

Bart Harloe and Helene Williams

The college library in the 21st century

Reconfiguring space for learning and engagement

The authors would like to dedicate this essay to the memory of Evan Farber: Role model, mentor, and ongoing inspiration to all those involved in teaching and learning in academic libraries.

Definition and challenge

One transition that college libraries face in the 21st century involves creating access to high-quality collections in both digital and print forms while reconfiguring existing space to allow for active learning and engagement, as well as study and research.

As students become more active as creators and producers of knowledge and scholarship, often within a collaborative or mentored project or program, the challenging question arises: How do these new forms of activity fit within the traditional model of a library as a space for collections and individual (often private) study?

For purposes of this discussion, the definition of *college library* is a library at an institution classified according to the 2005 revision of the Carnegie Classification as a Baccalaureate College.¹ Formerly known as “liberal arts colleges,” institutions under the new definition have an arts and sciences focus, with few or no graduate programs, are highly residential, and have fewer than 4,000 students.

Although the enrollment and library holdings may vary greatly among these institutions, the common factor is the four-year undergraduate program, as noted by Thomas Kirk in 2003.²

The instructional moment

The culture of college libraries has been shaped in no small way by what Evan Farber called “the university-library syndrome,” that is, the notion that somehow the larger the collection an institution has, the more effective it will be in addressing the scholarly needs of both students and faculty.³

Over the past 25 years, there has evolved another conversation, however, one that focuses on the appropriateness of college library collection for teaching and learning rather than advanced research. Certainly, within the context of the liberal arts mission, this conversation has increasingly been driven by an idea of collections developed in cooperation with faculty to support undergraduate instruction rather than advanced research per se.

Since the mid-90s, with the rise of the Internet and the corresponding explosion of digital resources available for both research and instruction, the traditional model of a “place” for quiet study and contemplation has been replaced by the notion of the library as a space where many kinds of active learning and scholarship can occur. In early days, this meant the creation of computer labs/classrooms where something called “bibliographic instruction” might take place.

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In more recent years, as more institutions thought about the impact of information technology on teaching and learning, the concept of the learning commons began to emerge in both theory and practice.

The evolution of the learning commons and the role of undergraduate instruction

At the same time, as the level of library undergraduate instruction has increased over the course of the past 15 years, liberal arts colleges have come to place more emphasis on active learning rather than traditional classroom instruction, thereby leading to the paradigm shift so well described by Robert Barr and John Tagg:

In its briefest form, the paradigm that has (traditionally) governed our colleges is this: A college is an institution that exists to provide instruction. Subtly but profoundly we are shifting to a new paradigm: A college is an institution that exists to produce learning. This shift changes everything... We are beginning to recognize that our dominant paradigm mistakes a means for an end. It takes the means or method—called ‘instruction’ or ‘teaching’—and makes it the college’s end or purpose. To say that the purpose of colleges is to provide instruction is like saying that General Motors’ business is to operate assembly lines... We now see that our mission is not instruction but rather that of producing learning with every student by whatever means work best.⁴

“Whatever means work best” has in practice meant more library space devoted to dealing with what we might call the “critical literacies” (information literacy, visual literacy, reading, and writing in both print and digital forms) and less space devoted to the storage of print collections.

To provide a concrete example, the creation of the JSTOR digital archive of core journals has meant that college libraries have

been able to reallocate more space to group and individualized learning spaces heavily mediated by various forms of learning technologies. This trend promises to accelerate and continue in the years ahead.

Managing dynamic change in the college library

The multiple paradoxes of the current historical moment in the history of college library collection management and development are profound; the arrival of digital collections (e-journals especially) and advanced forms of resource sharing mean that in effect college libraries are now perforce building high-level research collections that, in turn, support various forms of undergraduate research and scholarship. At the same time, due to the shrinking footprint of traditional print collections, college libraries can now explore different ways in which teaching and learning can take place within the physical spaces of the library.

Several factors must be considered during the exploration process; perhaps most important is the recognition that changes in physical space and collections are indeed processes, rather than one-time events. The current hybrid nature of monographic and journal literature will continue evolving, no doubt further towards the digital end of the spectrum, but alterations in physical space must be flexible in order to accommodate further changes in user needs, collections, and technologies.

Collaborations, either current or future, must also be taken into account. The use of space by internal units, such as Reference or Special Collections, may be changing, as seen in recent efforts at liberal arts colleges to improve students’ literacy with primary materials (in both electronic and legacy formats). Faculty also have a role to play in determining the near- and mid-term future of library space needs. Other units on campus, such as IT and the Centers for Teaching and Learning, can provide valuable input towards the most useful reallocation of library space. External collaborations, such

as those with library consortia, may include both acquisitions and interlibrary lending agreements, which affect the need for and use of library space.

College libraries, with their unique strengths and histories, are in a strong position to continue their positive impact on teaching and learning by making appropriate changes in their physical spaces. Tracking trends in student learning, working across campus units to provide enhanced curricular support, and collaborating in consortial partnerships are only a few of the ways libraries can gain the information and support needed to meet the challenges of changing collections and spaces.

Notes

1. "Classification Descriptions," *The Carnegie Classification of Institutions of Higher Education*, www.carnegiefoundation.org/classifications/ (accessed June 8, 2009).

2. Thomas A. Kirk, "College Libraries,"

Encyclopedia of Library and Information Science, edited by Miriam A. Drake, 2nd ed. (New York: Marcel Dekker, 2003), 591–601.

3. Evan Ira Farber, "Limiting College Library Growth: Bane or Boon?" *Journal of Academic Librarianship* 1:5 (1975): 12–15.

4. Robert B. Barr and John Tagg, "From Teaching to Learning—A New Paradigm for Undergraduate Education," *Change*, 17 (November/December 1995): 82–89.

Further reading

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Library as Place: Rethinking Roles, Rethinking Space. Washington, D.C.: Council on Library and Information Resources, 2005. (continues on page 535)

(*The blended librarian . . .* continued from page 507)

tion, but we have the opportunity to develop new types of spaces for social, cultural, and technological "gathering"—places where users can collaborate and work with trained professionals who understand the broader issues and contexts of information and technology.

If libraries are to remain viable on our campuses we must reaffirm our place as learning centers for the exploration, and sharing of information, and the blended librarian is key to making this successful.

Notes

1. Stephen J. Bell and John Shank, "The Blended Librarian: A Blueprint for Redefining the Teaching and Learning Role of Academic Librarians," *College & Research Libraries News* 65, no. 7 (July/August 2004): 374.


2. Stephen J. Bell and John D. Shank, *Academic Librarianship by Design: A Blended Librarian's Guide to the Tools and Techniques* (Chicago: American Library Association, 2007): 1.

3. Ibid, 20.

4. For a complete list see "Collaborative Learning Commons: Bibliography & Links," compiled by the author and available at <http://facstaff.unca.edu/sinclair/spaceplan/clcbib.html>.

5. Bryan Sinclair, "Commons 2.0: Library Spaces Designed for Collaborative Learning," *EDUCAUSE Quarterly* 30, no. 4 (2007): 4–6, <http://connect.educause.edu/library/abstract/Commons20LibrarySpac/45534>.

6. For example, see Sarah Barbara Watstein and Stephen J. Bell, "Is There a Future for the Reference Desk? A Point-Counterpoint Discussion," *Reference Librarian* 49, no. 1 (2008): 1–20, and Jack O'Gorman and Barry Trott, "What Will Become of Reference in Academic and Public Libraries?" *Journal of Library Administration* 49 (2009): 327–39.

7. "Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education," ACRL, 2000; www.ala.org/ala/mgrps/divs/acrl/standards/standards.pdf. 

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("The college library in the 21st century," continued from page 516)

Shill, Harold B., and Shawn Tonner. "Creating a Better Place: Physical Improvements in Academic Libraries, 1995-2002." *College and Research Libraries* 64:6 (November 2003): 431-66.

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