

March 31, 2021

Dear University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign Senators,

We urge you to vote No on Senate Resolution RS.21.03, *Resolution Regarding the Proposed Library Renovations*, asking to postpone the construction to support the Library's rare, archival and special collections.

The objections of the authors are primarily the following:

1. "The loss to undergraduates of their special community and their home away from home in a building specifically designed for their needs";
2. "A danger to our most precious library resources if they are stored in a sub-basement with known drainage issues";
3. And concerns that because the next phase, construction on the Main Library, "has been postponed to an unspecified time 5-10 years in the future, the resulting lack of availability of additional space ... means that after the undergraduates and their services are removed from the Undergraduate Library they will need to be squeezed into inadequate, much smaller spaces in the Main Library."

A staged process has been part of our planning from the outset in 2017, and is a necessary strategy with regard to funding. If the decades-long delays to the Library's construction plans have taught us anything, it is that hundreds of millions of dollars of funding cannot be mustered to address the construction as a single project. This first phase, creating a home for our rare and archival collections in the Undergraduate Library building, is nearly entirely funded and will establish a solid foundation for the Main Library phase, which the University has embraced as its highest capital priority. Our planning has ensured that we will meet the needs of undergraduates through the reallocation of equivalent programming space in the Main Library during this first phase, and that larger and better spaces will be created in the second phase.

The resolution fails to acknowledge the substantial work done to address these and similar concerns. Specifically:

1. The interests of undergraduate students are being addressed initially through the restructuring of several Main Library spaces to make them better-suited for group and quiet study, as well as moving the Media Commons to the Main Library. The underground construction of the UGL was driven by concerns about the Morrow Plots, and is less conducive to student needs than the planned subsequent Main Library phase of the project, which will provide improved spaces that also better integrate undergraduate library services.
2. Concerns regarding the drainage vulnerability of the Undergraduate Library are unfounded. The original construction of the UGL foundation was designed to guard against precisely the kinds of threats described in the resolution. In its 50 years, we have not encountered flooding problems, and the first job of the contracted architectural and engineering firm is to ensure that we address any potential threats. The current vault for the Rare Book and Manuscript Library, three floors above ground level, has encountered flooding and moisture problems from failures in nearby plumbing, reminding us that any location has vulnerabilities that must be addressed. We note, as well, that underground construction for rare and archival collections has been adopted for major institutions such as Cornell University and the University of Virginia.
3. While the demolition of the oldest stacks ranges and their replacement by a new 100,000 building is currently unfunded, the campus has ranked this next phase of construction as its highest capital priority. The University has recognized the imperative of replacing these older stack ranges because of the fire and environmental threat they pose to our important collections. Progress with this first phase will allow the University and the Library to work to secure funding to begin that next phase of work.

We note that the concerns expressed by the authors in several of the clauses are entirely inconsistent with the facts of this effort. The authors note that while the Library “has solicited and received student input regarding the conversion of the Undergraduate Library, this input has not [been] acted upon.” In fact, through 3 campus-wide town halls, 7 group discussions with campus faculty and graduate students, 3 meetings of the Senate Committee on the Library (which includes student representatives), one presentation to the Senate of the Urbana-Champaign Campus; 5 meetings with college or departmental executive committees, 2 meetings with departmental faculty, 2 meetings with the Humanities Council, one meeting with Illinois Student Government, and 7 recorded quarterly updates, input was received and that input shaped the current decisions. Those efforts played a significant part in shaping the recommendations from the Library Consultation Working Group (LCWG), a group of faculty members from many disciplines, including Classics, History and English. The final report of the LCWG endorsed the current strategy after careful consideration of that input and consideration of reports by architects and engineers.

The authors note that “no serious consideration has been given to other options for gaining additional space for Special Collections, such as expansion within stack range 6 or the construction of an addition to the west stacks.” These and other options were considered and rejected because devoting more space in the sixth stack range would limit the size of the accessible general collection, a priority widely endorsed by faculty, and because new construction to the west of the current Library building would have added significantly more cost, thus jeopardizing all phases of the proposed project.

Since 2017, substantial work has been done to reach the current conclusion. Nearly all of the necessary funding has been secured, and a contract with architects, engineers and preservation consultants has been signed to enable this work to go forward. Postponing that work will almost certainly cause the Library’s building project to fail. Most of the funding for the first phase cannot be used for other purposes and will be forfeit. A further delay of decades on a project that is long overdue poses great and certain risks to the Library’s outstanding collections. We ask you to vote No on Resolution RS.21.03 so that efforts to advance the Library’s future needs can continue.

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