
Public Relations of Academic Libraries

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WITH INCREASING NUMBERS of young people clamoring for admittance to colleges and universities, the attention of educators has turned toward the improvement of the intellectual climate of the campus, and toward relating the purposes of formal education to a changing world. Academic libraries, therefore, are challenged, as never before, to scrutinize their resources, their facilities and their services, and to reappraise the role of the library in higher education.

There is evidence of increased interest in public relations on all fronts since R. W. Orr's paper called for more descriptive information about the public relations of academic libraries.¹ However, college and university administrators (with exemplary exceptions) are still too prone to ignore the techniques of business and industry, and to reiterate the dusty clichés about the library as "the heart of the college" or "the core of the curriculum." It must be recognized, as C. D. MacDougall points out,² that ". . . sound public relations means the daily application of common sense, common courtesy and common decency in accordance with a continuous program of enlightened self-interest. . . ." While a constant preoccupation with public relations may lead to undue self-consciousness,³ nonetheless, a decent respect for the rights and needs of students, faculty, and administration must be coupled with a sensitive concern for the good name of the institution which the librarian, or janitor, or student assistant may for the moment represent.

Citizens are discovering Education, and are being urged to face up to the acute teacher shortage and lack of classrooms. But how much attention is being directed to the increased need for materials and resources of our academic libraries? In terms of higher education, the astute librarian must perceive the role of libraries in the total educational process and determine their function in relation to the whole.

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Speaking of "the social function" of libraries, B. Landheer reminds us that everything in contemporary society can be seen from the aspect of the producer, the consumer, and the general public.⁴ For librarianship, authors and publishers represent producers; librarians are more like distributors; the reading public our consumers. The outside world (our related publics) constitutes the general public insofar as it is indirectly affected by the integrated activities of the first three groups.

Any institution is secure only as long as it commands the fullest measure of public understanding and support. Therefore, higher education in the United States has been taking a serious, second look at itself. Academic libraries, as part of higher education, must awaken to the need for increased understanding and support. For too long, academic libraries have been content to plod, forgetting that every service they offer (or do not offer) has overtones affecting public attitudes. The role of the library, and the status of the librarian, on any given campus reflects, to a large degree, the academic vitality of the institution.

Where athletics, beauty queens, and military balls dominate the publicity, the library is usually on the fringe of campus life rather than at its center. On the other hand, when one of the nation's top liberal arts colleges deliberately concentrates on raising intellectual standards, the library becomes the focal point of the learning process, and receives commensurate support.⁵

In the scramble for new dormitories, student unions, and gymnasias—all of which may be vital to higher education—administrators must be made to recognize the need for new or expanded library facilities. Dormitories and student unions are self-liquidating, athletic and social events always newsworthy, but activities of an intellectual or cultural nature relating to the curriculum or to library services are conspicuous by their absence from most news releases.⁶ In the light of such obvious neglect or indifference on many campuses, how can any academic librarian sit back and claim that public relations are of no concern to him? It is the public which makes possible the existence and the operation of our institutions, as both MacDougall and R. B. Harwell have indicated, and librarians must realize that one of their primary responsibilities is cultivating the good will, understanding, and support of the various publics they serve.

While it is easy to agree with Harwell that relations within an organization are as important as those external to the organization, it

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is not agreed that staff relations are necessarily a part of *public* relations. As applied to the academic library, public relations may best be defined as “. . . the sum of the library’s external relations with students, with faculty, with administrative officers, and with the community at large; and generally in that order of importance, depending upon the library’s size and circumstances.”⁷ It is true that you cannot proclaim one thing and practice something different; to this extent, of course, library staff is involved in public relations. Basic to a good public relations program is a competent and informed staff that understands the underlying policies of good service.

Two prerequisites are necessary before embarking upon any program of public relations in academic libraries: (1) Librarians need a knowledge and awareness of the policies and program of the college or university of which they are a part, and (2) they must be convinced of the necessity for continuous motivation of the library’s clientele relative to resources, facilities, and services.⁸

“When in doubt, give attention to the needs of students.”⁹ Nothing should take priority over the best interests of those for whom higher education is designed; sometimes this means listening to student suggestions, and sometimes it means initiating policies or programs that are in the students’ best interest. While most students are in college to get an education, many of them wish to acquire it painlessly. Whether or not the faculty coddle or spoonfeed, or encourage independent study, the library’s responsibility is to stimulate intellectual curiosity and inspire appreciation of the accumulated wisdom of the ages. The most salient means the librarian has for achieving good relations with students is to make himself available. Librarians, whether in reference or circulation, in technical processes, or any other phase of library operation, have a responsibility to assist students when they seek help or obviously need it. For this very reason, one university librarian has two offices: one that is always open to students, faculty, and visitors; the other, his private hideaway for accomplishing a serious project. In the small college environment, the many opportunities for contact with students may prove beneficial to the library as well as the student. As Harwell suggests, good will is one of the priceless ingredients of an effective public relations program.

A second, and oft-debated technique, for building sound relations with students is the handbook or guide to the library and its resources. New methods and processes in the field of printing and publishing

are making their impact upon library publications, and some form of printed introduction to the academic library is welcomed by students. Another means of building good student relations, and one that is almost necessary today in competing with other campus activities, is in the area of exhibits, book sales, and other special events. Several college libraries have displays of inexpensive prints which students may buy; at least one new university library building includes a fully-equipped art gallery. Paperback bookshops, initiated several years ago at Hamilton and Beloit colleges, pay dividends in good will. Whatever is done will take imagination, time, and effort on the part of some member of the library staff.

Librarians should participate, as much as possible, in campus activities including student-sponsored events and organizations. Such manifestations of interest help dispel the stereotypes still held by students who seldom see or talk with a librarian. As an adviser, or member of the Union Board, or faculty representative on a committee, librarians are enabled to implement their public relations policies, and to do a great deal to break down the barriers between students and library staff. To cultivate students is to build good will; to build good will is one of the primary functions of effective public relations.

It would seem axiomatic that the cultivation of good relations with one's colleagues on the faculty helps the academic library and its staff. Universities, and many colleges, are made up of worlds within worlds. The specialist in one field is flattered by the colleague who makes an effort to learn something in his area of learning. Manifesting a friendly interest in various departments of the college or university can stimulate or revive a colleague's interest in services offered by the library. There are certain other techniques, certainly none of them unique, by which the academic librarian can aid his public relations program with faculty: (1) Get out of the library and join his colleagues for lunch occasionally, or meet them at the Union for coffee; (2) Attend departmental, divisional, and faculty meetings, insofar as time allows; (3) Support lectures, concerts, and other events in which other colleagues are interested; (4) Stand ready, at all times, to give extra help in a crisis situation. This may be ordering a book by telegram, securing a needed item through interlibrary loan, or providing a periodical, film, or recording on short notice. It is in the day-to-day contacts with faculty that capsules of good will are stored.

At the same time that librarians are "extending" themselves beyond their own four walls, they must be prepared to answer the questions

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and criticisms based upon misunderstanding or campus gossip. To do so tactfully is to mend fences as they are broken, and contributes to professional esprit de corps. In some institutions a library committee helps the librarian in interpreting policies and services; however, it is beyond the scope of this paper to argue the pros and cons of such committees.¹⁰ Another means of communication beyond the library is through various non-verbal techniques. While there is no unanimity on the type of publication which most effectively serves the faculty, current acquisitions lists and faculty bulletins are two examples widely used. These may vary from occasional mimeographed or multilithed publications to the highly professional, printed quarterlies published by some of the larger university libraries.¹¹ Competition for the reading time of faculty members should convince library administrators that their publications must be attractive yet functional, present information accurately yet concisely.

Various departments, or individual staff members, can help in this area of faculty public relations by routine techniques that are often effective stimulants to better relations. In the matter of new acquisitions, faculty should expect to be kept informed about books which they have requested. Reference librarians can often bring current articles from periodicals to the attention of a faculty member. An efficient, smooth-functioning, interlibrary loan service is one obvious means of winning faculty good will. The busy faculty member, working on his advanced degree, or preparing a book or article for publication, depends upon the library for assistance in securing materials that cannot be obtained locally. The generous loan policies of larger academic libraries make possible loans to even the smallest institutions.

College and university librarians are quick to recognize the importance of the president, the vice-president, or academic dean in their relations with the administration, but how often do they know their lesser administrative officers such as the director of admissions, the alumni secretary, the registrar, or the person who is responsible for development or public relations? Recently a new development director was appointed at one midwestern college. During his first months of orientation, the librarian was able to sit down with the new colleague and informally brief him on library problems and needs. The exchange of ideas and information will undoubtedly prove beneficial whenever the expansion of library facilities are considered in the over-all development program of this institution.

The administration officers frequently need reference materials which the library can provide, and prompt and courteous attention to such requests is an important responsibility of the library staff. Administrative personnel should be included in the distribution of library publications, such as a faculty bulletin or newsletter; the appropriate personnel should receive at least one written report a year from the librarian regarding the year's accomplishments and future plans.

Harried administrators, who are susceptible to departmental and divisional pressures, will never be aware of library needs unless kept informed and up-to-date. While being sensitive to the problems and responsibilities of the various administrative personnel, the librarian must take the initiative in any two-way communication that exists. Some librarians have become so adept at working with administrative personnel that they have been invited to assume responsibility in certain areas of college or university administration. Everett McDiarmid at Minnesota, B. L. Johnson at Stephens College, Eugene Wilson at Colorado, are examples of librarians turned administrators.

The significance of the library on a given campus may well be due to the professional enthusiasm of the librarian, and how effectively this enthusiasm is reflected through administrative personnel from the president on down. If librarians are not aggressive propagandists, why should we expect others to recognize the role of the library in higher education?

Currently, many institutions, large and small, are re-examining their programs of "continuing education," and genuinely seeking the best means of serving their alumni and friends who are interested in expanding their knowledge or keeping abreast of current events. One measure of the vitality of an institution is how well it keeps in touch with its alumni and friends, and as all colleges and universities know this is one of the most fruitful areas of public relations. It is an area that can be rewarding for academic libraries, too. A successful alumni reading program has been conducted by the University of Michigan for a number of years; Dartmouth¹² and the University of North Carolina are examples of institutions that have well-developed Friends of the Library groups; many schools make library resources available to graduates whose local library offerings may be limited.

With a few enthusiastic sponsors, any college library can develop a Friends' group, and thereby expand its public relations potential

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outside the campus. Collections that would otherwise be without distinction have become valuable and interesting because of the financial support and active interest of alumni and friends. Support from such sources is especially necessary at the time of a new building program. A number of small colleges have acquired modern library buildings that would have been beyond their means without the interest of devoted friends and alumni. The Sandburg Collection at the University of Illinois, said to be valued at over \$30,000, was made possible by the contributions of alumni. One of the best small collections of Russian literature in the United States was acquired two years ago by Beloit College through the interest of an alumnus studying in central Europe. Alumni "weekends," summer conferences, and institutes, are typical techniques for building good will, and the library should assume its share of responsibility in promoting such activities.

Town and gown rapport is exceedingly important in the college or university community, and the library can contribute its share in building good relations in the local community. Cooperation with other libraries, issuing "privilege cards" to community residents, and personal contact with key leaders of the community, can be of mutual benefit with little effort and almost no expense. An exchange of current periodical lists, avoiding duplication of certain expensive titles, and the co-ordination of reference services, are obvious techniques that can multiply library service in any community. A further extension of this idea is being carried out by a group of New England colleges situated within a fifty-mile radius of one another.¹³ Students may now have access to the resources of five libraries instead of one. Some academic librarians have found it profitable to participate in civic organizations and other community projects that cannot help but have public relations value to their institutions. While primarily for students and faculty, the academic library should welcome the serious-minded citizen who also wishes to make use of its resources.

The cumulative effect of public relations is the reputation or prestige gained by an individual, institution, or organization in the community served. As C. A. Schoenfeld reminds us: "Public relations, in the proper sense of the term, is primarily a matter of institutional conduct and only secondarily a matter of publicity."¹⁴ We cannot avoid having public relationships, but we can, by building and maintaining sound and productive relations, control the results. In recent years colleges and universities have gone beyond the printed page

to bring information to its various publics. First radio, now television, the picture-brochure, and a dozen other methods and media are now used to stimulate public sympathy and support. Since libraries are basic to the purposes of higher education, the librarian of the future will go beyond commonly accepted media and strive, through technological and communicative innovations, to bring together the right material, the right person, at the right moment. The Center for Documentation and Communication Research at Western Reserve University, established at the School of Library Science in 1955, is evidence that the profession is alert to its responsibilities in the exploration of new horizons. One of its major objectives: "To conduct research programs for the definition of techniques and principles underlying the organization of recorded information . . .",¹⁵ and a second, "To improve the accessibility of recorded information . . ." can have a yet unrealized effect upon library public relations.

Since our very future survival depends upon our capacity to understand one another, and since knowledge is necessary in the process, education remains the cornerstone of progress. The academic librarian must do everything possible to know the resources of his own library, to eliminate misunderstanding, to create and build positive relations, and to streamline and improve library services, so that he may make his maximum contribution to survival through learning.

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