Re-Placing the Library
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Congratulations to the Kalamazoo College community on the dedication of this splendid new facility! Today is a day of celebration for the faculty and students whose work will be supported by the Upjohn Library Commons; for the administrators who planned and executed its design and construction, for the staff who will ensure its smooth operation, and for the alumnae, donors, trustees and friends whose leadership and support made it possible. Congratulations to you all, and thank you for inviting me to be a part of this happy event.

The accomplishment of any major building project is reason enough for a campus to celebrate, of course, but the dedication of a library is especially meaningful. Those of us who have chosen the academic life understand how profoundly true it is that the library is the heart of a campus. We know what it is to find the answer to a nagging question in an old periodical that no one else has opened for 15 years. We appreciate the serendipity of browsing the stacks because we know how it can open unexpected new realms for exploration. Almost certainly, every member of this faculty retains powerful and fond memories of her or his own favorite libraries – the smell of old books, somewhere between chalky and dusty, the reading chair in a quiet corner where you can prop your feet up on a windowsill, the massive dictionaries on their swivel stands . . . at least I, for one, can recall the libraries of my childhood and youth in great detail to this day.

Historically speaking, it’s not an exaggeration to say that libraries are the reason that campuses as we know them exist. Those who study the history of higher education remind us that before the technology of the book (and allow me to emphasize here that the book is not some “pre-technology” natural occurrence but is itself a technology, albeit a venerable one) came along, students gathered around their teachers and were educated in public squares, private homes, on long walks, or in the fabled Groves of Academe. As the technologies of literacy emerged, however, scholars began to collect texts, and their collections soon grew into libraries. Naturally enough, scholars began to live and work in proximity to these collections of texts and students were soon attracted to the growing constellations of scholars and libraries. And so what I call the bibliocentric campus was born – and has remained the primary organizational form for higher education in the West for many centuries.

Today, new technologies are emerging and educators are wondering about their implications for institutions which have for so long been centered on the older technologies of ink and paper and print. The question of what digital technologies will mean for libraries is particularly pressing. James Duderstadt, former president of the University of Michigan, puts the question for libraries in these terms: imagine, if you will, that the entire contents of Upjohn – all the books, art, videos, manuscripts – could be
stored on a device approximately the size and shape of a football? What would that mean for the concept of the library? As you know, the technology to make this vision possible is fast approaching.

I would like to suggest today that digital technologies will in fact soon require that the libraries we know and love be replaced. But don’t be alarmed: I don’t mean that libraries will be “replaced” in the usual sense of being done away with, supplanted by a poor substitute. Rather, I mean that the library must be Re-Placed -- that is must be placed again at the center of our teaching and learning activities, placed again at the heart of the academic enterprise as that enterprise responds to the expanding opportunities of the digital age.

What can we say, now, about what the re-placed library will be like? First, as I imagine it, the re-placed library will no longer be understood primarily as a container of information, a silo of knowledge, or a repository for collections. Rather, it will be understood as a springboard or launching pad for seekers of information. The re-placed library’s primary function will be to connect users to scholarly resources that are for the most part not owned by or contained within the library itself. This is a radical shift in conception, from seeing the library as a container of assets to seeing it as an enabler of access. This is a shift, however, that is already well underway, although almost invisibly: consider, for example, inter-library loan. We take the ability to get books our local library doesn’t own entirely for granted and regard getting us such books as a normal and reliable library function. But of course inter-library loan was itself a product of networking technologies – the technologies made possible in the second half of the 20th Century by improvements in America’s communication and transportation infrastructure. It was the highways, the automobiles, the telephone and fax machine that made interlibrary loan possible – although we don’t think of it as a technology-inspired innovation, it certainly was.

Cyberinfrastructure, in turn, will allow campus libraries to connect scholars to networked digital resources which colleges license access to, rather than borrow or own. Already, libraries like Upjohn subscribe to multiple scholarly databases providing access to texts, journal articles, and images. The re-placed library of the future will therefore be valued as a portal to the universe of networked information and its facilities and operations will be designed as much to promote access as to protect assets.

Second, the change from “assets” thinking to “access” thinking will require re-imagining the role of the professional librarian. This change too is already underway. Recently I noticed an ad placed by a university seeking to hire what they called a “NextGen” librarian. To quote from the ad: “As the “NextGen Librarian” you will play a leading role in exploring, implementing and supporting transformative technologies that will enhance access to our electronic resources and services.” Among the qualifications listed were “working knowledge of blogs, wikis, online gaming environments, podcasting, RSS and other Web-related technologies …” That job sounds a good deal hipper and more exciting than librarianship as we tend to think of it now, but I think it predicts how we will think of librarianship 20 years from now. The professional lines between information
technologists, instructional technologists, and librarians will continue to blur. New professional relationships and roles will emerge and new skills will be required. Marion the Librarian, with her passion for silence and the Dewey Decimal System, will go the way of the dinosaurs. In 2026, Marion the Networked Information Specialist will be fluent in processes and applications we can’t even imagine today, a specialist perhaps in gaming environments and simulations, an expert in folksonomies and other metadata innovations.

Third, the change from “assets” to “access” thinking means that libraries as institutional units will become increasingly less book centered and more people centered, more learner oriented than collection oriented. Libraries and librarians will work to create and nurture learning communities, to promote student and faculty interactions, and to build human skills and capacity. Spatial and functional distinctions between the student union, the classroom building, the library, the teaching and learning center, the writing center, the language lab, and other teaching and learning “places” now identified with dedicated physical facilities will fade as teaching and learning become more ubiquitous and more mobile. Helping people access information, the key function of the re-placed library, will be an activity performed in many places and at all hours. “NextGen” librarians and library users may never set foot in a facility those of us who grew up among the stacks would recognize as a library, unless perhaps as part of an exercise in living history.

The future, as we know, tends not to arrive all at once, with a thunderclap. Rather, it is built, decision by decision, innovation by innovation, year to year. Kalamazoo, today, celebrates the “re-placing” of its own library and so takes a significant step toward the future the college is building. So it is impressive to note that many of the innovations Kalamazoo has embraced in the new Upjohn Library Commons point so clearly forward. This building and the activities it inspires reveal a forward looking understanding of the library’s role on a college campus, in large part due to the wise and thoughtful leadership given by Lisa Palchick and her team. Of many wise and thoughtful decisions, the first we should note is, of course, Beaners! Having Beaners in the library is certainly cool, and certainly convenient – but more than that it signals Kalamazoo’s awareness that Upjohn is not your parents’ library. Beaner’s sends a message that people are expected to relax and enjoy themselves in the library, that connecting for social conversation is part of what’s supposed to happen in a library, and that learning happens over decaf mochas as well as over first editions. It marks Upjohn as a cheerful community space that welcomes human interaction, rather than as a forbidding fortress protecting the books.

Other new features send this same important message. In particular, the emphasis on using compact shelving to free up floor space for an increased number of computer stations and larger student gathering areas sends a powerful message about the commitment to a user-centered facility. Equally clear is the message sent by the way in which the interior design prefers collaborative and small group work clusters over individual carrels. On the second floor, multisided work clusters, designed to allow up to three students to work at the same station and up to a dozen to work in a cluster of stations, reflect the reality that learning is social and that engagement with other learners amplifies the impact of engagement with texts and data.
If I may tell a slightly digressive story, I was recently talking with the chief technology officer from a West Coast college about Kalamazoo and this building. I described the Beaners, and the shelving, and the work clusters, and the gathering spaces with enthusiasm. She just shook her head and said, no, no – on her campus the librarian and the community would never go for such things. I asked why not, and she asked a question in return – “Well, doesn’t all that mean there’s NOISE in the building?” she asked. I tried to explain that having a little more noise in the building was precisely the point, but I’m afraid I was not very successful. You should be proud that Kalamazoo has recognized that the heartbeat of learning has an audible and energetic pulse -- which should be heard and felt in the library.

Another innovation of which you should be proud, today, is the tagging of the books in this library with RFID chips. To my knowledge, Kalamazoo is one of the first small colleges to adopt this technology. It’s an important innovation because it illustrates the potential of technology to help redefine the work of librarians – to help Marion the Librarian become Marian the networked information specialist. The potential of RFID tags to reduce the amount of time librarians spend on routine circulation tasks is the potential to increase the amount of time they spend helping connect faculty and students users with the resources and information they want and need. The foresight shown by K in deciding to seize the opportunity created by the renovation to implement this technology is admirable. But then, it is no surprise that Kalamazoo has shown foresight in this matter. You have rather a habit of foresight, here – you have one of the first “merged” library and IT service units among the Midwestern colleges, and the fact that this building houses librarians and technologists side by side is a testament to the strong relationship that has been developed to provide integrated information services to the college community.

At the same time, Kalamazoo has not exercised foresight at the expense of tradition. In Upjohn you have created beautiful spaces for the display of the College’s heritage. The new rare book room honors generations of dedicated collection and generosity to the College, with extensive display space so that many lovely things that have not been on view for years can now be shown.

The presence of the rare book room at the heart of this building suggests a profound metaphor. The library of the future will be built around and upon the libraries of the past – just as Upjohn has added innovative features to its rich historical collection. We need not fear that technology will replace the library unless we fail to take imaginative and thoughtful measures to RE-place it. I commend Kalamazoo College today on having done exactly that. Congratulations!