Putting the ‘Fun’ Back in Fungible

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 Portobello 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 an chaff. Hold that thought for a minute.

For those of us who live in places other than court-rooms, the word in shirt-sleeve English means, “interchangeable.” 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, Clevelands, 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 bloodletting. 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-