

The closing of the Welch Library building: interview with the Director, Nancy Roderer

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Abstract

Recently, the Welch Library made it into the news, because of their bold move to close their doors on December 31st. The reactions among patrons and librarians have been mixed. The Journal of EAHIL interviewed Nancy Roderer, Director of the Welch Medical Library, to learn more about the reasons behind the changes and share this information with libraries facing similar changes.

Key words: medical library, library future, informationists.

The William H. Welch Medical Library serves the information needs of faculty, students & staff of the Johns Hopkins Medical Institutions, comprised of the Schools of Medicine, Nursing, and Public Health and the Johns Hopkins Hospital and its affiliates, working with those units to advance research, teaching, and patient care. Notably, the number of library users in this research and clinically intensive setting includes more faculty than students. The overall budget of the library is about 8 million US Dollars (personnel costs 42%, collection costs 38%, and physical plant operations 12%) and is provided mainly by the three Schools and the Hospital. The Welch Library has about 50 staff members and is located in Baltimore, MD, USA (1).

Recently, the Welch Library made it into the news, because of their bold move closing their doors as of December 31st. The reactions among patrons and librarians have been mixed. A professor and a five decade user of the library wrote a piece in the Hopkins Medicine Magazine about what has been gained and what has been lost in the name of the progress (2, 3). The *Journal of EAHIL* interviewed Nancy Roderer, Director of the Welch Medical Library, to learn more about the reasons behind the changes and share this information with libraries facing similar changes.

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Q: Please tell us about the major changes coming to the Welch Medical Library.

Nancy: I'm happy to do that but first I should mention that many things are staying the same. The tradition of Welch serving people wherever they are with the emphasis on online services and librarians continues. But you ask what is changing, and the biggest change is that we are closing the building to the public as of the end of this year.

Q: What you would say specifically brought these changes about?

Nancy: The library does an ongoing review of services to make sure that they are as cost effective as possible, and with these reviews there have been many changes in the library over the decades. What we have seen for some years is very large increases in the availability and use of online materials and more use of our informationist (embedded librarian) services. At the same time, use of the physical building and circulation of print materials have gone down. A kind of tipping point came last year. Here are some numbers that capture what was happening: on an



Fig. 1. Nancy Roderer.

average day, there were 104 people walking through the doors of the physical library, there were 40 people checking out books and there were 35,000 articles downloaded. These data certainly support putting our emphasis on delivery of online materials and support of online use.

Q: Do you really feel the changes will make the library better?

Nancy: Yes. The costs that we save by closing the doors of the library can be redirected to collections and services to make them even better. Online check-out and delivery of materials makes these services better, allowing books and reserve materials to come to the user rather than the user having to come to them. In addition, our Informationists* work with their departments on site, holding office hours, attending meetings, and giving classes. (*See explanation at end of article)

Q: I think most patrons would like that aspect of the library coming to them. When did you first think of closing the physical library?

Nancy: We did a long range planning study in 2001-2002 that involved talking with users and envisioning what services should be like when the bulk of what was needed could be provided electronically. We selected 2012 as that year, and began to work towards it. That first study and a later action plan can be found under <http://www.welch.jhu.edu/about/management.html>.

Q: What has been the most difficult aspect of these changes coming about?

Nancy: Well, the answer to that question changes over time. As I said before, we have been in the process of thinking about this and planning for it for the last ten years. But as we come close to the closing of the physical library doors, I think what I am most struck by is the complexity of the library and the things that we need to review to make sure that everything will be in order as of January 1st. So we are very focused on having as smooth a transition as we can for all of our users and that requires a lot of project planning and scheduling and synchronization of events.

Q: Please provide an example why the complexity of the closing is higher than thought?

Nancy: Libraries have many detailed procedures, and we have had to review all of them for possible changes. One example is that spouses/significant others of faculty can have library privileges, but getting them previously required coming physically to the library. It will now require filling out a form on our web site.

Q: The closing is such a huge event. What have been some of the reactions you received?

Nancy: Most reactions have been neutral or positive. More have been in the neutral category because if you have been using the library online, it doesn't make very much difference to you. This is not to say there haven't been some concerns and some anxiety on the part of people who have used the physical library. Understandably, there is also some nostalgia about the end of the era of the physical library building.

Q: You have closed a number of branches over the last seven years, and ending services in the Welch building as the last step in that process. Will Welch continue serving patrons at other physical service points?

Nancy: After the closing, there will be five locations where students can access reserve materials and pick up and drop off print books that they have requested. (Faculty and staff have the books delivered to and picked up from their offices, but students do not have offices.) In our original planning study we talked about digital resource use and Informationist services, but thought that we might have small library areas around campus – we called them “touchdown suites”. Over

time, it became clearer that we did not really need those to work with the faculty and the students.

Q: Most people access the library online and electronically. Students' habits are changing in terms of their study habits and their social habits and they want to combine the two.

Nancy: Yes, the study habits of students have most definitely changed, and many are attracted to the new "perks" now available with studying in some places. They like to incorporate e-mail, snacking, and more social interaction along with their library experience. "Quiet time" is almost an equal partner with social media. The design of the Welch Library (we have one large study room, a computer room and many study carrels that can only accommodate 1-2 students) does not afford users the opportunity to gather in groups. They tend to opt for the coffee houses and other study spaces around campus that offer more environmental stimulation.

As an example, during a fire drill last week, I had the opportunity to talk to a nursing student who had been studying in the building, and I told her about the library closing. She expressed concern first, and so I began to tell her about the other study spaces that were available on campus. Once she was informed that she could still have a place to study, she was fine. I understand the anxiety when her accustomed place for studying is closing. Students in the Schools of Nursing and Public Health have excellent study space in the buildings where their classrooms are, and the MD students in the School of Medicine also have excellent study space in the new Armstrong building.

Also, I remember the evolution of the telephone. Do you remember when telephones were attached to the wall and when the headset was attached to the body and pre cell phones? There have been considerable changes in that arena with some anxiety at each stage, but what has resulted is a much more effective instrument.

Q: Yes, I remember very specifically thinking when I first saw cell phones that I wanted my phone attached to something. In conversations with people at Hopkins, what are their concerns, or is there some greater circumstance that they foresee happening?



Fig. 2. Welch Medical Library.

Nancy: Well, they often start with "Where will people study?" That is a common question. I think the next one that gets asked is "What will happen to the staff?" There have been rumours that if the library is ending public services from the building, the staff will be without jobs. But that is not the case, since there is still much work to be done. The third question I get is: "What will happen to the building?" It would be nice to know the long term answer to that, but we don't yet.

Q: What will happen to the physical interior of the building? What kind of changes, or is there a new design in place?

Nancy: We have a number of conceptual designs for the building, but we have not settled on one yet. We do know that the Institute of the History of Medicine and its library will stay in place, probably forever, and that the West Reading Room with its wonderful paintings will stay in place and will be an even better venue for events. In the short run, the building will be used to house all the library staff. We can't fit all library staff into the building now, but we will be able to after January.

In the long run, a promising plan for the building is to make it a center for graduate medical education, for the PhD programs in the School of Medicine that are currently growing out of the buildings behind the library. A second proposal is to make the building an orientation and history center for the campus, something that it does not have now.

To summarize, the library exists to support the information needs of its users, and that will not change. The way in which we do that will change, and it changes in much the same way as everything around us changes: as communication changes, as education changes, as networking changes. All of those things have been affected by technology over a number of years, and will continue to change. The library is just the same. What we know from our patrons is that they put an enormous importance on getting the information they need, and an enormous importance on getting it quickly and conveniently. So we are always working to get them the information they need more quickly and more conveniently, and this is another step in that direction. It is a journey we have made with our users. As they have adopted new technologies, so have we. We have tried to stay a step or two ahead of them. It is a journey that will continue.

Q: Other people have mentioned before that the closing is a very bold move and other libraries are undergoing changes in terms of downsizing, but yet I get the sense from you that you are very confident about the library's future?

Nancy: Yes, I am. The circumstances that make it the right thing for our particular library and this particular point are quiet compelling. I should note that that doesn't mean that it is the right thing for other libraries, but it is the right thing for us, I believe.

The interview was put together from the 2nd edition of the Welch Library Podcast (Interviewer: Alonzo Lamont, Communication Specialist of the Welch Library) (4) and a written interview in November 2011 (Interviewer: Oliver Obst).

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***What are Informationists?**

Informationists are approximately the same thing as a kind of embedded librarians. At Welch, we use the name Informationist in medicine because it was proposed by Florance and Davidoff as an extension of clinical librarians (The informationist: a new health profession. Ann Intern Med. 2000 Jun 20;132(12):996-8.) The Welch Informationist Service delivery model comprises customized information services that strengthen the scholarly efforts of clinical, research and education departments, centers and institutes of the Johns Hopkins Medical community. This model of embedded librarianship depends on the establishment of relationships between the informationist and the faculty and staff of an assigned group. Building these relationships is an informal, organic process that begins with an initial contact and grows through ongoing rapport, interaction and collaboration. Welch Library offers information services to all user groups. Services to interested groups are implemented according to their needs, fully maintained with appropriate levels of staffing and resources, and assessed regularly. Informationists emphasize their work in the context of their users, delivering information services wherever our patrons are, whether in their office space, on a medical unit or in a laboratory. Informationists hold regularly scheduled office hours, and participate in departmental activities and committees. Informationists join users in formal and informal partnerships to work on a variety of complex, in-depth projects (both funded and non-funded) that can span for days, weeks or months.