The most important building on any college campus is the library. It is the heart and soul of student learning and faculty development. In this information age, people might think that libraries should be categorized as antiquated relics of the past. After all, who doesn’t have a smart phone that can put a million facts and news items at one’s fingertips in an instant? However, those people could not be more wrong. For a college or university, the library is so much more than merely a repository of factual information. Obviously, there is enormous value in having ready access to information, but beyond that, most people need a library as organizing apparatus, quality control, and guiding hand.

Especially for students who are just beginning an adult journey into the world of ideas, the library arranges materials so that students can conduct research into virtually any subject of academic interest, finding not the easiest sources but the best sources available in the world. On their own, undergraduates often have trouble distinguishing between weak sources and strong sources, biased sources and objective sources, propaganda and fact. The library and the librarians who work there are our best defense against ignorance. I require my own students to use the library heavily for research for both essays and oral presentations. That library experience helps them grow as critical thinkers and provides them with the tools to sift and evaluate information, preparing them for a lifetime of self-education beyond the college classroom.

The sheer volume of information is overwhelming for the average person, and students often don’t know where to begin. Libraries and librarians are essential to the individual quest for knowledge. Our librarians are especially great at teaching students how to navigate the various types of information available both in physical and digital form. Librarians guide students to the highest quality materials when they would often be floundering through Wikipedia or stopping after the first Google hit. Our library filters the enormous amount of source material by carefully analyzing new books and old, selecting the highest quality and rejecting those that are unworthy of academic or popular attention. Librarians also carefully choose the best digital sources, including databases that give our students access to the best scholarly work in the world. While e-books are gaining currency, the need for tangible books, journals, and magazines will never disappear.

Also vital to students is a dedicated learning space where they can study quietly or just think deeply about the big ideas. Home is not always the best place for our students to work or ponder. They need a study space away from boisterous siblings or dormitory roommates. Students who are parents need to escape the demands of their children for a little while. And everyone, including faculty and staff, can benefit from being surrounded by the pleasing scent of books.