Libraries are like people. They come in all shapes and sizes, have different strengths and weaknesses, and exude a unique style. And libraries, like people, are constantly in flux, changing with the times to keep up with new ideas and stay relevant. Collegiate libraries in particular must stay in touch with their constituents because, although they have a captive audience of students researching course materials, their audience is entirely new every four years.

“It’s a very dynamic landscape,” said Daniel O’Mahony, a tall man with grey hair and a black digital watch that juxtaposes his button-down shirt and sweater combo. He has been working at the John D. Rockefeller Library at Brown University since 1992, when he arrived as a subject specialist for political and government-related resources, and is now the director of library planning and assessment. In just the last five years, the Rockefeller Library has seen physical resource borrowing numbers plummet from about 150,000 initial circulations during the 2012-2013 academic year to 121,000 during the 2017-2018 academic year.
“We’ve seen a drop off for traditional circulation and research questions,” O’Mahony continued. “The nature of what a library is has changed.” As physical resources like books and academic journals are used less, there is increasing pressure to get rid of those archives to make space for other services that libraries, and universities as a whole, provide for their students.

“People are eyeing our space like vultures,” confided Patricia Brennan, a short woman with a burgundy embroidered turtleneck and wire spectacles who is an associate professor and head of reference and research support at the James P. Adams Library at Rhode Island College. When she was hired in 1983, the Adams Library occupied the entirety of the building at 600 Mt. Pleasant Avenue; however, in 2014 the first floor of the building was cleared of library stacks and repurposed to provide space for a variety of student services unrelated to the use of the library. This constituted a thirty percent reduction in the number of physical volumes that the Adams Library could own.

Originally, the intrusion was supposed to be temporary, as the services that moved to the first floor were only there because their respective buildings were being renovated. But as time wore on, it became clear that the change would be permanent. The librarians had been told that this transition would be “a chance to refresh the collection,” but with no additional budget for new books and no more space, it simply became a library reduction.

Despite this real estate crisis, the Adams Library has done their best to create the types of spaces that students will use. They have worked to bring more technology to the library in the form of additional personal computers, arranged in pods of four to six in the center of the library. They have also observed students to discern what kind of furniture they prefer so they can make the most of the limited space they still have.
“Four years ago we did a little tiny observational survey where we gave people a little survey on a card to ask them, ‘Hey! Why do you like this space?’” Brennan explained.

“[Students] love the booths in the center.” And, indeed, every booth in the Adams Library as far as the eye could see was occupied with at least one student, diligently studying.

The Rockefeller Library has made similar steps to accommodate the fickle needs of students. Once the card catalog became accessible online, the stacks of cards and the monolithic reference desk were taken out of the main space on the first floor and replaced with various tables, glass rooms, personal computers, individual desks, and other study spaces for students to occupy.

“We no longer have to devote a significant amount of real estate to interactions like [reference questions],” said O’Mahony. “The way most people get their questions answered is through the web. No longer is it this sort of random connection of going to a physical place.” Instead, students can email a subject librarian and get their inquiries satisfied by a specialist, which serves the students more fully and conveniently. They can also start an online chat with a librarian to get immediate suggestions for researching their problem, whether or not they are physically at the library.

Both Brennan and O’Mahony said that, despite the decrease in readily available physical resources, they had observed an increase in foot traffic overall. They believe this is in part due to efforts to tailor the layout of the library to the habits of students. This means providing both individual and group study spaces, appealing furniture, and, above all, a wide range of resources.

“We’ve tried to make a variety of kinds of spaces,” said O’Mahony. “Part of the work that I do now is trying to find out if we’re meeting [students’] needs.” He went on to explain that
this is often achieved by enticing students to come to the library. “If you renovate it, they will come. The library always was, almost by default, a popular study space. Now it’s more of a destination.”

“Sometimes we have fun stuff like ‘treasure hunt in the XYZ database and if you find blah-blah then you get a prize!’” noted Brennan, referring to the Adams Library’s increased social media presence. The librarians work hard to leverage their online outreach in order to engage students and get them to explore the variety of both physical and digital resources available to them.

And the digital resources are bountiful. Although the space for physical resources is limited, both the Adams Library and the Rockefeller Library have vastly expanded students’ access to online materials. The libraries work tirelessly to digitize resources by scanning or photographing them or subscribing to online databases, allowing students and researchers to access any item, anytime, anywhere they want.

“[We’re] able to pretty much keep up with the IT guys on things like big data, network information. We’re teaching them about metadata. They came to that party late,” Brennan said with a laugh. She also noted that she works with information technology specialists far more now than she did when she began her career as a librarian, as many of the online resources are complicated and sometimes difficult to understand.

“It’s a closer relationship than it used to be. So many of our tools are built on programming paradigms that, if you don’t know what they are, you don’t know why they do what they do.” This can be frustrating at times, as libraries often rely on large corporations to
service their catalogs, run their search functions, and collect usage statistics. This creates a black box of behind-the-scenes work that neither librarians nor students can crack.

“When we subscribe to a package of journals, we’re really relying on [the company] to provide us with data,” O’Mahony explained. “To be blunt, some of those resources are pretty good and some of them are downright awful. It’s a crapshoot.” The uncertainty about what kind of data collection happens at large corporate providers makes it difficult for libraries to discern what their constituents are actually using, which in turn clouds the decision-making process of the library faculty and staff.

“So what are the relevant metrics these days? That’s a moving target,” said O’Mahony. “It’s both an opportunity and a challenge.” The challenge of staying in touch with the needs and habits of library constituents is not an easy one. It will continue to be a chronic conundrum for library workers, particularly at collegiate libraries.

“There was still quite a strong mindset when I was a younger librarian that we were here to protect and preserve the collection so that people can use it,” remarked Brennan. “When we acquire materials, especially digital materials, there is such an amount of commercial noise that covers them that the effort it takes to discover them is enormous.” And indeed, much of Brennan’s time working is spent guiding students through the many tools that the Adams Library provides so they can meet their research goals efficiently.

“The time of students and faculty and researchers is [spent on] the actual intellectual exercise instead of the futzing around of finding resources,” O’Mahony explained. With the advancements of technology and digitization, avenues to information that used to be unreachable are now open freeways. Yet both librarians hold hopes and reservations about the future.
“Hopes for the future: that we ride out the real estate drought in such a way that we still have a balance between physical materials and digital materials,” expressed Brennan. “[Libraries are] at least half about the space, maybe even more than half, but there is a contingent of our students, many of whom come from a background of being the first person in their family to go to college, who have no experience with going to the library… [When you show them an ebook] they look at you and say, ‘no no, I wanted a real book,’ and by ‘real book’ they mean a physical book.”

And from O’Mahony: “Things change so quickly that it’s hard to even imagine, let alone anticipate, the next generation of needs. Libraries need to be much more nimble and responsive than they have in the past. You never quite know what the next day will bring.”