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A New Star on the Horizon

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By Tim Obermiller

University Provost Janet McNew recalls her first visit to Illinois Wesleyan, as an external consultant for the university's humanities division. In trying to answer the question, "What kind of place is this?" McNew’s first stop was Sheean Library. Her reaction was one of disappointment—“not only because it was small, not only because the collection was not very good, but because it didn’t look like it had been conceived as a center for the community. It didn’t provide an accurate reflection of today’s intellectual community at Illinois Wesleyan.”

Although McNew credits University Librarian Sue Stroyan and her staff for their valiant efforts to make it a viable information resource, she says that the fact remained that Sheean Library gave visitors to campus—including prospective faculty members and students—the false impression that Illinois Wesleyan was not a community that took scholarship and research seriously.
"It is no exaggeration to say that the faculty of Illinois Wesleyan University regards the building of a new library as the final, and finest, achievement of our evolution into a distinctive national liberal arts college." —Professor of English Robert Bray (pictured right)

When she officially joined the university’s faculty in 1993, McNew found that the university's growing collection was a well as the technological resources that students and faculty needed for research in the 21st century.

A long-range master plan for the campus by Phoenix architect Jack DeBartolo boldly addressed this need. The plan DeBartolo presented to IWU President Minor Myers Jr. and university trustees in the mid-1990s placed a new library just south of the main quad in a two-block area between East and Park streets. As such, it would become Illinois Wesleyan’s most highly visible building, opening up a new gateway to the university on the south side of campus.

The question remained: what kind of building would this new library be? In 1996, Myers appointed a special project team—led by Associate Provost Roger Schnaitter and including McNab, Stroyan, Associate Dean Mona Gardner, and IWU Vice President for Business and Finance Ken Browning—to specifically answer that question.

Of key importance, says Stroyan, was determining exactly what the building’s primary users—faculty and students—wanted to use included in a new library.

Many surveys were conducted and those responses were carefully incorporated into a vision statement for the building composed by Stroyan and her staff. That statement envisioned the library as a “learning environment responding to the traditional values of a liberal arts university and to current technological advances, integrating technology within tradition” and as “the intellectual heart of the campus...a place for interaction, collaboration, consultation, study and reflection.”

This statement served as the project’s north star, guiding it throughout the planning and construction phases. Says Stroyan: “I felt a very serious responsibility to hold onto that vision, because it was based on the desires expressed by the library’s users, and ultimately they will be the decision-makers as to whether or not this building is successful.”

From Ken Browning’s point of view as the project’s financial overseer, another crucial factor was to build a library that would truly last. “I observed when we went into this that we needed to build a new library about every 30 years or so, and I was very interested in a plan that would break that very expensive cycle.”

As with the two previous major building projects—the Shirk Athletic Center and the Center for Natural Science—it was decided early in the process that this would be a “quality building...And we were really willing and anxious to have it make a statement on behalf of the university. Because it is sitting at our front door, it is probably the most significant building we’ve constructed.” Browning says.

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The Ames Library has become “a great symbol, a vast flag” of Illinois Wesleyan.
**At Sheean, you had to fight over the computers,” recalls Katrina Roloff, a third-year history major. Not only are there more computers at Ames, “but the environment is so much better that I find myself spending more time here.” And, unlike in Sheean, “I don’t feel claustrophobic here,” she says. “There’s plenty of room to spread out and not feel like you’re in someone else’s way.”**

As a third-year vocal-performance major, Peter Thoren says he’s “absolutely delighted” with the Thorpe Music & Media Center, built on the third floor to replace the old music library located in Presser Hall. “It has new listening rooms and all of the new technologies,” he raves.

“I think that the atmosphere that Ames has to offer is really conducive to learning,” Thoren adds. “The lighting and the comfort make it a much more relaxed place, where the desire to study is greater.”

If cozy chairs and spacious, sunny rooming provide incentive for students to walk into The Ames Library, the building’s true purpose is revealed amid the books and other materials that fill its shelves, and within computer workstations, generously distributed on every floor.

One of The Ames Library’s hallmarks is its perfect marriage of printed and electronic resources. This harmony was achieved despite the belief by some skeptics that paper resources, such as books and journals, will be swallowed up into extinction by the emergence of the Internet and other modes of electronically delivered information. Some of those skeptics even go on to suggest that campus libraries may become superfluous as students choose instead to sit in front of their dorm-room computers, and travel only on the information highway.

Minor Myers responds that anyone who actually tried to do research exclusively through the Internet would know the weaknesses of such predictions. “The Internet poses the same problem as the historical movie. It tells a fascinating tale—but is it true? And the classic way to judge it is return to the specific textbooks in which one group of experts looks at the work of someone else and says, ‘This will pass.’”

Indeed, one of the most important functions that The Ames Library will serve is to teach students how to conduct research by searching for credible information through a variety of media.

For example, one such workstation sits in the social-sciences area of the collection, and so someone doing research in that area can sit down at one of the station’s computers and find software and links to electronic journals that specifically address the needs of social scientists. “Increasingly journals are on-line,” says Sue Stroyan, “so we have over 10,000 titles that are available, full-text, electronically.” These e-journals and many other forms of electronic resources can be accessed either at the library or from home computers by members of the campus community, creating a kind of “virtual” library coexisting with the physical one.

To help students learn how to find their way through this potentially confusing world of virtual information, an Instruction Lab was set up on The Ames Library’s first floor. Equipped with 26 individual workstations, the lab offers classes such as how to do an online search for materials, available in the collection or how to look for and use electronic resources in a specific discipline. Adjacent to the lab is an Information Commons that provides access to the library’s reference collection—as well as a scanner, color printer, copier, and fax machine for student use.

Indeed, technology permeates the entire Ames Library. In total, there are 110 publicly accessible computers—including five laptops for use within the building. A total of 400 open network connections allow people to plug in their laptops to the campus network from every table and desk in the building. There is also wireless networking on every floor.

In the building’s design by Shepley Bullfinch Richardson and Abbott of Boston, the presence of bountiful technology is tastefully blended with more traditional functions. “We didn’t want it to look like a Microsoft campus,” explains Roger Schnaitter.

Above, Sue Stroyan and Minor Myers converse in the Bates & Mervin Reading Room. A special book collection will later fill the shelves. Below left, librarian Kristin Vogel enjoys her spacious new office. Overseeing the library’s construction were (below right, from left) project architect John Christiansen, University Librarian Sue Stroyan, and architect Roger Schnaitter, with Minor Myers.

In the building’s design by Shepley Bullfinch Richardson and Abbott of Boston, the presence of bountiful technology is tastefully blended with more traditional functions. “We didn’t want it to look like a Microsoft campus,” explains Roger Schnaitter. In the process of planning a new library, it was decided that the collection would be completely reorganized in a way that would give researchers easy access to many different types of information. Instead of segregating books, journals, and audio-visual pieces like VHS tapes into different areas of the library—often entire floors apart from one another—“those materials are now merged by topic into one area of shelving,” explains Associate University Librarian Kristin Vogel. “A student doing a paper on Martin Luther King Jr.’s ‘I Have A Dream’ speech can go to a specific area and find not only a transcript of that speech, but books and journals analyzing it in the context of King’s life, as well as video or audio recordings of this and other speeches by King.”

It’s the expanded space provided by The Ames Library that made this reorganization possible, says Vogel. At libraries like the recently retired Sheean, where lack of space is a dire $5 per square foot of space used, books and journals are grouped together to maximize shelf efficiency. Unfettered by these restrictions, Vogel says, the new library’s planners were free to look at how to best organize the university’s growing collection (currently at 368,317 with plans to expand to 400,000 volumes) from the researcher’s point of view.

That same philosophy was applied to the scholarly workstations, described in a library brochure as “personal computers with unique functions that relate to the physical collection surrounding them.” For example, one such workstation sits in the reading room. At The Ames Library, that mission has been accomplished, in ways both practical and spectacular.

As Janet McNew sees it, Ames is a building “that very clearly states, ‘This is who we are.’”

“One of my favorite phrases,” she continues, “is that very clearly states, ‘This is who we are.’”

“You and I will invoke when I talk to parents and students who are matriculating into Illinois Wesleyan, is that we are ‘a community of scholars.’ A library is, or should be, the most appropriate community center for an undergraduate residential college. And what we have now is something that is as fine and beautiful as this community of scholars is, and that’s a marvelous thing.”

Even for those who do not plan to spend much time inside it, The Ames Library has been a tremendous boon to the spirit of the IWU community, says Minor Myers, who’s heard excitement in the voice of everyone who tells him about it: faculty, administration, staff, students, alumni, and even members of the Bloomington community who just happen to be walking by. Deliberately placed in a highly visible section of the campus, it has become the new “gateway” to the community, the Ames Library has become “a great symbol, a real flag” of Illinois Wesleyan, says Myers.

“There was a time when steamship lines were elements of national pride, like the Cunard Line, which showed the status of Britain to the whole world,” Myers continues. “Vessels like The Queen Mary were monuments of a civilization. And I think for our students, faculty, and alumni, this library really announces that same institutional pride—a sense of ‘Wow, this is ours.’”

Images for this story were taken by University Photographer Marc Featherly with the exception of the two night photos of the library, which were shot by Robert George.