

February 25, 2007

Dear Friends:

February has brought all that winter can bring to the Earlham campus: bitter cold, piled snow, icy sidewalks, even a day when we had to cancel classes – a rare occurrence. Today we have slush and freezing rain. Our grounds and maintenance staff have done an extraordinary job in keeping the campus functioning through this trying month. We are all ready for spring to begin showing its promise of warmth and color.

In these snowy days, I have been able to see footprints to and from the library. Even in such weather, our students seek out the library. They find it a place where they can read, write, explore and see friends. At Earlham, the library has been such a place for decades. So what's ahead for the library? Will it always be a place like this?

That's not just a question for Earlham. It's also a question for colleges and universities everywhere. The building we know as Lilly Library has served us very well since it was built in 1963 and expanded in the early 1990s. Will it serve us well in the future?

Even recently, questions about libraries seemed simpler. Colleges and universities wanted their library buildings at the center of campus, and they wanted the collections (books, periodicals, newspapers, etc.) housed within those buildings to be as large as possible. How much could you afford to spend on the collections? And which materials did you add to your collection if you couldn't (as you surely couldn't) afford everything? Those were the questions.

Earlham College was a leader in establishing a new conception of the library. Well before anyone had a glimmering of the internet or digital information resources, Earlham understood that we should not think of the library as just a building. Decades ago, Evan Farber began urging us to see that the classroom, not the library, was the center of the campus, and that the measure of excellence of an academic library was how well a college's graduates knew how to find and make intelligent use of library and information resources. He encouraged librarians to partner with members of the faculty in teaching students. Thus was born 'bibliographic instruction,' which has been extended and enriched by our current College Librarian, Tom Kirk, and the other librarians who work with him. Today, most courses at Earlham include a component of bibliographic instruction, and our graduates have unusually strong understanding of how to find, evaluate and use library resources—wherever they find themselves.

Earlham has taught this understanding of libraries to colleges and universities everywhere. Late in the fall, I was privileged to be part of a conversation sponsored by the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL), part of the American Library Association. For two days, a group of about 30 discussed the future of the library. The majority of those present were college and university librarians. There were also a few academic deans and provosts, and a few people from publishers of scholarly books and journals.

Over the course of the two days most of the librarians took a moment to tell me how much they had learned from Evan Farber or Tom Kirk or other Earlham librarians. Or to tell me how much they had benefited from a library workshop offered by an Earlham librarian. Or to tell me how much they had appreciated an opportunity to visit to see how we do libraries at Earlham. Librarians recognize Earlham as a model and a pioneer in their profession.

The rapid emergence of digital network technology has exploded older conceptions of the library. The approach pioneered by Earlham has proven unusually prescient in conceiving of what a library should be in an era of electronic access to library and information resources beyond anyone's imagining.

Students no longer need to leave their residence hall to gain access to the library's resources; faculty members no longer need to leave their offices. With internet access, the questions are no longer how much can a library collect or store. Rather, they are how can we provide the most convenient on-line access to materials to students and faculty? And how can we help students and faculty evaluate the quality of library and information resources? When librarians focused mostly on building a collection, they could be reasonably sure that the books or articles one found in the library were trustworthy. Now, with on-line access, materials in abundance are available at anyone's fingertips, but many of these are likely to be of suspect accuracy or quality. The focus needs to be on helping students learn how to choose and use the best of what's available.

The footprints in the snow testify to the continuing value of our library as a place. But today it is not so much a place to find books and articles as it is a place to encounter others who can be helpful in finding, evaluating and using library and information resources. Students go to the library to seek advice and counsel from librarians. They go to the library to work with others. They go to the library to find a place to explore, study and write.

We are conceiving of the Earlham library now and in the future as an 'information commons,' a place that students will seek out and use intensively for many purposes. It will be the hub of teaching and learning about abundant information resources. We will devote less and less space to housing collections. But this won't change: the most likely place to find an Earlham student during evening hours will continue to be the library.

What will the library look like in the future at Earlham? That's an important focus of discussion at Earlham today. If you have suggestions, I hope you'll send them to me. We want as broad and thoughtful a conversation about the future of the library as possible. We want to continue to be a college admired and respected for its library excellence.

Looking forward to spring,

Douglas C. Bennett