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Little Red Herrings -- Library Permanently Closed: See Google

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Imagine if you will the near perfect state-funded program. Yes, I know, such words sound like an oxymoron, given the track record of both state and federally-funded programs, past, present and undoubtedly in the future. Indeed, such words sound almost mythological in light of recent attempts by the federal government to spend us out of the current recession with still doubtful results (so far, a record deficit). Yet, you’re an imaginative individual and can put aside petty political persiflage and visualize such a program. Not only does this program do precisely what it said it would do, it does it so surprisingly well that, as a taxpayer, you’re completely astonished and whole-heartedly impressed. Let’s further suppose — so long as it’s all supposition — that we witness daily the success of this program, not only to those for whom it was originally intended, but also to many others who, by virtue of their station or accident of location, also benefit massively from this program.

Now, it’s morning in the Palmetto State and we wake from our dream: our state legislature cuts the funding to this program by more than 90%.

Let truth be told: this was no imaginary program, but PASCAL, Partnerships Among South Carolina Academic Libraries. And, sad to say, nothing about the story above has been fictionalized in any detail. PASCAL did prove to be hugely successful for every two-year and four-year, public and private academic library in South Carolina. Yes, it did return more than six dollars for every one state dollar it received. Our governor called upon state programs to be collaborative, cooperative, and share resources as often as possible. The raison d’être of PASCAL did just these very things, every one of them, and in the most efficacious way imaginable. So what went wrong?

With PASCAL, nothing at all. Clearly the economy — our state’s, our nation’s, and the world’s — took a nosedive, partly because of the global economic meltdown, but partly, too, at least in South Carolina, because of the ill-advised change from property taxes to a sales tax. When the economy tanked, so did tourism in the Palmetto State, and with it any tax revenues the state hoped to collect. Naturally, all state programs had to cut back, tighten their belts, and scale back as much as possible.

But PASCAL lost more than 90% of its budget, from $2 million to $170,000 today. PASCAL’s total budget from the state totaled only two million dollars. That’s two million out of a twenty billion dollar state budget. PASCAL occupied one ten-thousandth of the budget. Legislators chose to kill a program that occupied one ten-thousandth of the budget that served over 200,000 students, faculty and staff in the state of South Carolina.

Our state seal reads in part, “Animis Opibusque Parati, or ready in soul and resources. If you’re trying to re-tool in this very bad Palmetto economy, however, only your soul is ready. The resources are not only drying up, they’re being taken away. The real tragedy is this: state officials know that there are more open jobs in South Carolina than there are people looking for work. But guess what: many of these unemployed simply aren’t qualified for the work. Could education be the answer? Good thing the other part of our seal says something about hope!

Some legislators will ask you, “If PASCAL is such a great deal, why don’t the institutions just fund it themselves?” Besides, they did it this year. That’s politician logic that defies, well, comprehension by everyday taxpayers. Academic institutions forwent various important initiatives to keep the PASCAL patient alive for one more academic year. Lost initiatives like positions, books, and services that students, faculties, and staffs rely upon for the one-year life-extension. Academic institutions funded PASCAL this year because it is the right thing to do, because it is such an excellent program, and because, well, the mind is a terrible thing to waste. But consortia like PASCAL only work when the costs aren’t prohibitive, and the state’s largesse — remember, one ten-thousandth of the state budget — provides just that right amount of coverage to make it work perfectly. After this year, however, without that two million dollars in funding PASCAL will unravel.

State legislators once saw the wisdom of funding PASCAL and courageously did so. We need courageous legislators once again. Funding PASCAL is what the young call a “no-brainer.” And yet here we are, waiting with baited breath to see what will happen. PASCAL does not help Winthrop alone, but every academic institution in the state. It provides the necessary intellectual tools for our young people to succeed in the 21st Century. PASCAL is cost-effective, collaborative, and cooperative. PASCAL is the poster-program of shared resources. It really is a no-brainer. But without PASCAL, we saddle our state with deadheads, with a brain drain, and the possibility of jeopardizing accreditations statewide.

We are fast approaching a time when the headline of this article is our fate: the library is closed, and for all your research needs, just use Google. Many of you reading this are laughing at me but think about it. Libraries are financial black holes. They cost a fortune to run while creating little revenue. Google is free. In one fell-swoop, tens of millions of dollars spent on databases could be saved with one decision. Of course it’s the equivalent of your spouse serving you pictures from Bon Appétit than actual food he or she prepared, but think of the calories you’ll save — at least until you fall into a literal dead faint. Bean-counters everywhere will see the Google-ersatz as a quick and easy solution, not unlike what fast food is to health. But remember, it’s free. And after years of this, just think of the possibilities: our collective ignorance will be our shared intelligence!

We fund PASCAL really is a no-brainer. Now all we have to do is convince decision-makers that it really, really is the only wise choice.