

Guest Editorial

Political Networking

The debate surrounding classroom productivity is heard more and more throughout the country. In my state, Oregon, public debate is couched in general terms of finding sufficient funding for higher education in a time of financial crisis. Private discussion is much more blunt and usually starts with the question "What do they do anyway?" The "they" refers primarily to teaching faculty, but clearly implicates all of us who are a part of higher education. What we have here is a group of people, in this case legislators, who still see teaching as a soft job involving six or seven hours a week in the classroom. Any attempts to explain that six or seven classroom hours per week represent many more hours of preparation falls on deaf ears and is usually too little too late.

This scenario can be repeated with librarians taking the part of the misunderstood faculty and university administrators representing the misunderstanding legislators. The question "What do they do?" is most frequently asked during promotion and tenure discussions as library administrators seek to define the role of library faculty. Anne Beaubien captured it well in a *C&RL* editorial when she noted: "Librarianship has a chronically low profile among the information and education professions because people do not understand the depth and breadth of our expertise or the extent of what we do."¹ I believe librarians should provide political leadership in building this understanding not only about the profession but also about academia as a whole. The common thread in both of the above scenarios is that the realization of the problem—for example, lack of understanding of what

we do—almost always happens at a critical moment (budget time). Then any explanation appears to be not an attempt to enlighten but rather an attempt to justify. In other words, those seeking to explain themselves have not been doing their homework. They have not been providing to those with budgetary power complete and continual information on what they do and why they are essential to a healthy economy.

Although it is not news that legislators and university administrators are unaware of the services and benefits provided by those they are funding, it is becoming more and more critical as resources grow scarce. In Oregon, the discussion of faculty productivity is taking place because mandated budget cuts are forcing legislators to scrutinize all aspects of state funding critically. "Doing more with less" is the motto of the day. As legislators seek to make cuts and to eliminate inefficiencies, their gaze turns to higher education. Overall cuts in higher education translate into specific cuts in library budgets.

We have to ask ourselves why this is happening. Is it true that teaching faculty are overpaid and underworked? Is it true that library faculty are not up to par with other faculty vis-à-vis research and publication? If it is not true, why the perception? Certainly, some academics in libraries and classrooms on campus have opted for the status quo. However, I propose that much of the criticism stems from ignorance on the part of those with administrative and/or budgetary responsibility. Neither librarians nor anyone else in higher education has done a successful job of explaining and marketing their

services. When measured against funding for police or other "necessities," we come up short. We have not translated what we do into words that make sense to the majority of taxpayers. We have not marketed ourselves or our services. We have assumed that those in charge value us as much as we value ourselves.

While the situation for the world of academia as a whole is severe, for libraries it is almost catastrophic. Library schools continue to close because they are perceived as not in tune with the research and teaching mission of the university. Nor, parenthetically, do they attract large donor dollars. The profession itself is greying, and budgets are declining while the need for new monies is more critical than ever. The increasing entry of private corporations into the information world (especially the electronic information world), along with the now proverbial information explosion, are causing libraries to reexamine what they do and where they should go. The *vision thing*, as it is sometimes called, is sweeping the library profession. There is a growing need to redefine the profession and to do so in a way that makes sense to us who are in it; and to those we want to be in it; and to those who will ultimately be supporting it.

I propose that although we must continue to work within the profession to define our changing role, we must spend equal time outside the profession making ourselves a part of the economic status quo. Particularly, we must get more involved in the political process of the cities and counties in which we live. I use the term *political process* in its broadest aspects to include all types of networking and coalition building with those individuals and groups who can affect legislative and economic change.

In Oregon, we have seen librarians

and other library supporters mount a successful campaign against an anti-Gay rights initiative by creating alliances with like-minded groups. Critical support of a local legislator who was in a close election race resulted in his coauthoring, sponsoring, and shepherding through the legislature major legislation for Oregon libraries. I am convinced that when he put out the eleventh-hour call for help and when seven of the ten who showed up to help were librarians, he understood that librarians wielded political clout.

However, the political arena, although critical, is only one avenue for networking. Participating in local civic affairs, working in service organizations, joining organizations other than library organizations, attending local, state, and national conferences that are not primarily related to libraries, and publishing in journals from outside our profession are all methods for marketing libraries and library services. The goal is to become a part of the decision-making process—not simply to react to it.

All of this is not to suggest that we neglect networking on campus, but we must recognize that the very institutions of which we are a part and from which we would normally seek support are themselves in trouble. Indeed, I propose that librarians take the lead on our campuses in terms of coalition building. We could be the model for the rest of the academy. Because of our ability to access information quickly and efficiently, we are in a position to provide service and information to local, state, and national leaders. Building support and visibility through political and community activism is the key component for ensuring that future legislators will never need to ask the question "What do they do?"

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REFERENCE

1. Anne Beaubien, "Image Counts," *College & Research Libraries* 53 (Mar. 1992): 97.