I conducted my field study of the public library experience at Hyattsville Library, located in Hyattsville, Maryland. Hyattsville is part of the Prince George’s County Memorial Library System and serves much of the College Park area. Hyattsville Library is scheduled for a redesign and renovation beginning in 2015, which will both expand the library and update its facilities to be more tech- and eco-friendly. My supervisor was John Krivak.

Despite the heavy focus in the media on the idea that technology is edging out brick-and-mortar libraries as well as ink-on-paper books, I found during my internship that both physical and electronic components of the library system are necessary to achieve patron satisfaction. Hyattsville Library offers almost 60 public computers and fast Wi-Fi at laptop power stations for patrons, but just having these available is not enough – patrons often have questions about how to use services or where to go to find what they need. One of the most commonly-asked questions is “how do I print something?” Other common questions include how to copy items, how to set up accounts, and how to scan items. A significant portion of questions are also requests for books or wanting to find out where the patron is on the hold list for a popular item. If a librarian is ever not at the desk, it’s almost certain that he or she is directing a patron to a section of the library where they can find the books they want.

The Missing list requires even more human intelligence. These are the items that are supposedly in the library but which were not found on an ordinary sweep; they may have been in transit or in the wrong section or even mislabeled. All the system can give us is a list of where the items are supposed to be. When I searched for the items, I also took into account where someone would likely put them if they didn’t know the filing system, where the items might be based on when they were last checked out, and how to make sure the error didn’t happen again.

The human component of the library system is vital when it comes to getting the right book to the right person. The 'Pick List’ of daily holds to be sent out is always over a hundred items long and occupies much of the time before the library opens. I often searched through the regular stacks, the shelves of to-be-put-out books, and the carts of recently-returned items before I found the right book, which then had to be labeled and sorted into the appropriate bin. Computers could tell the patron that the book was available, but no more; it was the librarians who made sure the book got to the right person on time.

The reference questions we receive – usually via email – give lie to the idea that “everything is on the Internet”. Broad answers and concepts might be, but when it comes to very specific details and personal questions, the internet can provide much less information. While I worked at Hyattsville, I looked up several primary documents for a person researching their genealogy, went through development plans to find pictures of the former Glendale Sanitarium, and scrolled through rolls of microfilm to discover many different articles in local newspapers. The Internet provided guidelines on where to look and a means of getting the results back to the questioner, but the physical archives held the answers.

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