

The relevance of academic libraries in the contemporary university

By Kevin Comerford, NMSU Dean of the Library,

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Do libraries still have a place in today's university? This is a question I often encounter in conversation, with some suggesting that due to the web libraries have outlived their usefulness and are on the brink of disappearing. "Aren't they all going digital?" is a typical question by well-meaning colleagues who seem worried about my job security. I appreciate the concern and understand how difficult it is to separate the brick-and-mortar library buildings on campus (and the traditional academic images they evoke) from the web pages and online resources that most students and faculty use daily to seek the information they need. In truth, the popular conception of the 'library' has lagged far behind the reality of what libraries have become in the twenty-first century.

However, the point is well taken. For better or worse, in an era where digital resources abound, and students are accustomed to immediate online access to every kind of service and information, academic libraries must continually reinvent themselves to remain relevant in the university. Once traditional strongholds of print materials and cavernous study halls, libraries are now challenged to adapt to changing student needs and rapidly evolving scholarly landscapes.

The academic library should be an exciting center for learning and growth that is an active part of every student's educational experience. The following are some ways that NMSU Library is reframing its role as the center of knowledge on campus:

Expanding Electronic Collections

Electronic publishing has completely changed how students and faculty access and use information. NMSU Library staff work with electronic publishers to offer access to a continually expanding collection of e-books, online journals, databases, and multimedia resources that cater to diverse learning styles and research needs. The library is also digitizing its archives and special collections so researchers can view them online, and efforts to implement user-friendly interfaces empower students to navigate the vast digital landscape easily.

Emerging Technologies

Last fall, NMSU Library opened the Emerging Technologies Learning Lab. In this technology experience space, any NMSU student may come to develop or enhance their 'digital fluency' skills using high-end computers, 3D scanners and printers, and other equipment. Digital fluency refers to students' level of skill or attainment where they can visualize a creative product or outcome, identify the appropriate tools needed to realize their vision, and then bring the vision to reality in digital form. Digital fluency is a next step beyond information literacy, enabling students to be more competitive in academia and the employment marketplace.

Reimagining Physical Spaces

While the online world offers unprecedented opportunities, the experience that on-campus physical spaces provide students remains integral to their academic experience. NMSU Library has made many additions and improvements to study and learning areas so they are more comfortable and convenient for students to use. New individual study pods, lounge chairs, and tables are available for students at both libraries. This year, the library's group study spaces will be redesigned and expanded to offer more opportunities for collaboration and creativity.

In addition, the NMSU librarians curate engaging exhibits, events, and cultural programs that reflect the diversity of the campus academic community. Whether showcasing local artists, hosting author talks, or organizing creative activities, the library creates inclusive spaces that celebrate cultural diversity. By encouraging a sense of belonging, NMSU Library strengthens its relevance as part of the university.

Engaging Library Instruction Services

In addition to serving as repositories of knowledge, academic libraries are centers of learning in their own right. NMSU Library offers research assistance, data management education, and copyright guidance. It collaborates with faculty and academic departments to tailor these services to meet the evolving needs of students and researchers across disciplines. The library also assists community members through its Patent and Trademark Resource Center.

NMSU Library's Reference and Research Services department offers credit courses, workshops, and one-on-one consultations that teach students how to evaluate information, navigate online databases, and utilize digital tools effectively. They also partner with academic faculty to develop course-specific instruction sessions to ensure students graduate with the critical thinking and research skills they need for lifelong learning and professional development.

Like other academic libraries, NMSU Library faces many upcoming challenges and opportunities. However, I am pleased that our faculty and staff have kept pace with the changing times and the new demands of the digital age. They have developed new library services for students, protected the cultural heritage of southern New Mexico, implemented cutting-edge technology infrastructure, and fostered productive collaborations with academic faculty. These accomplishments enable the library to continue to thrive as an essential part of the academic community.

Kevin Comerford is the the Dean of the Library at New Mexico State University. He may be reached at kevco@nmsu.edu.

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OPINION/COLUMN by Walt Rubel

Walter Rubel can be reached at waltrubel@gmail.com.

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