# Faculty Forum

## From the Faculty Center for Teaching Excellence

## Libraries Have Changed More in the Last Ten Years Than They Have in Their History Up To This Point

Although I've only been at WCU for a year and a half, I've been hearing a lot of complaints about some of the changes in the way the library does its business. As Coordinator of Library Automation, part of my job is to investigate problems that the library and its patrons experience and to try to find technological solutions.   I don't have any quick technological resolutions for everything that I've been hearing from the faculty, but I have some perspectives that might help.  Here are some of the most common complaints:

•TOP CAT is so slow and hard to use, I'd rather just browse the shelves. I've even encouraged my students to do it

•This technology is changing every year and every year we have to retrain people to use it again. When will it ever slow down?

•I used to be able to use any university library. Now, they are all different. When I go to another library, I waste time just learning the new system

•No wonder we can't afford to buy more books. All the money is being spent on those damn machines

In 1970, you could walk into any library in the country and find the same kind of card catalog you used in elementary school.  In 1990, this is no longer true. Automation has invaded the library setting at a pace so fast and far reaching that librarians themselves  as well as library patrons are having problems keeping up with the momentum of the transition. In the past, libraries were slow to implement any technological refinements and modifications. As a result, the way that a library worked had not changed significantly for decades. But now, no library can escape the impact of technology. Most libraries have recently had to add computer personnel dedicated solely to library applications. My position, as an automation librarian, has become a necessary position in the administrative units of most libraries. The information explosion in league with the computer revolution has transformed libraries forever.

So, the first thing you should know is that libraries are not going to ever go back to that comfortable yet cumbersome card catalog we all became accustomed to in high school. Although librarians are very sensitive to user's frustrations, libraries are going to get more technological in the future rather than less. We all might as well stop complaining and learn how to make the technology work for us.  In fact, we can start by seeing how the new technology is already working for us.

Although the "book" is still the basic library "unit," you can now go to the library for VCR tapes, CDs, audio tapes, statistical and bibliographic databases, microfilm, computer software, CD ROMs, kits and games, and the equipment to use it.  Because of technology, you can now even

go to our library and use someone else's library!  In fact, you can even use our library **and someone else's library** without even going to the library!  Technology has made it possible for users outside the library building to have access to online catalogs and other bibliographic and numeric databases.  What was once available only in the library (with help from the reference librarians if needed) is now available in other buildings on campus, at home to anyone with a microcomputer, and to other libraries around the state and across the country.  Access to this new world of materials is difficult at first, but once you gain some expertise, you will wonder how you did without these services for so long.

But in the meantime, there remains one serious complaint that must be answered directly, the complaint that all of this technology is taking away from the quality of the library's holdings, that is, that there are more gadgets and fewer books.  Few of the decisions being made in libraries are simple and none of them are painless.  In these times of budget cuts, each purchase, whether it be books, magazines, recordings, databases, or other technology, is a hard one.  When we buy one book, one journal, or one database, it means that we cannot buy another just as important.  With prices of regular print material rising several times the general rate of inflation, the purchasing power of the library materials budget has indeed been seriously limited.  But, keep in mind, while library materials money can be spent on CD ROM products and databases, the state regulations do not allow it to be spent for computer hardware.  Because these items cannot be used without some hardware, the "gadgetry" must be bought with funds in the equipment budget.  Therefore, the technological revolution is difficult to fund, but it is not being funded at the expense of the book budget.

There are no quick solutions to the complaints I have been hearing about the library,  but we can begin by becoming more aware of technological realities that may help make us more patient in this necessary period of transition.  These new technologies are  helping us all deal with the shrinking book budget by improving access to our current collections and by making available other collections. There are so many exciting innovations happening in the areas of computers and libraries, so many new ideas for introducing information, overcoming barriers, and getting to little bits of data. This technology will change the way we teach our students and the way we think about the knowledge we are trying to convey.  Perhaps most importantly, it will change the way we will store and retrieve that information, thus changing the whole way we think about information.

I want the technology to help make libraries more useful, easy to use, and responsive to the individual.  I want them to be fun, inspiring, and delightful places to use.  However, I know we have not achieved it yet.  If anything, it may seem temporarily more confusing to the library users then ever before.  But, we are trying.

In fact, next time you are at the library and you have a question, comment, gripe, or praise for or about what happens there, please use our new suggestion box.  It is located on the kiosk and called "HOW ARE WE DOING".  Responses will be posted on the board within a week.

In the meantime, please, keep these things in mind when you have to wait too long for TOP CAT to refresh the screen, when you have to learn yet another library retrieval system, or as you are directed to yet another "gadget" to find what you are looking for.

Remember that change is never easy...

**Jill Ellern, Library**