The gleaming Physical Sciences Building is a bright new star on the north end of campus, boasting 95,000 square feet of high-tech lab space. Right next door is a hidden gem that’s ready for an extreme makeover: SEL—the Science and Engineering Library—has seen few updates since it was built in the early 1970s. That’s about to change.

Occupying the first three floors of the Lederle Graduate Research Center Low-rise, SEL is not easy to find. You could walk right by and not know it’s there, because the entrance and circulation desk are on the second floor. The library blends in with the classrooms and offices that occupy most of the building. Even though SEL has few signs to attract attention, student traffic in the Library is as robust as ever.

At the same time, there has been a steady decline in the circulation of print resources. Patrons needs are changing. Rebecca Reznik-Zellen, SEL’s head librarian, is leading the staff on a mission to refresh the Library. Science librarians are actively involved with instruction and consultation for their departments. At the same time, they are buying fewer books, and fewer print materials circulate. Meanwhile, the physical spaces they inhabit are sometimes slow to catch up.

The “SEL Refresh” will reflect trends in pedagogy. “Science education and scientific research are very collaborative and data-driven; they involve a lot of hands-on work and require access to a variety of electronic tools and resources,” says Reznik-Zellen. “Our large print collection sees little use and competes with our students’ need for space.”

“There is an outdated stereotype of the lone scientist hard at work in their garage,” says Reznik-Zellen. “That’s not how science is done. It is people in geographically distributed teams, sharing and collaborating, and using a lot of technology to do their work.” A recent National Academy of Sciences report on the growth of team science over the last several decades found that today 90 percent of published research has between two and ten authors on it, often from multiple institutions.

Phase one of the SEL Refresh project involved soliciting ideas and understanding the needs of students and faculty. Last April and May, Reznik-Zellen and her staff gathered feedback from faculty, administrators, and undergraduate and graduate students about the spaces and services provided at SEL. This endeavor took several forms including a whiteboard set up for people to post comments; a survey during finals week when the library is most heavily trafficked; three focus group sessions with a total of 15 participants; and a half-day visioning session with 25 invitees that included university administrators; librarians; and science, technology, engineering, and mathematics faculty.

UMass Deputy Chancellor Steve Goodwin took part in the visioning exercise. “It is great to see the Science and Engineering Library think about how it can reinvent itself,” says Goodwin. “Libraries aren’t just about books, or computers or video screens; they are about the way people interact with books, and computers, and video screens, and especially how people interact with each other. Libraries are more important than ever.”

Students’ ideas about what makes a good library reflect day-to-day needs. “I tend to do work alone, but there are always projects and group work as well,” wrote one student. “I feel like a variety of small tables for individual work and large tables for group work would be a nice addition to the library.”

Feedback consisted of more than 700 discrete comments on issues ranging from the building as a whole to furniture, technology, electrical issues, and services such as instruction, collections, and exhibits. It helped to learn how their users view the library, explains Reznik-Zellen. In the words of one faculty member, “the library is curator of not only library information but also a set of functions.”

SEL staff have augmented this feedback with visits to high functioning exemplars, like the Cabot Science Library at Harvard University, and are now drawing up a detailed wish list. The next phase will be for administrators to create a budget so the work of making a plan and executing it can begin.
Ellen Lutz, a librarian at SEL for four years, is an avid supporter of the SEL Refresh. She has been the liaison to many disciplines in the health and biological sciences, including nursing, public health, nutrition, communication disorders, kinesiology and biology. In her portfolio are departments and programs with some 5,000 students and faculty, and much of what she does involves instruction and outreach.

“People think that because there’s lots of information on the internet, libraries and librarians are irrelevant or obsolete,” said Lutz. “The truth is that there is a lot of not-good information out there and, in fact, the abundance of information actually leaves students and faculty overwhelmed.”

Often Lutz encounters students who don’t know the Science and Engineering Library exists. “Librarians, whether they are seen or not, are constantly curating access to quality information that members of the university community aren’t necessarily aware of when there is so much unfiltered content all around them,” says Lutz.

To make room for the Refresh, Reznik-Zellen and her team have begun culling SEL’s collection of bound material, keeping some onsite, discarding others, and shipping some off to the Five College Library Annex in Hatfield, from which print materials can be retrieved as needed.

The goal of reorienting SEL from primarily housing physical materials to supporting a range of needs of students and faculty in the sciences, “may take a while,” acknowledges Reznik-Zellen. “Updating SEL for contemporary science is overdue,” she says, “and it’s exciting to begin the process.”

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