

College Libraries are Purging Book Collections. Are They Discarding Thought as Well?

While on a local university campus last fall, I decided to swing through the library. Near the entrance was a cart loaded with books waiting to be discarded. I made a beeline for it and soon left with an armload of books. Their loss was my gain.

Unfortunately, that library isn't the only one purging books from its shelves. In fact, some campus libraries are removing thousands of titles to make room for more digital study spaces, meeting areas, and even nap pods. As the *Los Angeles Times* [reports](#), many students don't mind the changes, but campus faculty do:

"At UC Santa Cruz, ... the removal of 80,000 books from the Science and Engineering Library last summer sparked uproar – among faculty. This winter, more than 60 science and math faculty members signed a letter to university librarian M. Elizabeth Cowell, complaining that they hadn't been adequately consulted on which books could be discarded and which ones had to be saved.

Cowell wrote in reply that ... all of the books that were moved or destroyed – about 60% of the library's collection – were used infrequently and could be accessed online or through UC interlibrary loans.

'Nothing has left the scholarly record,' said campus spokesman Scott Hernandez-Jason."

But that isn't exactly what's bothering faculty. They recognize that digital research is good, popular, and

efficient. What worries them is the straightjacket such moves put on the flow of student thought-processes:

*“Richard Montgomery, a UC Santa Cruz math professor, said online access or interlibrary loans are fine for those who know exactly what they need. **What’s gone is the ability to browse for ideas.**”*

As someone who has turned to the internet during writer’s block one too many times, I can testify to the truth of Montgomery’s statement. You see, digital resources are great if one simply wants to focus on headlines or the superficial chatter which happens to be trending on social media. But if one is looking to dig deeper and be exposed to the concepts which underlie those same headlines and trending topics, then browsing through book titles and authors is much more likely to unearth gems of knowledge which many have forgotten.

At first blush, it seems to make sense to turn libraries into sleek halls of digital study. But in doing so, will we only be encouraging young people to focus on the superficial, while shunning the great ideas of centuries past?

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