

the dean's corner

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Sown in tears, reaped in joy

“So often in our line of work you hear much about how important the library is; how it is the center of intellectual activity; how it is the cynosure of any good university education. Yet, it is rare indeed to find an institution that not only talks about library importance, but also funds in a manner to make it true. This is as rare as it is remarkable.”

They that sow in tears, the Psalmist opines, will reap in joy. It may sound odd but this verse perfectly describes our budget process this year. Let me explain. We sowed in tears. When we began this fiscal year, we did so with more than the usual angst. Every budget year we sow in tears and here's why.

On the whole, librarians are an even-tempered lot. Yes, yes, we've heard most of the stereotypes; and we believe we take them good-naturedly *most of the time*. (We even have our very own “librarian action figure,” released recently by Accoutrements. The action, in this case, is her “finger-shushing” when you press the button in the back. Do come by and we'll share it with you.) When it comes to budgets, however, librarians are as unfunny as the grim reaper.

We sow in tears because libraries are financial black holes, as we've said before. It isn't our fault. We blame God. Knowledge

is infinite and, as such, there really isn't a good stopping place whereby one could say, “Okay, that's enough of those fractals” ; or, “Whew! At last we can close the book on plate tectonics theory.”

It *really* isn't our fault. (We know we sound like teenagers, but it's true because we cannot control other-worldly library materials inflation. It's simply from another planet.) A library's budget can be adequate this year at X dollars, inadequate the next if nothing changes. Next year, *even if nothing else new is purchased*, it must be X plus 10 percent in order just to replicate last year's purchases. That is, if we have 100 items this year for which we paid, let us say, \$100,000, we will, to get the *same* 100 items the next fiscal year, have to pay \$110,000. We sow our budgets in tears.

Since 1999, our materials costs have gone up *at least 8.5 percent annually* on a line item that began that year around \$500,000. In one year

alone, it jumped 13.1 percent over the previous year. We sow our budgets in tears, you see.

It's not as if we haven't tried to do something about this. Since 1999 we have reallocated more than \$60,000. This was not done easily because these funds were already being well-spent. We just refocused them on materials that would satisfy the needs of more patrons. We also gave up a full position.

On the surface, some might be saying, “So what? Your budget problems are the same as what everyone faces.” Yes and no. They are and they aren't. When it comes to making certain curtailments, one can generally find ways to do so without really changing what one does. In our case, it's like having to cut back on the car; but you can only do it by removing one of the wheels. In the end, you'll neither begin nor end where you did last year.

We sow in tears. For example, let's suppose we have to cut 50 journals. The

question becomes, which 50? It also becomes, do we include the microfilm? And it also involves, do we ever try to go back and get those 50 again once the crisis has passed? If not, what do we tell users? (Experience teaches that notices reading "Year 2003 not purchased" are frustrating to patrons.) Finally, we have to ask, what do we do about the gap in information? (No, no, a thousands times no, everything isn't on the Internet!)

So we entered this year in a black cloud *vis-a-vis* realistic expectations about the library's budgetary prospects and sowed it in tears. We knew all about the decline in state appropriations. We also knew we had been fortunate to miss previous cuts. The question remained, just how much and from what areas would we have to cut back? We looked at scenarios that would have garroted our resources. We looked at others that would have merely left our patient, library resources, alive but on life support. Nothing looked very promising. We sowed the budget in a flood of tears.

Through our tears, however, we made what we thought was a good case. Library resources, we argued, are not for the library: they are for all students, faculty staff and community patrons. Library resources, we opined, do not support one degree program, but all of them. Library faculty and staff, we

coaxed, do not benefit from the budget per se, but provide resources to others to utilize. We do not push through one particular kind of student seeking one particular kind of expertise in one area, we cajoled, but all students, in every discipline, seeking every kind of expertise.

We also understand that the library isn't the only place on campus or the only program.

And now we reap in joy!

Much to our surprise and delight, we reaped in joy when word came to us in early October that the administration had approved the library's request as the single budget priority for the year.

If we could say thanks in a hundred languages, each would be inadequate. In all seriousness we understand that this cannot have been done without the support of so many others. We say a heartfelt thanks to the administration for hearing and acting on our request. We also say thanks to the scores of other departments who shoulder a budget burden they would rather not.

We cannot say in words how thankful we are. We are thankful that Dacus will continue to offer the best resources possible. We are most thankful because we know our students, and all our other patrons, can count on the continued good access they have enjoyed throughout this library's existence.

So often in our line of work you hear much about how important the library is; how it is the center of intellectual activity; how it is the cynosure of any good university education. Yet, it is rare indeed to find an institution that not only *talks* about library importance, but also *funds* in a manner to make it true. This is as rare as it is remarkable.

It is rare because we cannot name many places where this is done at all as opposed to literally dozens of places we could reel off that have had to cut severely, and throughout the library's budget lines. It is remarkable because this took place in what has become one of the most difficult budget years in recent history.

It is a singular privilege for us to be in this place and to serve such a fine institution of higher learning where the *learning* really is *primus inter pares*, first among equals.

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For more information, see <http://www.winthrop.edu/dacus>. Click on "about Dacus," then "Library Publications," and "Dacus Focus" or "Dean's Corner."

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