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For Making the Most of College, It's Still Location, Location, Location

By Scott Carlson

In late December, a set of articles and essays in The New York Times focused on the public library as a place, and on the changing meaning of that place with the rise of electronic books and the demise of brick-and-mortar bookstores like Borders.

As librarians "struggle with the task of redefining their roles and responsibilities in a digital age," said the lead article, their libraries are "reinventing themselves as vibrant town squares, showcasing the latest best sellers, lending Kindles loaded with e-books, and offering grass-roots technology-training centers." A related commentary prodded readers with a provocative question: "Do We Still Need Libraries?"

For me it was déjà vu. Back in 2001, I wrote an article in The Chronicle, "The Deserted Library," which reported that libraries would change in the face of the Internet and electronic materials. Some people, like Mark C. Taylor, a professor of religion at Columbia University, predicted an inevitable decline of the physical library with the advent of the Internet. My own conclusion, and what I reinforced in follow-up pieces, was that while deserted libraries tended to be outdated, unimaginative, and sterile places, the libraries that stayed vibrant—and busier than ever—were the ones that found ways to appeal to people's sensibilities and needs (including caffeine).

And they continue to be. I write many of my Chronicle stories from a seat in Goucher College's new library, and it is buzzing, even in the middle of the day. People, especially young people, want to be around other people, even if they don't want to interact. The library, as someone once put it, is one of few places you can go to be alone in public.
A Reckoning?

This conversation about place versus the Internet continues, but now it has grown to encompass the fate of the college campus itself. Online learning and MOOCs have arrived, the argument goes, so place doesn't matter. The campus will become a relic, bound for desertion, like the ruins of Ozymandias. Many of these predictions come with barely concealed indignation over the college building boom of the past 15 years. Pundits see a reckoning for the luxurious climbing-wall colleges—"Disneyland for Geeks," as Nathan Harden, in the latest issue of *The American Interest*, calls it.

Within the next 50 years, Mr. Harden declares in his essay, half of American colleges will succumb to mounting financial pressures and shut down. The problem is not student debt or a flaccid hiring market, he argues. Big changes are coming because "the college classroom is about to go virtual."

"Recent history shows us that the Internet is a great destroyer of any traditional business that relies on the sale of information," he continues. "Nostalgia won't stop the unsentimental beast of progress from wreaking havoc on old ways of doing things. If a faster, cheaper way of sharing information emerges, history shows us that it will quickly supplant what came before. People will not continue to pay tens of thousands of dollars for what technology allows them to get for free."

I'm not buying it—at least not the way that Mr. Harden lays it out. Online classes will surely play some role in supplanting some classroom teaching—they already do. And certainly colleges face challenges—like burdensome debt and deferred maintenance—that may hobble or kill off a number of them. In the next 50 years, we could see major geopolitical, environmental, or socioeconomic mayhem, which could push weak colleges over the cliff.

But will campuses and traditional teaching disappear because we now have MOOCs? No, because that defies the human yearning for meaningful places and the real benefits that come with them. We see it in the migration to cities and in walkable neighborhoods. We see it most of all on college campuses.

'Place Is Everything'

Such yearning may sound nostalgic, which is how Mr. Harden characterizes it. But even evangelists of disruption acknowledge the
intangible, serendipitous, and sometimes even uncomfortable educational opportunities that colleges offer by bringing different kinds of people together in one place.

Andrew Delbanco, a professor of humanities at Columbia and author of *College: What It Was, Is, and Should Be*, lauds the value of "lateral learning" between student peers who share a place. Mr. Harden, of all people, should understand this: *Sex and God at Yale*, his recent book about his experiences with promiscuity and political correctness on that campus, is a memoir made possible by being there.

"I think place is everything, and that's not to say that virtual learning can't enhance place," says Jonathan Brand, president of Cornell College, in Iowa. "You see how much students learn from each other sitting in the classroom, how much they learn sitting together in the dining hall—more than from their professor. It's hard to imagine replicating that virtually."

Look around, and you see the way people value place in education, even where you might not expect it. Goddard College did away with its traditional campus program and now offers low-residency programs mostly for adults, who spend only a week per semester on the campus. But those students regard the campus experience as a sacred time, when long walks and late nights on the old Vermont estate yield new ideas and new connections.

The so-called digital natives, who are too young for nostalgia, get it: Last fall, at a sustainability conference, a prominent environmental entrepreneur presented her vision for virtual classes designed to replace face-to-face classes. Undergraduates in the audience lined up at the microphones to tell her it was a bad idea, because they valued place and what it offered.

Many of these in-person-versus-online comparisons have a classist streak, as my colleague Goldie Blumenstyk and I discussed in a Chronicle essay in December. Mr. Harden, while briefly acknowledging that the virtualized classroom "can never duplicate the experience of the student with the good fortune to get into Yale," says it provides the wisdom of the Ivy League to "anyone who can access the Internet—at a public library, for instance—no matter how poor or disadvantaged or isolated or uneducated he or she may be."
He draws a simile: "Online education is like using online dating Web sites—15 years ago it was considered a poor substitute for the real thing, even creepy; now it's ubiquitous." Perhaps it's more like online sex—missing out on the intimacy, but offering something to those who have fewer options.

Local Geography

Take a lesson from recent history: Just as with libraries, campuses that are dismal, disconnected, and underutilized as places will suffer, while the ones that are vital will have a shot at succeeding. Colleges will need to find ways—preferably creative and inexpensive—to make their places relevant: Link to local communities. Use those communities as places where students can apply their education to fix problems or enhance strengths. Find the unique characteristics of the local geography, and incorporate them into lessons. Provide spaces where students can connect both intellectually and physically with one another, and with their college work.

People who predicted the death of the library made the mistake of thinking that libraries were merely useful for information distribution—an understandable error, given that libraries' central role involved passing around books and journals. But pundits now make the same mistake when thinking about the college campus. If college were merely about the "sale of information," the enterprise would have gone the way of Borders a long time ago.