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# Colleges increasingly closing the book on annuals

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McClatchy Newspapers

For better than a century, the yearbook has been as much a staple of campus culture as beer and bad dorm food.

But as of this year, the University of North Texas' Aerie is history.

Purdue and Mississippi State universities are also closing the books on annuals, while at schools that still have yearbooks, advisers tend to talk somewhat soberly about the future.

"It's probably a convergence of a lot of factors," said Tom Rufer, director of the UNT student union, which plans to distribute the final-edition 2008 Aerie in August. "To some degree, social networking is replacing that. Students are using Facebook to chronicle the college experience."

Rich Stoebe, communications director for publisher Jostens Inc., headquartered in Minneapolis, downplayed the influence of social networking sites.

"MySpace, YouTube, Twitter are a different category," Stoebe said. "High school students are just as involved in MySpace, and it hasn't had an impact. Virtually every high school produces a yearbook."

But if the virtual world isn't hurting yearbooks, rising costs, the loss of a key adviser and student indifference can lead administrators to shelve yearbook publication, Rufer said.

The fact that students at many schools are pulled in the direction of off-campus jobs, semesters abroad and off-campus living also means they don't share a common focus on traditional college life they might once have.

The fact that the University of Texas at Arlington doesn't offer a yearbook didn't bother Jason McDonald.

"It's not high school, where everybody's so centralized," said McDonald, 19, who will transfer to the University of Texas at Austin this fall.

As for UT, McDonald said he might get a copy of the Cactus as a senior. Advisers say first-year students and seniors are usually the biggest buyers.

Campus newspapers capture some of a college's culture. But yearbook fans say a paper can't put an academic year into a single volume students can pull off the shelves, leaf through and laugh at for the rest of their lives.

"It really does give you a sense of what it was like to be on campus in years past," UNT archivist Michelle Mears said.

At Kansas State University, the annuals are the most requested items in the university archives, the KSU yearbook adviser said.

"They're losing the only written history of the year prepared by the students who lived it," Cactus adviser Kathy Lawrence said.

Stoebe estimates that 1,100 of the nation's approximately 2,500 four-year colleges produce all-school yearbooks.

But at UT, the latest Cactus sold only 2,000 copies on a campus of about 50,000, Lawrence said. UT-Arlington has not had an annual for years. Texas State University's book was discontinued in 2004 after its 100th edition. Texas Wesleyan University's book ceased publication six years ago.

"There are very few yearbooks that have not experienced declines in the past few years," said Richard Lytle, director of Student Media at Southern Methodist University. "We have not come up with the exact reason.

"At this point we are still in the black, but if we continue to drop in sales, that becomes questionable," Lytle said, adding that most income for SMU's \$55 yearbook derives from sales to students, with ad revenue secondary.

Mary Finley has been Aerie adviser since 2000. She pointed out that UNT previously discontinued its yearbook, then revived it. The present incarnation is in its 26th year.

"Yearbooks come and go. It all depends on the temperament at the university," said Finley, who is retiring. "Developing a yearbook is an expensive thing. The students just weren't buying it. None of the other departments wanted to pick it up."

Kansas State yearbook adviser Linda Putney in 1987 wrote her master's thesis on the college yearbook's historic role and status.

"It's harder to sell books than it was 15 or 20 years ago," Putney said, adding that sales were about 4,000 six or seven years ago. "We're still selling about 3,500."

She estimated that "maybe" more than half of American universities publish yearbooks, but said numbers have dropped from 20 years ago.

"It's not all gloom and doom. It's a cyclical thing. When there's a lot of unhappiness in society, yearbook sales tend to drop off," Putney said. "When tradition is popular, yearbooks really thrive. I think where tradition reigns, you're going to have a wonderful yearbook."

Tradition apparently still runs strong at the University of Mississippi.

"We are in a good, stable position," said Ashley Dees, editor of The Ole Miss. "Our school is behind our book."

Dees said sales are about 6,000, with 416 color pages.

"The yearbook is a personal history book," Dees said. "It's our story. It's our book.

"You cannot hold Facebook. You cannot pass Facebook on to the next generation. And you're going to lose everything you put on Facebook."

At Ole Miss the \$45 cost of student annuals is included in tuition and fees.

Dees and her staff also market the book through the campus radio station, TV station and school paper.

Instead of nagging students to come in for portraits, staff members go to places like Last Call, a campus bar, and shoot student photos there.

To boost sales at Kansas State's veterinary college, Putney's The Royal Purple staff stripped pages from the campus life section and put out a special zoned edition. Sales went from four to 212. They also set up a Facebook account and post stuff to YouTube to drive traffic to the yearbook. And Putney expanded niche coverage with a DVD

of about 35 additional student "stories" inserted in the back of the book.

There's also life in Texas Christian University's Horned Frog yearbook, published since 1898. The 500-page book costs \$62 and includes a movie-style DVD.

Yearbook adviser Kathy Hamer said that more than 30 percent of students buy the book and that sales have trended up for a decade. "I think it's the kind of campus we have: We have a strong Greek community; they tend to be in it a lot."

Greeks often lead campus organizations and in many cases pay to have their fraternities or sororities featured in the book.

Of course, TCU, Ole Miss and Texas A&M University, which has one of the biggest annuals in the country, not only have fraternities and sororities but the kind of culture that seems to demand a book.

"The nickname for the school comes from the yearbook," said Dees, of The Ole Miss. "We are the school."