Little Red Herrings -- Library Permanently Closed: See Google

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I 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 all but 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

we cannot offhandedly label publishers the scheming bad guys here. For most academic publishers, print sales continue to represent the majority of production costs and revenue. Revenue and production cost savings for eBooks have not yet reached a level that would drive the displacement of print business models. Understanding and recognizing the different environments and expectations all stakeholders — libraries, vendors, and publishers — are operating from will inspire more satisfying and innovative e-book models. Conferences like the ones mentioned above offer an opportunity for this exchange.

Steve: At ALA, you facilitated a panel of vendor reps and librarians discussing eBooks, including the growing popularity of the patron-driven purchase models, which also was a major topic at Charleston. How about we pick up with that topic next time?

Robin: See you then. 🔵