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November 1999: Saving the Appearances

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the dean's corner

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'Saving the appearances'

To save appearances; how gird the sphere

Or if they list to try

Conjecture, he his fabric of the heavens

Hath left to their disputes, perhaps to move

His laughter at their quaint opinion wide

Hereafter, when they come to model heaven,

And calculate the stars; how they will wield

The mighty frame, how build, unbuild, contrive,

To save appearances; how gird the sphere

With centric and eccentric scribbled o'er,

Cycle and epicycle, orb in orb.

Paradise Lost,
Eighth Book

When Milton wrote these words, he was not thinking the way we do when we talk about 'saving the appearances.' When Milton wrote about saving them he was thinking about *rescuing* them, and rescuing the whole of the Ptolemaic system of the universe, undone in his mind by Copernicus's revolution. What bothered many about the revolution, so some scholars tell us, was not the change to a heliocentric universe so much as it was the radical departure that took science from the hands of everyman and placed it exclusively in the hands of what we might call experts today.

Simplicius used the phrase, 'saving

the appearances,' as well when he wrote his sixth century *Commentary* on Aristotle's *De Caelo*. An entertaining and highly controversial book was written on this very topic by Owen Barfield titled, aptly enough, *Saving the Appearances: A Study in Idolatry*. The book warns about how hypothesis becomes truth-in-itself, rather than an explanation of it, i.e. hypothesis is the reification of truth alone, without which there is only falsehood.

Doubtless the library's budget must increase and, in time, will gradually do so. But what can be done now, this year? How is it possible to add dollars to the budget while not also harming other areas?

Now all of this is pretty heady stuff and leads one to ask, "What in the world are you talking about and what has this to do with libraries?"

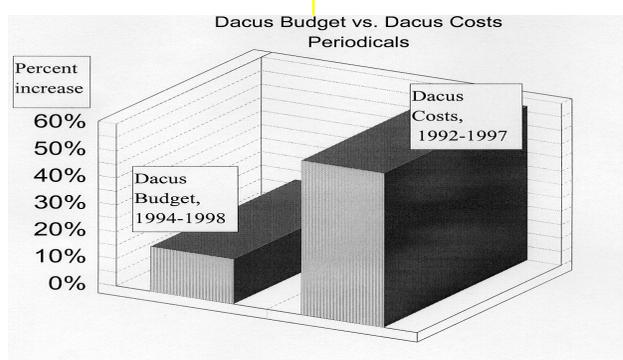
Whether 'saving the appearances' is in fact a useful trope to bridge the gap between scientists and humanists must be left for scholars to decide. There comes a time when libraries

must rely on the figure of speech, 'saving the appearances' when talking about the materials' budget. Dacus is no exception.

What can be done when budgets are tight and money is short, yet expenses are grand and invoices are voluminous? Hand-wringing comes to mind, but it is generally ineffective and solves nothing. Besides, librarians, while much-experienced at it, have an equally long experience with its failure.

Recent pieces have called for internal and external funding increases, but nothing is said about what the library is doing to help itself. Have we nothing to offer? Hardly. Hence comes 'saving the appearances,' as in rescuing the library's budget while not harming its strengths. Is such a thing necessary, and is it possible?

As to the first question, consider the graph below. In an earlier advent of this *Corner*, I pointed out not only our (low) position relative to our peers, but also the staggering blow dealt libraries via the remora of inflation. Over the last decade inflation has hit libraries to the tune of 145%. In serials



alone, since 1993, the inflation toll has been 173%! In a recent issue of the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, libraries whose budgets increased over the last ten years were ranked.

Not surprisingly, Harvard ranked number one. Even it increased only 75%, slightly more than half of what could be considered required. Dacus, as shown in the graph above, has had an equally difficult time making ends meet. While our magazine costs have soared 60% higher during the last few years, Dacus's budget has come in only about one-third higher. The same is true of other budget categories. *Not to put too fine a point on it, as prices for all libraries materials have increased significantly, the Dacus budget has remained nearly the same.*

To answer this call, we have robbed the Paul of book budgets to pay the Peter of periodical invoices. The end result has been that *both* have suffered. *Saving the appearances* becomes absolutely necessary in order to make certain key elements of the budget (books, periodicals) are not harmed overall. Doubtless the library's budget must increase and, in time, will gradually do so. But what can be done now, this year? How is it possible to add dollars to the budget while not also harming other areas? We can survive the disease, but can we recover from it sequela? Or, to put a Baconian twist on it, will the cure kill us faster than the illness?

We don't think so. In fact, to answer the second part of an earlier question, it is not only possible but also necessary. After combing through the budget rather carefully, one finds at least three areas

where possible savings could take place, "savings" being used here in the sense of "rescuing." What are these, and what have we done?

1. *Newspapers carried in microform*— For a number of years, Dacus subscribed not only to the paper version of more than a dozen local, state and national newspapers, but also to those same newspapers in microform. While a standard practice to be sure, the cost of the *microforms alone* proved very steep. I say alone, because with microforms one must pay for the subscription, the storage cabinet, reader-printers to read them, and space to house it all. While the subscriptions alone totaled more than \$25,000 annually, the cabinets run about \$2,000 each, while the reader-printers run as high as \$10,000 each. Space cannot be calculated exactly, but as Dacus is now in the last *three to five percent of its entire available space*, it is for us a very high premium. By discontinuing only the microform archive of selected newspapers (their backfiles will continue to be available electronically), Dacus will add more money to its book fund.

2. *Reallocations of funds from eliminated positions.* A recent resignation gave us the opportunity to address again staff workloads and responsibilities. This in turn led to collapsing the duties of the resigning staff member into the duties of three other staff members. The savings will be permanently added to the materials budget.

3. *Duplication of periodicals by format.* As it turns out, Dacus owns some periodical titles in two subscriptions: one in paper format, the other online. By reducing the num-

ber of paper duplications, Dacus can place a considerable amount of money in the book budget as well. This is not altogether easy to do, however. Electronic access is not perfect. Graphic-intensive journals simply do not transfer well to an electronic format, at least not now. This includes not only the obvious (art pictures, etc.) but the not-so-obvious (magazines rich in graphs and mathematical equations). These we will continue in two formats since the graphs are either not in the electronic format, or present in such poor quality as to be unreadable. This still leaves a significant number that are text only. These we will eliminate by taking them in electronic format. Is this fail-safe? No, nothing ever is. But it is a risk worth taking to reap the rewards of a larger book budget.

In the best of all possible worlds, such reallocations would not be necessary. Of course, that best-of-all-possible-worlds-philosophy took a bit of a beating in the hands of Voltaire, so perhaps getting to that world might not be such a good idea after all. Being frustrated is one thing in life, wrote Irving Kristol, 'getting what you want, that's when trouble really begins.' Perhaps so. Rest assured that Dacus staff members are doing everything humanly possible to stretch resources in the direction of materials: materials for you, our most treasured clientele. After all, what is a library about, if it is not about its resources, first, foremost and forever?

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