

# THE SECOND FRONT PAGE

## Hatcher Learning Commons Opens to Students at Alma College

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It snowed for the soft opening of the Hatcher Learning Commons at Alma College last Wednesday. As the campus was quietly blanketed in the first significant snowfall of the semester, many wide-eyed students streamed into the three-story structure they've seen on the rise for months.

Encased in glass windows stretching from the ground to the top of those three stories, as well as the more familiar red brick, the renovated library offers views for pedestrians looking in and campus views for anyone inside looking out. The Learning Commons, a multiyear, \$14 million project, promises to be the academic centerpiece of the campus.

Even as fencing and various construction implements still gather snow, the students are aware of the possibilities that await them in a building redesigned to increase collaboration. Within a few months, a Qdoba restaurant and student-focused programs will also be up and running. As the construction crews clear out and the landscaping takes shape, something more akin to a ribbon cutting should happen by the semester's end.

### A clean, well-lit place

Current upperclassmen, and of course Alma College alumni, would recall the darkened stacks of the old library. In fact, one alumnus, Eric Blackhurst, a 1983 graduate and chair of the Board of Trustees, spoke at a groundbreaking last May about his own study habits back in the day. The Swanson Academic Center, commonly known as the SAC, may have offered some quiet and solitude since its opening in 1972. Even for the most studious learners, intent on hitting the books, the SAC was hardly a gathering place.

Damon Brown, vice president for student affairs and chief diversity officer, sees all that changing with the renovated Learning Commons. "It's very exciting and has been a long-time coming," he said. "It's great for our students as it really gives them a place for academic resources, with the library on the top floor, while providing engaging space where students can connect."

That engaging and flexible space, equipped with lots of moveable furniture, was already in use by Wednesday afternoon. Paige Lamoreaux, a junior studying biochemistry, and Madilyn Ogle, a junior studying elementary education, pulled up with their laptops at a high-top table. Lamoreaux, an Alma College "career peer," helped Ogle tailor her resume for a student teaching position.

"Today's student is really about being collaborative," Brown said. "It's more about work done together, so we kept that in mind as we were designing the space. So we're really excited how the project turned out and the students love it."

Those collaborative areas are visible throughout the building, including the third-floor library. A trio of coed Scots study together in a room equipped with a television should they need it. Another young man sits alone in the library as light, even on a snowy day, pours in from the window behind him. Others, still taking it all in, tour the place on their own.

Tim Rath, director of college communications, noted that the Learning Commons begins a new era in the college history — one with a classic student union. "It's a central place on campus a stone's throw away from the main academic building where students can meet up with friends."

Additionally, offices centered on student success, including the Center for College and Community Engagement, as well as Career and Personal Development, will be housed in the Learning Commons. Brown said a digital media center, still in the works, will allow students to work on the cutting edge of technology. Smaller classrooms, conference rooms, and other large open areas all make for a diversity of space.

### Built for collaboration

Kyleigh Martin, a freshman studying special education, had a birds-eye view of the soft opening of the Learning Commons. As



Paige Lamoreaux (left), a junior studying biochemistry, and Madilyn Ogle, junior studying elementary education, pulled up with their laptops at a high-top table on the opening day of the Learning Commons. Lamoreaux, an Alma College "career peer," helped Ogle tailor her resume for a student teaching position.



LEFT: Damon Brown, vice president for student affairs and chief diversity officer, is excited about the newly opened Learning Commons at Alma College. "It's great for our students as it really gives them a place for academic resources, with the library on the top floor, while providing engaging space where students can connect," he said.



RIGHT: Kyleigh Martin, a freshman studying special education, had a birds-eye view for the soft opening of the Learning Commons. As a desk assistant who will put in about eight hours a week there, she helped students check out some of those individual study rooms on day one.

a desk assistant who will put in about eight hours a week there, she helped students check out some of those individual study rooms on day one.

A member of the cheer and stunt team, Martin enjoyed seeing friends and teammates "flowing in and out" of the facility, some even capturing it all with phone videos. "Everyone has been looking forward to this opening," she said.

Martin believes that with its open hours from 8 a.m. until midnight, the Learning Commons will boost studying habits. She's most excited about the collaborative opportunities to learn alongside those friends and teammates. "It's definitely the study rooms I'm looking forward to using," she said. "You can stay in there for two hours and bring as many people as you want."

As a freshman, Martin admits she has no firsthand knowledge of what the SAC offered. Though she's excited about how a building, with all its flexible and well-lit space, can further student knowledge. So much of the space and its surroundings speak to how a new generation learns, especially in regards to technology. Sound-absorbing doors, for example, which are currently on back order, will provide a buffer from the sound of the private televisions.

From new students like Martin to alumni returning to Alma College, Rath believes the

campus centerpiece can be "a point of pride" for everyone. With a focus on academic achievement, the building could prove positive in how to "recruit" the scholarly minded.

Rath reported that the entire renovation was made possible through "Our Time is Now," a record-breaking fundraising campaign. Those

donors and alumni, even if they recalled some darker days inside the SAC, are creating a better path for the next Scots. Within a few months, as the snow melts away and the sun shines a little longer each day, the Alma College community will again celebrate the future a renovated building might bring.



The Alma College Learning Commons, a multiyear, \$14 million project, promises to be the academic centerpiece of the campus. Though still under construction, students and staff were welcomed to a soft opening last Wednesday, Jan. 25.