Library Highlights

Law Libraries and Technology

by Richard A. Danner

While in New York City recently to seek funding for a major technology initiative at Duke, I took the opportunity to visit the newly renovated Rose Main Reading Room in the New York Public Library. Now technologically up to date in terms of access to electronic resources and capabilities for laptop use by library patrons, the Rose Reading Room still remains clearly what it has always been—a wonderful library reading room—a place providing both access to information and a community space for students, scholars, and others using information to develop knowledge and understanding.

How much and what kinds of space should a law school devote to its library in an era when law students own computers and can easily access databases of electronic legal information anywhere in the school or in their homes? Does a library that focuses increasingly less on print resources still play the central role of “lawyer’s laboratory” in the way it did when Langdell proclaimed the law library’s importance to American legal education in the nineteenth century? Certainly, the Association of American Law Schools signaled that the library was less prominent as a physical place when it eliminated AALS’s minimum seating requirement for law school libraries in 1997. If books are less important to the practice of legal research, are academic law libraries becoming less important to the training and education of lawyers?

To provide law school librarians and administrators an opportunity to explore these questions, as well as more practical aspects of law library space planning and construction, the American Association of Law Libraries is sponsoring a conference on “Space Planning and Technology for Academic Law Libraries” on March 12–13, 1999, at the Duke Law School. Building on the ABA Section of Legal Education’s successful series of Bricks and Bytes (formerly “Books”) conferences, the AALL program will concentrate on the law library. The list of speakers includes law librarians and other law school administrators experienced in law library design and construction, as well as architects, consultants, information technologists, and representatives of other design and construction professions. The program is designed to provide expert presentations and opportunity for interaction between the experts and other participants.

In addition to providing practical advice and information for those in the process of planning for new library construction or renovation of existing library space, the AALL conference should also provide the opportunity to consider questions about all of the roles played by the library in legal education. It is more than a truism to suggest that libraries are not for books, but for people. Within the law school, we ought to consider how best to preserve the library’s function as a place for people to learn and to build community as we consider the impacts of technology on the future of the law school building.

Information about the conference program and registration is available on the AALL Website at <http://www.aallnet.org>.

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