

Gutting the Science Library.

Over the last summer workmen removed most of the remaining books from our Science Library. They took out the stacks and replaced them with tables. Many of the books were shredded for recycling. “De-duplication” is the word the campus head Librarian prefers for the process. Many many books were de-duplicated.

When I was re-starting in college, in the early 1980s, Ronald Reagan appointed James Watt as the Secretary of the Interior. His apparent goals included gutting the Environmental Protection Agency, overturning the Endangered Species Act, and giving massive amounts of public lands to lumber companies and ranchers. Quoting from wiki “In a 2001 interview, Watt applauded the energy policy of the Bush administration, stating that its preference of oil drilling and coal mining to conservation was just what he recommended in the early 1980s.”

When I arrived to UCSC as a young-ish professor in 1990, the Science Library was one of the places on campus I really prided. Any new visitor, or prospective hire, I would show the collection to. I would tell them, truthfully, that the math collection was quite good, rivaling UC Berkeley’s, where I’d just come from. They had a room full of the new journals on display. I spent hours browsing, or sitting in the library studying. I particularly liked the whole spacious room dedicated to new journals. I tried to spend a half hour or so a week there, just browsing, noodling around to see what’s new in various fields.

Ten years later, and the new journal room was emptied, gutted, and turned into a vast study hall. Among the reasons furnished were that journals were getting too expensive, and that people did not use them. But surely they could have displayed one wall of journals? No. Some committee of librarians, maybe even with the blessing of the senate committee on the library (aka COLASC) had decided that new journals were not used enough. Why use all this space, to display new journals? Who uses them? Well I did, but no more.

Now, our librarian (likely under pressure from her higher-ups, let’s be real) has decided that the libraries under her charge are no longer places for books. Books take up space. Our University has, under pressure from the ex-director of the Homeland Security Agency, admitted more students than we actually have room for. Those students need a place to ... to... well one might say “study”, but certainly at least a place to sit between classes and click away on their phones and laptops.

Like all administrators these days, librarians have analytical tools (a.k.a. “Weapons of Math Destruction”) in their arsenal, ways of counting how many times a year a particular book is fingered, or which disciplines actually are still so old-fashioned as to actually use books. (Don’t reshelve your books, signs used to always say. I would disobey, carefully marking the spot in the shelves where the book I was currently browsing had come from, so that I could reshelve it properly. But all that time I had missed the real reason behind ‘Don’t Reshelve’ campaigns: data collection!) Books left untouched more than X units of time require de-duplication.

Libraries are become ...umm.. umm... what? Laptop portals? Study halls? Desk space? Electronic entrances to the world-wide web? Pay portals for JSTOR and Elsevier? If the library goal is to maximize student usage, please, librarians, COLASC, administrators around the campus, consider opening up an In-N-Out Burger franchise inside the McHenry library.

I went into the Science Library a month into the quarter just to see what had happened. I walked up to the 2nd floor where the math and physics books used to be. Nothing. Space. Lots of space. Students scattered around on their devices. Some eating. Some drinking.

When my mother died there was her chair left in the living room. The red chair with tattered holes on the right arm, white stuffing poking through, cigarette marks, sitting in the open sun. The 2nd floor of the library was that chair, that room of open death, that hospital room cleared out, cleaned, sun streaming in, after the machines have been unplugged.

In shock, I went down to talk to a librarian, a friendly face, a worker-bee librarian with whom I’ve talked to over the years. “What happened to all the books? I’d heard some were left.” He gave me a wan smile. “They’re in the basement.”

Yes, down in the basement were some math and physics book. Less than half the original collection, huddled dejectedly in a corner, valiant resistors of concerted efforts of de-duplication.

I’m sad.