Amateur Science & Library Access: Freedom or Privilege?
By Reginald Smith

Anyone doing serious amateur science will admit they eventually end up in a university library. The US is blessed with a great public library system which has great books and some journals like Nature and Science but if you need specialized tracts or want to look up a paper not available for free online, you will end up at your local university.

I am not that old. I went to school in the last couple of year of the 90s and the first couple of the 21st century. Back then, I remember that almost every university library I went to, including my alma mater the University of Virginia, were pretty free and open. You could walk on in, no questions asked usually, and go to the catalogs, stacks, etc. Sometimes for a nominal fee, non-affiliated guests could even get borrowing privileges. Computer terminals were relatively open and university libraries had ultra-convenient, long hours so that you could easily spend a couple of hours after (or before) work, especially if they were open during 24 hours in finals time.

Slowly, however, things began to change. I first noticed this going back to my hometown of Atlanta to work and I would often go to the Georgia Tech or Emory library. They took some more precautions than I had remembered from when I was younger, notably asking you to sign-in in the front and show a picture ID. Ok, no big deal. Then they restricted computer access. Emory had catalog only terminals you could use to access the catalog but I remember even to get the catalog I had to sign out an idea from the circulation desk at Georgia Tech. You may ask why I needed to use Internet and the answer is with the advent of Google and Google Scholar, often the quickest way to search the research is on the Internet.

No big deal, I understand there are malicious people who spread viruses and perverts who surf child porn anonymously. So I can understand the desire to secure things up a bit. But over the years it has gotten increasingly extreme, to the point where I wonder if some of our university libraries have lost sight of or increasingly narrowly defined their mission and relation to wider society.

At Georgia Tech, there were a few science books I wanted to borrow and that weren’t at my local public library system. I noticed a flier that said you could get borrowing privileges for a year by paying $75 to the alumni association. Happily I did so and was able to borrow books. However, I later got a polite letter telling me the library had made a ‘mistake’. The borrowing deal was only for alumni and I had mistakenly been given access despite paying the fee. My privileges were revoked and I never got a refund. Even more extreme is another anecdote. Once I was meeting my wife in Princeton, NJ for dinner at a nearby restaurant. The best way for us to meet was for me to take the New Jersey Transit commuter rail into Princeton to the Princeton University stop. I arrived early with some hours to kill and having been looking for a few hard-to-find books, I decided to spend my time in their library which was near the train stop.
Arriving at the library I saw that they had a full front guard desk with turnstiles and card readers. I asked the guard if I could browse the library and gave him my photo ID. He politely declined it and informed me that since I was not a student, faculty, or visiting academic I could not enter the library at all. Unsure that I was being given the right information I used my Blackberry to pull up their website and see what information they had for visitors. To my dismay, he was (nearly) completely correct. Unaffiliated visitors were not allowed. However, there is an exception. You can gain access to Princeton’s library as a visitor. All you have to do is go to the main library office during business hours, present two forms of identification, at least one a government issued photo ID, and pay $33/week, $66/month or $209/year. Note this does not give you borrowing privileges, it only allows you to walk in the door. If you want to borrow books you have to present two forms of ID and pay $720/year. Granted the borrow fee contains the access fee so you don’t pay both. But the bottom line is to get year round access to Princeton you are paying at least $200 and as much as $700. Seriously, for $700 what is the point of borrowing? I could probably buy most of what I want. Some universities have cut off borrowing for outsiders completely—not even a fee.

Computers and databases are also increasingly locked down. I have borrowing privileges at the University of Rochester which is in Rochester where I now live. For only $100 per year I get full borrowing privileges with very generous borrow times. I am not complaining. I have to sign in as a visitor but didn’t have to do the whole ID thing and the staff were great. But in the last couple of weeks things have tightened here too. IT departments often use summer to push out new programs since it causes the least disruption.

Going to the library to look up an article on scientific creativity (which I hope to write about in the future for CSL) I found a new logon on the terminal. There was public and student access (before there was pretty open access). OK, I can use the public access and for the first few weeks this was fine. I could access all searches, journals, etc. Then the security tightened. When I logged on to public access this week and tried to access Google Scholar and Google Books I was informed these were ‘blocked’ sites and I could not access any site ending with ‘.com’ and only the catalog. Even JSTOR (a journal article provider) seemed to be locked out in that it didn’t recognize me being from a subscribing institution. The terminal informed me that for ‘expanded’ access I would have to get a free 72 hour username and password—after presenting photo ID to the circulation desk.

A final ominous sign is with databases. Due to the Internet and electronic data volumes, there are now a lot of scholarly databases which have huge amounts of data to access. Some like NASA offer atmospheric or solar system data for free. Others you can only access at subscribing libraries, usually via a computer in the library. Some though are becoming more draconian. There are some databases, particularly it seems those from big publishers and targeted at fields like finance, economics, or some sciences, that have given ultimatums to universities. It is not enough to only restrict access to the library, you have to restrict access to one terminal or even worse, require a university id and password to access it. This happened to me once and the reference librarian kindly explained the
database publisher was concerned with access by visitors who weren’t university affiliates and to avoid the ‘free rider’ problem is now requiring the university to have students and faculty login with university emails and passwords for access, even if they are on the university network.

I am not naïve or particularly demanding. I understand many universities are private and have the right to use their resources as they wish. I also understand per economics that people overuse free resources. There are people who would just surf Youtube, porn, and TMZ all day. There are also individuals who probably would come in the library to cause mischief or assault someone (though I am unsure how common this really is). But deep down I feel like something is slowly dying if university libraries are becoming increasingly like airports and airlines. We have to present government photo ID and even money for access. We have to pay for things that we used to take for granted, or at least cheap. Resources are being separated into ‘tiers’. Students who shell out $35k/year get all access and anyone else should take their peanuts and water and be happy.

Many universities are private but even many public universities are taking these steps. Also, ALL universities seem to have no problem taking federal and state research grants ponied up by we the taxpayer. Universities, as it has often been stated before, have always been businesses but now even more acutely so. Nothing is wrong with business; in fact it is vital. But I feel business is being unnecessarily interpreted as ‘we do not need to act as a guiding academic and scholarly resource for the local community.’ From kids doing research projects to interested residents of the local community, universities have always been a boon of resources and assistance. It would be sad if that ideal went the way of affordable tuition.