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Consistent, Memorable, In Sync: Making the Budget Case to Busy Administrators

by Robert L. Houbeck, Jr. (Director, Frances Willson Thompson Library, University of Michigan-Flint)

How to be heard without raising one's voice — or stamping feet or thumping shoe-soles on-table: that's the challenge every library director confronts during the campus budget cycle. As you correctly surmise, I compose these reflections in the midst of that annual ritual.

Lots might be said on the art of academic budgetary persuasion. There are no magic formulas or generic rhetorical kits. Occasionally even shoe-thumping might yield results. But, for those of us who learned how to play with others, there are more productive, if less immediately gratifying, strategies. Following are three basic principles that a library director, and his or her colleagues, can bring to bear in making the budget case to busy administrators:

- Be consistent
- Be memorable
- Be in sync

These principles, coupled with patience, foresight, and imagination, can amplify our voice. We have a good story to tell. If we are consistent, memorable, and on key, we can be heard.

Be Consistent

What do I mean by "consistent"?

The term is shorthand for a steady, patient, year-to-year campaign that hammers away at one or at most a few core themes. Our institutions are busy, noisy, lively places, akin to a family dinner table. To get the salt passed, you sometimes need to be persistent. Identify a priority, stay with it, and repeat it.

A central annual priority, for example, for ATG librarian-readers, would be: To secure collection resources adequate to support faculty research and student learning at our university's established programmatic levels.

Faculty and administrators on our campus should come to identify us with that priority. When the topic is budget, a point should come when their lips form the words that emerge from ours.

Our goal, too, should be to recruit lots of other pairs of lips. To be successful, we need multiple singers of our priority tune. Library colleagues must understand our budget message, and embrace it. The same goes for key allies such as the members of the library's faculty advisory committee. Work with them so they also understand the library's budget needs and can echo the message. Spend time with each of these groups on the details. Their voices will not only amplify the message, but legitimize it. Choruses are harder to ignore.

Consistency in message is important because the campus budget process is both an ongoing informal process as well as a more compressed formal process. You want your refrain, among its many competitors, to have become a familiar one. You also want to up the odds, during the formal process, that your priority makes the cut at each stage along the way. And if it doesn't make the cut this year, you'll continue singing off the same page until it does.

Consistency of message matters more than one might realize. Stop back mentally for a moment. Imagine the various audiences to whom we must make our case. How does the budget process look from the other sides of those tables, to the faculty who sit on advisory committees and to administrators?

We know how matters look from our angle. We're, as we should be, engaged parties who know a lot and care a lot about our corner of the university. But universities have many corners, each administered by individuals who have their own set of interests, many of which compete for resources directly with ours. Budget committees and administrators will tend to view the library's request through a lens that has at least three filters:

- The campus has lots of needs, yours is but one among many.
- During the budget review process, each review body confronts the same dilemma: Which unit priorities represent real institutional priorities? What happens to the institution if we don't fund a given unit priority?
- Librarians don't directly generate revenue — you consume it.

We start each budget review with a structural disadvantage. Since we're not a revenue source, administrators and committees incline to ask themselves: "How will an investment in the library, as compared to credit-hour-generating faculty posts in instructional units, pay off for the institution?" Administrative instinct, in fact, inclines them to examine each non-revenue-generating unit's budget request with this as the guiding question: "How much can we pare you back and still accomplish our institutional mission?"

Happily, though:

- Nobody hates libraries. In fact, academics like us.
- Offsetting these two hard-nosed perspectives — you're one among a lot of competitors and you don't generate income — there's this compensating positive: There is lots of good will toward libraries. In general, we go into each budget cycle with a reservoir of affection. Nobody hates us, nobody feels threatened by us. We're not a direct rival for students. Faculty in particular understand that we're necessary for student, and for their own, success. We have structural allies as well as genuine friends ready to help. But all lies and friends need us to lead by giving them arguments to show why libraries continue to matter to the success of students and faculty. A consistent message of our need can help to engage the fundamental affection that academics have toward libraries, incline them to reflect on the value our collection has for their students and their faculty colleagues, and appreciate the consequences of erosion of collection resources.

But consistency alone won't do the job.

Be Memorable

We need to be consistent in telling a memorable story.

In the area of collection development and acquisitions, there are a number of storylines with significant academic and budgetary implications. Some of these include:

- **Growth in the number of academic publications.**
  Contrary to what some might imagine, there continues to be steady growth in the number of books and academic monographs published (between 1989 and 2002, for example, new titles increased 25%). Databases and online versions of academic journals, too, continue to increase in number, content — and price.

- **Growth in the cost of academic publications.**
  Inflation in the price of print journals, for example, continues to increase about 8% per year. Book prices, too, are rising steadily: in 1989 an average academic monograph cost $41.69; in 2002, $55.90 — or 34% more.

- **Growth in use of academic publications by faculty and students.**
  Online access to digital publications as well as to online catalogs has resulted on most campuses in increases in circulation of print materials, in interlibrary loan requests, and in database searches and downloads.

Growth in the universe of print and digital academic material coupled with growth in the cost of that material — whether the cost to acquire or the cost to "rent" — is putting severe pressure on our ability to provide access to the ongoing conversation that these publications record and communicate; which is to say, libraries are having increasing difficulty supporting effective teaching and up-to-date research. The library collection, print and digital, on-site and remote-but-accessible-at-a-price, is a central resource to effectively carrying forward the mission of our universities. But those collections are increasingly hard-pressed.

continued on page 50
How most effectively, how most memorably, tell this story? By reinforcing the message of our voice with pictures. Not necessarily a lot of pictures, but a few simple graphs, charts, illustrative anecdotes that condense our challenges into striking, memorable images.

Here are some examples of what I mean.

Twenty years ago, while working for Edna Laughrey at the University of Michigan's Library, I stumbled, literally, upon my first illustrative anecdote. Late for a meeting, I plunged through the rattling double doors of the acquisitions department straight into a narrow double line of book trucks packed with new volumes. Scraping my way through the caravan, I petulantly wondered: "How much of this stuff do we move through this place each year?" Yes, I knew how many volumes we added annually; but, negotiating the line of creaking trucks, what was that in yards? (In Ann Arbor, we tend to think in terms of yards.)

In the economy of salvation nothing is wasted. From a chance scraping, a startling calculation: The University Library, by golly, each year was adding 2.3 miles of volumes. Or, in Wolverine terms, 44 football fields.

I don't know about you, but that's memorable. I still see that mileage figure, and updated variations, in University Library reports. It's still used because it still packs a punch. It condenses, for example, into an understandable image the ongoing, pressing need for a major research collection has for a storage facility, or two.

Table 2 depicts a similar foray into bibliographic illustration. It rose out of the perennially insistent question: How can we effectively describe to busy administrators the effect that journal inflation, coupled with a static acquisitions budget, is having on our ability to acquire books? (Non-librarians, remember, tend to think of the library's "book budget" as a budget spent only on books.)


Illustrations and graphs of this kind can be powerful persuasive tools. They capture attention, enable one to tell a complicated story, and illustrate the consequences of inaction. They enable a director to stay on offense.

Another advantage of simple graphic material, if properly constructed, is that one can address the question that smirks in the shadowy corner of every budget hearing room: "How do we know you need 'x' amount?" A director's challenge is to describe what the "investment" of a budget increment will buy. A good table can go a ways toward reassuring skeptical administrators that your request is tied to a demonstrable outcome.

Finally, use simple tables and charts to provide audiences with basic unit cost information for materials. Don't overestimate what academics know about the prices of books, journals, and databases.

Take a look at Table 3, a portion of a larger set of graphs and charts that we call "The Price(s) of Knowledge." This excerpt from that larger set concisely captures the acceleration in the cost of academic print journals as compared to other, more familiar goods: a gallon of gas, a new car, a new house, college tuition.

We use these charts in different settings, for different audiences. Invariably, people are surprised by the figures, both the absolute numbers and the inflation in those numbers. The cost of library materials has escalated at such a rapid pace that even experienced faculty need to be reminded of the raw figures. They illustrate the formidable and continuously pressing challenge we face to keep our users current with the ongoing conversation within and among the disciplines. An important part of our story is that knowledge isn't cheap — and that, as ever, you will get what you pay for.

The metaphor — keeping up with the conversation — ties directly to our third imperative:

Be in Sync

Naturally, as stewards of our particular corner of the larger institution, our first concern is the library. By contrast, an administrator's first concern is the institution, and how each part contributes to the overall mission. So it's very important that we have a clear understanding of the way our library contributes to that overall mission. Administrators are inclined to put funding into those areas that contribute most directly to

continued on page 52
Table 3: “The Price(s) of Knowledge” (Excerpt)

Real Dollar Cost Increases, 1984 - 2002

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Endnotes

2. See Bowker Annual, 2004, Table 1, p.489.
4. This term is most famously used, of course, by Mortimer Adler and Robert Maynard Hutchins, with respect to their Great Books project. See Adler’s interesting summaries of the concept of conversation over time that informed the choice of volumes in the first and second editions of the series, and the development of their “Syntopicon”—the index of 3,000 key ideas that enables the reader to trace discussion paths among the hundreds of books that comprise the series; discussion of the first edition is in Mortimer J. Adler, Philosopher at Large: An Intellectual Autobiography. (New York: Macmillan, 1977), pp.235-54; he discusses the second edition in A Second Look in the Review of Modern Romance: Further Autobiographical Reflections of a Philosopher at Large. (New York: Macmillan, 1982), pp.140-45. See also Robert M. Hutchins, The Great Conversation: The Substance of a Liberal Education. (Chicago: Encyclopedia Britannica, [1952], pp.xxv and 85-89. Even if one rejects Adler and Hutchins project of trading ideas—paths among the ancient and later authors, the metaphor of the library collection as an assemblage of voices in dialogue aptly describes the ongoing conversation within, and to some extent across, disciplines. Useful, too, for thinking about the relation between the university, the library, and the “conversation” of civic discourse in a pluralist society are the essays of political philosopher John Courtney Murray, S. J. Aristotle and St. Thomas Aquinas, he notes, contrast the conversation that is civilization to barbarism. Conversation, as they use it, means “living together and talking together.” See We Hold These Truths: Catholic Reflections on the American Proposition. (New York: Sheed & Ward, 1960), pp.13-24; also “Creeds at War Intelligibly: Pluralism and the University,” pp.125-39.