

the dean's corner

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Putting the 'Fun' Back in Fungible

When I ask you to help us put the "fun" back in "fungible" I'm asking you to help us by substituting your generous verbal praise (for which we are most thankful) with dollars for Dacus.

Please, no. This isn't about mushrooms so I'll ask you not to send vegetarian jokes. Besides, if I were writing about mushrooms I'd probably have written something like, "Making Fun of the Fungivorous." Be thankful that isn't my topic. Besides, it isn't that I dislike Portobelo sandwiches, either. I do. As a vegetarian I rather think they are as delightful as they are delicious. Instead, this is about a lesser known fungi that can be equally fun.

I mean of course *fungible*, once an uncommon word that seems to be making something of a comeback. It isn't a new word really, but a very old one. It comes to us from the Medieval Latin *fungibilis*, and from the Latin *fungi* (from *fungi vice*), to perform (in place of), to fulfill the office of.

The word has roughly two senses: When used in law, the definition runs, "Freely exchangeable for, or replaceable by, another of like nature or kind in the satisfaction of an obligation." This legal gobbledegook is followed by more legal gobbledegookery in a discussion of stocks and bonds, and dollars and cents, wheat and chaff. Hold that thought for a minute.

For those of us who live in places other than courtrooms, the word in shirt-sleeve English means, "interchange-

able." It can also mean commutable, exchangeable, interconvertible, substitutable. Now we're getting somewhere. Bring that previous meaning back and we're nearly there.

When I ask you to help us put the "fun" back in "fungible" I'm asking you to help us by substituting your generous verbal praise (for which we are most thankful) with dollars for Dacus. In the same sense that many years ago one might exchange an axe for an ox, thus making the one fungible for the other, I'm asking you to substitute your verbal praise with Grants and Jacksons and, dare we hope, Madisons, Clevelandes, McKinleys and even a Chase or a Wilson!

Does this sound brazen? Perhaps, but what is known is not always obvious, and what is obvious may not always be known. Twenty-five years ago, I encountered, during the course of some scribblings, a small library. Yet this incredibly small library boasted one of the most impressive collections of its kind, indeed, for an institution two and three times as large. I set up a field trip with the library director and went to see it for myself.

What I saw left me awed, and still does today as I think back on it. Here was a very small faculty, fewer than 50, with a full staff of under 80 and

a total enrollment of hardly 140. It was a specialized course of study, so the enrollments rarely flew above this low-flying altitude. Yet the library had everything one could want while pursuing that course of study. Really. Everything.

When I sat down with the director I found out why. Everyone there, including students, saw the library as important and said so. Nothing new there, really. Libraries, like the weather, are always much talked about. What astonished me was that *everyone* gave. It wasn't in lieu of other programs, or even of their own private giving to other worthy causes. Every year they exchanged their praise with cold, hard cash.

More amazing still, however, was that everyone *expected* it of each other. The sheer determination that this program of study, which wasn't for everyone, never lagged for want of library interest. They found a way to put the fun back in fungible; and whatever the annual budget turned out to be, the library staff knew it could count on even more from its wide-ranging support.

Dacus enjoys much of that same support but our needs, being so very much larger, tend also to be very much greater. We also live with terrifyingly high *library* inflation rates. For example, in 2001-2002, our periodicals' budget

soared up 13.1 percent, *with nothing new added*. In looking over the matter I thought we'd end up at about 6 percent, maybe even 7. After all, we had made a significant number of adjustments and reallocations in our budget.

Never in my wildest imaginations would I have guessed that our budget would have come in at twice the inflation rate we assumed! It's hardly new that library materials outdistance almost all other inflation rates. It *is* new that so large a jump would occur in so short a time. To give you some idea of the dollars we're talking about, our periodicals budget in 2001 ran about \$400,000. That 13 percent jump--about \$55,000--nearly broke our backs.

Nearly. But we made it and with very little blood-letting. We made it chiefly because the president protected the library from budget cuts that touched everywhere else on campus. We made it because we were not only not cut, but we also were able to tap into other resources. We made it because we robbed the Paul of our book budget to pay the Peter of our periodicals.

What's troubling, however, is that we cannot go on this way forever. We have to look to other resources, and, of course, we have been. During our nearly year-long internal discussion of the future of library services, we realized that we were not concentrat-

ing enough on external fundraising. We are now. We applied for more grants last year than at any other time in our history. We'll do the same thing this year. We're also looking at teaming with other libraries for mutually beneficial purchasing and resource sharing, something we've always done but will do as much as can be humanly arranged.

We've trimmed staff when positions went vacant, and where we have found extra dollars, every dime has gone into our materials budget. We have also examined every subscription we take, every continuation, every paper versus electronic access we subscribe to, and made adjustments, freeing up dollars for the never-ending spiral of ever-increasing costs. The law of endless returns, however, works overtime in libraries: whatever you buy today will cost more next year. So, every new service or new venture drives our budget up. The cost of library materials is never fixed but always rising. Postponing one year what you'll buy the next simply means you'll put off what costs "x" this year for what will cost 2x (or 3x or 4x) the next.

Which brings us once again to the "fun" in fungible. I know you know how important libraries are. I know for most who read this I am merely "preaching to the choir." But I also know we can do better, that we must do better. We must do better because our

students deserve it, because research demands it, because the community in which we reside expects it.

I've used this line before but I still think it resonates with truth today more than it did seventy years ago. Ida Jane Dacus concluded her 1931 annual library report with words that are agonizingly true today: "Our growth," she warned, "cannot be continued unless we get help from outside."

Dacus needs your help. If you're wondering how you can help, or where, take a look at our web page under "Library Fund Raising." For now, allow me to say that there are at least two ways. First, take a look at our needs list on our fundraising page. Subscribe to one of those needs in whatever way you can. Perhaps our building fund appeals to you. So be it. Perhaps you'd rather help in our book and periodical endowment. Be our guest. We need your help in the most important of ways.

Second, maybe you'd like to join the Friends of Dacus Library. Details are given on the library's web page, too. We are as interested in 'friends-raising' as much as we are in fundraising! *Only you can help us put the "fun" back in fungible.*

Mark Y. Herring
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