What the 21st-Century Library Looks Like

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CHICAGO

Alyssa Schukar for The Chronicle
The library at DePaul U., where   Scott Walter is university librarian,   is among those that have emphasized serving students, not just collecting books.

When DePaul University opened its new library in 1992, the information ecosystem was on the precipice of change. The internet was becoming mainstream and, with it, libraries' role in providing access to information was crumbling.

Two and a half decades later, DePaul's John T. Richardson Library looks the same from the outside. But when visitors walk through its tall-ceilinged hallway and onto the first floor, they enter a space that's clearly adapted to the digital age.

For one thing, most of the books have been moved off this floor. Instead, a spacious room swims in warm light and hums with activity. Soft chairs are clustered in pods across the floor, and a buzz of conversation fills the air.
There's a Genius Squad counter, where students can get technical help, and a Scholar's Lab, equipped with 42-inch monitors and scanners. In another corner, a job-preparation night is underway in the Learning Commons, a community room for campus groups.

Some students are tapping away at laptops; others are scrolling through phones or chatting with neighbors. This part of the library is a place for people, not books.

Offices once lined the walls, blocking the windows from view, says Scott Walter, the university librarian. Bookcases rose seven and a half feet high.

"It was all completely gutted in the renovation," he says.

The transformation reflects how the internet has upended a premise around which libraries had long structured their existence: that more books on shelves meant easier access to content.

Now, with information always a few taps away, libraries have had to carve out a new niche. They've done so by pivoting away from books and toward supporting students. Institutions across the country have moved books off-site to make way for study spaces, "Maker" labs, and nap pods.

Librarians' jobs are changing, too, as they find new ways to make themselves central to the changing needs of colleges. Though their focus differs depending on their institution, librarians are broadly spending less time with collections and more time teaching students how to do research and use digital tools. DePaul's library is one of many that employs staff members with titles like Wikipedian in Residence, and Assessment and Marketing Librarian.
But as libraries adapt to a digital world by carting books off-site and rebranding themselves, are they shedding part of their core identity? Is anything being lost?

As libraries have been displaced by the internet as the go-to place to seek information, a diminished sense of place and importance has followed.
A survey published in April by Ithaka S+R, a research-and-consulting service, found that library directors feel increasingly less valued by senior academic leadership and less involved with decisions on their campuses. Only one-fifth of respondents said their institution's budget demonstrated a recognition of the library's value. And while

librarians reported being deeply committed to student success, they struggled to articulate what exactly their contributions are.

Decades after the internet's introduction, the survey found that some librarians are still trying to hold on to the library's historic role as the fount of academic information. But their number is declining. From 2010 to 2016, the proportion who said it's strategically important that the library be seen as the first place to go for scholarly information decreased from more than 80 percent to 64 percent.

But librarians haven't just been passive observers of decline. Though some cottoned to the internet more quickly than others, most have now re-envisioned both their collections and their roles.
Libraries have reported spending less on print materials and more on electronic resources, including online journals and databases. Providing instruction to undergraduates and giving students a space to collaborate were broadly deemed core purposes of libraries in the previous iteration of the survey, published in 2014, as well as in the new report.

The survey has added questions over the years, making some results hard to compare longitudinally. But it's clear that teaching is an increasingly important part of librarians' work. By 2017, library positions related to instructional design, information literacy, and specialized faculty research support were those that most respondents expected to grow over the next five years. Among those expected to decline were positions related to cataloging and print preservation.

The structural changes are mirrored by demographic ones.

Stanley Wilder, dean of libraries at Louisiana State University, has analyzed demographic data on librarians for decades. He noted aging in the profession as early as 1995 and predicts that library professionals will be much younger, on average, by 2020, as a significant number of them retire.

Replacing the old guard are young librarians who have diverse educational backgrounds and are more skilled in areas identified by the survey as being high-growth.

While librarians have historically skewed female, he adds, more and more women are ascending the ranks to become library directors.

Trends like these have already been factored into the calculus of market-savvy education programs and institutional libraries. Some library programs have been renamed information studies or computing and informatics. DePaul's library is among many that employ librarians specializing in engagement, data, and digital services.

"There's absolutely a sense that research libraries need to change. They need to do different things now that they're in a completely digital environment," Mr. Wilder says. "Having these vacancies approach is going to be huge for allowing libraries to reorient themselves."

While traditional skills won't go away altogether, he says, new hires can help their employers "figure out what the 21st-century research librarianship actually looks like."

When people had to walk into a building and ask where to find a book, librarians could assume that they dominated the information-discovery process. Though they've been usurped by the internet, they still see retrieving and vetting information as an important part of their job.

So on an afternoon in late May, Christopher Parker is standing at the help desk on the first floor of DePaul's library, awaiting queries. Hands on hips, he surveys the scene. Above him is a sign that reads "Research Help Ask Here."
"When people walk into the library," he says, "we want them to see someone who is overtly available."

It is the start of Mr. Parker's two-hour shift staffing the help desk, where he'll respond to patrons' questions, like how to access a specific journal or where the bathrooms are. He opens an instant-messaging system on the computer to field incoming chats and looks around expectantly. It's the same job that reference librarians have done for decades.

The phone rings. "Hi, this is Chris Parker at the Research Help Desk," he says. "How can I help?" He listens to the caller, a student employee on DePaul's other campus, a few miles away, and types a search into the library catalog. He is trying to determine why the latest issue of a certain journal seems to be a year old.

"It may be a lapsed subscription," he says. "I'm not sure."

But he quickly determines that the journal was renamed a year ago, and rattles off instructions to the student employee. Mr. Parker logs the question into an internal tracking system, assigning it a complexity level of two out of five.

Over the course of 45 minutes, it is the only research question he receives.

The aim of the help desk — which is staffed until midnight most nights during the academic year — is to meet students where they are at the moment they need help, Mr. Parker says. He believes it's important that librarians maintain that "professional presence" at the help desk.

"When I go to the post office or some other service point, and there's someone sitting there, I want that person to be able to help me with the question I've got," he says. "I don't really want to have that person disappear round the back and try to find someone who can answer my question."

But much of the help he and his colleagues provide happens elsewhere, in scheduled consultations or visits to classes, where they work with faculty members and students on research assignments. It is a sign of the changing profession. In the 2015-16 academic year, DePaul's library reported holding 4,076 consultations and 484 instruction sessions for 11,899 participants.

The library's website offers a variety of materials, including a tip sheet to help instructors assign research projects. One recommendation: "Require that students turn in a topic proposal, an annotated bibliography, or a draft along the way to the final product."

These online resources and in-person sessions are a way the library promotes "this idea that we're here to help you," Mr. Parker says. "We're very, very flexible in the way we provide that help."

Like other librarians, Mr. Parker teaches students how to find, analyze, and use information in 90-minute class visits. He sometimes starts the session with music and handouts to set a friendly tone. Otherwise, he says, "you can make it seem scary and inaccessible very quickly." He'll walk students through the mechanics of plumbing databases and the frame of mind needed to define and analyze a research topic. Students who participate are sometimes rewarded with bars of Twix and Almond Joy.

DePaul's librarians also work closely with students and faculty members in specific disciplines to provide tailored research help. Mr. Parker, for example, who works with the nursing school, sometimes reviews medical terms before meeting with the nursing students. Because they have off-campus clinical work, he also uses video services like Zoom as an alternative to in-person consultations.

"We don't just do this because we love books," Mr. Parker says. "We really want to help students succeed."

In the pre-internet age, libraries could measure their impact by counting how many books they circulated, or the number of people who passed through their gates. Now their value is harder to quantify.

"We've done a good job of making information very accessible," says James J. O'Donnell, a former provost at Georgetown University and the university librarian at the Arizona State University Libraries. Such a good job, in fact, that "there are certainly plenty of faculty nowadays who don't set foot in a library building."

Campus libraries pay for many of the resources that students and faculty members access through online portals. But that leaves a different impression on users than walking into the library does. The loss of face time, librarians fear, can translate into a loss of funding.

Exacerbating this problem of visibility is the fact that libraries have an unusual brand, says Mr. O'Donnell, who was hired to transform Arizona State's libraries for a digital age. Nobody dislikes them. But without alumni or students, and with staff members who are sometimes not considered faculty members, libraries don't have a natural constituency to advocate for them.

In a way, libraries have an advertising problem on their hands. And to address it, librarians like Mr. Walter, at DePaul, have become astute marketers.

It's in that spirit that some library associations and libraries are collecting metrics to demonstrate their contributions on campus. The Association of College & Research Libraries organized a research effort that found even even checking out a book or using a study room in the library connected to positive outcomes for students. The impact of library instruction was found to be similarly beneficial.

DePaul, which participated in the effort, has what librarians there call a "culture of assessment." The library puts online a list of facts about its two main branches: how many materials were circulated in the 2013-14 academic year (191,916), how many e-books the library has (nearly 200,000), how much money was spent on books ($727,807). It recently hired an assessment-and-marketing librarian to coordinate the library's efforts to evaluate its services.
This focus on outcomes reflects a broader trend in higher education. But data are also a way for libraries to demonstrate their value in a way administrators will understand. Mr. Wilder says he's seeing library directors spend more time on external-facing work and become better at inserting themselves into campuswide conversations. Libraries may have always seen student success as a core part of their mission, but they've had to become better at selling their services.

Mr. Walter is adept at doing so. When he was hired by DePaul, five years ago, he set up meetings with various administrators to get to know them and their needs. At one of these lunches, an associate provost said she was struggling to establish a one-stop shop for tutoring services — a widely supported proposal that had stalled because no location could host it.

Mr. Walter thought back to a blueprint he'd seen that morning for the library's renovation, which was then in progress. "Well," he remembers saying, "I think I might have a place for you."

The university got the tutoring center, and the library got recognition. Offering a home for the tutoring center helped cement the library's role as a partner in moving

the effort forward. And the library has been able to build support for its initiatives by tying them to the center and other university goals, Mr. Walter says.

When DePaul unveiled a strategic plan in 2012, Mr. Walter wrote a news release describing library initiatives that aligned with that vision.

"We would not be successful in competing for available resources at the end of the year if we just talked about what we wanted to do," he says.

His strategy has worked.

When its renovation is completed, DePaul's library will feature a "Maker Hub" on the second floor, stocked with 3-D printers, a vinyl cutter, a sewing machine, and a 3-D scanner, which, the library's website notes, can scan people. Booths with audio and video equipment, as well as a green screen, will line the walls outside. A classroom and office space will be added for a group on campus focused on faculty development and interdisciplinary academic work.

The library's renovations were mentioned by the university's president in a news release about innovation at DePaul. "That is evidence that senior leadership understands," Mr. Walter says. "They may not understand the library's contributions as fulsomely or in every way that I might consider, but the fact that we're on the list to me is very meaningful."

As books are moved off-site, a question remains: What happens to the body of knowledge they contain?

Irene M.H. Herold, a recent president of the Association of College & Research Libraries, says a downside to removing books is that patrons won't be able to stumble on interesting material just by perusing library shelves.

But libraries that have moved materials into storage, or even gotten rid of them, insist it's a process undertaken with care. Many, including DePaul, have formed partnerships with other institutions to share resources, including digital ones.

Mike Furlough is executive director of HathiTrust, a repository that aggregates digitized materials. He says efforts like these are not just about saving space; they can also fulfill libraries' historic duty to preserve information.

HathiTrust, for example, is working to ensure that at least one of its member libraries holds onto a physical copy of each resource hosted online.

A goal of the effort, he says, is for libraries to be able to look at data from HathiTrust and their own usage patterns and realize, for example, "Great, 10 libraries have a copy

of this item that hasn't been circulated since 1963, so it's safe for us to let go of it without fear it will be lost permanently."

Because libraries cannot match the internet's quantity of information, many of them are finding that the best way forward is to emphasize what's analog and local. They offer space to campus groups and make the library an enticing destination for students. They also focus on special collections, or on print and archival materials that are unique to them.

By doubling down on the physical collections that only they have, libraries are emphasizing their depth rather than the breadth provided on the web.

At DePaul, this means collections about social justice in Chicago, Catholicism, and the Vincentians who founded the university in 1898.

The Wikipedian in Residence whom the library recently hired, creates or adds to Wikipedia entries that reference DePaul's special collections. She also leads instruction sessions in which students do similar work with Wikipedia as an information- and media-literacy exercise.

The efforts align neatly with two of the university's strategic goals: to enhance a historic connection with the city of Chicago, and to strengthen its Roman Catholic and Vincentian identity.

Mr. Walter says the library has tried to ensure that its special collections reinforce what's distinctive about DePaul — its mission, its history, its enrollment, the interests of faculty. It's this mind-set that defines how the library thinks not just about its collections but also about its role.

When libraries change their focus to be about advancing the mission of the university, Mr. Walter says, they're more likely to be successful and appreciated.

"For many people, it can be scary, it can be challenging, it can really demand a lot in terms of reskilling and rethinking their roles," he says. Librarians have to be more collaborative, creative, and fluid in how they think about their contributions, he says. "To me, that's exciting."

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