

EDUCATION

Bringing the reading room into the digital age

Universities are changing the role of their libraries and how they deliver information

BY ELIZABETH CHURCH
EDUCATION REPORTER HAMILTON

Jeff Trzeciak is out to re-vamp the role of the university library, putting computers where rows of books once stood and experimenting with new ways to deliver information that include gaming and a site in cyberspace.

"For me, the issue is meeting students wherever they are," explains Mr. Trzeciak, the chief librarian at Hamilton's McMaster University. That effort extends even to the virtual world, where McMaster staffs a reference desk at its site on Info Island in Second Life. "Some students don't request our assistance, but they do need it. We want to make it easier for them to ask," he says.

Mr. Trzeciak, 41, came to McMaster last year with a mandate for change. Signs of that work are easy to see. Groups of empty shelves, corralled by yellow caution tape, are pushed up against walls. They are what's left of former reference areas. On a recent morning, the old reading room, now called the "learning commons," as it is at many universities, is crammed with students, some studying in groups at tables, others at one of the many rows of computers, checking e-mail, working on assignments and visiting popular websites such as Facebook, YouTube and Wikipedia. "Students are coming to the library in higher numbers than ever before, they are just coming for different reasons," Mr. Trzeciak says.

What's happening at McMaster is playing out in some form in research libraries across the country as university faculty and students increasingly turn to digital resources and demand different services and around-the-clock convenience. Amid the upheaval, serious questions are being asked about who is



The old reading room at McMaster University in Hamilton is now called the 'learning commons' where students can study in groups at tables or work on computers. GLENN LOWSON FOR THE GLOBE AND MAIL

I am not getting rid of all the books.

Jeff Trzeciak,
McMaster University

preserving information and who will cover the price for all the changes that are demanded.

At the University of British Columbia, Peter Ward, a historian who is currently in charge of the library system, speaks eloquently about the transformation he has witnessed during two years in his post.

"I have a window on one of the most dramatic stories that the university has to offer in our time," he says. "Libraries are among the oldest institutions in the Western world. These are immensely ancient places with long, complex traditions and cultures. Their ways of doing things are being challenged daily by the world around us."

UBC has renamed one of its three main libraries a "learning centre." It is home to the university's fine arts, engineering, science and rare-book collections and has a traditional reading room. But when renovations are completed, it will also be a gathering place, with lounges, computers, meeting spaces for collaborative work, classrooms and support services to help students sift through an ever-increasing amount of information.

The primary role of libraries, Mr. Ward says, is to connect people with information, but they are also quiet, dry places where students can come together and work. The demand for space is often at odds with the role of libraries as keepers of information.

At UBC, the solution is a massive storage facility in the heart of the renovated learning centre with room for two million volumes that can be quickly plucked by a robotic retrieval system. At the University of Toronto, chief librarian Carole Moore says work is

being done to move some rarely used books to a storage site off campus, and there are hopes that the university's Roberts library will be expanded to add 1,200 new study spaces.

But Ms. Moore cautions that in the rush to create new spaces, care has to be taken to preserve collections along with the rising tide of information now being delivered in electronic form.

Mr. Trzeciak at McMaster is familiar with such concerns. "I am not getting rid of all the books," he says, quick to dispel what has become a common fear since his arrival.

Instead, he says, he is working with staff to eliminate duplicate copies of texts and materials that are available in an electronic format. Still, Mr. Trzeciak refuses to give even the slightest hint of how many volumes the university has donated to developing nations since his arrival. "Libraries are stewards of the university's intellectual assets. We are not about to get rid of materials willy-nilly," he says.