

WINDOW ON THE FUTURE



Looking through the three-story, 150-foot-long parabola of glass that dominates UF's new library is like peering through a lens at the future of scholarship. Through the gracefully curved panes, we can see all the elements that go into a bricks-and-mortar library in the Information Age.

On one floor, a lone student snuggles into an overstuffed chair equipped with Internet connections and electrical outlets. On another, half a dozen students gather around a u-shaped table, each contributing to a group project on a flat screen before them. On a third, students interested in video game design test their skills on a 60-inch LCD television.

Behind these students, undergraduate and graduate students and faculty navigate row upon row of moving shelves that efficiently house more than a million books whose pages hold information that will probably never reach the Internet.

Farther in, librarians staff a massive circulation and reference desk where they will answer 150,000 questions a year — many via instant messaging — and check out more than a million books.

Before the first shovel of dirt was turned on this \$30 million upgrade and expansion of Library West, we spent considerable time asking students and faculty what they wanted in a new library. The answer was often very different, depending on who was responding.

Not surprisingly, our undergraduates emphasized online resources. Raised in the Internet age, they have become most comfortable searching for information electronically, and most of what they need can be found in that way.

So we devoted most of the original Library West building to electronic resources — more than 130 computer terminals to go with wireless and wired networking throughout. We also increased our subscriptions to electronic journals and books to more than 80,000 titles.

But — as our graduate students and faculty told us — not everything they need is on the Internet, and not everything on the Internet is accurate. So most of the 55,000 square feet of new space in Library West is devoted to those moving stacks. Some have complained that the sophisticated system of rolling shelves lack the ambiance of the old stacks, but they hold many times more books in the same amount of space.

The needs of these more advanced scholars highlight the great paradox of the Information Age — it is often harder to sort through too much information than it is too little.

One of the most valuable functions of the traditional library remains its exclusivity — the judgment that keeps as much mediocre information out as it keeps quality information in.

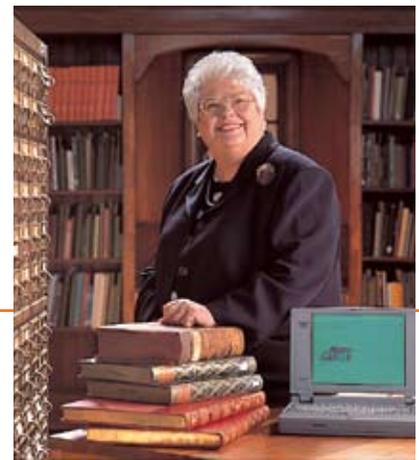
Since 1992, the World Wide Web has expanded at dizzying speed. It contains myriad databases of legal, scientific, historical, literary, mathematical, social science and government



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information. These databases can be searched with great specificity, and they create possibilities for research that could only be dreamed of a decade ago.

The Web also contains the ill-considered opinions and erroneous discourses of thousands of self-professed experts.

All these resources are returned in searches for information, creating the infamous downside of the Web — “info-chaos.”

Further, the Web doesn’t have the unique information contained in millions of books and journals published over the past 500 years and housed in research libraries throughout the world. Many books still are published only in print format. And not everything on the Web is free — there are charges for access to much of the Web’s high-quality information. So a Web search in itself does not guarantee either accuracy or complete information.

Can libraries ignore the Web? Absolutely not. The job of integrating print and electronic resources is an enormous one, and one the library must do if its scholars are to be successful in their efforts to expand the universe of knowledge. Modern libraries make their catalogs available to Web-crawlers so their contents will appear to students and scholars in Google and other Web searches. We purchase access to high-quality databases for our users and we provide guides to Internet resources.

The function of research universities like UF is to create new knowledge and to transmit knowledge to new generations.

Research and learning are at the heart of the educational process. Basic to the university’s purpose is to create an archive, a record of what has been learned, to serve as a resource for both research by scholars and learning by students. Libraries archive that record and provide access to it in systematic ways.

Libraries are the vital center of university life, selecting, storing, organizing and protecting ideas. Libraries provide expensive services, things students and faculty can’t provide for themselves, things that it makes sense for the whole community to share such as expensive scientific information, space and equipment for all the various formats that contain knowledge (books, journals, maps, microforms, computers, recordings, etc.), and assistance for library users to navigate through this vast array of information to locate what they specifically need for their academic purpose.

A recent study found that undergraduate students, graduates and faculty report coming to the library for help in beginning research projects; they felt that printed resources would still be important to them in five years; and they considered library-supplied information to be more trustworthy than information found on the Internet.

And library users want books. Librarians have found that when we purchase and make available electronic books, suddenly the print copies of those books circulate heavily. What’s going on here? The more we digitize older materials, the greater the demand for the printed version. As search engines pick up key words and other metadata describing the digital works, many more people discover relevant books, journals or manuscripts than they would otherwise.

UF’s nine libraries are open more than 100 hours per week, serving thousands of students every day. More than two million students and faculty pass the turnstiles of UF’s two largest libraries — Library West and Marston Science Library — each year.

Who needs a library? UF does. A place to study, a place to learn, a place to work with your class team, a place to find the facts and ideas that form the basis for papers and research.

Despite the growing importance of electronic information, we believe the library will continue to be a vibrant center of the university’s intellectual life.