

Barbara Howes and Michael Zimmerman

The case for preserving academic branch libraries

Fostering campus communities

While few would question the wisdom embodied in Alfred Lord Tennyson's lines from his poem "In Memoriam A.H.H."

*'Tis better to have loved and lost
Than never to have loved at all*

there are some specific situations in which his powerful message might not be appropriate. One such case, far from the topic he had in mind when he penned those words, is the loss of a branch library from a college or university campus.

In tight budgetary times, academic administrators are always looking for ways to cut costs and consolidate services. Branch libraries often seem to attract attention during these periods by those focusing on the bottom line because it may appear that the library's space can easily be repurposed while monetary savings might be able to be achieved by downsizing staff and services. Since library resources are increasingly being delivered electronically, some believe that there's little benefit to continuing to devote physical space to branch libraries. What's often ignored are the more intangible values associated with branch libraries, values that are intricately linked to the academic mission of the institution.

Our experiences at Butler University provide some insight into these issues. Butler has a modestly sized science library (12,000 square feet) in close proximity to the offices, laboratories, and classrooms of its science faculty. It's staffed by one librarian, one part-time staff member, and numerous student workers. Last year senior administra-

tors proposed to close the facility, absorb its services into the campus's main library, and convert the space to other purposes. At first glance, on a campus that is experiencing a severe space crisis, such a move makes very good sense. Scratch just a bit beneath the surface, however, and it's hard not to come to a very different conclusion.

The real value of Butler's science library, like that of most branch libraries, is multifaceted and often is ignored in a cursory review. Consider just four positive aspects: proximity, flexibility, quality of service, and student learning/retention.

Proximity: On a geographically small campus it might seem absurd to speak of proximity as a value but, in fact, it can play a very important role. When a library is adjacent to its primary users, the facility is used differently and more frequently than when it is even slightly further afield.

Butler's science library, for example, serves as an alternative student union in addition to a library. When students drop in for a few minutes between classes, a social network of students majoring in science is formed and strengthened. Meaningful academic conversations are more likely to take place under such circumstances. The library has become a hub for study, both by individuals and groups, and a location of choice for the collaborative work groups

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that so often are created in classes. Similarly, faculty are more likely to interact with the science librarian on a routine basis and such interactions often lead to a better integration of library services into the curriculum. Interestingly, while circulation statistics are down, as they are in most libraries, at Butler's science library usage of its facilities and services is at an all time high.

Flexibility: A branch library has the ability to be far more flexible and thus more responsive to user needs than a main library. At Butler, for example, hours and services are regularly adjusted to be in synch with the rhythms of the science curriculum—a rhythm that is obviously different from that found in the arts.

Quality of service: Because a branch library serves a specialized function, it can better meet the needs of its users. The library's staff, both the professional and the student staff, are well positioned to understand the idiosyncrasies associated with the specialized subject matter.

Additionally, in institutions of Butler's size, the staff are able to comfortably work with all science departments and thus are capable of designing more holistic processes and services that are likely to be more efficient and better received. The library staff are full members in the community of science rather than being outside service providers.

Learning/retention: While these are the most difficult factors to measure, they are clearly the most important. Branch libraries create intentional learning communities, populated by students, faculty, and staff. These communities foster an atmosphere of disciplinary excitement and interest and lead to enhanced learning.

When students see their classmates studying individually and collectively, when they encounter their faculty members working with disciplinary material and with fellow students, and when they are able to work in an environment designed for them and outfitted with specialized, technical resources, they take themselves and their studies more

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seriously. Under these conditions, they are more likely to persist to graduation and to learn more along the way.

By influencing student culture in these ways and so many more, branch libraries have the potential to promote student success, and that's something that needs to be factored into any decision concerning their future.

A sense of shared purpose is essential to the building of a meaningful academic community. Once the hard work to create such a community has been undertaken, its loss is likely to be a truly debilitating event, one that may well devastate the morale of students, faculty, and staff alike. In such cases, institutions are better off never having experienced the benefits that accrue from having had a vibrant and successful branch library. Simply put, knowing what was lost can be incredibly destructive to the campus community.

What happened to the plan by Butler administrators to close the science library? That plan immediately faced such a strong, negative response from students, staff, and faculty that the administration backpedaled quickly. A final decision has now been deferred for several years. The concern shown and action taken by the users of the science library are a testament to the type of tight knit community that branch libraries foster. All of us who care about the academic mission need to find ways to incorporate a metric associated with such community building into our decision making processes. *~*