The Leavey Library: A Library in Your Future?

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"When in the course of human events...," a writer starts a column for Searcher Magazine, they should probably introduce themselves. My name is Doris Small Helfer. I've been a librarian at the University of Southern California (USC), the RAND Corporation, NCR/Teradata (formerly AT&T Global Information Solutions), and recently returned to academia, as the Sciences Librarian for California State University in Northridge. Besides paid positions, I've been overactive in the Special Libraries Association, serving as chair of both the Information Technology and Telecommunications Divisions, the Networking Committee, as well as a past president of the Southern California Chapter. All this activity and that old RAND connection, seem to have led me into my new role of columnist for my dear friend and colleague, Barbara Quint.

In the course of my career, I have become familiar with corporate and academic libraries and the issues and opportunities facing librarians now. Fortunately for me, all the jobs I have held seem to have been in places at the forefront of changes in the information profession. My column will focus on developments in libraries which continue to change the ways they do business and do service. It will also focus on libraries that have become sources of information for other information professionals, as well as the vendor products and services that enable change among "ex-traditional" libraries.

By the way, if you work in or know of a library you think has made a contribution to pushing the leading edge, or if you just have comments on what you read (or don't read) in my column, contact me by e-mail at doris.helfer@csun.edu. I hope you look forward to my bimonthly columns as much as I look forward to doing them.

The Big Opening

In this day and age, when a major new library opens, it's very big news in the library community. We've become accustomed, especially in the corporate world, from which I've just come, to hearing about libraries closing or downsizing. How exciting to hear about a new library opening — especially when people describe it in glowing terms!

I recently interviewed Charlotte Crockett, director of the new Leavey Library at the University of Southern California (USC) and Dudee Chiang, the Networked Information Resources coordinator of the Leavey Library. "Everyone" had been talking about the Leavey — at least, everyone in the information professional community in Southern California. I hadn't seen the new Leavey Library before. As I left for the interview, one of my colleagues said, "It's a lovely library, but I don't think they have any resources we don't have here at our [California State University, Northridge] Library.

As I drove to the interview, I wondered why some colleagues described the Leavey as wonderful, while others said it didn't have anything we don't have. After interviewing the Leavey librarians, the reasons for the difference of opinion became obvious. It depends on your viewpoint. In many senses the Leavey is similar to many academic libraries in terms of the online resources available to its patrons. The Leavey has, however, implemented two innovations that make it different and unique.

First, the designers recognize that libraries today are computer centers, and, as such, need a wider variety of personnel to answer all types of reference questions. Reference librarians can answer traditional reference and even Internet reference questions, but it's a rarer librarian who can diagnose why a computer is not working and whether the problem is the PC or the network.

Along with traditional library staff, the Leavey Library has computer consultants sitting right next to the reference librarians to help with the computer problems.

By contrast, in most academic libraries, when a patron has computer problems, they get the number of the computer center to call for answers. This innovation ends a frustration for both librarians and patrons. I suspect students with computer problems sometimes feel the library staff has brushed them off and not helped them with their information problem. It also marks the library as establishing its own territoriality over computers as a "library" information technology. Also, many students attracted to the Leavey first by the computers find the content-expert
reference librarians right there to help increase their understanding of the value of research consultation that librarians can offer.

From the student viewpoint, having to go elsewhere for help with a computer problem is inconvenient — even if elsewhere is a campus phone 20 feet from where they sit. And students may not distinguish between a computer problem and a library reference question. If they have to leave the library without needed information, they do not differentiate why, but only remember that their information needs were not met. By having computer people there answering questions, the likelihood of patrons not getting answers due to a computer problem is greatly diminished, and librarians can assist the student in finding any other information they seek.

The Leavey’s second innovation is written into its mission and original goals: to be a teaching library, but not just in the traditional sense. Its mission encompasses the incorporation of technology into the curriculum and active assistance to faculty in using technology in the curriculum. This mission justifies the establishment of the Leavey Library in the first place and explains why The Center for Scholarly Technology as well as The Center for Excellence in Teaching resides within the walls of the Leavey Library. The Center for Scholarly Technology was placed within the Leavey to develop and make available technology for creating unique collaborative capabilities, to facilitate easy and timely access to major U.S. sources of information, and to encourage the rapid electronic publication of scholarly work. The Center for Scholarly Technology works with faculty members. One of its programs, called “JumpStart,” provides technical expertise to help faculty incorporate technologies into curriculum. It also supplies technical support for Web page development. The Centers also help support teaching with the Electronic Reserves project, which scans course materials and makes them available to students around the clock, both on and off campus. The Center for Excellence in Education works to improve the teaching skills and abilities of professors.

The Centers and the Leavey Library work together but are separate facilities, bureaucratically. Besides the Centers, the Leavey houses the Adaptive Technology Laboratory for the Disabled, which helps students with disabilities learn how to use specially designed hardware and software.

History and Structure

In 1982 discussions began regarding having a teaching library on campus. In 1986, as part of the university reaccreditation process, the Leavey Library concept took serious shape and received a high priority on the USC campus. USC management gave the Leavey Library top fund-raising priority and received a major grant of several million dollars in 1988 from the Thomas and Dorothy Leavey Foundation. Groundbreaking took place in 1992, with the library opening on August 30, 1994. Originally the Doheny Library housed the Library’s printed collection on campus. The Leavey Library did not replace any subject specialty libraries already on campus, but, as an addition to the three systems of libraries on campus, it did replace the College Library. The print collection comprises the old College Library collection, with a new effort underway to build up a dynamic collection for undergraduate studies. Librarians, such as Dudee Chiang, were picked for their backgrounds in teaching and technology.

The Leavey has gotten the resources it needed since its opening largely due to its high campus-wide priority. Its book budget is still separate from the rest of the library systems. As the undergraduate library for the campus, the Leavey has about 100,000 volumes and about 300 journal subscriptions. Open 24 hours a day, it has a staff of eight professional librarians, nine paraprofessionals, and numerous student navigation assistants designated to help with simple computer problems. The professional staff is not available past 10 PM in the evening. Only the basement and first floor are open 24 hours a day. After 10 PM, it takes USC identification to gain admittance, but even at 1 AM or 2 AM, you’ll typically find 30 to 40 people at the Leavey Library.

The Library has five floors, with a very light, airy, and open feel throughout the space. The basement contains the Information Commons. It has 30 PCs, 50 Power Macintoshes, and 12 Sun UNIX workstations. It also has three laptops available for circulation and use within the library. Built with technology in mind, the Leavey has more than adequate wiring throughout the building. The Leavey librarians and designers believe in what they term holistic computing, so that productivity software, Internet access, and library databases are all available on the same workstations — tied by dedicated lines to USC INFO, the front-end for all USC networks, including the Library catalog.

The computer consultants, reference librarians, and navigation assistants all work side by side in the Information Commons. Each workstation can seat two people at a computer comfortably. The student navigation assistants usually have some background and familiarity with computers as a condition for hiring. They receive up to 10 hours of training before the librarians let them help in the Information Commons. Besides the Information Commons, there is an auditorium, two computer classrooms, and a printing center. The auditorium is the site of many cultural activities on campus. The first floor has the circulation and reserve desk, current periodicals reading room, The Center for Scholarly Technology, The Center for Excellence in Teaching, and multimedia carrels. The second through fourth floors contain the library’s holdings and study carrels.

Charlotte Crockett, the new director of the Leavey Library, says that her future plans for the Leavey include providing reference, via video conferencing and the Internet, with students in their dorm rooms. Students will not have to come to the library to get answers to reference questions. She plans on more cultural activities taking (continued on page 40)
place at the Leavey. Most importantly, Crockett plans to continue to keep the Leavey Library on the cutting edge and explore the best ways to deliver the latest technology.

Winning Strategy

How has the Leavey Library been so successful on the USC campus? I think it has been a combination of factors. First the building blends in well with existing campus structures, yet still looks light, airy, wired, and technologically forward in its design. No distinction is made as to the type of work done by students, whether e-mail, Internet, or using one of the productivity software packages that the Leavey offers on most of its computers. The work the Leavey staff has done in bringing technology to the classroom has greatly enhanced the perception of faculty and students about the librarians and the functions of a modern library.

At this point in time, the Leavey Library does not serve many off-campus patrons. Non-USC users can only use the library by coming into it physically, where they can use the paper collection. Only USC students, staff, and faculty can use the computer resources. Off campus non-USC users can get to USCweb (http://www.usc.edu) or particularly Leavey Web pages (http://www-lib.usc.edu/Info/Leavey) to reach non-password protected resources. Certain databases and resources, such as Encyclopedia Britannica Online, USCInfo, RLG (Research Libraries Group) databases, Electronic Reserves readings, etc. require a USC IP address or limit access to students in a particular class with a class password.

Other subject libraries at USC have participated in distance learning projects. The Leavey has played a supporting role in a few such activities, for example, putting up electronic reserves for a couple courses at the School of Social Work Orange County campus. Other projects may be in the works.

Searchers Complain About Demise of Avenue Technologies

Searchers can no longer offer their clients the handsome, reasonably-priced company profiles offered by Avenue Technologies over the last few years. Within weeks of completing the acquisition of Avenue Technologies' parent, DataTimes, UMI announced that it would close the subsidiary and discontinue all support for Avenue's Company Profiles. Instead, UMI offered searchers their Business Analyst Corporate Profiles.

Unfortunately for UMI, business searchers around the country were not happy with the alternative. The business librarian listservs buzzed with complaints. Avenue Technologies' staff, busy packing, received some poignant calls from corporate librarians, according to Rich Kreisman, former director of Product Management at Avenue Technologies. Some of the calls said that Avenue had "changed our lives," eliminating the need to compile and re-format selections of company information from multiple sources, and, instead, leaving searchers free to work in-depth research questions. Business partners like Teltech and Investext Plus and even DataTimes EyeQ itself, which distributed Avenue Technologies' reports under "private brand" labels such as EyeQ Executive Report, found themselves scrambling to find effective substitutes.

Then, finally, came the ultimate act of consumer rebellion — an e-mail message to Searcher Magazine.

Quality Difference

Lots of business information services offer profile or background products on publicly-held companies. Some also cover private companies. Several combine information culled from an array of business information sources to produce their reports. Avenue Technologies appears to have done all that at least as well, perhaps better, than other suppliers like Standard and Poor's, Dow Jones, etc. However, what most distinguished their product was the handsome, double-column, multi-font, graphically enhanced, display format they developed. For a reasonable price of $39.95 base price for Avenue Company Profiles (Public Company, Private Company, or International Company) and $29.95 for the Industry Scorecard, searchers got packages of information that "clients loved," as one searcher put it.

Still, vendors come and vendors go. Why not switch to UMI/DataTimes' Business Analyst?

Searcher Kathleen Rainwater at Gates Rubber Company posted a carefully researched, comparative analysis of Avenue Technologies' service to Business Analyst in early November 1996. Overall, Rainwater concluded: "BA [Business Analyst] products do not produce a neat, concise report on a company. BA gives you bits and pieces and you have to pull out the information you need. You get more detail — but when we want a snapshot of a company — we don't want to wade through the detail...."

"Conclusion — most of the same data is available — but there is so much information, that I had to spend a lot of time digging out the pieces I was looking for. One of the main reasons I liked the Executive Reports [DataTimes' brand name for Avenue Technologies' reports] so much was that the information was easy to use — and easy to glance through. Information found in Business Analyst is very complete, and not easy to wade through — it takes more time to use."

Like many business searchers, Rainwater could not understand the decision. "They are losing a unique..."