

LIBRARY ISSUES

BRIEFINGS FOR FACULTY AND ADMINISTRATORS

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The Glorious Study Hall: How Libraries Nurture a Life of the Mind

by Barbara Fister

When a colleague of mine taught a one-month interim course on "The Library as Place," her undergraduate students (several of whom identified themselves as non-users of the college library) studied library design, talked to architects, sought out elements of libraries that appealed to them, and created a plan for their own ideal library.

To her surprise, they didn't want a high-tech, high concept modernized space. They wanted good lighting, comfortable furniture, warm colors, access to food—but also "rooms that inspire." What appealed to them in libraries they examined was mahogany paneling, wooden bookshelves, overstuffed armchairs, and traditional reading rooms with high ceilings and long tables. One student argued that "the library needs a grand entrance that will show those who pass by that this is a place to further your learning." The students, in short, wanted comfort, but they also embraced the cultural symbolism of the library of the past, not a digitized, high-tech future.

But another curious fact emerged. In their discussions about the ideal library, they didn't talk about access to lots of books. They didn't talk about databases or computers or library services. They accommodated the need for those things thoughtfully in their final design, but when they talked about their ideal library, they were thinking about a physical place that was conducive to academic work. For them the library was not a collection of information and a suite of services, it was a place to study and learn and be inspired.

Does that mean, in the words of Ernest Boyer, who was dismayed that students weren't encour-

aged to do more research in their undergraduate years, that libraries are essentially "glorified study halls"? Could another building with the right lighting and ambience be a cheaper alternative to the library?

Defining "Library"

The debate over the meaning and use of academic libraries is a fraught one. Some see the future of the library as a contest between the printed word and digital formats, with books, for better or worse, being ousted from the library and its budget to make room for computers and digital collections. Others see the conflict as shifting resources, space, and emphasis from serious research to the less purposeful activities of overindulged undergraduates, making the library an extension of the student center, dumbing down its exalted mission. And some wonder if libraries are necessary at all.

Daniel Greenstein, vice provost for academic planning and programs at the University of California Systemwide, raised eyebrows at a recent Ithaka conference when he suggested libraries should in the near future outsource most of their services, stop storing large numbers of books, shrink their space, and reduce their staff to a bare minimum so that funding could be reallocated from libraries to academic departments that can more effectively develop innovative technologies and data-driven projects. For him, the library

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of the past is an unaffordable luxury in the future.

He didn't go as far as Adrian Sannier, the University Technology Officer at Arizona State University, whose keynote address at the 2008 Campus Technology Conference was incendiary in every sense of the word. "I suggest you burn down the library. All the books in the world are already digitized! Burn the thing down. Change it into a gathering place; a digital commons. Stop air conditioning the books!"

He was operating under the misapprehension that Google had entered into a digitization agreement with major research libraries, so every book a scholar might need was not only digitized but freely available in its entirety to everyone. But he also mistakenly assumed that nobody had any interest in printed books, or in libraries per se, but only in having places where they could gather to collaborate as they used digital materials.

Scott Bennett, an advocate for designing libraries around student learning rather than around library staff needs, holds no brief for burning down libraries, but he has raised the question of whether libraries adequately promote learning. He further raises the question whether there is any solid evidence that students using the library are actually *using* the library—in terms of its collections and its traditional services. Though recently renovated libraries are drawing students through their doors in record numbers, is it possible that another building with group study spaces, computers, and a café could be just as popular? What impact, if any, do the contents and the traditional purpose of the library actually have on the learning students are doing in libraries?

More than Collections, More than Service Points

Many academic libraries have successfully negotiated their multiple roles, adding collaborative learning spaces, new technological information resources such as data services

and geographic information systems software, as well as popular amenities such as cafés, while continuing to maintain local print collections, particularly of circulating books. (Journal and reference collections are increasingly being provided online, saving space if not money.) On many campuses an increasing emphasis on experiential learning, project-based learning, and undergraduate research is providing new uses for libraries, ones that Ernest Boyer would approve of. Yet discussions about renovating or replacing libraries almost always require an academic community to come to consensus about what a library actually *is*.

Storage or study space. Renovating the main library at Ohio State University was not only complex and expensive, it required the removal of nearly two million volumes to other locations while providing services and access to materials during the three years of construction. It also caused a controversy when faculty learned some 700,000 books would be placed in remote storage in order to free up space for other uses. Some felt collections shouldn't be sacrificed for social and study spaces.

Research or browsing. A report by sociology professor Andrew Abbott on the future of the Regenstein library at the University of Chicago examined changes in the ways students used the library. More students were entering the building, but fewer were checking out books. Most circulation came from a small group of heavy users. "The library is thus a laboratory facility for a core group, and a study hall for most others," he reported. The task force he reported to acknowledged the need for both uses, but they established clear priorities. "The main purpose of Regenstein is research and should remain research," they said bluntly. "The library's public spaces should celebrate the research function and the University should work harder to expose its undergraduates to library research as one of the forms of knowledge generation."

While acknowledging the need for study space, and even recommending improvements to the coffee shop, Abbott's more detailed report rejected the idea of remote storage that was being embraced at other research libraries. In many fields, he argued, research is artisanal in nature and requires both a wealth of primary and secondary materials and the ability to browse them. "Library research as currently practiced is unthinkable without browsing," he wrote. He considered it "the one thing that absolutely must be protected in the research libraries of the future."

Campus center. This year Goucher College opened a new library. They also opened a new campus center. It just happens that they are in the same building. The campus was in sore need of a central gathering place, and planners determined that a new library building could provide that hub. In addition to traditional stacks where students can do research and find solitude the old-fashioned way, there is an auditorium, a restaurant, a radio station, an art museum, and even exercise equipment.

Though taking the multi-use nature of libraries a bit further than most, the institution found that the need for a central gathering space and for a new library came together without conflict, and the library itself remains the primary focus of the new facility. Here, browsing doesn't compete with other purposes, it's part of the mix. Though some traditionalists find this mix of uses slightly sacrilegious, the library truly is "the heart of the campus" in a way few campuses can boast.

From the Student's Perspective

A ground-breaking study at the University of Rochester used ethnographic methods to study student use of the library. A mapping found that students are peripatetic, traveling from class to class, from one activity to the next. Seldom do they sit down to a meal, but rather grab something to eat when they can. They carry a heavy load of

books in their backpacks, but rarely squeeze in a laptop; it simply adds too much weight. The library provides an anchor for them: a place they can return to several times a day to rest, study, meet friends, check their e-mail, download assignments, gather sources, and write papers. Quite often they can't find time in their schedules to settle down to sustained research and writing until classes and scheduled activities are over—usually after 9 P.M.

Librarians as translators and coaches. Another ongoing study, Project Information Literacy, has further light to shed on student perspectives. Their surveys and interviews so far have found that research in a digital age is more difficult for undergraduates to conduct than previously. They typically spend a lot of time trying to establish context for their research because they aren't familiar with the ideas and the language of the topics they're asked to explore or in what form their finished product should be. They turn to librarians as translators and coaches, people who can not only help them find information but also help them understand their teacher's expectations. If they can't get help at their point of need, they generally try to find a work-around, often settling for a Web page that will do rather than a scholarly article they can't locate. The fact that their point of need may well come after 9 P.M. has interesting service implications for libraries.

Taking their cues from faculty. When it comes to using library resources, students rely on signals from their professors. Daphnée Rentfrow, a PhD in Comparative Literature and MLS candidate, wrote in a report on the future of research libraries that it is in the hands of the professoriate. If the faculty fail to support the library as an essential tool for inquiry and learning, it will become an irrelevant museum. "But the opposite is also true. If we can get faculty and scholars to be willing and eager collaborators

with librarians in their course development, teaching, and research, then we will have guaranteed the active and irreplaceable role of the library in higher education, no matter how many books are digitized or how much shelf space is given over to cafés."

The members of the task force on the future of the University of Chicago libraries would agree, recommending in their report that the library should be a site for understanding how knowledge is made from examination of records. Classroom space should be made available in the library, and courses should be created for both undergraduate and graduate students to ensure that research as a practice fundamental to knowledge is built into the curriculum.

The Biggest Classroom

One of my colleagues in the music department refers to our library as "the biggest classroom on campus." It provides a common ground for the disciplines as well as spaces where students can engage with ideas either individually or in groups, formally and informally. But it isn't enough for the library to provide information and assistance in using that information; the library must also be a place designed for learning. That learning begins in the classroom, but continues in dormitories, in the cafeteria—and ideally, in the library.

Spaces conducive to learning. Scott Bennett's research found that domestic spaces are conducive to learning. Where there is food and easy interaction, students are more likely to have conversations about life, the universe, and everything. In order to nurture those connections between everyday life and the life of the mind, between work and play, the library needs to rethink its role. "The character of the study environment matters immensely," he says, "and that environment must in direct and tangible ways foster effective learning." A library focused on learning creates "space that allows students

to manage the social dimensions of learning, that domesticates the foundational character of knowledge."

Spaces that inspire. Though Bennett raises the concern that we have no easy way to measure the library's impact on student learning, entangled as it is with a multitude of influences, architect Geoffrey Freeman points to the symbolic role that the library plays.

The library's primary role is to advance and enrich the student's educational experience; however, by cutting across all disciplines and functions, the library also serves a significant social role. It is a place where people come together on levels and in ways that they might not in the residence hall, classroom, or off-campus location. Upon entering the library, the student becomes part of a larger community—a community that endows one with a greater sense of self and higher purpose. Students inform us that they want their library to "feel bigger than they are." They want to be part of the richness of the tradition of scholarship as well as its expectation of the future. They want to experience a sense of inspiration.

Not all are convinced that such inspiration leads to learning. Andrew Abbot says skeptically, "The repurposing of libraries away from research and toward the student study function has usually been justified by a belief that placing students in settings made dignified by visible books, high ceilings, and elegant surroundings will by some mechanism improve their scholarship and learning. . . . There is little evidence for this osmotic learning of scholarship one way or the other, but it seems a frivolous idea. Scholarship is an activity rather than an emotion. A priest might well feel that sitting in a Gothic cathedral induces a sense of the numinous, but he would not expect it to teach a believer the religious practices necessary for salvation."

But sacred spaces such as cathedrals do influence believers in ways that secular spaces do not. There

is no current research that can definitively demonstrate that the library as a physical place improves student learning outcomes “by osmosis.” Yet in research on the psychology of religion we can find some intriguing parallels.

The Academic Library as a Sacred Space

Most universities refer in their mission statements and mottos to concepts such as knowledge, justice, and truth. These core concepts are embodied in the academic library. Surveys of library users frequently reveal the library as a physical place is important to students even if they are not using the materials in it. Undergraduates frequently say it is the space on campus most conducive to scholarly pursuits. Our usual methods of assessment—customer satisfaction surveys or assessment of research skills—fail to get at why students make such a strong connection between abstract values and the physical library. There is something about the library as a place and as a cultural institution that makes it different from other “third places” such as coffee houses, bars, and community centers where people gather to socialize and develop a sense of community. If we base our decisions about the library of the future purely on utility or on tests of student research skills, we might lose out on something meaningful.

Architect and planner Earl Broussard has argued that universities must identify and value the “sacred spaces” on their campuses, ones that make students feel connected, grounded,

inspired, transformed. It is these spaces that give students a sense of transcendence, giving them a sense of personal belonging, of being “at home” but also being in a place that matters and will continue to matter to them. The library designed for learning, which combines domestic comfort and informality—where students feel “at home” in the world of knowledge—is also a space where the individual can feel a connection to great ideas, can feel an almost spiritual sense of purpose.

“...universities must identify and value the ‘sacred spaces’ on their campuses, ones that make students feel connected, grounded, inspired, transformed.”

In a recent study informed by research on the psychology of religion and the meaning of sacred spaces, librarians Trudi Bellardo Hahn and Heather Lea Jackson assessed students’ feelings about libraries using images and guided questions. Students tended to feel that traditional library spaces were preferable to modern ones, that some libraries and objects had a spiritual dimension that embodied the institution’s motto or mission, and that they felt much more positive about using libraries that, for them, seemed to have spiritual meaning.

Their findings explain some of the puzzling results found on student surveys—that regardless of whether a student is using the library collection, being in a library conveys a sense of connection to

knowledge itself and to the higher purpose of their education. That value is hard to measure, but it is one we need to consider as we envision the academic library of the future.

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