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Academic Library Autopsy Report, 2050

By Brian T. Sullivan

"Insensible of mortality, and desperately mortal."
—Shakespeare

The academic library has died. Despite early diagnosis, audacious denial in the face of its increasingly severe symptoms led to its deterioration and demise. The academic library died alone, largely neglected and forgotten by a world that once revered it as the heart of the university. On its deathbed, it could be heard mumbling curses against Google and something about a bygone library guru named Ranganathan.

Although the causes of death are myriad, the following autopsy report highlights a few of the key factors.

1. Book collections became obsolete. Fully digitized collections of nearly every book in the world rendered physical book collections unnecessary. Individual students now pay for subscriptions to any of several major digital-book vendors for unlimited access. The books may be viewed online at any time or downloaded to a portable device. Some colleges have opted for institutional subscriptions to digital-book collections, managed by their information-technology departments. Most of these collections originated in physical libraries, which signed their own death warrants with deals to digitize their books.

2. Library instruction was no longer necessary. To compete with a new generation of search engines, database vendors were forced to create tools that were more user-friendly, or else risk fading into obscurity. As databases became more intuitive and simpler to use, library instruction in the use of archaic tools was no longer needed. Almost all remaining questions could be answered by faculty (see No. 3) or information-technology staff (see No. 4). It was largely the work of academic librarians that led to most of these advances in database technology.

3. Information literacy was fully integrated into the curriculum. As faculty incorporated information literacy into

their teaching, it became part of the general curriculum of colleges. It was the persistence of librarians, who in the academic library's dying days lost faith in their ability to impart useful knowledge to students, that led to the universal adoption of campuswide information-literacy standards drawn up by the Association of College and Research Libraries. Librarians also played a key role in the development of the new curricula that included information literacy.

4. Libraries and librarians were subsumed by information-technology departments. Library buildings were converted into computer labs, study spaces, and headquarters for information-technology departments. Collection development became a mere matter of maintaining database subscriptions recommended by faculty. Cataloging became the exclusive purview of the vendors of digital-book-and-journal collections (who frequently hired former librarians to assist with the process). Some members of the remnant of former librarians have now taken jobs with their colleges' information-technology departments.

5. Reference services disappeared. They were replaced by ever-improving search engines and social-networking tools, along with information-technology help desks that were relatively inexpensive to run. Without the need to worry about faculty rank, tenure, and professional pay grades, most colleges are reporting about the same level of student satisfaction for a fraction of the price. It was librarians who first provided evidence—through the development of "tiered reference" services, in which initial questions were fielded by nonlibrarians—that queries could be answered by low-wage employees (including student workers) with minimal training.

6. Economics trumped quality. Some administrators admit that the old model of libraries and librarians yielded outcomes theoretically superior to those of the new model: personal service, professional research assistance, access to top-quality information sources. But so few students were taking full advantage of the available resources that the services were no longer economically justifiable. Ever since it became so easy and inexpensive to find adequate resources, paying significantly more for the absolute best was no longer an option for perpetually cash-strapped colleges. It was the widespread adoption of early tools like Wikipedia and Google Scholar by librarians that opened the door to the realization that traditional academic libraries and librarians were an expendable luxury.

At the same time, the death of the academic library is being hailed by many as progress and the logical next step in the evolution of information.

In summary, it is entirely possible that the life of the academic library could have been spared if the last generation of librarians had spent more time plotting a realistic path to the future and less time chasing outdated trends while mindlessly spouting mantras like "There will always be books and libraries" and "People will always need librarians to show them how to use information." We'll never know now what kind of treatments might have worked. Librarians planted the seeds of their own destruction and are responsible for their own downfall.

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