

Benefits of Automating the School Library

by William D. Jones, MLS

Library automation is beneficial to students, librarians, faculty members, administrators and parents for various reasons. The library is the resource center that supports and enhances the curriculum for the school. Students can expand their horizons more effectively with an automated library. Teachers can reinforce their classroom instruction with assignments that guide students to research opportunities within the school library. An automated library helps administrators complete accreditation requirements for the school. Parents can feel good about the school library being available to their students anytime the students want to access it via a Web browser. Everyone benefits when the school library is automated.

Students are computer savvy today. Their dexterity at playing computer games provides a continuing excitement for them. The library is part of their experience at school. It should be automated to permit the students to be excited about finding and using materials that enhance their studies. Schools that have automated their libraries report that students actually check out two to three times more items after automation than they did before automation. Why? One reason is that searches are easy and quick for students. Another reason is that links to other materials via subject headings and authors enable the students to go to other items of interest with one or two clicks of the mouse. Searches can be sorted instantly by author's names, title, copyright year and other ways with a single mouse click also. Another reason is that visual searches are possible for the youngest users and visual search is helpful for remedial learners. Still another reason is that the catalog card electronically displayed helps the student know details about it when tested on standardized tests.

More important, though, is that electronic access to the catalog data describing library items gives many more points of access for finding materials because summaries, notes and keywords are indexed searches. Many sophisticated systems index keywords automatically from words within titles, subject headings, notes and summary fields. Excluded from the list are articles, prepositions and conjunctions; but all other terms are automatically indexed and accessible through searches. Search strategies range from basic to complex, allowing experienced users to move to more specific searches while encouraging users who need pictures to begin the learning process. To summarize in a few words how automation in the library affects students, an automated library is seen as **vibrant** and **alive**. Automation can make the library an **awesome** place.

Librarians appreciate automation because of its ease of use. Items can be cataloged using vendor-supplied catalog records. The Internet provides a vehicle for using electronic search of massive databases and adding professional cataloging into the library database with the scan of a barcode and/or with very few keystrokes. Librarians can circulate items with ease and have an accurate account for each student's activities. Interaction with students is enhanced when the library is automated. Hosting the library to the Web, for access wherever teachers, students and parents have access to a Web browser, is a wonderful benefit that occurs for little cost and with practically no additional work for the librarian. Networked library software provides for access in each classroom if so desired, as well as via the Web for access to the contents of the library beyond the school's walls.

The cost of automating the library is less expensive than maintaining a traditional card catalog. When one counts the cost of the expensive cabinet in which the processed catalog cards are stored, the cost of cards, and the time and tedium of filing such cards, automation is cost-effective in the long term. Additionally, library automation is easier than the maintenance of a card catalog and provides many more access points to the information than the traditional cards arrangement can provide. An online catalog makes the printing, filing and expense of cards obsolete. Also, librarians can involve themselves with the students in more meaningful ways because so much of the tedium of maintaining a catalog is removed when automation is implemented.

Faculty members can appreciate an automated library because library resources can become an expanded collection of materials for students to use. Research projects from materials owned by the school become the basis for term papers, along with online resources that the school can offer. The Web access to items in the library collection can facilitate faculty members in their preparation of class activities. Knowing the resources that are available in the library helps faculty members provide meaningful topics for research and evaluate topics of interest to students. Requesting specific additional materials to bolster the library holdings can be more easily and accurately provided from faculty input to the librarian. Faculty and students benefit when the library is automated.

Administrators with a well-organized automated library have additional “bragging rights” when competing for students. Reports can be generated in a timely manner. Specific information is readily available for planning and budget purposes. Benefactors will respond to specific requests when needs are identified with respect to library holdings. Accreditation requirements are more easily met when the library is automated. Reports can be generated to support accreditation goals and outcomes.

Parents can feel good about having their children enrolled in a school where the school library can be available to them and their children anytime the students want to access it via a Web browser.

In short, automation of the school library is a good investment and benefits the entire school population.

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