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Jared Seay
College of Charleston, seayj@cofc.edu

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You Gotta Go to School for “This?” — A Rave Review

by Jared A. Seay (Reference Librarian and Head, Media Collections, Addlestone Library, College of Charleston, Charleston, SC 29424) <seayj@cofc.edu> www.cofc.edu/~seay

Oh for the days when the word “rave” merely referred to speaking or writing enthusiastically (or incoherently) about something. Yet, linguistic evolution marches on. The term “rave” now describes a wild dance party. Certainly this is not news to those among you (you know who you are) who are connoisseurs of modern party culture. But, the thought of such an event occurring in a library (one with real books in it) sends the mind reeling, especially if one’s mind tends toward reeling as mine does. A rave in an academic library? Who knew?

I was introduced to this rave library thing when our staff recently received an urgent all points bulletin of a student rave which was to occur at 1:15 pm in the green just outside the library. Learning that this would involve hundreds, if not thousands, of (potentially riot prone) students who would actually move INTO the library for the main event, I realized I had served my public dutifully for the previous eight hours. I thus selflessly considered that my presence would be unnecessary.

So, though I was not physically present during the event, by piecing together eyewitness accounts, police reports, pieces of shredded textbooks, and the extensive YouTube record of the event, I was able to conclude that my decision to leave on time after work was a wise one. Even so, it was a literally earthshaking and exciting event for the library.

Apparently it is a common thing these days for students to blow off steam during final exams. Why one would find it necessary to “blow off steam” during this time is beyond me, since during my student days I found exam times conducive to quiet reflection and relaxation. Of course, besides the fact that I may not be indicative of the norm, my memory is fading a bit, and I sometimes lie outright for dramatic effect especially when it involves my youth. In any case, this library rave thing is a growing phenomenon on campuses in which students are given access to turn the university library into a rocking, screaming, pounding, music thumping rave arena. Students fill the open spaces within the library and dance and scream (with total indifference to unceasing noises of loud music for ten minutes without pause).

For those used to the library as a place of study and sedate information exchange, it is surreal to see the main floor packed with a seething mass of screaming, dancing, exhilarated students. I think the sight of students crowd surfing across the rotunda amid a blizzard of shredded textbooks (being precipitated from the second and third floors) was particularly memorable and striking. For those ancient ones among us who have never experienced such a thing (or don’t remember it) the rave has all the noise, chaos, and mayhem of a street riot, but with much less tear gas and much happier people. It is also over as quickly as it begins, which tends to calm the police/security who just stand to the side and grin a lot.

Across the country there are also so-called “silent raves” in which everyone listens and dances and wiggles (silently of course) to the same music on their iPods. It’s a sort of a synchronized chaotic, silent dance thing. This removes the
of keyword searching. Our patrons, however, would generally rather run the risk of missing a relevant title than go through the contortions that are necessary to use the library catalog, especially in the ways we think they should.

Our patrons may be dead wrong in all of these attitudes, and we librarians may be right. But being right will not save us from marginalization if our patrons decide the library is no longer relevant to their research agendas. If they believe wrongly that we’re not relevant, the effect on us will be exactly the same as if they were right. Google Book Search, in other words, is our problem—not our patrons’ problem.

A similar principle applies to funding. When faced with budget cuts and demands for increased service (or even maintenance of services at current levels), our temptation will be to respond to our host institutions by saying “Sorry, you can’t have those services anymore because you’re not giving us enough money.” While that may seem like a perfectly reasonable response, it really doesn’t matter whether it’s reasonable or not—what matters is the effect it’s likely to have on those who have to make tremendously difficult funding decisions for the institution as a whole. Before responding in that way, we should look around at the academic departments on our campuses: are professors taking on heavier teaching loads? Are they cutting their travel budgets? Are they making do with fewer student employees? If so, we had better be very sure that the library is doing similar things before claiming that we can no longer afford to provide services that our patrons want. If a professor who has just cancelled a conference trip and taken on two additional sections of a freshman survey class sees librarians sitting for long lonely stretches behind deserted service desks (or, worse, taking hour-long coffee breaks in the student union), you can bet that there will be repercussions—and there should be.

Of course, sometimes budget cuts are deep enough that the library has no choice but to make cuts to some service areas. When this is the case, attitude and tone make a huge difference. Imagine this situation: the library budget has been cut by 10%, and at the same time the university administration is asking the library to stay open past midnight on weekdays. Here’s the natural response: “You want us to be open past midnight? Fine. How much of our budget will you restore so we can hire more staff?” (Translation: “This is your problem, not ours. When you figure out a solution, we’ll be willing to try and implement it.”) Here’s a more effective response: “We would love to stay open past midnight; we know our students have wanted that for a long time. In order to make that work, we’ll probably have to close earlier on weekend nights, or reduce service in another area in order to support the late-night shifts. Would that be an acceptable tradeoff?” (Translation: “Our goal is to do whatever we can to serve you well. We can’t afford to do everything we’d like to do, but we’re anxious to find a way to make this work.”)

In the past, when times have gotten tough, libraries have been able to defend their budgets by appealing to the ways that we—and only we—could provide essential support to the teaching and research missions of our institutions. The current financial crisis has occurred in a completely different information environment, one in which many other players are fighting hard to supplant us in our traditional roles. We can no longer assume that the old arguments will still work. It’s time for us to swallow our pride, roll up our sleeves, and start dealing with the fact that we have competition to beat—or, if we can’t, start figuring out new ways of being essential to our institutions. A good way to start is by focusing on our stakeholders’ problems rather than our own.