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More Than an Open Book

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– Mary Ellen Davis, executive director of the Association of College and Research Libraries

More than an open book

What's the value of a brick-and-mortar library in 2017? Step inside Linfield's Nicholson Library and find out.

It's 8 p.m. on a Sunday evening and psychology major Kelsey Rosborough '17 is three drafts into a 12-page research paper on opiates and their effect on the brain. Due tomorrow.

From his dorm room, the reference material he needs is four clicks away on his laptop keyboard. Rosborough packs up his work and makes his way to Nicholson library anyway.

"That's where the work gets done," he says. And he's not alone. Most evenings, Linfield's Nicholson Library is teeming with students just like Rosborough.

In an age when information is as close as the nearest web browser, are libraries still relevant? Are buildings full of books necessary in the age of online content?

Dan Cohen, executive director of Digital Public Library of America (DPLA), says yes, and argues that the role of libraries may be changing but that they are as relevant as ever.

"Libraries are crucial civic institutions," Cohen said. As head of DPLA, he works with libraries and museums around the country to digitize a wide range of materials and make them available to the public. "Libraries function as the heart of the community and democratize access to our shared culture. Common access is critical."

Amid technological change, libraries are taking on new roles. In addition to offering access to free books, newspapers and computers, libraries increasingly offer makerspaces (collaborative work space for creating), how-to classes and instruction, and even the ability for patrons to check out household items, such as power tools.

But brick-and-mortar libraries also remain gathering places to learn, collaborate and innovate, said Mary Ellen Davis, executive director of the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL).

"Today's academic library buildings serve as intellectual and community centers for the campus," she said. "Libraries and librarians provide essential spaces and services through which students can grow as learners, creators and informed citizens."

Linfield's Nicholson Library, like its counterparts elsewhere, has evolved with the digital age to meet the changing needs of users – both on campus and in Yamhill County. County residents have free access, along with students, faculty and staff of the college.

Led by Susan Barnes Whyte, Linfield library director, a staff of 19 increasingly tech-savvy workers maintain a multitude of services for patrons – books, computers, multimedia services, digital materials, archives and more.

"Our profession is all about change," said Barnes Whyte, at Linfield since 1990. She is in position to know, on the front lines of library changes as chair-elect of the Orbis Cascade Alliance,

a 39-institution group; director of the Consortium on Digital Resources for Teaching and Research, part of the Council of Independent Colleges; and ACRL board member.

Gone are the days of "shushing" librarians and strict rules of library conduct. Students often snack as they study, discuss their work and collaborate using colorful markers and white boards – 48 are in constant use throughout Nicholson. Study rooms with flat-panel monitors, movable furniture and cozy nooks provide various seating configurations for groups and individuals.

For Rosborough, the individual study rooms in the back are his favorite areas to study. Those tend to go fast.

"You have to get there early to get those rooms," he said. If he does manage to get one, "I can close myself off to write essays and get sources."

Linfield maintains libraries on both the McMinnville and Portland campuses, with more than 159,000 volumes on their collective shelves. But their presence extends well beyond the buildings' walls. Linfield boasts access to DigitalCommons@Linfield, an online research repository with 5,700 works (and counting), and Summit, an exchange service for books and materials with more than 28.7 million items available for lending.

Keeping a foot in the past and the future, Linfield libraries maintains everything from cutting-edge video and multimedia gear to VHS tapes and slide projectors. The Educational Media Services crew supports technology in 60 classrooms and for lectures and speakers.

Linfield student workers are integral to the operation of the library, and often conduct graduate-level research in the archives, Barnes Whyte said.

"Our workers are trained to be quasi-reference librarians and to do deep research," she added. "It's a very unusual model, and has been successful. This didn't exist at Linfield 20 years ago, and it barely exists now at other college and university libraries."

Increasingly, Linfield librarians are teachers, as well. They work with faculty to supplement curriculum, with a focus on teaching foundational research skills to first-year students. This early training for students pays off. A 2016 report by the ACRL, a division of the American Library Association, found that library engagement boosts student confidence and retention in first-year students.

Throughout the evolution, the library's mission has remained the same, said Kathleen Spring, collections management librarian.

"Our job as librarians is to connect people to the information they need," she said, "and maybe the information they didn't even know they were looking for."

– Laura Davis