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Editor's note: Can academic libraries remain relevant into the next decade? Our future will depend, to a large extent, on our ability to embrace the most useful technologies and to relate to a new generation of students.

Spike hits the wakeup key on his computer. His cyberdog, Bowser, barks, reminding him to check for comments on the writing assignment he turned in yesterday. As he glances over the comments, Spike starts planning his next essay. He wants to do something on the origins of watershed councils in Oregon. Typing in his concept on his Alpha Smart X, he immediately gets back a short list of suggested resources including a new e-book, two scholarly articles, a government agency contact, and a note on the consulting availability of library specialists.

"Cool," he thinks, noting that Joe, one of the librarians at the nearby Corbis University, is assigned to him. "The last time I worked with Joe, he seemed to really understand what I wanted. Maybe I'll buzz over to the library later if I can schedule real time with him." Then, he remembers that Joe had told him last time to do some research first. So, Spike starts browsing the e-book.

Joe's wrist pilot beeps letting him know that Spike has been assigned to him. Sometimes he wonders if this system of one-on-one assignment is all it's cracked up to be. Then he remembers those long hours at the reference desk answering questions about where the bathroom was located and how to fix the paper in the printer. Joe's typical day includes a slow start (he never was much good at mornings), working at home on his latest reviews of bird books and Web sites, then going to the library for scheduled consultations with students and faculty. He finishes up on the library's e-reference desk from 10 p.m. to 2 a.m., doing his shift from home or sometimes from his office.

Today, Joe skates in early to talk with Julia, the library director, about rethinking the two vacant positions. Remembering all the trouble he has getting students to do their research, Joe wants to expand a project team working with all of the

libraries and media centers in the area on a coordinated effort to teach information skills. He thinks that two students who recently graduated from the undergraduate library program would be great additions to the team. Over coffee, he explains his idea to Julia.

"Cut that out," shouts Spike as his 12-year-old sister grabs his hardly-there hair spray. "But, I really need it for my science experiment," retorts Samantha as she bounces down the stairs and plunks down at her computer station. She scans the methods section of the online botany class, noting the rest of the ingredients for the model Venus'-flytrap she's building. Two years ago, Samantha was bored in her science class. The multi-level classes the U offers are great. She's already looking at another one on rocketry; maybe Spike would take it with her. Together they could build a higher-powered rocket.

Spike decides that he really had better check in with Professor Yogi, his capstone project advisor, about this essay he's working on and talk to him about the internship he needs to do. He thought he would do something in the field, maybe a stream survey, but he was really impressed with Joe and his ability to find just the right information whenever Spike asked. Maybe, he could do something with Joe for his internship. So, Spike e-mails Professor Yogi with his idea.

As luck would have it, Professor Yogi is chatting with Marina, the natural resources librarian, when Spike's e-mail arrives. He quizzes her about Joe, library internships, and learns the university has a certification program for undergraduates. "Joe would be a great mentor," Marina observes. "And, Spike could use his interest in watersheds and maybe work on our ongoing digital collection. Let me know if I can help set this up," she volunteers as she leaves.

Professor Yogi eases back in his chair, reflecting that librarians sure have changed. They never used to show up regularly in the departments. "I only saw them when



we had to cut journals. Marina's here more often than in the library. Maybe this undergraduate program would be a good spot for Spike. I think he would fit in, even down to his hair color," he muses as he replies to Spike, encouraging him to set up a virtual meeting with Joe, Marina, and the two of them.

Spike checks his email as he walks through the library's commons. "Yeah," he exclaims as he reads Professor Yogi's message. He also notices that the library sent him an automatic reminder of a new document that may be useful for one of his projects. "How did they know?" he wonders.

Upstairs in the big meeting room, a few Content Provision Center staff meet with the freelance catalogers sprinkled throughout the region. The big screen monitors and surround-sound make it seem like all ten people are in the same room. Amelia congratulates the group on their speedy work uploading and organizing the most recent census information. "Stan, we really appreciate how you figured out the real-time updates." "Well, you did a great job negotiating with all those agencies. I'm glad they respected the librarians because they sure had a hard time talking to each other," responds Stan. The group debate about which project to tackle next—a retrospective digitization of endangered species listings, or the metadata tagging of those pesky Oregon Department of Transportation records in the shared database.

"I think the digitization project sounds like fun, and it ties into two courses we are teaching statewide," observes Maya. Shirley sternly reminds the group, "We've been avoiding that tagging project for several years now. It should be easier with the automatic error checking and standardizing programs they've developed over the past year." The group agrees to bite the bullet and tackle the tagging project. Assignments are made and the meeting is over within an hour.

As Amelia walks through the Commons, she overhears Spike mumbling "How did they know," and asks him, "Do you really want to know how the library does that?" She then explains how the Content Provision Center populates the portal system, and how his searches and the courses he's registered for suggest to the system what he might want to see. "That's kind of scary," squeaks Spike. "You may know more about me than my mom." "Don't worry. We take a lot of care to keep your profile private." "Cool," says Spike as he reflects on how everything is falling into place for him today.

As the day winds down, Julia sits back in the Director's office overlooking the library's atrium. From here, she can see students using the Information Commons, the Corbis Arts Council setting up for tonight's lecture, and by peering closely, she can make sure the green lights are flashing on the self checkout machines. It's been a good day, she decides. Elizabeth, who started as a student shelvee, just completed the library IT program on a full scholarship from the library foundation, and will start work tomorrow. It feels good to have been able to "grow" an IT person.

Professor Babbitt finally retired and left the library his beautiful collection of artists books. Julia even convinced him to set up a small endowment to fund the curatorial expenses of the collection. She is excited to think of the possibilities of using that collection as a teaching tool. Finally, Julia thinks, she made some progress with the administrative computing people; she convinced them to look at a new portal product that protects individual privacy, can be customized by every user, and still provides the tracking needed for product development and collection development. "Yes, it was a good day," Julia muses, watching Spike with his perfect hair walk across the Commons. "I wonder if he has thought about working in the library." 

