The Twenty-First-Century College Library

THERESA BYRD
Director of Libraries, Ohio Wesleyan University

The College Library

The esteem of the college library is exemplified by not only its location on campus but also by its connection to the academic enterprise. The college library frequently has the enviable position of being located at a prominent location on the main campus thoroughfare. Moreover, because of its relationship with the teaching and learning process, it is called the “heart of the campus.”

In the twenty-first century, college librarians and libraries are undergoing significant change. College librarians have worked hard to create vibrant libraries for faculty, students, and staff. Yet librarians and faculty would assert that despite enormous innovations (electronic resources, online catalogs, learning commons and cafés, course management systems, digital projects, and social networking tools), the basic mission and framework of the college library remain unchanged, that is, to support the teaching and learning process.

To explore this notion of whether or not the college library’s purpose has changed from the twentieth century to the twenty-first century, one must examine the history of the college library.

In 1961, Guy Lyle, in his seminal work The Administration of the College Library, noted, “In the perspective of the last half-century, the college library in America has undergone enormous change. The process by which this change takes place appears to be continuous and inevitable so long as there are vitality and change in the college and in the society which it serves” (p. 1). In addition, Lyle (1961) proceeded to enumerate the essentials of the college library program:

If the college library is to function effectively in support of teaching and as an instrument of teaching in itself, there are certain requirements which must be met. Five of these are especially important. They are the maintenance of a live, growing collection; a modern physical plant; a well-qualified staff; leadership in promoting library use; and adequate financial support. (p. 11)

Amazingly, after 48 years, Lyle’s purpose and essentials of the college library are still extremely relevant today. The only addition to the statement above would be technology. Technology, especially with the advent of the World Wide Web, has been the driving force of change in the college library over the past 25 years.

For the purposes of this essay, Lyle’s five essentials will not be dealt with individually, but rather in the context of three broad categories: reference and instruction; library as place; and digitization, institutional repository, and scholarly communication.
**Reference and Instruction**

Reference and instruction play a significant role in the college library. The college library, especially at liberal arts institutions, exists to provide excellent customer service and research skills for students. To promote reference and instruction, the liaison librarian model that emphasizes curriculum subject expertise is frequently used to form tight connections between faculty and librarians, which leads to the library being integrated into the classroom and course assignments. While the reference desk continues to be staffed by librarians throughout the day, students can also now reach librarians via the Internet through services such as Ask-A-Librarian, instant messaging, and statewide consortial 24/7 chat reference services like Ohio’s KnowItNow. Other options that librarians have for working with students via the Internet include social networking tools, Facebook, Second Life, and Twitter.

Teaching library skills has been a part of the college library program since it was known as bibliographic instruction. College librarians have been leaders in the information literacy movement that seeks to instruct students in how to effectively locate, evaluate, and use information. College librarians teach the following types of classes: English 105 courses, basic research paper skills for a religion or sociology class, and specialized classes on databases (e.g., SciFinder Scholar and JSTOR). In addition, they integrate instruction throughout the course sequence for a department.

The Millennials’ preferences for experiential learning through trial and error may mean that librarians must design library instruction to incorporate clickers, gaming tutorials, and hands-on activities that encourage learning by doing. In the digital age, library instruction is still needed to prevent students from plagiarizing and violating copyright by doing what is called RPB, that is, “ripping, pasting, and burning.”

Not only must the college librarian teach traditional library skills and work toward incorporating digital initiatives into instruction, he or she must also teach what has been called information fluency skills, which involves teaching basic computer skills, PowerPoint, Word, multimedia, scanning, etc. The librarian, if not proficient in all of these skills and the library is not a part of a merged organization (library and IT combined), may need to partner with his or her campus’s information technology department to teach these skills. The “best practices” approach and ultimate goal is for the librarian to partner or team-teach with faculty members in planning and teaching a library instruction course(s).

**Library as Place**

To meet the needs of Millennials in the digital age, a new emphasis has been placed on the role the library building plays in meeting students’ needs and learning. Scott Bennett, Yale University Librarian Emeritus, argues that “the library’s core responsibilities . . . lie not in the efficiency of its operations but rather in the effectiveness with which students learn” (Bennett, 2005b, p. 21). For example, he says that choices about operational issues—the design of reference areas—must be guided by what we know of student learning. According to Bennett, “library space design situates information in the social context of learning. This synergistic situating of information
and learning is the core function of a bricks and mortar library, and it aligns both the library and its building with the basic educational mission of the college or university” (Bennett, 2005a).

At Ohio Wesleyan University (OWU), a small liberal arts institution in the Midwest, the library sits in the center of campus on a path that is affectionately called the “Jaywalk” on campus. The “Jaywalk” connects the academic and residential sides of campus. On one side of the “Jaywalk” is the student center; the other side is Beeghly Library. Thus, no one can cross campus or enter the student center without passing Beeghly Library, the main library of the OWU Library system. The librarians understood Beeghly occupied prime real estate and decided to take advantage of this blessing. They set out to make Beeghly a centerpiece of action on campus by creating a high-tech, high-touch, attractive facility that fosters community.

The librarians began making this transition by redesigning Beeghly Library to incorporate an Information Commons with 40 computer workstations and five laser printers as well as computers located on all floors throughout the library. To facilitate printing, a bank of four print-only computers was installed in the foyer of the library. The Information Commons concept includes a full-service Library Internet Café that contains an additional ten computer workstations with a laser printer, and it operates from 5 p.m. until 12 midnight during the academic year. The café was designed by a broad-based campus committee that included the Vice President for Admissions, the Director of Dining Service, the Director of Facilities, and representatives from development, information technology, and the library. The café is supported by a gift from the 2004 graduating class.

Other steps in the Beeghly transformation include the availability of 20 laptops for check-out at the Circulation Desk for use within the library, allowing students to roam throughout the building untethered, and five laptops located at the Audiovisual Circulation Desk for 48-hour checkout by students, as well as the establishment of a Computer Help Desk dedicated to answering students’ computer questions. Also, lockers have been installed on the ground floor of the library to allow students to have a place to keep their materials while in the library or class.

The Beeghly Library hours have been expanded to allow students to study when it is convenient for them, regardless of the time of day or night. The library is open 104 hours each week—Monday through Thursday from 8 a.m. until 2 a.m. After the library closes at 2 a.m., students use their OWU “swipe cards” to enter the 24/7 Study Room. The library is a part of the university’s ubiquitous 802.11n high-speed wireless network.

The centralization of the Information Commons, café, circulating laptops, lockers, extended hours, and 24/7 Study Room are all designed to provide students with a one-stop shopping service point and to create an environment that encourages both studying and socializing. These services have been available for four years and the Information Commons, which is the busiest place in the library building, is filled with students throughout the day. Indeed, the library is the hub of activity on campus. About the library as place, Geoffrey T. Freeman (2005) said the following:

When beginning to conceptualize and plan a library for the future, we must first ask an obvious question: If faculty, scholars, and students can now obtain
information in any format and access it anywhere on campus, then why does the library, as a physical place, play such an important role in the renewal and advancement of the institution’s intellectual life? The answer is straightforward: The library is the only centralized location where new and emerging information technologies can be combined with traditional knowledge resources in a user-focused, service-rich environment that supports today’s social and educational patterns of learning, teaching, and research. (p. 3)

In our technological world, the library still serves an important part in the academic enterprise, and for students as a place to engage in serious study. We know from the changes that library buildings have undergone in the early years of the twenty-first century that information technology will continue to have an impact on libraries and that students, in the future, will demand new and different services. Therefore, the library building of the future must be flexible to enable repurposing of space as needs change. Hartman (2000) argues, “While there is a long tradition to draw on, there is no agreed-on paradigm for the library of the future” (p. 112). Most college librarians probably would agree with this statement. However, they also would agree with Freeman (2005) when he says, “The library of the future remains irreplaceable” (p. 9).

**Digitization, Institutional Repository, and Scholarly Communication**

With the advent of the digital age, the college librarian must work with faculty to incorporate digital projects into the curriculum. This can happen by the librarian making faculty aware of the new digital collections that exist, both on and off campus, as well as by getting faculty to integrate digitization as part of courses by working with students to build digital collections. Charles B. Lowry and others (2009) note:

> As undergraduate instruction shifts to active and experiential learning and research, libraries will draw more heavily on primary materials in special collections, digital image repositories, and data stores to support the new pedagogy. To achieve this, special collections and library instruction staff may intensify their marketing to academic courses, as well as facilitate digital access to these resources. (p. 17)

Furthermore, Steven Bell (2009), in “Don’t Leave It to Them: An Information Literacy Model from the Bell Tower,” posits that librarians should use a model for librarian–faculty collaboration on digitization projects that is based on work with information literacy. In Bell’s scenario for digitization projects, the faculty member provides the subject expertise and the librarian supplies the collections and technical expertise.

In the digital age, the college library collection is a hybrid of books and electronic resources. However, with digitization projects underway in libraries, are we starting to see a paradigm shift? That is, as college librarians become more involved with digitizing and maintaining the institution’s special collections and hidden collections, will we need to rethink collection development? It appears that we might, given the gravity of the current economic crisis and reduced library budgets. Richard Ovenden in a *Chronicle* article said, “the speed at which universities adopt digital curation may depend on their willingness to divert funds from more traditional areas” (Kolowich, 2002, p. A8). In addition, Charles B. Lowry and others
(2009), in Transformational Times: An Environmental Scan Prepared for the ARL Strategic Plan Review Task Force, said the following: “Libraries need to change their practices for managing traditional content and develop new capabilities for dealing with digital materials of all types, but especially new forms of scholarship, teaching and learning resources, special collections (particularly hidden collections), and research data” (p. 5).

The OWU Libraries have jumped into the new territory of digitization by hiring a digital librarian and digitizing two collections. The first collection to be digitized was the Branch Rickey Collection. The second collection, “Our Shared History: Delaware, Methodism, and Ohio Wesleyan University,” was funded by a one-year Library Services and Technology Act (LSTA) grant. The digital librarian’s and Methodist archivist’s experiences, respectively, with these two projects have resulted in questions about process and prioritization of regular job duties with digital project work. In addition, these two projects have raised these questions: Will OWU Libraries need to establish a digital department? How will the liaison librarians find time to work with faculty to incorporate digital projects into the curriculum and teaching and learning? How will the liaisons handle metadata? Digital initiatives will require equipment, training, staffing, and money as well as a rethinking of work processes.

Institutional repositories are a place where institutions can store digital archives and preserve and access their institution’s instructional, research, and creative materials. While a repository may serve many schools, it does feature a local brand for each institution. As a member of OhioLINK, the OWU Libraries utilize OhioLINK’s institutional repository, called the Digital Resource Commons. Digital collections and institutional repositories will reduce the size of library collections and the need for new library buildings. Moreover, if the concept of the institutional repository becomes popular with students and faculty, it has the power to become a disruptive technology for the current scholarly communication model.

New forms of scholarly communication include digitization and electronic formats. Like other college and university librarians, the OWU librarians have tried to introduce the faculty to changes in scholarly communication by inviting speakers to campus and disseminating the Scholarly Publishing and Academic Resources Coalition’s (SPARC) brochures. Future plans for scholarly communication include more training for librarians about scholarly communication; formation of a faculty committee on scholarly communication; more faculty workshops about scholarly communication; and plans for an online journal to feature student honors papers, essays, and creative output such as poetry, drama, music, and images. Because the college environment places an emphasis on teaching for faculty, the OWU librarians hope to encourage faculty to include preprints, postprints, or working papers as well as other creative resources in its OhioLINK institutional repository.

Conclusion

In the future, because of digitization, institutional repositories, changes in scholarly communications models, and reduced budgets, college libraries’ collections will be smaller and different. Perhaps these collections will be a mix of traditional print, electronic resources, and digital collections. The library as a place and as a place where students come to study and learn will continue to exist. However, Web 2.0 tools will influence reference services and information
literacy will continue to be important. Assessment and accountability will become more important, especially since the accrediting agencies are promoting assessment now for libraries. This means that librarians must utilize assessment tools such as LIBQUAL+, library instruction evaluations, the Association of College & Research Libraries (ACRL) statistics, as well as usage data to benchmark against peer libraries.

Consortia will continue to be popular because of the concepts of economy of scale and the elimination of duplication. As always, libraries will need to hire qualified staff. But with the graying of the profession, with baby boomers still working and Generation X and Millennials joining the ranks, there is the need to watch for generational differences that can be deleterious for staff. The latter is not necessary as both groups have much to share with one another. Technology and the World Wide Web will continue to assist or force libraries to change.

The successful college library needs a strong library director who is able to work cooperatively with faculty and to serve as a strong advocate with the administration. A skilled library director will be needed to obtain funding for the library.

References


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