College Libraries Set Aside Books in a Digital Age

By RALPH BLUMENTHAL  Published: May 14, 2005

HOUSTON, May 13 - Students attending the University of Texas at Austin will find something missing from the undergraduate library this fall.

Books.

By mid-July, the university says, almost all of the library's 90,000 volumes will be dispersed to other university collections to clear space for a 24-hour electronic information commons, a fast-spreading phenomenon that is transforming research and study on campuses around the country.

"In this information-seeking America, I can't think of anyone who would elect to build a books-only library," said Fred Heath, vice provost of the University of Texas Libraries in Austin.

Their new version is to include "software suites" - modules with computers where students can work collaboratively at all hours - an expanded center for writing instruction, and a center for computer training, technical assistance and repair.

Such digital learning laboratories, staffed with Internet-expert librarians, teachers and technicians, have been advancing on traditional college libraries since appearing at the University of Southern California in 1994. As more texts become accessible online, libraries have been moving lesser-used materials to storage. But experts said it was symbolic for a top educational institution like Texas to empty a library of books.

The trend is being driven, academicians and librarians say, by the dwindling need for undergraduate libraries, many of which were built when leading research libraries were reserved for graduate students and faculty. But those distinctions have largely crumbled, with research librar-
ies throwing open their stacks, leaving undergraduate libraries as increasingly puny adjuncts with duplicate collections and shelves of light reading.

Mr. Heath said removal of the books had raised some eyebrows among the faculty and anxiety among the library staff. But he said the concerns were needless. "Books are the fundamental icon of intellectual efforts," he said, "the scholarly communication of our time."

So, Mr. Heath said, speaking of the library, "if you move it, there's a pang, a sense of loss." He added that the books were merely being moved within the university's library system, one of the nation's largest, home to some 8 million volumes and growing by 100,000 a year. Basic reference books like dictionaries and encyclopedias will remain.

The move, Mr. Heath said, would free about 6,000 square feet in the four-story Flawn Academic Center, which opened in 1963.

Students at Texas, interviewed as they studied or lounged at the library tables, said that they would welcome extra computer space and that they got most of their books anyway at the far larger Perry-Castañeda Library. But some said they liked the popular selection at the undergraduate library and feared the loss of a familiar and congenial space.

"Well, this is a library - it's supposed to have books in it," said Jessica Zaharias, a senior in business management. "You can't really replace books. There's plenty of libraries where they have study rooms. This is a nice place for students to come to. It's central in campus."

Library staff members said they were taken by surprise when told last month of the conversion, which is how the news first emerged. At a retreat just weeks earlier they had brainstormed about ways to improve service and save money. They said they had been promised reassignment after the conversion and feared speaking out publicly at the risk of jeopardizing their jobs.

Many specialists said Texas was going along with an accelerating trend.

"The library is not so much a space where books are held as where ideas are shared," said Geneva Henry, executive director of the digital library initiative at Rice University in Houston, where anyone can access and augment course materials in a program called Connexions. "It's having a conversation rather than homing in on the book."

"We're teaching students how to do research," Ms. Henry said. "Their first reaction is to Google. But they need to validate their information and dig deeper."

Carole Wedge, president of Shepley, Bulfinch, Richardson & Abbott, an architecture firm in Boston that has redesigned dozens of college libraries for the computer age, said most were built "as boxes to house print collections." The challenge, Ms. Wedge said, is to adapt them to what she called "the Barnes & Noble culture, making reading and learning a blurred experience."

Rarely do today's students hunt for a book in the stacks, she said. Now they go online and may end up with a book, but also a DVD or other medium. But, she said, "it's unlikely there will be libraries without books for a long time."

Significantly, librarians are big supporters of the trend.
"There's a real transition going on," said Sarah Thomas, past president of the Association of Research Libraries and the librarian at the Cornell University Library in Ithaca, N.Y. "This is not to say you don't have paper or books. Of course, they're sacred. But more and more we're delivering material to the user as opposed to the user coming into the library to get it."

Southern California, which celebrated the 10th anniversary of its electronic center, called Gateway, last October, keeps about 80,000 books at Gateway, although millions more are available at the university's 15 other libraries, said Lynn O'Leary-Archer, director of the university libraries.

Similar digital library centers have been built at Emory University in Atlanta, the University of Georgia, the University of Arizona and the University of Michigan. The University of Houston, which is doubling its library space, specializes in the publishing of scholarly material online.

"This is a new generation, born with a chip," said Frances Maloy, president of the Association of College and Research Libraries and leader of access services at Emory. "A student sends an e-mail at 2 a.m. and wonders by 8 a.m. why the professor hasn't responded."

Ms. Maloy praised the initiative at the University of Texas as signifying "that a great university with a fabulous library collection recognizes it's in the digital age."