

Academic Libraries: “Social” or “Communal?” The Nature and Future of Academic Libraries

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ABSTRACT: The apparent death of academic libraries, as measured by declining circulation of print materials, reduced use of reference services, and falling gate counts, has led to calls for a more “social” approach to academic libraries: installing cafés, expanding group study spaces, and developing “information commons.” This study compares these social models with the traditional academic library, whose spirit is best understood as “communal.” It argues that this communal spirit is unique, and greatly valued by academic library users. Efforts to create a more social academic library threaten this communal spirit, and may do more harm than good.

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The increasing use of electronic resources off-campus has resulted in both declining circulation of print materials and reduced use of reference services in academic libraries. These trends, combined with reports of falling library gate counts, have led to numerous claims of the impending death of the traditional academic library. While some have resigned themselves to putting libraries on life support, others have responded with aggressive treatment: installing “social” spaces like cafés, museums, and theaters; creating collaborative group study spaces; and developing “information commons.” These very different responses to the plight of academic libraries are rooted in the idea that academic libraries are little more than storage facilities for printed materials.

If academic libraries do nothing more than store books, then patrons’ increasing reliance on electronic resources accessible anywhere may indeed mean the death of the academic library as it currently exists. New models of the academic library may therefore be warranted. But the academic library has never been just a book warehouse. Historically, patrons have come to academic libraries not only for the intellectual resources they offer, but for the spaces in which to seriously engage those resources. The rise of electronic resources may mean that patrons no longer have to come to academic libraries to access the information they need, but many still come anyway. What they come for and value is the “communal” experience of seeing and being seen by others, quietly engaged in the same serious, studious activity.

A communal academic library is not the same as a social academic library. The social model envisions a library in which students and faculty collaborate and communicate with each other in the creation of new knowledge. Adding social functions and services like cafés, art galleries, group study facilities, and info commons creates spaces and models of behavior that are open to conversation and cooperative work. The problem is that the social model undermines something that is highly valued in academic libraries: the communal nature of quiet, serious study. Communal activity in academic libraries is a solitary activity: it is studious, contemplative, and quiet. Social activity is a group activity: it is sometimes studious, not always contemplative, and certainly not quiet.

This is not to say that social activities have no place in the academic library; that providing new services and facilities to bring more students and faculty into the academic library is a bad idea. Rather, the problem is that these services and facilities are being promoted without sufficient regard to the ways in which social activities undermine communal activities. In addition, it is not clear that social activities add value to academic libraries, either in terms of the broader goal of supporting the research mission of universities or the narrower goal of increasing library use.

This study will explore the literature on remodeling academic libraries. What is the historical purpose of the academic library? Is this purpose still relevant? What are the primary forces driving the perceived need for change in academic libraries? Will these changes serve the needs of academic library patrons? Are non-traditional library services like cafés, social spaces, and info commons adding to or detracting from the communal spirit of the academic library?

Impetus for Change in Academic Libraries

The demand for change in academic libraries has been driven by three seemingly interrelated factors: the increasing use of electronic resources outside the library, the declining circulation of print materials, and falling gate counts. Scott Carlson, in his controversial 2001 article, “The Deserted Library,” notes that gate counts have been falling at many academic libraries: 20 percent at the University of Idaho-Moscow since 1997 and 32 percent at Augusta State University since 1993.¹ As academic library users rely on electronic resources more and more, their use of libraries’ print collections declines, resulting in less use of the physical library and declining gate counts. Because the electronic availability journals and books is only going to increase, at some point patrons may never have to enter academic libraries to make use of their collections.

This notion has led some to claim that the academic library is all but dead. William Wisner claims that “we must accept that the historic mission of libraries is finished, that our buildings will disappear gradually over the next 100 years, and that the portable e-book, once perfected, will drive the last nail into our collective coffins.”² Others argue that creating new services and facilities within the academic library can rejuvenate it. One of the driving forces behind this movement has been a pedagogical shift in higher education. Work in the sociology of knowledge suggests that knowledge is not produced by solitary researchers working with library collections, but is a social process. Indeed, knowledge itself is seen as socially constructed.³ The model of the professor dispensing knowledge from a lecture podium and students engaged in solitary research projects conflicts with the idea of knowledge as a social construction. Learning is increasingly seen as a collaborative process among faculty and students. In response to

these ideas, faculty have turned away from relying solely on exams and papers, and are assigning more group projects. These group projects are seen as a way to allow students to negotiate their ideas collaboratively, in ways that more accurately reflect the actual process of knowledge creation.⁴

These trends and ideas have had a profound impact on academic librarians and library space planning. Barbara Fister notes, “sociologists of knowledge argue the creation of new knowledge is a socially negotiated process. Communities share ideas....”⁵ Scott Bennett draws a distinction between libraries, which reinforce hierarchical relationships, and “domestic spaces,” which “affirm a non-foundational view that holds knowledge to be ‘a community project. People construct knowledge working together in groups, interdependently.’”⁶ He argues that academic libraries of the future should be more like domestic spaces: “[S]pace that allows students to manage the social dimensions of learning, that domesticates the foundational character of knowledge... and that celebrates the communal... character of knowledge will indeed foster learning.”⁷

Implicit in this view is a confusion between “social” and “communal.” There is a profound difference between a space in which library users are engaged in social activity and a space in which they are engaged in communal activity. Social activity in a library involves conversation and discussion among people, about either the work at hand or more trivial matters. Communal activity in a library involves seeing and being seen quietly engaged in study. As Sam Demas writes:

One of the powerful attractions of libraries is the unique pleasure of being alone, in a quiet place, while simultaneously being in a public place associated with scholarship.... Student focus groups and anecdotal evidence portray individual study as both a private and a communal act. Students associate the library with the privilege of being part of a

scholarly community; in this respect, it ranks second only to the classroom.... Nationally, the traditional library reading room is enjoying a renaissance as a place to study in the presence of others; it is a place to see and be seen while working privately.⁸

Unfortunately, social activities are not always compatible with communal activities.

Conversation, scholarly or not, can be a distraction from serious study in a communal place. Indeed, as Demas reports, “Some students are beginning to ask for places in the library without the distraction of computer keyboards, printer sounds, and cell phones.”⁹

However, many writers increasingly see academic libraries as social, rather than communal spaces, or at least see little conflict between the two. Fister argues:

The social nature of the academic library today is somewhat different – and certainly noisier. The enduring value of the library as a cultural meeting place is taking on a more extroverted character as libraries realize how potent that social element can be in fostering learning.¹⁰

Even Demas falls into this trap: Carlson quotes him as saying, “There is a huge amount of socializing and flirting and being seen that’s not in the least in conflict with the main use of the library, which is research.”¹¹ But there can be a conflict between socializing and serious study, at least at some times, in some places, for some people. There must be places in academic libraries for communal study.

Some do see the value in preserving the communal nature of the academic library, or at least preserving some communal spaces. Emily Ranseen notes how appreciation for quiet study has been lost:

We live in a noisy society, where it is frequently expected that exchange of energies necessitate sound. But communal study in a library fosters a silent exchange of energy, and quiet study is in truth an active experience. By providing quiet space, the library ensures a welcome refuge from pervasive societal noise. It is in fact this quiet force of energy that many comment on in their love for libraries, but the power of silence is not always recognized since noise has become the norm.¹²

The trick for academic libraries is to create inviting communal spaces for study and research without falling into the trap of making the library a social gathering place. Indeed, it is worth emphasizing that solitary study is also a social act. As Fister notes, “The act of reading is itself a social interaction between text and reader.... Every trip to the stacks is entry into a conversation, as eavesdropper or as a participant....”¹³ In other words, social knowledge is created even in communal academic libraries. Social construction is a model of knowledge creation, not a mandate for the creation of social academic libraries. It is by no means clear that social academic libraries will create “better” knowledge, or even foster better learning.

Underlying the view that the academic library should become a more social place is the notion that the traditional academic library is little more than a warehouse for books. Geoffrey Freeman argues that academic libraries were never designed with user aesthetics in mind, having “been designed first and foremost as places to collect, access, and preserve print collections.”¹⁴ Though housing print collections may be the main impetus for academic libraries, it has never been their sole purpose. Moreover, it is not clear that the declining use of print collections is creating an exodus from academic libraries, or even that such an exodus exists. Biennial reports on academic libraries by the National Center for Education Statistics suggest that falling gate counts are not a general phenomenon among academic libraries. While library gate counts fell at institutions offering at least a bachelor’s degree in 1996 and 1998, gate counts went up in 2000 and 2004. Between 1994 and 2004, gate counts overall rose 9.2 percent. For institutions offering a master’s degree, gate counts went up 5.6 percent overall between 1994 and 2004. For institutions offering a doctorate, gate counts fell in 1996 and 1998, but were up

9.8 percent overall from 1994 to 2004. While NCES figures show that gate counts are not falling at academic libraries, they do show that the circulation of print materials is declining. Between 1994 and 2004, general circulation declined more than 13 percent at institutions offering at least a bachelor's degree. Similarly, reference transactions at institutions offering at least a bachelor's degree dropped almost 32 percent between 1994 and 2004.¹⁵

In sum, if gate counts are rising while print circulation and use of reference services are falling, users must be finding something else of value in academic libraries. What they value is a place to engage in communal study.¹⁶ Sam Demas and Jeffrey Scherer note “many students go to the library because peer pressure and the overall ambiance put them in the mood to study.”¹⁷ Outside the library, there are few such places, on or off campus. In a small study of users of the Leavey Library at the University of California, Susan Gardner and Susanna Eng found that 80.6 percent of users visit the library because they wanted to study alone. They also report that study facilities received the second lowest service rating in the survey.¹⁸ Academic library remodeling projects must therefore be careful to preserve places for serious study, and even consider expanding them. As Freeman notes, even in remodeled libraries, “a significant majority of students still considers the traditional reading room their favorite area of the library....”¹⁹

Models of Change in Academic Libraries

What are the components of the “social” academic library? Though specific recommendations vary, there are two basic ideas: integrating technological and

information resources in what is often described as an “info commons” and bringing non-traditional functions like classrooms, event programming, and cafés into the library.

Exploring the details of these models, neither of which is mutually exclusive, is beyond the scope of this analysis. Instead, these approaches will be examined in terms of their relationship to and impact on the communal academic library. In addition, their effects on academic library use will be discussed.

For many, the idea of the info commons is simply to integrate technical resources, information sources, and staff support. Traditionally, the computer lab and the reference desk have been separate service points; no library help is available in the computer lab and no technical support is available at the reference desk. By bringing the two together, users are able to make better use of both.²⁰ This model of the info commons is entirely compatible with the traditional, communal academic library.

For others, the purpose of the info commons is to serve new, collaborative models of teaching and learning. Donald Beagle argues that a “key feature of the Information Commons is the coordinated and extended set of study and workspaces offering an array of options ranging from traditional individual study to collaborative conference areas.”²¹ Joseph Brewer states that one of the aims of the info commons is to “[provide] community spaces for inquiry-based learning and out-of-classroom activities...”²² It is important to note that in this view of the info commons, facilities for group work are seen as a supplement to, rather than a replacement for, individual study spaces. Communal spaces coexist with spaces for social group work. Nevertheless, social spaces are seen as becoming more important than communal spaces in the future. Though Laurie MacWhinnie notes, “Academic libraries are a refuge for those who... need a place

conducive to study...” she goes on to argue that “libraries are natural gathering places for groups to study and provide social space for students to meet between classes...” and that “these features will be more important in the future as remote access to information isolates users and students seek learning and social spaces where they can interact with others.”²³

For some however, the info commons is central to the idea of the social library. Bennett defines info commons as “spaces where learning is the primary activity and where the focus is on facilitating the social exchanges through which information is transformed into knowledge.”²⁴ Freeman argues:

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 an 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.²⁵

Freeman’s argument is based on the implied (and problematic) premise that the traditional academic library has little value as a physical place; that only by integrating print and electronic resources can it remain relevant. However, as has been shown, academic library patrons continue to see value in communal library spaces that facilitate serious study. Equally problematic, both Bennett and Freeman view the info commons as a social space. In addition to the problems of creating a social library at the expense of the communal one, it is not at all clear what a “social” info commons is. If it is a place for collaborative projects, what of the needs of those working alone? Are they to be relegated

to an old-style computer lab without the benefit of the research services available in the social info commons?

The range of nonlibrary functions being added to academic libraries is vast: cafés, art galleries, social and event spaces, classrooms. Demas argues, “The purpose of offering what are now quaintly termed *nonlibrary* services is to qualitatively enhance the library as a resource and to create an atmosphere conducive to sustained, serious academic work.”²⁶ To what degree do these services qualitatively enhance the library? Are they conducive to, or even compatible with serious academic work? Do they even bring users into the library?

Harold Shill and Shawn Tonner engaged in a large-scale study of academic library construction and renovation between 1995 and 2002. A major focus was the addition of nonlibrary facilities. They report a significant increase in the number of libraries reporting such facilities after remodeling projects:

- Conference rooms (41.1 percent)
- Computer labs (34.1 percent)
- Seminar rooms (31.8 percent)
- Multimedia production centers (26.6 percent)
- Cafés (24.9 percent)
- Educational technology centers (15.6 percent)
- Art galleries (15.1 percent)
- General use classrooms (15 percent)
- Auditoria (10.4 percent)
- Research institutes (4.1 percent)
- Bookstores (2.8 percent)
- Writing labs (0.4 percent)²⁷

As can be seen, some of the largest increases are in facilities that have little or no connection to the traditional mission of the academic library. Conference rooms, seminar rooms, art galleries, classrooms, and auditoria can all be found elsewhere on college

campuses. Computer labs and multimedia productions centers do have considerable utility for students, but one facility with a potentially significant impact on students, the writing lab, barely increased at all.

Shill and Tonner note, “Many academic libraries have cannibalized existing seating areas to accommodate collection growth.”²⁸ Unfortunately, their survey does not explore communal spaces, only group study seating. General seating for individual study is analyzed only in terms of the presence of wired or wireless access. Whether seating is for quiet study or more social use is not specified. That numerous nonlibrary facilities have been installed in these projects portends poorly for the provision of sufficient quiet, individual study space, however. Though their survey does find that users find “user seating/work space” to be greatly improved, the reasons for this result are unclear.²⁹

A follow-up study focused on the relationship between gate counts and library renovations. Shill and Tonner found that gate counts increased after remodeling and renovation, with a median increase of 37.4 percent. Interestingly however, the addition of nonlibrary facilities appears to have a negative effect on library usage, or at least no positive effect:

[T]here is no significant relationship between the proportion of building space allocated for library functions and postproject usage levels. In fact, there appears to be a tendency toward diminished usage among facilities allocating less than 25 percent of their space for library purposes.³⁰

While “the greatest concentration of 100 percent usage increases occurred in buildings assigning 75 to 90 percent of their space to the library,” they found that “usage increases were found in 93.3 percent of facilities devoted entirely to library use.”³¹ Even when examining the relationship between particular types of nonlibrary functions, such as

cafés, conference rooms, and computer labs, “there is no evidence that the presence of particular nonlibrary facilities has a significant impact on library exit counts.”³²

Interestingly, Shill and Tonner find “no relationship between the number of seats in an improved library and postproject usage patterns.”³³ This could suggest that studying facilities are not relevant. However, it should be noted that this analysis, like their previous study, does not distinguish among different types of study spaces. The only kind of study space singled out is group study space, and it was found “that there was no demonstrable relationship between the number of group study rooms and facility use.”³⁴ This suggests that even with the rise of social models of knowledge and learning, and greater reliance on group projects in higher education, students do not greatly value collaborative spaces. However, Shill and Tonner found that the “quality of user work space” was highly correlated with increased gate counts. Several other important factors in increased use likely dovetail with this result, including “quality of layout” (which helps delineate between communal and more social spaces); “quality of natural lighting” and “quality of overall ambience” (which are conducive to an inviting and studious environment); and “number of data ports” and “quality of telecommunication infrastructure” (which improve access to electronic resources in quiet study areas).³⁵

Overall, they conclude:

The number of general-use seats in an improved library facility was not associated with increased usage. However, . . . *the quality of user seating and work surfaces is a factor significantly affecting postoccupancy usage.* It would appear that comfortable seats, plus spacious, well-lit table and carrel surfaces, are factors that have a positive impact on usage of an enhanced facility.³⁶

This is an important finding, but needs to be read carefully. It might appear that because the amount of general study space does not affect gate counts, academic libraries can add nonlibrary functions without negatively impacting library use. However, because nonlibrary functions do not meaningfully increase library use, and because the presence of quality study spaces does, it would be more fruitful for academic libraries to devote their limited resources to improving and expanding communal study space.

Most studies of academic library space focus on students, ignoring another important constituent: faculty. Karen Antell and Debra Engel studied how different age groups among faculty used library resources and spaces. They hypothesized that older faculty would value print collections and the physical library more than younger faculty, who rely more on electronic resources. Surprisingly, while older faculty do place greater value on print resources, their use of the library for study and research is relatively limited. It is younger faculty, even with their greater reliance on electronic resources, who value the academic library as a place for research and scholarship:

Younger scholars were found to be far more likely than older scholars to make statements reflecting the idea that the physical library is a unique place that facilitates the kind of concentration necessary for doing serious scholarly work.³⁷

That younger faculty value the contemplative aspects of the communal academic library as much as students is further evidence that the social library model is an incomplete, if not inaccurate model for the future of the academic library.

Reconciling the New Academic Library with the Old

There is nothing inherently wrong with bringing new functions and services, even social functions and services, into the academic library. But it is vital that the new be

reconciled with the old; that new functions serve the needs of academic library users and that new services don't detract from existing, and valued ones. This can be challenging, as Christina Peterson notes: "This need for silent place is most at odds with other library uses and as such is most in need of protection."³⁸

Separation between the communal and social parts of the library is one solution.

Ranseen suggests:

With a library providing a multitude of environments, the contradictory functions of areas set aside for collective learning, discussion, and recreation, and of other spaces designed for concentrated study, have to be reconciled. This would most easily be done by separating the noisier, more active elements from the quieter and the still, as well as by displaying clear signs explaining the different areas of the library and the codes of conduct expected of individuals within differing spaces. This would provide patrons with a clearer orientation as to what is expected and where to get it, making them feel more at home, more comfortable.³⁹

However, there is a danger in separation; that the communal library will become an afterthought, a second-class citizen with limited concern for either aesthetics or library staff support. Given the centrality of communal study and research to the academic library, at least as much consideration (and financial resources) should be devoted to it as to info commons and cafés. Bernard Frischer argues that "librarians need to think more about architectural design because in the digital age, users of physical libraries will want to experience something in a library that cannot be had in the office or home, and that something is the drama of community."⁴⁰ This drama cannot be maintained, let alone expanded or created, by providing social or nonlibrary services.

With apologies to Mark Twain, the death of the academic library has not only been exaggerated, but misunderstood. Despite the increasing use of library resources off-

site, people do still use academic libraries, and in increasing numbers over the last ten years. Because they aren't making as much use of print collections or reference services, they must be finding something else of value in the library. This analysis suggests that what users of academic libraries find most useful and appealing are communal spaces that encourage serious study. Ever-growing collections have put such spaces under tremendous pressure in many academic libraries. One of the most important goals of academic library design must be to restore and rejuvenate communal library spaces.

The creation of facilities that do not serve this goal should be considered carefully. As has been shown, providing nonlibrary services and functions may not even serve the limited goal of increasing gate counts, let alone the mission of the academic library. Of more concern, many nonlibrary functions serve to promote a social rather than communal atmosphere in academic libraries. Coffee and conversation, group study and garrulousness are valuable, but these activities can happen anywhere. The academic library is unique as a communal place for study and research. There may well be room for social functions in the academic library, but such functions must not be allowed to undermine its fundamentally communal character. Intellectual conversation with library resources and conversation in the library are not necessarily the same thing. The challenge for the academic library of the future is to encourage the former and mitigate the negative consequences of the latter. Too often, those who advocate a new model for the academic library lose site of this distinction. As Demas and Scherer note:

Given the variety of activities that take place in a library, one key challenge is achieving a balance among an opposing range of functions and needs. Some examples include: solitude versus interaction; quiet versus noise; conservation versus food and drink; order versus mess; existing physical barriers versus no barriers; durability versus comfort;

openness versus security; and limited hours versus 24/7 expectations. In addressing these apparent tensions, it is much too easy to either opt for the status quo or succumb to the latest fad and introduce changes for the wrong reasons. The successful library meets all of its needs through a careful, iterative process of consultation, compromise, and design.⁴¹

Preserving, improving, and expanding the communal academic library neither maintains the status quo nor embraces the latest fad. Communal spaces in academic libraries are shrinking and aging, and need to be rejuvenated. Unfortunately, the social model of the academic library undermines communal spaces in three ways. First, library resources are finite, and money spent creating new social spaces reduces the money available for redeveloping communal spaces. Second, social spaces take up valuable library real estate, often at the expense of communal spaces. Third, and most important, social spaces are incompatible with communal spaces, and creating adequate separation between them is difficult. It is the communal aspect of libraries and the environment of serious study and research it creates that students and faculty value most, and which is bringing them into academic libraries in increasing numbers. This communal spirit should not only be preserved, but expanded and improved in academic libraries of the future.

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¹⁶ It could be argued that the creation of social academic libraries is responsible for rising gate counts. However, Harold Shill and Shawn Tonner report that between 1995 and 2002 there were about 400 academic library facility projects, which represents only 11 percent of the 3,653 academic libraries noted by the NCES in 2004. Moreover, it is not clear that social functions are responsible for rising gate counts in new and renovated academic libraries. See below for a further discussion of this point. Harold B. Shill and Shawn Tonner, "Creating a Better Place: Physical Improvements in Academic Libraries,

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⁴¹ Demas and Scherer, "Esprit de Place: Maintaining and Designing Library Buildings to Provide Transcendent Spaces," p. 66.