Partnering with faculty will allow Learning Commons to create a schedule of programmatic offerings that meet the most pertinent learning needs of specific courses or disciplines. With the technology enhancements and cross training associated with this model, workshops can be offered electronically through the Virtual Learning Commons, allowing access to individual students, faculty, and student organizations.

The strong focus upon technology allows us to enhance not only information literacy, but also media literacy. Today’s students are producing videos, audio projects and recordings as part of their academic learning, and these skills are becoming more of an expectation for candidates to be competitive in the job market. The building of a media production room becomes another service point, one that complements the use of other technologies in the learning process. The Learning Commons staff will be trained on how to use software programs such as Audacity and Camtasia. This becomes a hub of technology-based learning, assistance, and production that spans across academic disciplines. A partnership has been identified to help fund this aspect of the Learning Commons model, as USM has secured grant funding to support faculty in the creation of audio and video files for the enhancement of lectures, Blackboard components, and online instruction. Additional SIF funding would allow us to create the physical space and incorporate this programmatically into the broader dynamic learning environment of Learning Commons.

In addition to the collaboration with multiple University offices, partnership with our student staff will be an essential component of the Learning Commons model. Currently, most of the tutoring services offered through the various campus departments are undergraduate or graduate students. All tutors hired by the Learning Center must complete a 20-hour certification that is accredited through the College Reading & Learning Association (CRLA). Those students are already poised for additional training to help their peers best understand and utilize Learning Commons. With the current infrastructure for such training in the Learning Center, any tutor will be able to receive professional development, and all will be oriented to Learning Commons, and receive an invitation to join the Learning Commons Facebook page.

In addition to these student workers, there is another large group of student staff at USM who are naturally situated to be champions of Learning Commons. For the approximately 1,500 students living on campus, the most present and consistent “face” of USM is the Resident Assistant (RA) -- a student staff member living on each floor of the residence halls. These students already participate in an intensive and ongoing cross-training process to prepare them to be effective supports for the residential students. Together with the Department of Residential Life & Residential Education, the staff of Learning Commons will acculturate the RAs to the Learning Commons model, in turn creating learning “ambassadors” within the residence halls. The RAs will be able to offer academic-success programming in the residence halls, and “normalize” the Learning Commons as a place where students can maximize their learning.

A third opportunity of potential partnership with students is the connection with student organizations that have an academic foundation. Examples include the Chemistry Club, the
Physics Club, and the Psychology Club, all of which have a visible presence within the majors, and marshal dedicated and passionate students to enhance the learning that occurs within the classroom. Much like the RAs, the members of these organizations would help to acculturate students within the majors to the Learning Commons, make appropriate referrals, and emphasize academic success and rigor. Our student partners will help to create and foster the culture of learning. A fourth group of students who would make natural partners for the Learning Commons is our Academic Peer Advisors, students who take a course in how to support their peers in a variety of ways, and then assigned to various departments and in numerous roles throughout the institution.

We envision multiple opportunities to serve our students more effectively, expand our current services, and fill several unmet needs through the creation of Learning Commons. These include the following:

- Building the infrastructure for more centralized math and writing assistance to allow USM to begin to move towards the support and coordination of tutoring from other disciplines, which in turn increases student access to academic support
- The expansion of online tutoring services, as well as enhancement of those current services
- The use of technology in learning assistance in critical areas such as math, writing, and the sciences
- Providing further support and opportunities to our online students by expanding online tutoring services and connecting students with even more USM resources through the Virtual Learning Commons
- Partnering with the staff and advisors of Athletics and Greek Life in order that students associated with a program that requires study hours can fulfill that requirement in a much more supportive, engaged, and effective environment

In a broader university context, today’s student wants meaningful relationships, the opportunity to learn in a way that best suits their personal needs, and information and resources that are flexible in their delivery. Their work is often collaborative in nature, as supported by the theory of Social Constructionism, asserting that knowledge is socially constructed and students learn best through active participation and collaborative learning strategies. As we envision the Learning Commons model, we believe that those who work in an environment of learning need to be willing to engage in educational process with students not sit behind a desk. The Learning Commons model creates a culture of positive intrusiveness, a sense of community, and a space that is learning centric. It becomes more of a gathering space for our students, faculty, and staff, fostering conversation and connectedness in this place of learning.

To implement the model detailed above, the following steps will be taken should we receive SIF funding:

- The Learning Commons implementation team will continue to develop its implementation plan through ongoing site visits of comparable campus sites, collaboration with national experts, and evaluation of current utilization and outcomes data.
The Learning Center will be physically and programmatically incorporated into USM Libraries on both the Portland and Gorham campuses.

One and a half floors of the Glickman Library in Portland will be repurposed for Learning Commons, and similarly the bottom floor of the Gorham Library.

Small group instructional/collaborative/study spaces will be constructed in both locations, incorporating furniture and technology that is flexible for effective learning approaches for multiple disciplines.

A media production center for students and faculty will be constructed, with current grant funding used for the creation of the center.

Two offices will be constructed, one of which serving as a “swing space” for faculty from any discipline to meet individually with students or to collaborate with other faculty.

Individual tutoring stations will be purchased and installed in both locations.

The construction of a “Virtual Learning Commons” will replace the current website of the Learning Center, and enhance the online resource offerings of USM Libraries and other University departments.

All Learning Commons staff will participate in cross training to enhance their current skill sets; additional tutors will be recruited and trained in both in-person and online instructional modalities.

Our learning support services will be moved to this space that currently operates from early morning through late evening hours.

An online scheduling system will be purchased and implemented to increase student access to (and awareness of) tutoring services at the university.

An awareness campaign will be developed to acculturate new, returning, and prospective students to the Learning Commons locations and offerings; such a campaign will also include outreach to faculty, staff, and other stakeholders.

Project Outcomes

The Learning Commons project has several qualitative and quantitative outcomes. These include:

- The creation of dynamic, supportive, and academically-engaging spaces for the USM community that results in an increase in student engagement.
- Increased accessibility to comprehensive academic support through maximizing and building upon existing University resources, including the expansion of service hours and online offerings.
- Increased use by students of the Libraries as a center for learning, with an emphasis upon information, media and technology literacies.
- Reduced complexity of the organization for the user, with better coordination of resources that are much more integrated and cross functional.
- Increased partnerships across campus to grow the culture of learning and further the culture of student success at the University.
- Measurable outcomes for the Learning Commons model within the first year including:
Increasing the usage of available writing and math tutoring services from approximately 70% to 90%.
- Increasing the utilization of online writing tutoring by at least 50% (only 39 hours were sought by students during fall 2010).
- Increasing the utilization of online math tutoring by at least 50% (only 26 hours were sought by students during fall 2010)
- Increasing the number of information desk questions in the libraries by 20% in the first year

Milestones and Timetable

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<thead>
<tr>
<th>Timetable</th>
<th>Milestone</th>
<th>Who Responsible</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>December 2010</td>
<td>Consult with national expert</td>
<td>Learning Commons Implementation Team (LCIT)</td>
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<tr>
<td>January-February 2011</td>
<td>Visit successfully-implemented sites of comparable programmatic campus services</td>
<td>LCIT</td>
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<tr>
<td>February-April</td>
<td>Conceptualize spaces and develop architectural plan</td>
<td>LCIT in collaboration with Facilities Management</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May-August 2011</td>
<td>Physical plant construction in Portland and Gorham</td>
<td>Facilities Management</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>June-August 2011</td>
<td>Develop programmatic curriculum</td>
<td>LCIT and other partners</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>June-August 2011</td>
<td>Cross training and promotion</td>
<td>LCIT</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>August 2011</td>
<td>Complete renovations to physical spaces</td>
<td>LCIT in collaboration with Facilities Management</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>September 2011</td>
<td>Learning Commons open for students</td>
<td>LCIT and Learning Commons staff</td>
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<tr>
<td>September 2011-December</td>
<td>Initial assessment of Learning Commons services</td>
<td>LCIT and Learning Commons staff</td>
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<tr>
<td>2011</td>
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<tr>
<td>April 2012</td>
<td>Year-end assessment and evaluation</td>
<td>LCIT and Learning Commons staff</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>May-August 2012</td>
<td>Programmatic changes based upon outcomes data</td>
<td>LCIT and Learning Commons staff</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

How the Project Relates to Identified Priorities and Will Serve the Citizens of Maine

The broader priorities served by this project include those of recruitment, retention, progress to degree completion, and diversity. As part of our recruitment efforts, Learning Commons will be a prominent asset that the Admissions Office can highlight to prospective students and families.
From a retention perspective, *Learning Commons* can provide academic support, an engaging environment conducive to learning, and an opportunity to build community. The research on student success and persistence is clear about the need for relationship building, the provision of adequate services, high expectations by the institution as well as the student, and the critical importance of students spending their time on the “right” activities. Similarly, all of these conditions will increase the likelihood that the students achieve degree completion, with both information literacy and technology literacy as core threads in the *Learning Commons* model. With the growing number of ESL students at USM and our proximity to the diverse cultures of the greater Portland area, the provision of ESL tutoring services becomes even more critical, and serves as a lynchpin for supporting diversity at USM. More specifically, *Learning Commons* is directly related to the following goals of USM’s Strategic Plan:

**Goal 2:** To make student success a core University priority.

**Goal 3:** To provide the distinctive graduate and professional training critical to the needs of 21st-Century Maine.
- 3.2 ACTION: Refine administrative and support services to ensure that they are accessible to graduate students and that they are responsive to the unique demographic features and circumstances of this student population.

**Goal 6:** To further the University’s commitment to diversity.

**Goal 7:** To strengthen community on and across USM’s three campuses.
- 7.5 ACTION: Move, wherever possible and cost-effective, the provision of student, faculty, and staff support services to the virtual commons
- 7.6 ACTION: Consolidate and centralize student, faculty, and staff support services
- 7.7 ACTION: Enhance the electronic availability of student, faculty, and staff support services through expanded use of the Internet.

**Goal 8:** To deploy USM’s physical plant in support of the university’s mission.

**Collaboration Involved with Other System Universities**

A critical part of the development and implementation of *Learning Commons* at USM has been, and will continue to be, the collaboration with colleagues and experts from several institutions across the country. The *Learning Commons* Implementation Team will enthusiastically collaborate with other System Universities who are considering the creation of a *Learning Commons*, sharing our experience and our connections with the national colleagues.
## Detailed Project Schedule

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>DATE</th>
<th>ACTION</th>
<th>RESPONSIBLE</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>January and February 2011</td>
<td>Ongoing consultation with experts</td>
<td><em>Learning Commons</em> Implementation Team (LCIT)</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Visit successfully-implemented sites of comparable programmatic campus services</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>February-April 2011</td>
<td>Conceptualize spaces and develop architectural plan</td>
<td>LCIT, Facilities Management, architect, USM Library staff</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Conversations with campus stakeholders</td>
<td>LCIT, numerous University departments and representatives</td>
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<tr>
<td>April 2011</td>
<td>Second polycom meeting with Dr. James Elmborg (national expert)</td>
<td>LCIT</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>April and May 2011</td>
<td>Create professional development plan</td>
<td>LCIT, USM Library staff, Residential Life &amp; Residential Education, Student Success Center staff, other USM departments</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Create assessment plan</td>
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<tr>
<td>May 2011</td>
<td>Physical plant construction begins</td>
<td>Facilities Management</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Develop promotional plan</td>
<td>LCIT, Marketing &amp; Brand Management</td>
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<tr>
<td>May-June 2011</td>
<td>Order furniture and technology hardware/software</td>
<td>Facilities Management, LCIT, Informational Technology staff</td>
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<td>Create technology work plan and order technology</td>
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<tr>
<td>May-July 2011</td>
<td>Develop programmatic curriculum</td>
<td>LCIT, USM Library staff, Residential Life &amp; Residential Education, Student Success Center staff, other USM departments</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Develop content for Virtual <em>Learning Commons</em> website</td>
<td><em>Learning Commons</em> staff, USM Library staff, LCIT</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Create appropriate service protocols</td>
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<tr>
<td>May-August 2011</td>
<td>Professional development and training of project partners</td>
<td>LCIT, USM Library staff, Residential Life &amp; Residential Education, Student Success Center staff, other USM departments</td>
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<tr>
<td>June-July 2011</td>
<td>Develop promotional plan and materials</td>
<td>LCIT, Marketing &amp; Branding</td>
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August 2011

- Physical plant construction completed
- Implement technology plan
- Implement online scheduling program for tutoring services
- Learning Center staff move into Learning Commons

Facilities Management
USM Library staff and Information Technology staff
Learning Center staff
Facilities Management and Learning Center staff

September-October 2011

- Faculty open houses @ LC

LCIT and Learning Commons staff
Learning Commons partners

December 2011

- Fall semester assessment of programs and services

LCIT and assessment stakeholders

April 2012

- Year-end assessment and evaluation
- Write year-end report

LCIT and Learning Commons staff

May-August 2012

- Programmatic changes based upon outcomes data

LCIT and Learning Commons staff

Requested Investment

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>PROJECT INITIATIVE</th>
<th>SIF REQUEST</th>
<th>USM MATCHING</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Construction of 6 group study/instruction rooms and upgrading existing rooms</td>
<td>$95,000</td>
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<td>Tables and chairs for 6 new group study rooms and existing rooms</td>
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<td>8’ pull down screens and white boards for 6 group study rooms</td>
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<td>Computer, mouse, keyboard, and large instructional monitor for 6 group study rooms</td>
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<td>Networking/telecommunication connectivity for 6 group study rooms</td>
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<td>$1,200</td>
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<td>Construction of a media production center</td>
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<td>Construction of two administrative offices, one as a faculty “swing office” to meet individually with students</td>
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<td>Item</td>
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<tr>
<td>Office furniture</td>
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<td>Electrical work</td>
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<td>LCD data projector for the largest of the group study rooms</td>
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<td>20 iMac computers (8 for the Gorham Learning Commons, 12 for the Portland Learning Commons)</td>
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<td>Furniture for 20 computer stations</td>
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<td>New comfortable student seating</td>
<td>$20,000</td>
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<td>Web design for the creation of the Online Learning Commons</td>
<td>$2,500</td>
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<td>Online scheduling and tutoring software (WC Online)</td>
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<td>3 card readers and associated software</td>
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<td>Staff training and professional development</td>
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<td>Learning Commons promotional materials</td>
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<td>On-site visits of Learning Commons development staff to best-practice campuses</td>
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<td><strong>TOTAL REQUEST</strong></td>
<td><strong>$214,700</strong></td>
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<td><strong>- $19,100</strong></td>
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**Potential Impact upon Other System Universities**

As indicated in the Project Description, the *Learning Commons* concept is one being explored and implemented by numerous institutions throughout the country. Throughout our planning and implementation, we will be documenting our process, our challenges, and our successes to make available to other System Universities. We also will be gathering evidence of student impact of the *Learning Commons* on retention and persistence to degree completion, which we will also avail to other institutions who may be considering such a model.
Application for Strategic Investment Funds (SIF) for FY2012 (July 1, 2011 - June 30, 2012) Submitted by: Elizabeth Higgins Phone: 780-4632

Campus: ☐ UM  ☐ UMA  ☐ UMF  ☐ UMFK  ☐ UMM  ☐ UMPI  ☑ USM  ☐ SWS
(If more than one campus will participate in the project, check the box of the campus that will be responsible for administering the funds)

This request is for (check one box only): ☑ a NEW project that will start on July 1, 2011.

The proposed project manager is: Elizabeth Higgins

☐ ADDITIONAL funds to be added to EXISTING SIF award project #: __________________________

The title of the NEW proposed project is: Learning Commons

Project title: __________________________ Dept ID: __________________________

Managed by: __________________________

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<td>EXISTING APPROVED AWARD (if applicable)</td>
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<td>Funds Requested for Year Starting</td>
<td>July 1, 2011</td>
<td>July 1, 2012</td>
<td>July 1, 2013</td>
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<td>Regular Rate Compensation</td>
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<td>Temporary Rate Compensation</td>
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<td>Independent Personal Services</td>
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<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
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<tr>
<td>Supplies and Materials</td>
<td>3,500</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
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<tr>
<td>Travel</td>
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<td>0</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Equipment w/unit cost &lt; $5,000</td>
<td>89,200</td>
<td>0</td>
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<tr>
<td>Equipment w/unit cost =&gt; $5,000</td>
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<tr>
<td>Other (identify) Renovations</td>
<td>116,000</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0</td>
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<tr>
<td>Other (identify) Staff development</td>
<td>6,000</td>
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<tr>
<td>Requested Investment from SIF</td>
<td>$214,700</td>
<td>$0</td>
<td>$0</td>
<td>$0</td>
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<tr>
<td>University or Other Match</td>
<td>$19,100</td>
<td>$0</td>
<td>$0</td>
<td>$0</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOTAL</td>
<td>$0</td>
<td>$233,800</td>
<td>$0</td>
<td>$0</td>
<td>$0</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Number of years of additional SIF funding requested: ☑ 1-year ☐ 2-year ☐ 3-year ☐ base budget

In the SIF application narrative, describe any potential financial impact on other System universities, e.g., revenue / savings / costs.

X