

A librarian's manifesto

The library is an essential classroom

by Jennifer W. Kimball

In this age of information glut, we must never let the academic library lull in the background too easily overlooked. The presence of computers in our world seems to be clouding people's vision so thoroughly that the library is only discernible through a fog. Pretty soon we won't need library buildings? Surely we can at least cut back on library space? Can the reference desk staff telecommute? Can we merge information systems departments and libraries, since they're basically concerned with the same thing?

Our response is too often unheard. Are we too nice to rock the boat? Too comfortable? Too defeated? Or simply so beleaguered we don't know what to tackle first? This article addresses the last scenario. In dealing with the not-so-hypothetical questions in the paragraph above, answers ought to be worded for the ears of the administrators, faculty, and students who ask them. And the answers become a polemic to dispel the library fog.

The library continues to be an absolutely essential classroom, scene of a "core course" for every student. In this nonregistered course that spans the student's academic career, cognitive thought processes are challenged and formed as the difficulty of assignments progresses: reading what a professor has placed on reserve; writing a brief analysis of an assigned article; finding, critiquing, and applying scholarly material as it addresses a

defined question; conducting an extensive literature review and analyzing all the material gathered in order to apply it to a complex problem.

The library is not simply about information, but about knowledge. It is not only knowing what button to push on the computer, but knowing how to evaluate what the computer emits. It is not only knowing when to use a computer, but also recognizing when to use a book. It is not simply knowing where to go, but what to do when you get there.

In the skills of information literacy—the ability to find, evaluate, and use information effectively—the librarians are readily associated with teaching the first component in this list. For the second, librarians and professors collaborate (intentionally or not). Evidence of the third is mainly left to the professor to see upon assessing the student's work. The first two are all too often assumed, and almost never graded. It is assumed either that students possess these skills upon entrance to college, or that these skills will automatically develop themselves along the way, requiring neither the time nor the attention of faculty.

The reality (as all reference librarians know) is in fact the opposite; these skills take time, effort, and guidance. Because the library is the significant place where these skills are practiced and developed, students ask for guidance from the teachers nearby: the

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librarians. Because librarians see and understand where the students are and how far they need to go to become information literate, it is the librarians' responsibility to make the need for this education known.

And we are well qualified to illuminate this need. Who teaches more students every year than the librarians? We are in a unique position to speak about student trends, competencies, and characteristics that can only be seen when working with such large segments of the student population annually. After grading library assignments from every first-year student (whom I've met in their college writing classes at the onset of their research paper), I see where they are and know how much they have to accomplish to become capable lifelong learners. (I am also very tired.) I've met the whole first-year class, so, over time, I will have met the whole undergraduate student body (minus transfers). I will see many of them later when upper-division classes come for one-shots, and when individual students come to the reference desk—so I can see how much they've learned, and what they still need to learn. I also meet with graduate classes, and see where they are.

When these research skills and cognitive developments are overlooked, the library is overlooked, as well. Our teaching function is forgotten . . . our budget requests seem low priority . . . our study carrels are empty . . . people can't remember why they should come to the library.

Perhaps our strongest argument for the library as a place, is no longer, "This is where all the stuff is," but, "This is where the librarians are!"

If you were trying to improve your hookshot, would you take your basketball to the cafeteria and ask an unathletic passerby to critique your form? So when research is the game, why not come to the library, and have a librarian nearby when you get stuck?

The voice of the librarian should be a clarion call that establishes the presence of the library at the center of the university. We must articulate the necessity of this monumental laboratory we call the library. To do it, we must open the discourse with strong claims, and continue it with lucidity. Forget about computers and books for a minute—Why are we *really* here? We are interested in something bigger: *learning*.

And as we all know, "higher learning" does not merely mean acquiring a larger mental store of material. It is about process as well: how to look at something *wisely*; how to solve a *complex* problem; how to put ideas to use. All of these are practiced in the library time and again as part of research. We cannot allow this crucial, sustained, experiential learning to fall by the wayside—forgotten in an age when it is needed most, and too many students are trying to navigate through trees without having any comprehension of forest.

Are professors complaining about the poor quality of student learning as evidenced in papers based on Internet snippets? Tell them to bring their students to the real place for research—the *library*, complete with faculty waiting to coach them. ■

(*"New frontiers . . . continued from page 910*) to gain access to more GL, including self-posted writings by those without institutional affiliations. How would such work—referred to by Sociologist Helmut Artus in his paper as "dirty grey literature" with no bibliographic qualities at all—be filtered by users? This question showed an interesting gap between special librarians—who did the searching themselves to package results for clients—and academic librarians, who could too easily see the impact on uncritical undergraduates of a Web full of good, bad, and ugly research indiscriminately presented by aggregators and engines.

Another distinction that became evident during the conference related to ephemerality and obscurity. How much GL was the larval stage of published research, necessary to identify in the interest of speed and currency, and how much research of enduring value never will be published beyond the original, GL report?

Not addressed was the related question—posed, for example, by U.S. environmental-impact studies, of how much research that used to be published by museum occasional papers and other well-controlled sources is now found in agency branch office contract research reports, far outside the view of libraries?

Note

1. *Mark Twain: Mark Twain's Notebook*, May 23, 1903. ■

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