

May 21 2019

Chris Bourg
Director of the Library Systems

Dear Chris,

We have been alerted to the renovation plans for Hayden Library, which currently include eliminating access to Hayden's books for AY 2019-2020. We are a group of faculty and students representing a number of disciplines in SHASS. This letter seeks to begin a dialogue with you and the Libraries in the hope that we can preserve the uninterrupted, immediate, on-the-shelf access to books that is essential for our research and teaching.

We understand that the current plan is to rely exclusively on ILL/Borrow Direct during the renovation period. These services, which we use, don't begin to replace the direct access to Hayden's stacks that our work depends on. Here are some of the ways in which they don't:

1. *Finding the right book.* A visit to the stacks is the fastest and the only reliable way to get information on existing research. The search functions at <https://libraries.mit.edu/>, and other electronic search methods, can function only as initial guides, not as substitutes for the text of a book. *If we can't look inside a book, we can't tell that it's the book we need.* If we're not sure it's relevant, we're reluctant to order it. Suppose we overcome this reluctance, and start ordering on ILL the dozens of books that emerge as something to possibly look into, on a WorldCat search of some one topic: will Hayden's staff and partner libraries be able to cope with such steeply increased demands? What happens if they don't?
2. *The time factor.* A search of the stacks can deliver an answer hours after the question was first asked. That's often as much time as we have to finish a problem set, write a lecture, research a paper. By the time an ILL-ordered book comes in, many questions have gone moot[1]. The lecture had to be delivered, the assignment is posted, the paper deadline passed. Lectures and assignments are prepared in response to evolving class demands, so no amount of advance planning replaces a library with immediately accessible books. Unexpected research questions have a way of coming up at the last minute, so it is nice to know they can be answered immediately, by a trip to Hayden. What about going to Widener instead? That means spending much of the day off campus. Obligations to MIT make that impossible for many of us, for months at a time.
3. *Incidental learning.* We go to the library to answer one question but often discover on the shelves answers to other questions, or new puzzles. That's one way in which research advances. For the younger scholars, an aimless browse of the shelves is part of their personal introduction to a field. There is no electronic substitute for this activity because we can't always find online the text of the right book. A year in the life of a graduate student is a long time to be deprived of this.

What is the solution? We are reluctant to offer ideas to a team of professional librarians, who must have given serious thought to this issue. But we admit to wondering about alternatives to the loss of access to Hayden's books. The simplest one: can circulation move near the stacks, in the basement? The basement is not being renovated[2], and can perhaps be separated from the area under renovation. A more complex solution: can the Hayden collection be split into thematically coherent groups and relocated temporarily to other libraries on campus, which are not under renovation?

A general comment: the cost and duration of library renovation must factor in finding a temporary replacement for that library's essential services to the academic community. As ILL doesn't replace Hayden's functions, we very much hope that another solution can be found. We are unaware, after various Google searches, of any other research university's library being closed to its readers for one year.

Why haven't we spoken sooner? We have followed the Library's announcements about the upcoming renovation, but the topics advertised for community dialogue[3] did not reflect the concerns raised here. They involve broadening the uses of Hayden, rather than insuring that its current essential function, to make books immediately accessible to readers, can be delivered during renovation and beyond. The announcement that the books will be off limits for a year has eluded us until a week or so ago.

On this topic of community engagement about the functions of Hayden, some of us have sought a dialogue with the Libraries since 2014[4], on related issues. We are very grateful for the expressed willingness of the Libraries to help, and we hope that this collaboration will continue.

[1] ILL recognizes this when it asks, essentially, 'will you still need this book 2 weeks from now?' Good question. It grants obliquely that ILL-ordered books don't always come within 2 weeks of the order. And that's true: a survey of 20 Linguistics faculty and students finds that ILL books come in as fast as one week, and as slowly as three. Now imagine that the demand for borrowed books has massively increased, because ILL has completely replaced the stacks: will the books come faster then??

[2] <https://libraries.mit.edu/future-spaces/faq/>

[3] https://calendar.mit.edu/event/hayden_renovation_community_workshop_-_postponed#.XOGRolNKjXE

[4] <https://thetech.com/2014/12/09/libraries-v134-n60>