



# McKEE LIBRARY

## THRIVING AFTER A MIDLIFE CRISIS



**[T]he healthy library is a library that is actively growing in importance. A healthy library is one that has sufficient resources and influence available to initiate change, commit to significant professional and staff development, expand services beyond the traditional environment, contribute significantly to the mission of the institution, and augment learning outcomes.<sup>1</sup>**

What do libraries do when their facilities or services encounter a midlife crisis?<sup>2</sup> Is there life after 40 for libraries that were built long before the Internet, Web 2.0, social networking applications, smartphones, eBook readers, iPads, and other high-tech devices? How can library facilities achieve their goal of being the heart of the academic campus at a time when there is a

plethora of distributed information and diminishing attention spans?

The story of the McKee Library facilities at Southern Adventist University in Collegedale, Tennessee, is an example of how an academic library sought to answer these questions.

As the result of the university's successful library fundraising campaign, with the O. D. McKee family as major donors, a new facility was completed in 1970 and named McKee Library. The

new larger building better accommodated the university's rapidly growing student body. It also housed more shelves for a growing book and periodical collection that was needed by that generation of students and teachers.

The new building allowed the library to make gradual but significant changes. In the late 1970s, books were re-cataloged under the Library of Congress system, a better system for large academic

BY JOSIP MOCNIK and R. LYNN SAULS

collections than the Dewey Decimal System. The library's holdings gradually increased from 69,034 to more than 170,000 volumes. Two special donated collections were added: one dealing with Abraham Lincoln and the Civil War, and more recently, a comprehensive collection of Mark Twain's writings.

The dawn of the computer age brought faster and greater changes. When McKee Library was dedicated in the fall of 1970, Southern Adventist University's students had never seen a personal computer or a laptop and had never heard of a VHS, DVD, CD, e-mail, e-newsletter, or e-anything. But by the turn of the century, the library had put its card catalog online, made computers and electronic databases available, and added many electronic resources to its growing collection of books and periodicals.

### The Current Situation

The facilities and programming changes implemented during the latter part of the 20th century were not enough, however, to meet the needs of 21st-century students and teachers. Like human beings who experience a midlife crisis, as the McKee Library building approached its 40th anniversary, the facility and services needed some transition and adjustment. In terms of its physical appearance, the library building no longer attracted those students who preferred to go online or to a comfortable commercial bookstore for their information needs. The percentage of the library gate count in relation to enrollment had declined; faculty found alternative ways to access information, while some students even made public pledges to finish their entire education without ever venturing into the library! Ironically, the library provided access to more information than in earlier years. What explained this disconnect between available resources and faculty and student interest in using the facilities?

Changing styles of learning created a need for modifications in Southern Adventist University's library. Rejecting the old stereotype of the library as a ware-

**Computer use in McKee Library then and now. In recent years, the use of computers has become more relevant through the availability of an online card catalog and many available electronic databases.**



house for books and periodicals, colleges and universities began to convert their library rooms and open spaces into comfortable lounges, multimedia-equipped group study areas, and user-friendly locations for a variety of community events. Commonly known as knowledge or learning commons,<sup>3</sup> these new spaces offer convenient, expanded Internet and database access, as well as areas for group learning or individual research. Knowledge commons are designed to be "person-centric, motivated by needs to provide novel, sophisticated, and personalized experiences to users [as they] concentrate on communication and collaboration."<sup>4</sup> Megan Oakleaf further suggests that "[l]earning commons . . . help libraries become campus community centers, . . . [which] complement [other] services and integrate [themselves] even more deeply into the scholarly life of . . . campus[es]."<sup>5</sup> The McKee librarians rec-

ognized that they needed to pay attention to these trends in order to recapture their academic audience.

### Physical Adjustments

During the past few years, Southern Adventist University has adopted a three-phase master plan for a library makeover. The funding for the first two phases was generously provided by the university administration, while the third phase has been supported by an external donation. The first two phases were completed in 2009 in time for the 40th anniversary of the library building. The third phase (in the planning stage at the time this article was written) will replace the flat roof with a pitched roof, extending the usability of the building by creating additional functional space on its top floor.

Phase one concentrated on the



upper floor and ground floor. One-third of the collection, those books and bound volumes that are used only occasionally, were put into storage on the ground level where library employees could readily retrieve them. This opened up the upper floor area and provided for wider aisles between the stacks and the outside wall, thus allowing more natural light into the library. On the main floor, the stacks have been rearranged so library users can see from one end of the library to the

other, providing a sense of openness and transparency.

Phase two made the library more attractive to and useful for students. The renovated periodicals area has a warmly lit reading nook where students can complete a reading assignment or relax with a favorite magazine. Eight study rooms can be reserved online, some of which have screens and projectors that students can use with their laptops. Most of the rooms seat six to eight people; one seats 12. Study rooms allow students to work collaboratively on proj-

ects without distracting others nearby.

Fifty new desktop computers enable patrons to locate online materials from inside the library and to retrieve information from databases and the Internet. Twenty laptops can be checked out and used in the library. The library has also acquired a Kindle reader for eBooks and an iPad as a part of its effort to keep up to date with the latest technological developments and to determine whether these devices will become popular with students.

Compact shelving on the main floor has made space available for a multipurpose knowledge commons. Here students can study in casual chairs; and speakers, artists, storytellers, musicians, and others can share their knowledge and talent. The events already hosted include a lecture to commemorate Native American heritage, a presentation on local Civil War history, a book promotion, several artists' exhibits, poetry readings, and recitations. A library lecture series has been established to better coordinate these popular and well-attended events, which provide "edutainment" opportunities for students and outreach to the local community.



**The periodicals area then and now. This newly renovated space gives students a warmly lit reading nook for completing reading assignments or just relaxing with a favorite magazine.**



## Program Adjustments

**Community Relations.** The changes in the physical plan of the library have allowed for programming changes that bring it into line with the knowledge commons concept. The Friends of McKee Library group (Friends group) has been formed to support the library's expanding role on Southern Adventist University's campus. The Friends group promotes library development through voluntary contribution and participation, and serve as goodwill ambassadors to the local community.<sup>6</sup> Members have organized community service events during Christmas holidays that bring in winter clothing items to share with needy members of the community. They have also sponsored book sales to raise funds for library programs.

**Academic Support.** A revamped First Year Experience, part of the university's information-literacy program, encouraged freshmen to leave their handprint on a large mural in the library. Faculty handprints surrounding the outside of the mural symbolized the embrace that the administrators, teachers, and support staff hope all students will receive on campus. All incoming freshmen receive library instruction as a part of the one-credit Southern Connections course, which is designed to introduce students to the university setting. There has also been a significant increase in both the number of information-literacy sessions being taught and in the number of individuals attending the sessions. All these activities help promote the library and encourage students to explore its physical and online resources.

**Digitization.** Through collaboration with a library consortium and digital archiving service, McKee Library has been able to provide an online archive of digital versions of many of the university's campus publications. From the library Website, visitors can view electronic versions of campus publications, including older yearbooks, *Columns* magazine, the student literary magazine *Legacy*, and student newspaper *Southern Accent*. The new digital archive is fully searchable by date, publication, and keyword, making it a valuable resource for


people doing research about the university. In an attempt to keep pace with technological advances, wireless printing and scan-to-e-mail services have been introduced to save time transferring documents to a library computer for printing.

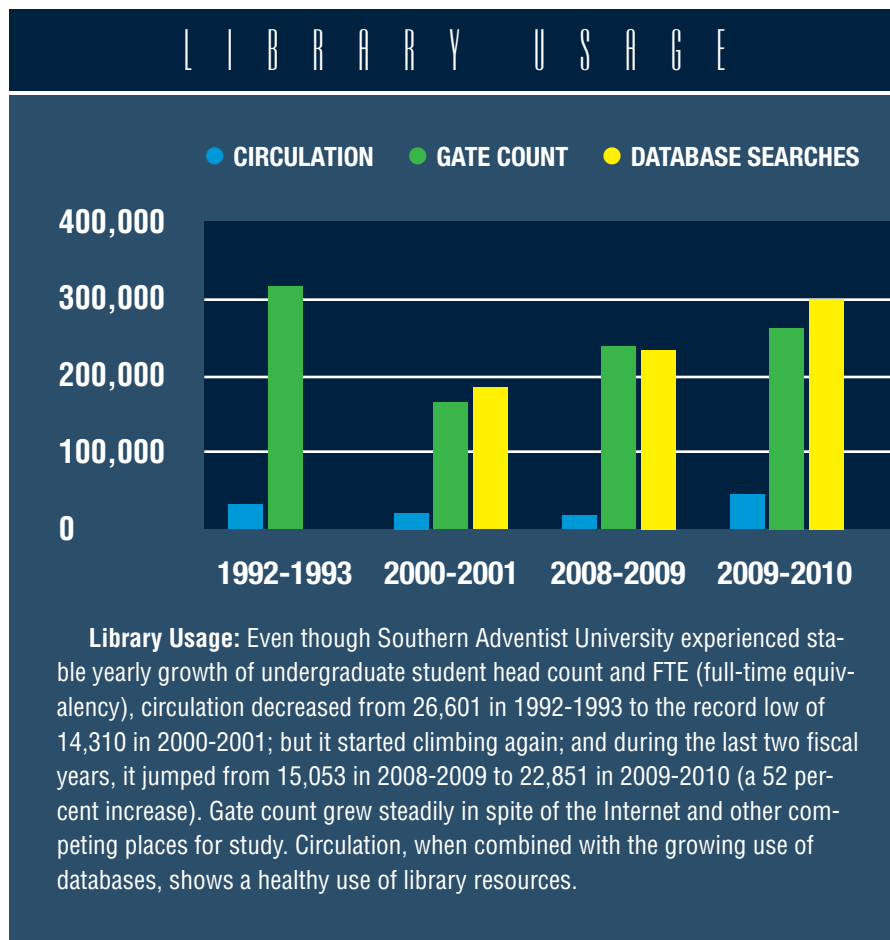
## Conclusions

Concerted efforts by the entire library team to rejuvenate the library have met with considerable success. McKee Library has recaptured the attention of the campus, experienced significant increases in usage, and become once again a popular social space—a sort of campus community center.

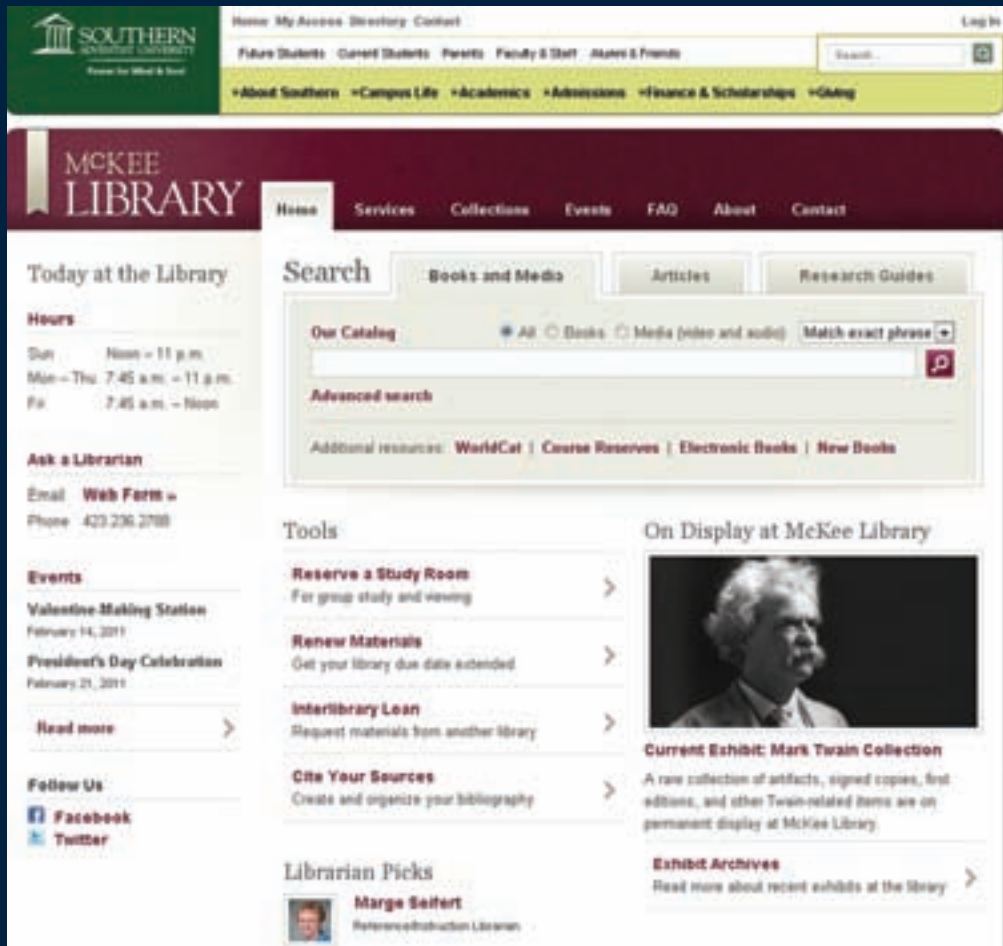
Thomas Frey suggests that “progress is too often seen as a zero-sum game, where innovation inevitably comes at the expense of the old.” He further adds that “libraries are showing that innovation always brings opportunity, too. While retaining its traditional functions, the library of the future will be home to myriad informational experiences, where great ideas happen, and people

have the tools and facilities to act on them.”<sup>7</sup> By using an example of successes at an engineering library, Thomas K. Grose stresses the importance of the physical appearance of the library by stating that “a big reason . . . libraries remain popular hubs is space—space to study, meet, and relax.”<sup>8</sup>

In the case of McKee Library, as the university enrollment continues to grow, space constraints may still be a problem even after the third phase is completed and the new space opens to the public. As with the recent renovation, such issues will undoubtedly be addressed through library-administration strategic planning, campus-wide discussion in committees or special task forces, and appropriate budgetary and personnel allocations. Such cooperative efforts between administration, faculty, and library personnel will ensure that the library continues to empower students and faculty to locate, evaluate, and use a wide range of library-provided information. 







## Example of an Award-Winning Website

McKee Library's Website was selected by the College Library Section of the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) as its "College Library Website of the Month" for January 2010. Like the remodeling of the physical library building, the transformation of the Website made it a pleasant online experience. Every design and content decision was made with users in mind to provide an attractive and highly usable site with intuitive and seamless navigability. See <http://www.southern.edu/library>.



**Josip Mocnik, Ph.D.**, is the Director of Libraries at Southern Adventist University in Collegedale, Tennessee. He follows the trends in academia and their effect on the delivery of library services in support of teaching, learning, and research.



**R. Lynn Sauls, Ph.D.**, was Professor of Journalism and English before he retired from Southern Adventist University. Preparation for his doctoral dissertation led him to do research in 12 major world libraries, such as Yale's Beineke, Oxford's Bodleian, and the British Museum. He has been acquainted with the development of Southern Adventist University's library since his years as a college student.

## REFERENCES

1. David Pappas, "Ten Indicators of Vitality in Smaller Academic Libraries," *Online Submission* (December 4, 2009):25, 26 *ERIC*, EBSCOhost. Accessed April 30, 2010.
2. Yana Weaver, "Mid-Life—A Time of Crisis or New Possibilities?" *Existential Analysis* 20:1 (2009):69. Although Weaver's definition of midlife crisis is used as an analogy for the need of adjustment of library services in the wake of technological advancements, it could equally apply to library facilities: "The commonly held view of mid-life crisis is that it is an emotional state of doubt and anxiety in which a person becomes uncomfortable with the realization that life is half over. It is a potentially stressful period as it usually involves reflection and re-evaluation of one's accomplishments. It usually occurs between the age of 35 and 50."
3. Yannis Ioannidis, "From Digital Libraries to Knowledge Commons," *ERICIM News* 66 (July 2006):12. In discussing the transition from digital libraries to knowledge or learning commons (this article is assuming that these two terms refer to largely the same concept of repurposing library spaces to better support learning and research), Ioannidis suggests that knowledge commons "are pervasive systems at the centre of in-

tellectual activity, facilitating communication and collaboration among scientists or the general public and synthesizing distributed multimedia documents, sensor data, and other information."

4. Ibid.
5. Association of College and Research Libraries, *Value of Academic Libraries: A Comprehensive Research Review and Report*. Researched by Megan Oakleaf (Chicago: Association of College and Research Libraries, 2010), pp. 56, 57.
6. According to Peggy Barber, Friends of Libraries U.S.A. board president, "no one has a stronger voice for libraries in the community and on campus than those who use and love libraries": <http://staging.ala.org/ala/mgrps/divs/altaff/about/index.cfm>. Accessed April 27, 2010.
7. Thomas Frey, "Future Libraries: Nerve Center of Community": <http://www.davinciinstitute.com/papers/future-libraries-nerve-center-of-the-community>. Accessed April 27, 2010.
8. Thomas K. Grose, "The Place to Go: Libraries Reinvent Themselves to Serve Digital-Age Students," *ASEE Prism* 19:7 (March 2010):47.