

To: Academic Senate 41

From: John Bender, Chair, Academic Council Committee on Libraries

Date: 29 October 2008

Re: Report of Subcommittee on Digital Information Technologies in the Research Library Environment at Stanford

Background

In response to an administrative decision that came to light in fall of 2007 both to demolish Meyer library within seven years and also to not construct new space to house the East Asian Library personnel, reference or stack space now housed in Meyer, C-Lib held a town hall meeting on November 28, 2007. At this town hall meeting Provost John Etchemendy reviewed the decision and outlined his view of the libraries. University Librarian Mike Keller presented several options for accommodating the East Asian Library within the existing Green Library.

Great concern was expressed by faculty present at the meeting from the East Asian departments and programs and from many other departments that use Green Library as their major research library. They questioned the assumption behind the administration's decision that the digitization of research materials used in the humanities and social sciences would move rapidly enough to obviate, within seven years, the storage of large numbers of books on the central campus. Faculty expressed alarm about the impact of a marked reduction in physical facilities and on-campus book storage on their research, as well as on the recruitment and retention of faculty and students.

Immediately after this town hall meeting, the Provost extended the time for demolition of Meyer and asked that C-Lib, together with Deans Saller and Hinton, form a subcommittee to study the impact of a digital library environment on the research libraries of Humanities and Social Sciences. Such a subcommittee was formed with Michael Marrinan as chairman. They were requested to make their deliberations available by this fall and, in September, filed the report now before the Senate.

The specific title of the subcommittee reflected the fine grain of its origins but so does the extremely broad charge it eventually received. This charge evolved after the time line for Meyer was extended. The charge opens with the words, "The C-Lib subcommittee will recommend principles and procedures to manage an orderly transition at Stanford from traditional research library facilities to those incorporating new technologies of storing information in digital form, electronic access to this material, and maintaining an effective program for retrieving research materials on conventional paper support." The subcommittee took the occasion offered by this charge to think about profound issues about libraries under consideration at every research university today.

Stanford's Situation in Context

Although Stanford's own circumstances are local, of course, they intersect importantly with those at other universities. We are fortunate that the subcommittee was able to study our situation in the national context of debate and action by peer universities and also to learn from recent studies of libraries by faculty conducted by the ITHAKA Foundation and by visible scholars like Robert Darnton and James Evans.

Digital resources are opening enormous opportunities in every discipline. And so the subcommittee places them strategically within the large spectrum of resources that make up the hybrid library it envisions for Stanford. The studies just noted show that library needs have become ever more specific to individual disciplines. In most areas of science and technology and in some social sciences--where publication takes place largely in serials--digitization already is very far along. In the humanities and some fields of social science, digital and print resources are being used side by side and need to move toward the fullest possible integration so that the distinctive merits of each may be fully realized. The subcommittee sees the catalog of the library as central to this goal. In the context of ever more dispersed disciplinary demands, the library system as a whole becomes the unique site where fully integrated resources can support the kinds of interdisciplinary research so strongly endorsed by the administration of Stanford.

It becomes clear, in national context, that Stanford faces questions that recur elsewhere about the integration of physical and digital information resources employed by faculty and students in their research, and about the distribution of millions of volumes of physical material between conveniently accessible central campuses and remote storage. It also becomes clear that Stanford is not keeping pace with, for instance, Princeton, Chicago, and the University of Toronto, each of which is in the midst of major investment programs in central, on-campus library facilities.

Stanford's Libraries Now

Stanford, by contrast, works with the reality that two of its three central library structures are aged. The Bing Wing of Green Library remains handsome after ten years, but Meyer Library is now under death sentence at forty and Green East approaches thirty years of age. Several worn out branch libraries orbit these dilapidated doyennes, though a new Engineering library and a Medical information center will be coming on-line before too long, and a new Art Library (of reduced size it seems) lies in the more distant future. In short, and despite real investment in off-campus storage facilities, Stanford lives with a substantial deficit in its physical library infrastructure. It should go without saying that library structures house not just books but support curatorial and reference services along the intellectual sociability of faculty and students that is the pride of residential universities like Stanford. It is not hard to imagine that comparisons will occur when faculty recruits, and graduate and undergraduate admitters consider Stanford. They, like the subcommittee, will look to Stanford for first-class library facilities.

The subcommittee also reports serious deficits in the digital catalog at the heart of the usage infrastructure of the Stanford libraries. Both the interface offered by Socrates and the underlying catalog data that it presents were found to be seriously wanting. The defects in cataloging are magnified when large numbers of books are in remote storage. In many cases, the contents of large multi-volume sets are not analyzed and, title pages and tables of contents are not typically available online. All of the issues raised about Socrates balloon in the realm of books written in non-Roman characters. The collections in Chinese, for instance, contain many sets of dozens, hundreds, or even thousands of volumes. The subcommittee stresses that books that have been or will be moved off campus must be fully described in the catalog.

Stanford's librarians report efforts over many years to gain operating and capital funds to remedy the deficits the subcommittee describes. C-Lib views the chain of events that brought the charge and report of the subcommittee into being as fortunate because it occasioned the first wide study of Stanford libraries since the aftermath of the 1989 earthquake.

The Subcommittee

The subcommittee's recommendations are found in sections five and six of its report (pp. 13-16). In forming these recommendations, the subcommittee worked within limits of time, much of which went to a broad survey of departmental views with which it was charged, and to numerous meetings. Every effort was made to discover as much as possible about the Stanford University Libraries and to present accurate data, but the group was not equipped to do detailed studies of collections, staffing, or cost implications. Depending upon actions the Senate may take, the role of C-Lib over the coming year may include full study of such issues.

Questions about priority setting and costs are central to further planning. The subcommittee certainly was aware that some of its recommendations would involve various modes of estimation and management. Some recommendations would depend on one-time or ongoing budgetary improvements. One important category remains imponderable because the question of the cost for building and for long-term maintenance of enormous digital collections has not been understood.

Important subcommittee recommendations would require quite substantial capital expenditure. C-Lib carefully discussed the question of costs. Certainly, they will be real and considerable. When it comes to such recommendations as those for improving the catalog, delivering books more frequently from storage, or relocating the East Asian Library to the current SAL 1 and 2, the costs could fall under current arrangements for budgeting or special allocation. When it comes to recommendations about buildings, the costs would depend on precise configurations and timing. The time line proposed by the subcommittee take a long view, though one conditioned by information on the destruction date of Meyer in 2015 with which it was provided. The planning process that C-Lib is now asking the Senate to actuate would be strongly framed by this date or any revision of it.

But cost management depends not only on estimates and figures but also on institutional will and on the determination of Stanford's leaders. The subcommittee report closes with a quotation from the Provost's report to the Senate last May, where he listed with pride many realms in which Stanford's facilities will be revitalized upon completion of the current capital plan in 2011. Libraries were not on this list. Yet, if Stanford is to imagine itself the top, or a top, university in the world, that ambition will remain no more than a fancy until library infrastructure matches that available in other areas of the university on the Provost's list.

To meet the now divergent research needs for libraries and library services of faculty and students working in our many disciplines may well cost two-hundred million dollars or more. In context with dormitory at over a two-hundred million dollars and a business school of nearly four-hundred million (both including parking and site preparation), this figure is not improbable. President Sterling raised the money for a new Meyer undergraduate library; President Lyman raised the funds for a new Green Library; President Casper inspired Peter and Helen Bing to renovate the structure named after them. Everyone says that it is difficult to raise money for libraries. In the past, our leadership has risen above this cliché.

The subcommittee recommends a hybrid library system in which digital resources are central. These include not just digitized books and serials but the large numbers of proprietary data bases that have transformed research in all fields. The recommendations also insist that large physical collections will remain central in many fields of the humanities and social sciences for at least a generation. The survey of departments supports this contention. The recommendations also recognize that collections in non-Roman characters will become machine searchable at a much slower pace and must be substantially housed on campus for the foreseeable future. In addition, the recommendations see the conditions of modern research, with large numbers of books off campus and ever more inquiry in collaborative groups, as requiring a flexible flow of physical materials through on-campus stacks and through studies and research spaces dedicated to projects run by faculty and their students. A time line for realization of these plans is on pages 16-18 of the subcommittee report, conditioned by the demolition date for Meyer specified as 2015.

Taken together, the recommendations point to the need for new physical facilities on campus. Although these facilities might be in more than one building, it is perhaps easiest to imagine them in a single structure. This building would put intense compact storage largely underground. This storage, together with that in a renovated Green Library, would house something over five million books, including most of those in non-Roman characters (serials having been moved to remote storage or being on line). On what one might call the main floor would be the East Asian Library reference and curatorial faculties and work space to bring together the now dispersed programs in Asian studies. On what we may imagine as the top floor would be work spaces and studies designed for faculty research in groups and in the context of course work with students, spaces through which materials would flow on a temporary, as-needed basis. The East Asian Library could well be the flag under which fund raising for this project would sail.

With regard to the on-campus availability of books, the subcommittee recommends a direction contrary to that outlined by the Provost at the meeting last November 28, and declared in various press formats by the President and Provost at least since the President's interview with Charlie Rose on January 6, 2006. The report considers on-campus collections not as inhabiting a central warehouse of "rarely used books" to be traded off against space for people on campus (John Etchemendy, Stanford Report, October 24, 2008). Nor does the subcommittee report view on-campus collections chiefly as "core" holdings. Rather, the subcommittee proposes the management of on-campus collections as changing dynamically in response to faculty and student needs. Books that were actively used would be kept centrally—not necessarily for long periods--while others that may have been held on-campus would be shift away, only to return as required. This concept is not one of simple circulation. Instead, a book that is used would remain, while others that were not being called up would retire to remote storage.

A chief reason to hold large collections on-campus is that students and faculty insist upon the importance of the physical browsing of books. But the wish to browse physically, though shown by new studies to produce different results from targeted searching, is not the only reason to centralize substantial numbers of book. Students, in particular, insist that they normally work on short deadlines and require quick access to books to finish their projects. Faculty preparing lectures often work under similarly tight time constraints. A quick trip to the library can make all the difference.

SUL figures show that substantial browsing does occur in the form of so-called "internal circulation." Users remove these books from the shelves to consult them but do not charge them out. Browsed books may, of course, also be charged out. Students or faculty checking a point for a paper or lecture due in hours surely are responsible for much of this activity. Faculty and students doing the most vital research in the fields that now use books are combining both methods and may well search or browse on line at the last minute, though the current browsing interface in Socrates falls short of a scan of a bookshelf. The day might come when electronic devices would present the potential for true browsing, by contrast with searching, but the present Socrates barely suggests what might be possible with, no doubt, large investments.

How can anyone determine the size of the flexible collections needed on campus for browsing and for quick turn around research on papers and lectures? Librarians have deep experience in such matters. The present collections are on campus in no small part because of detailed consultations with departments to define what books are needed for easy access, and because of the flow of circulation. The subcommittee recommends even more flexible principles, but the basic ideas remain. A critical mass in each field and subfield is needed to meet these goals. Even fields in which large collections of digitized older books exist, the books that have been found most useful by faculty and students are not necessarily available in concentrated packages analogous to a shelf. In addition, important holdings in art history, cartography, music and other disciplines heavily dependent on graphic forms or large format books, will need to be on campus for at least a generation. The numbers involved for such books

lie within the subcommittee's recommendation concerning numbers of books to keep on campus. With further study, the number in this recommendation might change, but the size of collections in the categories just mentioned, along with substantial holdings in special collections and books in non-Roman characters is very very large. And the current flow of new books in non-Roman characters makes up about one-third of all acquisitions. This flow, along with that of other acquisitions, is determined by the protocols that govern purchases of a proportionally tiny fraction of world book production. Given the growth in the rate of publication, and the numerous parts of the world in with digital formats are still part of a distant future, it seems unlikely that Stanford's purchase rate would decrease significantly even as digital publication grows in the English-speaking world..

C-Lib Action Item for the Senate

C-Lib requests that the Senate vote on the action items that follow.

Recommendations of the sub-committee have been discussed, amended, and refined by C-Lib for discussion before the Stanford community at large in preparation for its report to the Senate. The recommendations presented by C-Lib should not be construed as final but rather policy considerations that trace out a roadmap to guide new thinking about, and initiatives for, the libraries at Stanford.

First, C-Lib understands that the recommendations below entail heavy financial commitments. We ask the Senate to explore hard questions with university officers about the place of libraries within the allocation of resources at Stanford. C-Lib is concerned that Stanford's support of research, and thus its position among elite research institutions, might be compromised through neglect.

Second, in light of the perception by many faculty that important decisions about the libraries already have been made without including faculty and students in the debate, C-Lib recommends that the Senate take the lead in assuring that every discipline and constituency is being heard and taken into account as decisions are made. Many issues of pressing importance need to be aired: an outdated physical plant; deficiencies in the electronic catalogue; inadequate paging of books from Livermore; and the specter of a vastly diminished on-campus collection. A complex university requires a flexible approach to research libraries that will serve fairly its many different fields and modes of research. We believe this is best achieved by an open and candid exchange of ideas.

Finally, in light of statements received by C-Lib that demonstrate deep worry on the part of faculty and students in many disciplines about the near-term threat to research projects presented by the rush to a "bookless" library, the committee asks the Senate to expand the present findings and policy recommendations and to establish a coherent blueprint for guiding Stanford libraries through the next decades of transition.