

What's the Difference between a "Reading Room" and a "Library"?

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Abstract. This question is a no-brainer for librarians. The difference between a "reading room" and a "library" is, of course, *the librarian!* But this answer is not so obvious nowadays to many of our (former) users, who think books and journals are passé, and all the information you really need is easily accessible on the Web.

1. Introduction

At what point does the physical space allotted to the library become "too much" in the architectural plan of the departmental building? When does the administrator or the astrophysicist say, "Since I do all of my work from the computer in my office, wouldn't the library space be better used for *more offices* for *more astrophysicists*?"

It is true that fewer people are coming to and using the library than when I became the astrophysics librarian at Princeton University eleven years ago, in 1991. If I were an administrator, I too might question the library's use of the space if I seldom saw anyone using it.

But I would argue that a physical space for the library has value and is needed. The challenge is to figure out exactly what brings people to the library. Why do they come? And what do they do when they are there?

When we know these facts – and we may have to collect this information not only by observing, but also by surveying our users – we can not only better provide the goods and services that our current users want, we can also market these goods and services to people who do not currently use the library since they may not be aware of what we have to offer. We need to figure out what the modern user wants, and market that.

2. How is the library used nowadays?

So, what do people do in *your* library? Here are some of the behaviors I've observed in mine:

People come to see what's new. They read the *New York Times* newspaper. They look at the new books and journal issues (especially *Science* and *Nature*). They come to consult bound print journals (even if available online), and they

check factual information in our collection of reference books. They come to find and borrow books, and the students come to read textbooks on course reserve.

There are some new behaviors also since the library has PC-based hardware and software and the rest of the department is Unix-based. The most popular new activity is using the library's scanner to create .jpg image files. People use PowerPoint to prepare their presentations, and Word to open e-mail attachments and print files. In fact, the library now has Ethernet connections in the wall so that people can bring their personal laptop computers and plug in to the Internet.

All we need is some coffee to have our own Internet café! Should we provide chat rooms where colleagues can converse and students can study together? Or do people want privacy, and a quiet place to do uninterrupted work?

3. Questions we need to ask

How do we best find out why people come to the library, and what they do when they are there? Do we conduct a survey? How about a web-based survey? [It was in part to find out what *books* people were really *using* that I participated in the collaborative project coordinated by Liz Bryson to create the *Core List of Astronomy Books*, now available to all at <http://ads.harvard.edu/books/clab/>.]

How do we best tell people about our new services? How do we market libraries? Advertise in student newspapers? Put fliers in faculty mailboxes? [Jean-Charles Cuillandre, William Claspy, and Virginia Smith, in their presentations earlier this morning, have already given us some excellent ideas on how to make people aware of what libraries have to offer.]

4. The future of the library

We also need to *anticipate* future changes. The major change I have to anticipate is that Princeton University has hired the architect Frank Gehry to design and build a consolidated science library next door to our astrophysics building. Many people in the department want to maintain the *status quo* and keep the astrophysics library in its convenient, spacious location at the center of our present building. But others want to move the collection to the centralized library, use some of the library space for offices, and keep only a reading room in the department.

Thus it is that I must ponder the difference between a "reading room" and a "library". I would be very interested in hearing from those of you who have experienced consolidation of a branch library into a centralized facility, or whose departments maintain a reading room as a replacement for, or in addition to, a centralized library. As more and more of our resources become available electronically, we may be called upon more often to justify the physical space that traditional libraries occupy.