

What is a library?

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I've been doing a lot of thinking about this for many years, especially recently as we have been called on to reduce our staffing beyond the bare bones that it already was, in spite of increased student enrollments. The idea that an institution or organization must generate revenue in order to have value is one that we have been grappling with a lot lately. It's a strange idea to have taken hold so firmly in an institution of higher learning — but more on that in another post. Some of what the institution known as the Nelson Poynter Memorial Library is:

- A collection of a couple hundred thousand books, journals, videos, CDs, DVDs and a licensed gateway to more than a million electronic resources
- A place to have access to high-end technology, be it our 45-station networked information commons, our wireless connectivity throughout the building, our laptops available for checkout, our big-screen monitors in group study rooms, our listening and viewing rooms for media, our soon-to-be-renovated Distance Learning Studio, our Assistive Technologies room, or our digital archive
- A group of highly-trained, dedicated, hardworking, professional, and smart librarians and other library staff who care deeply about providing the best service possible to whoever walks in the door or finds us virtually
- A place that people like to come to because of our beauty – situated right on Bayboro Harbor you can't beat the views
- A highly collaborative workspace with a variety of modular and comfortable furniture that still provides places for people to work quietly and independently
- A huge array of services from circulating library materials, maintaining electronic and print reserves, providing access to over a million electronic resources, helping students and faculty do their research in person, on the phone, or via email and chat, assisting faculty with their professional portfolios, providing an open-access publishing platform for student and faculty scholarship, teaching classes in information literacy, guiding specific classes to know where to look for information and resources for their field, assisting faculty in the design and delivery of their hybrid and fully online courses, creating USF ID cards, helping disabled students through specialized technology, educating and entertaining through high-quality exhibits, presentations, and public lectures — and much more
- A safe haven for people to question, explore, discuss, debate, reflect, and create

One would think (incorrectly) that the inherent value of such an institution in a university would be clearly understood. But I suppose it's not too surprising that the value of a library is not obvious in a world where the value of educational institutions as a whole is under such fierce and relentless attack from politicians and pundits. First the pundits said that we didn't need libraries because all information was available on the Internet. Now the same pundits are decrying the need for universities since, they say, everyone can simply find the bits of content they need on the open Internet and learn as they go.

It's not just libraries that have to prove their value now.