

A Snapshot of Academic Libraries in North Carolina in 2024

Since 2020, the higher education landscape has been in a drastic state of flux. From ramping up efforts around diversity, equity, and inclusion to scaling back these same efforts due to new policies and laws, from implementing health and safety measures at the start of a pandemic to again rolling the measures back, and from shifting teaching and learning into an online setting to bringing it back in-person to varying degrees, academic libraries have been in a constant state of change. In addition to the aforementioned shifts occurring, other new and significant issues are facing colleges in North Carolina. This article will examine some of them through the lens of some of our institutions. In particular, the examples will focus on the rise of AI, construction and renovation, and changing staffing patterns, before closing with a look to the future.

Addressing the Rise of AI Head-on at Appalachian State University

While machine learning and artificial intelligence have been around for decades, the release of ChatGPT by OpenAI pushed artificial intelligence (AI) and especially generative artificial intelligence into the spotlight at academic libraries everywhere. ChatGPT and an increasing number of different generative AI tools have been particularly disruptive within higher education settings as faculty question the authorship behind students' papers and determine how to integrate AI into their teaching. Academic libraries, with our emphasis on critical thinking and information literacy, can then be a perfect platform to host conversations around the impact of these new technologies.

The University Libraries at Appalachian State University decided to address this growing issue head on by hosting an AI Symposium on April 5, 2024. The symposium's theme was "Academic Frontiers of AI: Innovations & Impact." Presentations featured faculty and staff from all over campus in addition to library personnel. The keynote, "Using AI Responsibly in Research and Creativity," was presented by

Leonardo Flores, the Chair of the English Department and scholar in electronic literature and e-poetry. The symposium featured presentations, posters, and lightning talks. Topics across the sessions included ethical use of AI in the classroom, utilizing AI in interior design, how AI is transforming education, prompt engineering, and having AI assistance with syllabus creation and digital scholarship. While the symposium was a full-day event to discuss AI, members of the Technology Services team had also been hosting AI workshops throughout the academic year focused on specific tools, such as Adobe Express and Adobe Firefly, as well as exposing students to other free AI apps they can use for audio and multimedia projects.

From the release of ChatGPT through the summer of 2024, a lot of the conversations around AI have centered on research and teaching, but as our vendors, like EBSCO, look to develop their own generative AI models, its impact will continue to be far reaching in academic libraries for decades to come. AI will not just impact our information

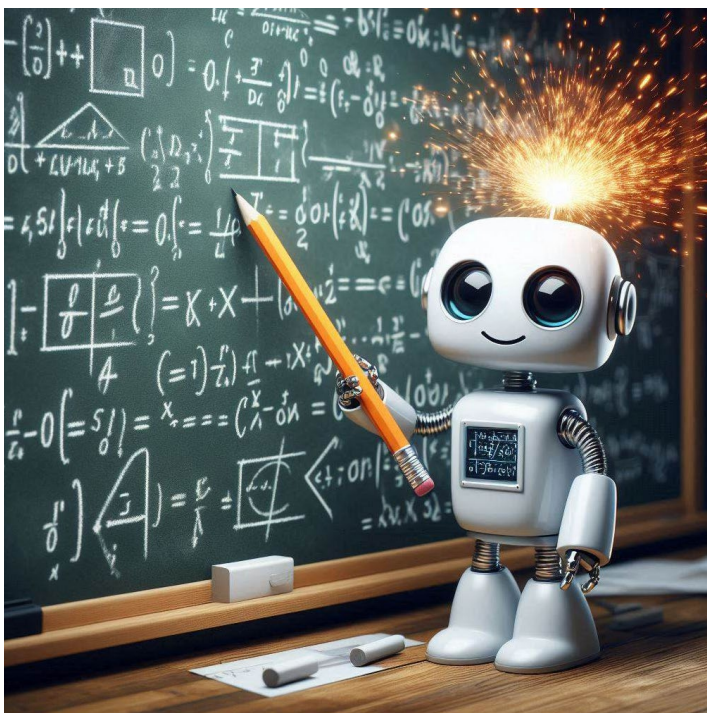


Image 1: Robot Writing on Chalkboard, generated by Microsoft Designer 31 July 2024.

systems, but how we operate in terms of cataloging, reference, collections, and perhaps in ways we cannot even imagine at this point. Regardless of any individual librarian's thoughts on AI, it is a topic that will continue to stay relevant to academic libraries all over the world.

Construction and Renovations at CPCC, UNCG, and UNCW

Aging buildings and renovations are another issue affecting many libraries across the state. On April 25, 2024, ACRL-NC offered a Lunch Bytes webinar featuring leaders from four libraries across the state to talk about new construction and renovations to their libraries: UNC Greensboro (UNCG), UNC Wilmington (UNCW), Central Piedmont Community College (CPCC), and UNC Chapel Hill (UNC-CH). They talked about their new spaces, how they determined their priorities, and some of the considerations and obstacles they encountered along the way. While UNC-CH's upcoming renovations will largely focus on a new egress and upgraded sprinkler systems for Wilson Library, CPCC, UNCW, and UNCG offer examples respectively of constructions and renovations happening across the state.



Image 2: Rendering of New West Entry for Jackson Library, UNCG

While construction projects offer exciting opportunities to enhance services and spaces, they also bring challenges as well. When CPCC's new library was being built, the library had to be temporarily relocated as the old building was torn down. This occurred at the end of 2018 with a three-year projected timeline. The temporary space was not initially designed as a library, and although it was retrofitted to work, it offered fewer study rooms for students, closed stacks

only available to library staff, and generally a less comfortable working environment. While the library was able to continue operating during this period, it was a less-than-ideal space for staff and students alike. Good signage and communication were necessary to help students and faculty navigate space. The new Hagemeyer Library is part of CPCC's Parr Center which opened in 2022. The Parr Center is meant to be the central student hub and houses other facilities such as the Student Union, the Academic Success Center, the Dove Art Gallery, and a large theater. The library itself includes a makerspace, two family study rooms, a wellness/quiet room, archives, multipurpose spaces for programs, and an outdoor terrace (Parr Center, n.d.).

In 2019, UNCW hired architects to help with their Randall Library Renovation & Expansion project. They broke ground on their new expansion in 2022 with completion expected in Fall 2024. The new building features a large programming space, a data visualization lab, enhanced technologies with a large makerspace and an enhanced multimedia studio, as well as space for exhibits, additional seating and group study rooms, a sensory space, and more. The addition will also provide a new space for the Center for Southeast North Carolina History and Archives. Part of the project also includes renovations to the current building which was closed during the summer of 2024 for construction (UNCW, n.d). For more details and images of the new space, see "[In View of Randall Library](#)," elsewhere in this issue.

In 2022, UNCG began work to renovate the Jackson Library on their campus. The renovation is meant both to expand the amount of space for students and also bring the building up to code to be fully ADA compliant. As of August 2024, UNCG is still in the design phase with construction expected to begin at the beginning of 2025. During construction, access to parts of the building will be closed and the print collection will be moved offsite (UNCG, n.d.). As with CPCC and UNCW, the construction period means less access to resources, less space for students, family, and other community members, and the disruptions of noise. Once the project is complete, the library will be able to offer more space, more seating, and never-before-offered services like a wellness area.

Changing Staff & Usage Patterns in Public Services at East Carolina University

East Carolina University's (ECU) Academic Library Services has not experienced as much impact from declining enrollments as other college and university libraries at this time, but foot traffic and usage patterns have changed considerably over the last few years. The university reached its highest enrollment of 29,131 students in 2017. Over the course of the next three years, the enrollment figures declined slightly and then the decrease accelerated during the pandemic and beyond. The enrollment for the 2023-2024 academic year totaled 26,785; a decrease of 8% from the highest enrollment numbers (East Carolina University, 2024). While budget cuts have occasionally caused the elimination of a few vacant positions across the library during the last 10-15 years, services have continued without much disruption to the library's operation. Owing to the impacts of the pandemic, changes in traffic patterns, and the continually changing demands of users, departments within the Public Services division have adjusted or are considering changes to desk staffing and other services such as library instruction and research consultations.

In the years prior to the pandemic, the library often bustled with activity as many people visited, groups of students frequently worked in the building, and services such as the number of library instruction sessions reached high levels. At the present time, gate counts show a significant decrease in the number of people visiting the library, resulting in much lower circulation rates for physical materials, except for the lending of equipment, and less need to repurpose spaces for individual and group study. Also, with the ever-growing demand for electronic access, which accelerated during the pandemic, liaison librarians and collections personnel are focusing their efforts on providing as much electronic access as possible, enabling users to access more resources at the point-of-need whether they are located on or off-campus.

With lower foot traffic and less demand for circulating physical items, library hours and the staffing of service desks are monitored closely throughout the year to trace peaks and valleys in usage. With these changes, staffing patterns have been adjusted over the last few years at all public service desks. Academic Library Services follows a 24/5 schedule

Sunday-Thursday each week while providing shorter hours on Fridays and Saturdays. Several years ago, the circulation desk was staffed overnight, but as check-outs decreased, administrators made the decision to no longer staff the desk during overnight hours. Now only security guards remain in the building at that time.

Other desks in the Public Services division face similar challenges and have adjusted their staffing accordingly as the need for different types of assistance have changed. With the continued decline in questions posed overall and the majority of questions being directional or technical in nature, different departments have explored and/or implemented changes based on new traffic patterns. Service desks in the Teaching Resources Center and the Music Library open later in the morning, owing to fewer patrons early in the day, while the staff members of the Research and Instructional Services (RIS) department want to explore the use of more graduate students at the service desk, so members of the department may focus on other duties and answering more advanced reference questions.

Changes in demand for library instruction sessions and research consultations post-pandemic have necessitated shifts in staffing patterns as well. Both the Teaching Resources Center and Music Library have many requests for both services, and those librarians spend considerable amounts of time preparing for them. However, the demand for instruction has not rebounded as much for the Research & Instructional Services department, but there has been a significant increase in requests for research consultations, many of which are now being required by the university's teaching faculty. This change in demand has forced RIS librarians to readjust their focus and put more effort into preparing for consultations instead of instruction sessions, usually with a short turnaround time. The shift has caused RIS employees to speculate if individual consultations will become the predominant instructional model in the future instead of traditional group instruction sessions. In an effort to bolster library instruction classes, outreach efforts to faculty by liaisons within RIS have increased and other class options such as shorter, more-focused sessions and librarians teaching in other classrooms on campus have been implemented.



Image 3: Research & Instructional Services: Academic Library Services, ECU

During the writing of this article, ECU library personnel learned there would be a significant cut to the student employee budget for the 2024-2025 academic year, which will likely necessitate further changes to the staffing of service desks and other tasks frequently completed by student workers. While uncertainty remains regarding the impact of declining enrollment, further loss of revenue, and the increasing presence of artificial intelligence tools, the library's employees remain hopeful about the future of ECU's Academic Library Services. They continue to be committed to ensuring that the information needs of the ECU community are met and that students have the skills they need to be successful in college and in the future workforce.

Future Considerations

At this point, the future of academic libraries in North Carolina seems to be focusing on the current technology landscape and a reimagining of library spaces and services to meet the needs of current students. The biggest challenge ahead for academic libraries and higher education at large is the upcoming enrollment cliff. Complicated by the global

pandemic which brought about declining enrollment at multiple higher education institutions across the state of North Carolina, an enrollment cliff is projected to occur around 2025 or 2026. This drop in college enrollment has been brought on by several factors including decreasing birth rates, high tuition costs, and the evolving job market (Manfuso, 2024). In November 2022, the UNC System reported a decline in enrollment; the total headcount across the system for Fall 2022 was 239,663 students – a decrease of 4,387 students, or almost 2% (Public Ed Works, 2022). The UNC System began to counteract how this enrollment cliff will impact UNC System universities by shifting their funding model to one that is weighted around meeting performance metrics as opposed to enrollment. Still academic libraries can expect the enrollment cliff to bring a larger emphasis on transfer students or back-to-school students, shifting the demographics of the populations we serve. Fewer students can also impact advocacy for positions and resources. Still, as the examples show above, academic libraries have always been open to change and places of innovation and creativity.

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