

Digital shift

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Going (almost) bookless has made Cushing Academy's library a popular spot

By Sam Allis, Globe Staff | November 6, 2010

ASHBURNHAM — Until 2009, the library at Cushing Academy, a small, co-ed private boarding school, looked like any other school library: a crowded space packed with dark canyons of books. It was, says headmaster James Tracy, the least used building on campus. Then, a little over a year ago, Cushing got rid of almost all of its 20,000 books in a radical shift to create a digital library. The goal was to liberate students from stacks full of outdated reference material and mold them into online artists adept at pursuing research through mastery of databases — information literacy, in short. To some, the change was a smart step into the digital reality of the 21st century. Others were appalled.

“I was a pariah in the beginning,” recalls Tracy, who led the shift. “I was called ‘a book-burning Hitler.’ The most negative reaction came from the blogosphere. But we were getting overwhelmingly positive response from educators. After the first six months, I went from pariah to prophet.”

The digital change has been something of a branding opportunity for Cushing, a school of 445 students that has never been considered a top-tier prep school. “I was mobbed by other educators at a speech I gave at an Association of Boarding Schools conference last year,” says Tracy.

“We’ve heard from Harvard Law School, the University of Virginia libraries, and Syracuse,” he says. A rural public school in West Virginia has also approached him, and he has begun a conversation with UNESCO to see if there is a worldwide potential to what Cushing is doing.

On the other hand, says Robert Darnton, director of the Harvard University Library, “Libraries must advance on two fronts — digital and analogue. To concentrate on one at the expense of the other would be a mistake. The idea that printed books are in decline and will go away is just plain wrong.”

As prophets go, Tracy is alone in the wilderness closer to home. While other institutions have expressed interest in what Cushing has done, he’s unaware of other schools following his lead, and larger prep schools such as Phillips Academy in Andover and its sister school, Phillips Exeter Academy, have no intention of getting rid of their books. Exeter has 176,000, Andover more than 150,000. (“In general, I believe that the book in its traditional form is beyond wonderful and is not going to become obsolete,” says John Rogers, Andover’s dean of studies.)

Meanwhile, Cushing’s library has been transformed into a wide open space (though there are a couple of stacks left). Circles of comfortable chairs are located at each end of the room, where some classes are held, and students study together or, just as often, chat at tables in the middle. There’s a coffee shop, too. The new iteration, in Cushing parlance, is “a creative commons.” The sepulchral silence of a traditional library is gone. (A small Silent Room remains for those who need quiet to study.)

The move drew national attention and remains a hot topic. On the cover of its Oct. 18 issue, *The New Yorker* magazine presented a cartoon of a student working on his laptop, dwarfed by rows of anguished books looking on.

But what about the consumers? How have Cushing students reacted to the change?

With delight. There may be students who don’t like it, but, like the Himalayan Yeti, they’re hard to find. Students today think digitally to begin with, so this move was a natural one for most of them.

“Everyone likes it a lot,” says Chris Nicoll, a junior who is grouped with three friends around a table studying Spanish. “No one really used books in the first place.”

Adds Nicholas Merrill, a sophomore, “I love the switch. It has changed my learning experience. The new technology makes it easier to study. We’ve got a lot more resources now. I get it.”

To that end, Peter Clarke started teaching his sophomores last month how to find good databases for his “Roots of the Modern World” history course. He began by steering them to sharpen and expand searches to find what they’re

looking for.

In the first class devoted to this, with all students sharing the same screen as Clarke on their computers, he took them through the library website to his course. There, students found over 20 sites available to them suggested by Clarke. It's then up to them to find the best ones to use.

The library uses a "federated search" system, explains Tom Corbett, its executive director, that scans a huge range of databases, evaluates them, and then ranks them by relevance. One database is an e-book library that provides access to 145,000 academic books.

Students have Wi-Fi so they can do their homework wherever they choose. Yet the dorm room breeds isolation so, counterintuitively, the Cushing library went from being the least used to the most used building on campus.

"It's packed every night," says Justen Woolever, a junior. "It's more of a hang-out place now. It's the social setup. You can all study together."

The digitalization of the library was never meant to eliminate books on campus, says Tracy. It's up to each student to choose between a book or an e-book reader like Kindle to use in class. For those who choose to read e-books, there are 100 Kindles and another 100 other e-readers available to students.

Do students miss books?

"Kind of," says Merrill. "Particularly in English class, I want the physical book. But for history and science, online is helpful. For chemistry, I'll buy a CD textbook." (Such CDs, with PDF attachments, run about \$30, he says.)

Rene Ahn, a sophomore, says, "I really like reading books. I like the smell and the feel of a book. But this is a bridge from being an ordinary prep school to something bigger."

The digital switch has put more pressure on teachers and librarians to get computer literate fast. Teachers in particular may have come late to digital literacy and struggle to get up to speed. Corbett meets with teachers informally and students once a week for training. Susie Carlisle, dean of academics and a teacher, speaks for many colleagues when she concedes that students are often more computer literate than she is, but she's gaining. Besides, her role teaching critical thinking has not changed.

Instead of cutting librarian positions, Cushing has added a fifth to accommodate the new flood of questions that have come with the digital change. Most are available from their homes each night to help students who are having trouble, says Corbett. The students first e-mail them with problems and then usually work it out together in a chatroom set up for this purpose.

The decision to go digital was no sudden thing. The Cushing faculty and board of trustees thought long and hard before voting unanimously four years ago to do so. And as Tracy points out, not every small library is worth keeping. "This is not a particularly precious library," he says. "If we invested another half-million dollars, we would still not have a library like Exeter's."

The only drawback to the school going digital is that parents can follow instantly how their children are doing. "No more throwing away report cards," Merrill laments. "It's all online."

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