VSU Offers an Inferior University Experience in the Name of Equity

Parwinder Grewal, who will soon become president of Vermont State University, announced in an email to students, faculty and staff late Tuesday afternoon, February 7, a plan to eliminate the system's physical libraries and collections and instead offer only digital materials to the university community. The goal, he said, was to provide "greater equity of access to [our] library services" (*VTDigger.org*, February 8, 2023).

This decision marks an inauspicious beginning to a university presidency. That aside, by limiting library access to the digital realm, the action certainly will achieve a misguided form of equity in access to educational materials among the institutions that are being combined to form Vermont State University.

A looming question remains, however: Why are other institutions of higher education, particularly those that serve more affluent states, more generously funded institutions, and more affluent student populations not leading in this pursuit of "equity"?

The answer lies in the function of all libraries, and in the function of university libraries in particular, that currently strive to carefully combine the physical and the digital. They serve first and foremost as intellectual and social commons for a community of established scholars, future scholars, and informed citizens interested in the pursuit of knowledge and truth, as well as places to interact, reflect and dream.

They do not operate as narrowly as Kelley Beckwith, Vermont State University's Vice President for Student Success, describes in addressing student concerns,"[to provide] the academic materials that you need related to your academic programs". That is the least of what they do. If this is the definition of equity, it is equitable access to an intellectual world so thin as to be embarrassing.

In addition to offering VSU's academic community a degraded experience of a university library, this decision ignores serious and mounting critiques of digital information and all-digital resources.

Key features of the distributed web and internet, as Jonathan Zittrain, professor of law and computer science at Harvard (where he co-leads the Berkman Klein Center for Internet & Society's Institute for Rebooting Social Media) points out, "naturally create gaps of responsibility for maintaining valuable content that others rely on. Links work seamlessly until they don't . . . .[L]ink rot and content drift are endemic to the web, which is both unsurprising and shockingly risky for a library that has 'billions of books and no central filing system' . . . . These gaps represent actual holes in humanity's knowledge" (*The Atlantic,* June 30, 2021).

As a result, cutting library resources, including well-trained library staff, as a step toward cost savings is counterproductive. Were an institution to move to an all-digital collection, that move would necessitate a *larger* staff of specialists to help students and faculty access and evaluate sources, a well-funded effort to educate the VSU community in information literacy, and an increased investment in interlibrary loan—all of which should already be on offer, given the unreliable state of digital materials.

The decision to eliminate physical libraries from VSU campuses lacks an understanding of its wider implications because it lacks an understanding of how the digital resources themselves function and are accessed. It undoubtedly also misapprehends the cost of such an initiative. Perhaps more importantly, it demonstrates a level of disregard for the critical functions of libraries and disrespect for the needs and expectations of its own academic community. Such a decision reflects badly on its decision-makers and short-changes the citizens of Vermont.

Eleanor M. Miller, Ph.D., South Burlington
UVM Professor of Sociology and
President of UVM's faculty union, United Academics