Welcome to the library. Say goodbye to the books.
Cushing Academy embraces a digital future

“When I look at books, I see an outdated technology, like scrolls before books,” said headmaster James Tracy. (Mark Wilson for The Boston Globe)

By David Abel
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ASHBURNHAM - There are rolling hills and ivy-covered brick buildings. There are small classrooms, high-tech labs, and well-manicured fields. There’s even a clock tower with a massive bell that rings for special events.

Cushing Academy has all the hallmarks of a New England prep school, with one exception.

This year, after having amassed a collection of more than 20,000 books, officials at the pristine campus about 90 minutes west of Boston have decided the 144-year-old school no longer needs a traditional library. The academy’s administrators have decided to discard all their books and have given away half of what stocked their sprawling stacks - the classics, novels, poetry, biographies, tomes on every subject from the humanities to the sciences. The future, they believe, is digital.

“When I look at books, I see an outdated technology, like scrolls before books,”
said James Tracy, headmaster of Cushing and chief promoter of the bookless campus. “This isn’t ‘Fahrenheit 451’ [the 1953 Ray Bradbury novel in which books are banned]. We’re not discouraging students from reading. We see this as a natural way to shape emerging trends and optimize technology.”

Instead of a library, the academy is spending nearly $500,000 to create a “learning center,” though that is only one of the names in contention for the new space. In place of the stacks, they are spending $42,000 on three large flat-screen TVs that will project data from the Internet and $20,000 on special laptop-friendly study carrels. Where the reference desk was, they are building a $50,000 coffee shop that will include a $12,000 cappuccino machine.

And to replace those old pulpy devices that have transmitted information since Johannes Gutenberg invented the printing press in the 1400s, they have spent $10,000 to buy 18 electronic readers made by Amazon.com and Sony. Administrators plan to distribute the readers, which they’re stocking with digital material, to students looking to spend more time with literature.

Those who don’t have access to the electronic readers will be expected to do their research and peruse many assigned texts on their computers.

“Instead of a traditional library with 20,000 books, we’re building a virtual library where students will have access to millions of books,” said Tracy, whose office shelves remain lined with books. “We see this as a model for the 21st-century school.”

Not everyone on campus is sold on Tracy’s vision.

They worry about an environment where students can no longer browse rows of voluptuous books, replete with glossy photographs, intricate maps, and pages dog-eared by generations of students. They worry students will be less likely to focus on long works when their devices are constantly interrupting them with e-mail and instant messages. They also worry about a world where sweaty-stained literature is deemed as perishable as all the glib posts on Facebook or Twitter.

Liz Vezina, a librarian at Cushing for 17 years, said she never imagined working as the director of a library without any books.

“It makes me sad,” said Vezina, who hosts a book club on campus dubbed the Off-line Readers and has made a career of introducing students to books. “I’m going to miss them. I love books. I’ve grown up with them, and there’s something lost when they’re virtual. There’s a sensual side to them - the smell, the feel, the physicality of a book is something really special.”

Alexander Coyle, chairman of the history department, is a self-described “gadget freak” who enjoys reading on Amazon’s Kindle, but he has always seen libraries and their hallowed content as “secular cathedrals.”

“I wouldn’t want to ever get rid of any of my books at home,” he said. “I like the feel of them too much. A lot are wondering how this changes the dignity of the library, and why we can’t move to increase digital resources while keeping the books.”

Tracy and other administrators said the books took up too much space and that there was nowhere else on campus to stock them. So they decided to give their collection - aside from a few hundred children’s books and valuable antiquarian works - to local schools and libraries.

“We see the gain as greater than the loss,” said Gisele Zangari, chairwoman of
the math department, who like other teachers has plans for all her students to do their class reading on electronic books by next year. “This is the start of a new era.”

Cushing is one of the first schools in the country to abandon its books.

“I’m not aware of any other library that has done this,” said Keith Michael Fiels, executive director of the American Library Association, a Chicago-based organization that represents the nation’s libraries.

He said the move raises at least two concerns: Many of the books on electronic readers and the Internet aren’t free and it may become more difficult for students to happen on books with the serendipity made possible by physical browsing. There’s also the question of the durability of electronic readers.

“Unless every student has a Kindle and an unlimited budget, I don’t see how that need is going to be met,” Fiels said. “Books are not a waste of space, and they won’t be until a digital book can tolerate as much sand, survive a coffee spill, and have unlimited power. When that happens, there will be no difference between that and a book.”

William Powers, author of a forthcoming book based on a paper he published at Harvard called “Hamlet’s Blackberry: Why Paper is Eternal,” called the changes at Cushing “radical” and “a tremendous loss for students.”

“There are modes of learning and thinking that at the moment are only available from actual books,” he said. “There is a kind of deep-dive, meditative reading that’s almost impossible to do on a screen. Without books, students are more likely to do the grazing or quick reading that screens enable, rather than be by themselves with the author’s ideas.”

Yet students at Cushing say they look forward to the new equipment, and the brave new world they’re ushering in.

Tia Alliy, a 16-year-old junior, said she visits the library nearly every day, but only once looked for a book in the stacks. She’s not alone. School officials said when they checked library records one day last spring only 48 books had been checked out, and 30 of those were children’s books.

“When you hear the word ‘library,’ you think of books,” Alliy said. “But very few students actually read them. And the more we use e-books, the fewer books we have to carry around.”

Jemmel Billingslea, an 18-year-old senior, thought about the prospect of a school without books. It didn’t bother him.

“It’s a little strange,” he said. “But this is the future.”

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