

## Who Needs the Library When It's All Free on the Internet?

It has been suggested that the library is no longer needed because ubiquitous access to the Internet, where students and faculty "find all the information they need" to support their research endeavors at no cost, has rendered a library irrelevant or obsolete. The Internet and its resources cannot, for the foreseeable future, replace the Sawyer Library because:

- "free" Web sites do not include all of the information needed for academic research;
- the library offers a variety of unique campus services; and
- the library has an increasingly critical educational role in knowledge transfer concerning effective and efficient information retrieval, evaluation and use.

Despite the long-standing existence of bookstores, television and other media, libraries had no real competition regarding the retrieval of information content until the availability of the World Wide Web on the Internet. Since the advent of the Web, the library's mission has changed, adding electronic means to directly link users and information together (including databases and Web-based subject help guides), in addition to its traditional roles of acquiring, organizing and making information available. Electronic resources are expensive. Library staff apply professional "collection development" expertise to identify, evaluate, and license quality databases and electronic resources that best support Suffolk University's programs and research, and ensure funds are spent wisely.

### The Internet and Its Resources

The enthusiasm for using the Internet and the World Wide Web to seek information is certainly understandable. A vast amount of information is available at all hours from almost any place on the planet. However, unlike a traditional library, it is not a coherent collection of information. The amount of scholarly, intellectual, and aesthetic information is truly minimal, and access to most scholarly information is not free. [\(1\)](#) A recent university study found that when students searched the Internet:

- 54.7% did not find the information needed
- 52.8% found no full text information that could be cited for academic study and/or research
- 50.1% retrieved more citations than they wanted. [\(2\)](#)

Much of the scholarly information that students and faculty require for research is currently copyrighted and not in the public domain, is included in resources not available at all on the Internet, or is not available "for free" as widely believed. Furthermore, much of the information in printed resources will never be converted into digital formats.

The Sawyer Library provides access to scholarly print and electronic resources for the university community by applying its annual operating budget to purchase or subscribe to professional-level and scholarly information resources. And, through additional document delivery options, library staff can locate materials through additional databases and collections, world-wide.

### **Variety of Unique Campus Services**

The Sawyer Library serves as an often-used physical space for individual studying and group projects and, because of the lack of a student union, a social gathering place. From the Sawyer Library's Web-based 2001-2002 survey, 79% of the students reported coming to the Sawyer Library to study, and 51% came to meet with a study/project group. Half of the students reported coming to use textbooks on Reserve while over half (51%) came to use the library's computers to search the Internet for research information (versus 32% for fun).

In addition to the physical space, the Sawyer Library also provides students with:

- help finding and mediating the multiplicity of information resources;
- books and periodicals to use for course-related assignments;
- availability of almost all course-required textbooks;
- electronic databases with thousands of full text peer-reviewed academic journals inclusive of millions of articles;
- laptops and a wireless network enabling students to sit anywhere in the library and search the library's online resources; and
- free printing at computer and microform workstations.

The library supports faculty and doctoral students' research needs with additional means for identifying and retrieving resources not directly owned. We also work with the faculty to integrate and align technology resources to support learning and to educate students about information concepts and processes while developing their skills for searching online and evaluating the information they find. Supporting "information literacy" works directly to improve the academic enterprise.

### **Instruction**

College students are technologically adept, and most are skilled users of general Internet resources such as search engines, e-mail and message boards. Because students know how

to access information that is both free and electronically available, they also assume they have the ability to find, select, organize, and use relevant information sources for their academic needs. In a June 2002 report, two-thirds of the 1,050 college students surveyed stated that they "strongly feel they know best what information to accept from the Web." (3) Fifty-four percent of students responding to a 2001-2002 Web-based survey posted by the Mildred F. Sawyer Library "find the information I need for research from Internet search engines, such as Google or Yahoo."

Competence with information technologies and the ability to find, select, evaluate and use the most relevant information to meet their curriculum-based information needs are not the same skill sets. In assessing the information skills of undergraduates, UCLA found that students (4):

- did not know how to evaluate Web sites
- did not know when to cite sources
- could not recognize the difference between book and journal citations
- were unaware of the function of Boolean search operators
- did not know the meaning of call numbers used to organize books on library shelves.

Students are overconfident concerning their searching skills and are comparatively naïve consumers of information they find on the Internet. In fact, the confidence so many students demonstrate in using technology often creates a barrier between what they really know and what they could learn to sharpen their skills and make their online time more effective. For example, fifty-eight percent of the students surveyed in a June 2002 study said there is no difference in the quality of information retrieved from commercial Web sites versus ad-free Web sites (5) -- they do not perceive a difference between anonymous free information on the Web and subscription-based scholarly databases.

Students primarily value convenience and speed when it comes to information. One writer recently concluded that as a result of seeking instant information gratification, students can be indiscriminate and uncritical in evaluating information. (6) A writer in The Chronicle of Higher Education concludes that student research papers "become a synthesis of quotes" because students are unfamiliar with how books and journals work; "students think of research as a process of finding answers, transcribing them, and documenting where they came from." (7)

Unfortunately, students may not know how to use available academic resources. During direct observations of college students' use of the Internet in a library and in a campus computer lab for a Pew Internet and American Life Project report, it was noted that the majority of students' time was not spent using the library online resources. Students observed doing academic-related work made use of commercial search engines -- and, often, poor quality but "intuitive" natural language search engines such as Ask Jeeves -- rather than university and library Web sites. This report surmises that "although academic resources are offered online, it may be that students have not been taught, or have not yet figured out, how to locate these resources." (8)

Sawyer Library reference librarians schedule formal instruction sessions, offer early semester "drop-in" sessions and specialized course sessions at faculty request, and interact with individual students concerning effective information searching and retrieval skills using the library's high-quality, fee-based resources. We want to prepare students for the working and living world, including information skills necessary for lifelong learning. To help meet that objective, we seek collaborative relationships and partnerships with the faculty to hone student information-seeking skills, and to better critique the knowledge they find. Using our Web-based instructional modules, we can assess student learning outcomes, and directly measure if students have learned from library instruction and intervention.

## **Conclusion**

The Mildred F. Sawyer Library has a central role in the education of Suffolk University students. We want the Sawyer Library's physical environment to be an attractive, "good" place to study, and need to add group study rooms and tables. We also want to help students realize their potential concerning information skills, and seek additional collaboration with faculty concerning effective information searching, retrieval and evaluation instruction. A larger library instruction area that can accommodate a full class is also needed because our current room can seat only ten students at workstations. And, we will continue to do what we do best -- make available and accessible, and help students find, information resources in a variety of formats that meet their academic needs.

## **References**

1. Brian L. Hawkins, "The Unsustainability of Traditional Libraries" in *New Thinking on Higher Education: Creating a Context for Change*, edited by Joel W. Meyerson (Bolton, MA: Anker Publishing Company; 1998), p. 149.
2. Xue-Ming Bao, "A Comparative Study of Library Surveys of Internet Users at Seton Hall University in 1998 and 2001," *College and Research Libraries* 63 (May 2002): 255.
3. OCLC White Paper on the Information Habits of College Students, "How Academic Librarians Can Influence Students' Web-Based Information Choices," June 2002, p. 4. Available: <http://www2.oclc.org/oclc/pdf/printondemand/informationhabits.pdf>.
4. Patti Schifter Caravello, Judith Herschman, and Eleanor Mitchell, *Assessing the Information Literacy of Undergraduates: Reports from the UCLA Library's Information Competencies Survey Project*. Presentation at March 2001 ACRL Conference in Denver, Colorado. Available: <http://www.ala.org/acrl/papers01/caravallo.pdf>.
5. OCLC White Paper, p. 4.
6. Lorie Roth, "Educating the Cut-and-Paste Generation," *Library Journal* 124 (November 1, 1999): 42.
7. Barbara Fister, "Fear of Reference," *The Chronicle of Higher Education*, June 14, 2002: B20.
8. Steve Jones, "The Internet Goes to College: How Students are Living in the Future with

Today's Technology," *Pew Internet and American Life Project* (Washington, DC: September 2002): p. 13.