The Middlesex Libraries

Out With the Old and Embracing New Technologies

It wasn’t all that long ago that pundits were predicting the demise of the printed word and expecting libraries to wither and die for lack of patrons. While we do live in an increasingly online world, the Middlesex Community College campuses’ libraries in Bedford and Lowell are not only alive and well, but flourishing.

“We have more users of our libraries than ever before,” said Mary Ann Niles, MCC’s Aistant Dean of Academic Resources & Instructional Technology. A month earlier, 200,000+ visitors used the Middlesex libraries last year, according to Niles, and library visits have more than doubled over the last five years.

“Our circulation has actually gone up, as the size of our permanent collection has gone down,” Niles added. Last year, the libraries circulated approximately 18,000 books, DVDs and CDs, an increase of about 10 percent from the previous year, she said.

Thanks to advances in technology – and the fact that librarians have been quick to embrace them – libraries are no longer dark repositories of dusty tomes. MCC’s libraries are airy, modern facilities equipped with computer workstations and wireless Internet access. The library’s popular website (www.middlesex.mass.edu/library) also serves countless online patrons.

The libraries at MCC are under the direction of Niles, along with Ellen Royalty, Coordinator of Library Services in Bedford; Allyson O’Brien, Coordinator of the Lowell Campus Library; and Laura Horgan, Coordinator of Library Technology and Computer Services.

They are continually purging old and outdated items, and looking for new ways to harness technology for the benefit of the college community. As a result, the library’s permanent collection has been shrinking, while access to online information has increased substantially, said Niles.

Users of MCC’s libraries now have access to more than 1 million books, recordings and movies, as well as 17,000 full-text magazines, journals and newspapers. This wealth of information is made available to students, staff and faculty through state, regional and international inter-library loaning networks.

Niles explained. Most of these materials can be ordered or accessed 24 hours-a-day, seven days a week, via the Internet.

“When I first came to the Middlesex library in the mid-1980s, we had very few inter-library loan requests,” said Horgan. “Today, we get deliveries of books from other libraries on a daily basis and it has changed our collection. Now, we don’t need to buy that six-volume set of Churchill’s biography, we can borrow it.”

A through Middlesex lends more books than it borrows through inter-library loan. Royalty added, such programs greatly expand the library’s reach. “A book is one thing we can’t get are rare or historic collections,” she said.

By subscribing to selected online databases, the library also provides access to information not otherwise available on the Internet. “Students often assume that everything is online and that it’s all free,” said O’Brien. “That’s simply not the case. We spend thousands of dollars each year on databases so our students can access a lot of very valuable information online, for free.”

Technology has even changed the way MCC librarians answer questions, according to Royalty.

Visitors can now “talk” to a librarian 24/7 via the library’s website. Middlesex librarians are available by e-mail or instant-message during regular library hours, she said. Even after the library closes, off-site librarians can answer online questions through a state-wide service the library subscribes to. “If you’re writing a paper at midnight, you need an answer right away,” said Royalty.

In addition to academic materials, MCC’s libraries also offer access to best-selling books, as well as movies and music. “We like to have some of the best new fiction and nonfiction on our shelves whenever possible,” said Niles. However, these “populr” items are not part of the library’s permanent collection, she explained. Rather, they are “rented” through an outside vendor and continually rotated through both libraries.

“We want to be able to offer those kinds of materials for our students,” said Niles. “This is a fast-paced world and everybody is busy. When our clients pass through the library and something catches their eye, we want to grab them and keep them interested in reading, thinking and learning.”

With so much information available from so many new sources, library users often need assistance finding it. MCC librarians give presentations on how to use the library at the request of faculty, either in the library or in the classroom, said Royalty. For those who can’t attend one of these formal presentations, Middlesex librarians have developed LibGuides – customized online lists of the library materials geared to a particular career field or program of study.

“All this online information can be overwhelming,” said O’Brien. “A LibGuide will list all of the journals, websites and databases we subscribe to that are related to your field or program. It’s a nice snapshot of what the library can do for you.”

Thus far, LibGuides have been developed for Criminal Justice, International Business, Paralegal Studies, Nursing, Dental Hygiene, Early Childhood Education, Accounting and Graphic Arts. More are planned and currently under development, said O’Brien.

MCC’s librarians are working hard – behind their desks and behind the scenes – to improve the “information literacy” of Middlesex students, Niles explained. “Information literacy is how students find, assess and use information,” she said. “That is something that is taught in the classroom by the faculty, but is also supported in other areas of the college, especially the library.”

“A nd it’s working,” said Horgan. “Students are coming into the library and asking for peer review articles and research studies,” she said. In other words, MCC students are learning the limitations of the Information they can find through a simple Google search, and are turning to the library databases instead.

“Google is great,” said Niles, “but you have to be a discerning consumer. You have to know what’s reliable and what’s not, and you need to think about it.”

- Kathy Register
Results Are In: MCC Libraries Make the Grade

The library community has spoken and MCC’s libraries are responding.

In order to assess their services and collections, all 29 members of the Massachusetts Commonwealth Consortium of Libraries of Public Higher Education Institutions, a state-wide group of public college and university libraries, conducted an online LibQual survey in the fall of 2007, according to Mary Ann Niles, MCC’s Assistant Dean of Academic Resources & Instructional Technology. Middlesex did well in the assessment.

“The survey results were very gratifying,” said Niles. “In terms of service, MCC’s libraries scored higher than most other community colleges in the state.”

Following the survey, MCC’s Bedford and Lowell campus libraries have extended their hours. “We open more often, survey respondents gave high marks to MCC’s library facilities, saying the hours are: 8 a.m. to 10 p.m. Monday through Thursday; 8 a.m. to 4:30 p.m. Friday; and noon to 5 p.m. Saturday. (The library is closed on Sunday.)

In addition to requesting that the library be open more often, survey respondents gave high marks to MCC’s library facilities, saying the physical space was very inviting and pleasing.

Several survey respondents even said the library was “the place to be on campus,” said Ellen Royalty, Coordinator of Library Services in Bedford.

“Our libraries have become more and more central to campus life,” said Royalty. “When students know they’re going to be on campus awhile, they come here between classes. We have many, many regulars.”

The online survey also indicated the college community appreciates the ability and readiness of staff members to assist library users, said Niles. “We can see from the survey that our clients believe they have the best of both worlds: online content and helpful humans, too.”

-M Kathy Regler

Recently Restored MCC Lowell Campus Library

A Look at What Our Librarians Like

With a seemingly endless array of books before them, what do librarians like to read? MCC librarians share their favorite book choices, as well as what they are currently reading – or listening to, via audio books.

Laura O’Horgan, Coordinator of Library Technology & Computer Services

Favorite: Pride and Prejudice by Jane Austen - A literary classic; A. Austen traces the intricacies and economics of 19th-century British mating rituals.

Reading now: Executive Orders by Tom Clancy - Best-selling author Clancy goes to the White House with this thriller about political terror and global disaster.

Ane-Marie Mulligan, Catalog/Reference Librarian, Bedford & Lowell

Favorite: Twenty Chances for a Soldier: The Story of an African-American Community in the Vietnam War, by John Clardy – In this novel a New York playwright moves to a small town in Colorado and is drawn into the local land-rights dispute, which provides fodder for his new play.

Mary Ann Niles, Assistant Dean of Academic Resources & Instructional Technology

Favorite: The Road by Cormac McCarthy - Winner of the 2007 Pulitzer Prize for fiction; a post-apocalyptic story of survival in a very bleak world by the author of No Country for Old Men.

Reading now: The Brief Wondrous Life of Oscar Wao by Junot Diaz - A Pulitzer Prize-winning novel about the complexity of Dominican-American author, award the 2008 Pulitzer Prize for fiction.

Allison O’Brien, Coordinator of Library Services, Lowell

Favorite: My Antonia by Willa Cather - This great American novel tells the story of several immigrant families in late-19th-century rural Nebraska.

Reading now: The Road at the Center of the World: The Epic Story of Dutch Manhattan and the Forgotten Colony That Shaped America by Russell Shorto - A gracefully written historical account of the origins of Manhattan, based on records discovered in the late 1600s.

Jessica Rabban, Reference Librarian, Bedford

Favorite: The Mopster by Colm Tóibín - This riveting novel by Irish author Tóibín is written as if he were inside the mind of novelist Henry James.

Reading now: Shatter Island by Dennis Lehane - A terrific suspense novel and impressive follow-up to 2003’s Mystic River.

Ellen Royalty, Coordinator of Library Services, Bedford

Favorite: Man on God: The Man-eating Predator in the Jungles of History and the Mind by David Quammen - T. The author’s research of the lions of India’s Gir Forest, crocodiles of northern Australia, bears of Romania’s Carpathian Mountains, and Russia’s Siberian tigers.

Reading now: Dead Lucky: Life After Death on Mount Everest by Lincoln Hall - T. the story of veteran mountain climber Lincoln Hall’s near-death experience on Mt. Everest.

Linda Tullmann, Reference Librarian, Lowell

Favorite: Middlesex by Jeffrey Eugenides - This beautifully written novel, an intergenerational family saga, revolves around Cal Stephanides and the physical, psychological and cultural issues he faces.

Reading now: People of the Book by Geraldine Brooks - In this novel, a rare-book expert traces how an ancient illustrated book survived and moved across international, cultural and religious borders.

Bedford Campus Book Club

Last January, a group of Middilex staff members – all avid readers – formed a book group. The Bedford Campus Book Club now has 14 members and meets once a month, during their lunch break, in the Bedford Teaching, Learning & Reflection Center.

“It’s a very low-key group,” said member Jessica Rabban, an MCC reference librarian. “We order two books each month from the library and members can read either one or both. We get together to relax and reconnect, and share book ideas.”

For more information about the Bedford Campus Book Club, contact Jessica Rabban at 781-280-3705.

Bedford Campus Book Club Picks:

- When the Emperor Was Divine by Julie Otsuka
- The Weight of Water by Anita Shreve
- W. H. Auden: The Dead Know by Laura Lippman
- The Last Girls by Lee Smith
- The Dive From Clausen’s Pier by Ann Packer
- The Knitting Circle by Ann Hood
- The Choice by Nicholas Sparks
- Truck: A Love Story by Michael Perry
- Fried Green Tomatoes at the Whistle Stop Cafe by Fannie Flagg
- Shutter Island by Dennis Lehane
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