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Financial Black Holes & Other Challenges

“Financial Black Holes” is not exactly the best epithet but unfortunately it is a moniker libraries must endure.

Libraries have been called many things over the years, most of them complementary. “Financial Black Holes” is not exactly the best epithet but unfortunately it is a moniker libraries must endure. How is it possible that libraries can remain so costly in this, the electronic age? Hasn't the Internet made libraries nearly obsolete?

Perhaps you've thought that yourself. If so, you're not the first person, nor will you be the last. Nearly everyone in information services is thinking it these days, including a few librarians. The newest university in the California system opened *without* a library building. But before we assemble a cortege for the library, let's stick a mirror under our patient's nose to see if it really no longer breathes.

The Tangled Web

First, the available resources on the web are scant compared to print materials. If you add up all the journals that academic libraries take, you'd have about 100,000 different ones. Of that number, less than 6 percent are online in a full text format. Stated another way, fewer than 6,000 of that 100,000 are available online. Those that are available are expensive.

The situation with books is even more

grim. For example, the celebrated Gutenberg Project, wherein hundreds of great books were to be put on the web, has encountered numerous difficulties. Of those in place, the error rate can be laughable. Even expensive online retrievable systems, like our own Search-Bank and First-Search, occasionally result in some side-splitting howlers.

Virtually Vanishing

Xanadu, a thirty-year electronic project of Ted Nelson, has just been spun off, meaning that its parent company no longer wishes to swallow its not inconsiderable bill. Meanwhile, the *Chronicle of Higher Education* reported that barely eight months after it was spun off from state government, the California Virtual University is ceasing operations as an independent organization with a mission of promoting electronic distance-education.

Then there is the accuracy of the web. According to Chuck Koutnik, director, Appomattox Regional Library System, it can be abysmal. Koutnik examined 104 “typical” library reference questions and found that for seven out of eight categories, the web fell below 50 percent accuracy, or worse.

So what's the point? The point is,

that while web resources continue to proliferate, judicious use of it is mandatory. Students *must* use the web, but they must use it warily.

It also means that libraries must continue to collect print sources while offering electronic access. This is an expensive proposition for libraries and often garners them the epithet “financial black holes.” It's easy to see why.

Over the last 10 years, health care services increased 65 percent. During that same decade, costs to libraries increased 145 percent! I do not know of a single U.S. library whose budget increased 145 percent over the last 10 years. Even those increasing 8 percent each year—a *very* impressive gain—lost ground.

Costs Double or Triple

We face the same problem at Dacus. Inflation threatens to wipe out our holdings from year to year. It is altogether too common for a library periodical to double, triple and yes, even increase fourfold in one year. How can this be during what is arguably the best economy ever? If you think about it, it makes sense. Who else besides libraries will buy many academic journals? *The Journal of Limpid Research* does not, despite its brilliance,

have a huge following outside the library's walls. It will never be a *Starbuck's* coffee table reading staple.

Ebsco, the vendor for Dacus periodicals, predicts a 13 percent *increase* for us if we buy the very same titles again. That's **no new** titles; just the very same ones. Unless our periodicals' budget increases 13 percent, we'll lose titles. The sad fact is that even if it increased 10 percent, we'd **still** lose titles.

Money: That's What We Want

What can be done? Librarians everywhere, including Dacus librarians, must work harder and think smarter about funding issues. We must look more often and more vigorously at external funding opportunities. This is

a new role for many of us. For too long we have simply looked to the annual budget to supply every need.

For example, our Friends group, while vigorous, must expand to generate more income while new ventures must be seriously and unflaggingly explored. (*Let me take this opportunity to invite of all of you to join the Friends group today!*) Grants opportunities for libraries, while limited, are another venue. Grants written by other academic units can help by dropping a line item, however small, in the budget for library support.

Of course libraries cannot generate FTEs or other performance funding indicators. Yet nearly every student is impacted by the library. And now you no doubt see where

this is going. All of us must work together to make sure these inevitable losses do not jeopardize Winthrop's excellent academic reputation. A library's strength is often a measure of its institution's overall academic seriousness. Let us meet these challenges fearlessly, but let us meet them by working together.

End Game

Comparisons are odious, as the saying has it, but often they are inevitable. Below are a handful of peer institutions and what they spent last year in three areas: books, periodicals, and electronic access. The figures in parenthesis refer to FTEs.

Mark Y. Herring
Dean of Library Services

College (Enrollment)	Book Expenditures	Serial Expenditures	Electronic Expenditures
Radford (7,768)	\$160,917	\$1,065,917	\$69,652
Appalachian State (11,373)	\$750,700	\$1,175,626	N/A
Austin Peay (6,305)	\$208,411	\$217,996	\$60,786
James Madison (12,538)	\$508,012	\$615,160	\$116,152
Middle Tennessee State (14,984)	\$438,000	\$1,063,000	\$153,000
West Florida (6,388)	\$422,019	\$534,796	\$47,647
Valpariso State (9,034)	\$210,763	\$497,201	\$93,937
Western Carolina (5,881)	\$303,689	\$784,352	\$94,894
College of Charleston (9,321)	\$584,000	\$695,000	\$60,000
Winthrop (4,431)	\$137,405	\$334,730	\$38,090

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