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Regional

College libraries eye tradition in era of change

One could argue that universities originated from places like the Library of Alexandria, established 23 centuries ago in Egypt. Libraries like the one in Alexandria attracted the most talented intellectuals.

They contained not only a large number of papyrus scrolls but also served as botanical gardens, collections of art and places of residence for scholars.

When modern universities were built, libraries occupied a distinctive place where students and faculty went on an almost daily basis to seek the information they needed for their studies. But over the last few decades their role has transformed and lessened. One reason for this decline is the spiraling cost of running them while institutions of higher education – particularly public ones – face constant budget cuts. Another reason is the increased availability of scholarly journals and books in electronic formats that can be accessed from remote locations, making a visit to the library less and less necessary.

However, the most transformative element has been the threat that libraries are being seen as anachronistic places. Such a view could threaten their very existence. And as in nature, when anything faces extinction the only way out is to evolve into something else.

Today, many college library administrators have taken notice and have decided to change how they operate while still preserving their original purpose of being the centers of intellectual discovery on campuses.

Dr. Aldemaro Romero Jr. Letters from Academia

For one thing they have been reducing the space being occupied by physical books and journals, given that many of those publications can be accessed electronically.

Although the cost of electronic subscriptions keeps rising, due mostly to the accelerated merger of academic publishers that has resulted in less competition, there is also less physical space that needs to be maintained, which is a huge cost savings to universities. An official from the Library of Congress once told me that the most valuable item they had was space.

So what are libraries doing with these newly freed spaces? Many things, it turns out. They are being transformed into learning and technology hubs, centers for research and academic support services, rooms for collaborative initiatives and even dining areas. This is the result of the conclusion that libraries should not be viewed as just book repositories, but as multidisciplinary centers of the university campus, giving them back the centrality they used to have as the heart of intellectual life.

A good example of this phenomenon is the recently completed Guerrieri Academic Commons at Salisbury University in Maryland. At a cost of \$117 million, this 224,000 square-foot facility

includes support for both information technology and research, ample space for collaboration (similar to those you will find for start-up companies), cyber cafes, dining rooms, 24-hour study rooms, and, of course, book stacks. The facility is oriented toward what its users want – a more diverse and multi-purposed space.

In addition structural changes, some libraries are also providing more opportunities for students and researchers to internally design the spaces they require according to their needs.

Grand Valley State University in Michigan, for example, provides a great variety of movable furniture so the users can design their internal spaces according to their needs, from those who want to work in groups of different sizes to those who want to study alone.

The library was able to provide this flexibility by moving 90 percent of their printed material into an automated storage and retrieval system. As a result, many faculty members who teach small classes where direct interaction with students is essential have been moving their classes to the library.

Because of the increasing use of electronic devices such as laptops, libraries are also making sure that there are enough power outlets. Some libraries, like the one at the University of Notre Dame, have developed specialized centers in digital scholarship, incorporating labs for digital research, 3D printing services, high-tech classrooms and digital sound studios.

Another innovation has come from libraries

making modifications to some of the spaces so that more natural light can come through, creating more inviting environments. These changes are direct results of not having as many books that need to be protected from the damaging effects of solar radiation.

Changes are also occurring in the kind of people who work in university libraries. Librarians with doctorates in specific subjects, as well as people with high levels of technical skills, now make up most of the staffs at these libraries. This change in personnel has made it possible for these libraries to become centers where students can learn indispensable skills in areas such as oral and written communication, math tutoring and digital literacy.

Do all of these changes mean that the traditional role of libraries as book depositories will disappear? Probably not. According to a 2013 study by American University in Washington D.C., 92 percent of U.S. college students prefer printed books to electronic ones. Also, many students and researchers seek quiet spaces where they can read and conduct their research without being interrupted. Some devote entire floors as quiet zones. What is important is that college libraries be able to balance progress with time-honored traditions.

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