



Hollins Library Is Anything But “The Living Room At Grandma’s House”

Roanoke, Va. – If Hollins University Librarian Joan Ruelle could give one piece of advice to patrons of the school’s Wyndham Robertson Library, it likely would be this: Check your stereotypes at the door.

Since coming to Hollins in 2003, Ruelle has been leading a not-so-quiet campaign on campus to change the image of the library from intimidating and uncomfortable to accessible, friendly and even fun.

“At first glance, you see what a beautiful facility our library is and you would think students would naturally gravitate to it,” said Ruelle. “But in reality, a lot of our students found it imposing. One even compared it to ‘the living room at grandma’s house’ – something to be admired from afar but not to be used or disturbed.”

Ruelle added that the stereotypical view of librarians – “unapproachable and don’t want to be bothered” – did not help.

The student feedback led Ruelle and her staff to explore ways in which they could better integrate the library into campus life. One of their first initiatives was to embrace the very factor that some see as a major threat to the traditional library: computer technology.

“The library’s traditional emphasis on the printed page has led to the notion that we’re anti-technology, but the exact opposite is true,” said Ruelle. “Technology is a huge

part of what we do. In fact, going back to the early automated card catalogs, libraries were one of the first areas in higher education to incorporate it into how we operate.

“In addition to searching the catalog with greater ease, technology allows rare documents to be viewed digitally by many researchers at various locations without damaging them. We can do keyword searching and indexing of vast databases of scholarly articles online, and there’s so much more access to information: for instance, 22 students can look at the same article online in the middle of the night.”

The Wyndham Robertson Library has also installed 19 additional labs to allow students to take their research full circle from their first inquiry to the final product – whether that product is paper, web page, PowerPoint presentation, or a blog entry.

Second, to raise the library’s profile with faculty as well as students, a staff librarian was designated as a liaison with each academic division at Hollins. “When you need help, it is human nature to talk with someone you know,” said Ruelle. “The liaison librarian was our way of establishing ourselves as the friendly experts and personalizing the services we offer.”

Rather than wait for students to approach them, Hollins librarians proactively go to classes and assist with research assignments. “We don’t write the paper for them, but we do help them perform better research,” explained Ruelle, who said that while this outreach activity is a major time investment for her staff, “it has been a very successful way for us to build relationships on campus.”

Third, the Wyndham Robertson Library has become a much more comfortable and enjoyable place to spend time. Food and drink are allowed throughout the facility, and soft seating and reclining abound.

“Students today are by nature multitaskers,” said Ruelle. “They can work on a paper, drink a latte, and Instant Message their friends simultaneously. We want them to feel as at ease doing this in the library as they do in their dorm room.”

Live entertainment is even a feature of the library now. On January 20, a coffeehouse-style event featuring a performance by local singer/songwriter Phil Norman will highlight Hollins’ short-term academic session. “Rockin’ the Stacks,” an event which features a rock band and dancing in the library, was very positively received last winter and will have an encore this spring.

Ruelle emphasizes that the Hollins library’s activities are by no means intended to alienate those who are devoted to the traditional library setting. “People who love books, love libraries,” she said. “Books will always be the central component of a liberal arts education. They aren’t going away and libraries aren’t going to go away; it’s just a matter of achieving a balance between the printed page and digital content on the computer.”

The library staff’s efforts are paying off: Patron visits have risen from about 8,000 in September 2001 to over 10,000 in September 2004.

“We’re definitely building a solid reputation here,” said Ruelle. “Increasingly, students feel we’re accessible, approachable, and part of the campus support structure.”

The Wyndham Robertson Library opened in 1999 and was Virginia’s first National Literary Landmark. In addition to providing a variety of environments for study and instruction, the facility features the Hollins Room, a showcase for the works of Hollins alumnae and faculty authors; a two-story periodicals reading room; multimedia facilities; and a 40-seat screening room.

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