A Virtual Experience

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[On July 1, 2000, Dean Joe Reish accepted a special appointment to serve as the Interim Dean of the University Libraries. He assumed his "library" responsibilities at a critical juncture in the history of the Libraries at WMU. New Provost Fred Dobney had just arrived on the campus, and President Elson Floyd was concluding his second year at WMU. The Libraries needed a firm hand to direct major technological changes in the information world, and to maintain the electronic thrust of current systems and collections. Ten months later, Dean Reish reflects on his experiences as Dean of the University Libraries.]

As an undergraduate at George-town University, I worked in the main library at the circulation desk. Occasionally, I also shelved books, answered directional questions for patrons, and closed down the facilities. Washington, D.C., in the middle of the summer, in a non-air-conditioned, mid-nineteenth-century, neo-gothic edifice tested my smile and my public-service ethic. Today, my son is working in the Sterling Memorial Library at Yale. His chief duty is to ensure the running of a battalion of computers that makes up the backbone of a modern, automated library. He also answers the occasional question that a non-techi user might pose about access to on-line databases. At home in the humanities and sciences, my son, I trust, responds with a similar ready smile to mine and my public-service ethic.

Today, I assumed the position of Interim Dean of the University Libraries in July, 2000, I stepped back into a world that I only partially knew — and knew originally at a very different time. Of course, I could navigate around Waldo and the satellite libraries since I had gathered valuable information in each of them, at one time or another, for my teaching and research. Sure, I was familiar with the on-line catalog and comfortable with the electronic search engines and databases in my field of French cultural studies. After all, I had been a library employee and a library user for several decades. However, after comparing my son's activities to mine, and exploring WMU's behind the scenes situation, I also quickly realized that I had little sense of how the modern-day library had become an electronic Mecca, or, as once described, automated. From the acquisition of monographs and serials to the international cataloguing of records; from the on-line WMU collection records (the catalog) and the multiple screens of the WWW home pages; from circulation and reserve records for millions of items to resource sharing of thousands more, the libraries are automated. The information collections in Waldo and the branches are electronically acquired, cataloged, referenced, circulated, and retrieved. Even 4,000,000 physical items, e.g., books, documents, media, are tracked from acquisition through cataloging through retrieval through circulation electronically.

Moreover, change is a constant in this electronic world. As I pen these words (on my laptop computer), the homepage of the Libraries' catalog has assumed a new look and new touch options by utilizing the fifth (or is it the sixth) upgrade of Voyager since 1997. The Systems and Web Offices have again been working extended hours to bring this latest conversion to full implementation. Library faculty and staff will soon launch a sophisticated lab in the main library dedicated to the digitizing of visual images, archival materials, and manuscripts of special collections. All of this has been a fascinating new land to explore with helpful traveling companions these past months as I came to know something of the virtual library.

What has made these advancements in automation ever so more remarkable, I have learned, is the fact that the current academic librarians and support staff have reschooled themselves with only a few positions filled by people who formally studied the latest technologies. These folks of the University Libraries have personally invested in the modern technological revolution exemplified by our University library. In a sense, every one of them has

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had to learn the nature of contemporary information science, of browsers, servers, systems, and all that makes up the technological underpinnings of Web pages and on-line catalogs.

To assist in this ongoing transformation of staff once focused on printed books and ordinary media applications, the Libraries’ administration has continued this year to cover faculty and staff participation in conferences and workshops with both financial support and encouragement to achieve even more. For example, the Head of the Systems Office, Mary Ross, is a former cataloguer, once surrounded only by 3 by 5 cards, official codes, and books. Today, she is “ultra-tech.” Mary works through a PC to bring on-line each new version and all intervening modifications that appear on the screens of WestCat, our state-of-the-art, on-line catalog. The just retired Head of the Web Office, Helen Healy, said, “yes” to automation, the Internet, Web pages, and search engines at least a decade ago to help design and implement the first on-line library system at WMU. She became one of the first Internet librarians in the nation, and then webmaster of the Libraries’ first home pages.

The electronic library invites—and demands—that the faculty and staff confront new issues and problems head on. Assistant Dean for Resources Bettina Meyer is much concerned with emerging copyright interpretations and licensing agreements that have been radically impacted by Internet and WWW access. We gather information in an era where clicking on a Web screen can access protected information. However, legally obtaining the full text and/or reproducing what we find demands constant vigilance to protect the rights of the authors and publishers. None of the complex licensing agreements or extensive copyright review was a part of the Assistant Dean’s role only a few years ago. She, too, had to remake her role and learn new duties and assume new responsibilities.

During my tenure exploring Waldo and its branches, I have often had to learn new vocabulary to interact with my colleagues and to understand their plans for the future. While enjoying the benefits of extensive University resources allocated to update the technical infrastructure of library operations, the Director of Operational Services Regina Buckner found that she faces problems that never existed before. Most recently, she has had to weigh the advantages and limitations of rewiring the offices of the library personnel with the latest material on the market. Where once Regina and her colleagues spoke of “CAT5” with an occasional reference to “CAT5e,” there now has risen a “LEVEL7.” Each makes sense when one realizes that the wiring of Waldo, done over ten years ago, is out of date, and new installations need to serve the library for five to seven years when fiber optic cable will be “de rigueur.” Moreover, working closely with the Office of Information Technology, Waldo will become one of the first campus sites to be a “wireless” environment for the University-wide laptop initiative. The library space again is ready for the latest technological advances.

Turning from the infrastructure to the user needs, one key area is the expanded public service to faculty, staff, and students that serves to enhance the teaching and research mission of the University. In 1994, a new position was created to coordinate the “information literacy initiative” for the Libraries. Elaine Jayne is the current coordinator of all faculty and staff bibliographic/information instruction that demystifies access to the multitude of online databases, traditional books, and other resources available from the University Libraries. Our savvy information literacy specialists teach users to discriminate among the many collections and services that are offered at and through WMU. What Elaine and colleagues do for the local campus community, the Continuing Education Resources Librarian, Mae O’Neal, does for the growing network of users who study on-line and at the six regional centers. Mae and a soon to be hired additional faculty member in that office are necessary links between the distance learner and all of the collections of the University Libraries.

Before I leave these six examples, I must emphasize that the individuals just mentioned are only a small sample of the professionals who have transformed the University Libraries. Heads in every unit and branch have also made extraordinary “upgrades” in their skills and knowledge of technological applications. Without across the board efforts, the Libraries would not offer over 8,000 links and 3,700 files on its Website, or function as an academic library in a research university. Moreover, there is not a single individual among the 80 plus faculty and staff members who work in Waldo or the branches who has stood still during the information explosion and electronic revolution. Each has had to be at home in the “electronic” world of computer searching, computer applications, and a myriad of other techniques necessary to function when one’s major instrument for all activities is a sophisticated PC.

I, too, have learned much during my appointment as Interim Dean of the University Libraries. The faculty and staff are individually and collectively professional. The University Libraries has earned a national reputation for the quality of its on-line Web site and its comprehensive collection of electronic indexes and databases. The University Libraries has led in one initiative after another to provide significant access to numerous information resources needed by students, faculty, and staff. In addition, I have had an opportunity to learn, first hand, the unique role that each faculty and staff member plays in his or her unit and in the Libraries as a whole. I’ve also been privy to the challenges, satisfaction, and pride that all take in their University Libraries. I feel I have become a part of their social milieu, and have been privileged to assist in resolving problems. Finally, I have become a much more informed scholar traveler along the heavily traveled roads of the information highway. In a sense, I hope that I have become a real part of the University Libraries environment, service orientation, and a member of its virtual library.