There is no question that our collections and access to information resources are much stronger today, and we have every reason to think they will grow stronger during the first decade of the 21st century. Every year during the past seven years we have increased our library materials budget by double digits. I know of no other academic library that can make a similar claim for the same period. We can give thanks to two enlightened presidents and two equally supportive provosts for a materials budget that has increased from $2.2 million to $4.2 million since fiscal year 1993. That has resulted in a net gain of over 700 journal subscriptions, numerous electronic and print databases, and a healthy monograph acquisition rate. All this has been happening at a time when many other colleges and universities have had to cut journal subscriptions and/or subsidize them by acquiring fewer monographs.

Funding for libraries has been important in our success. Indeed, among Michigan’s fifteen public universities, Western Michigan University ranks first in terms of the percentage of appropriated university funds that are allocated to libraries. Increasingly important is a library’s ability to leverage its materials budget through consortial purchasing agreements. For too long, libraries have negotiated with publishers alone. The result has been that we have been spending more and acquiring less as inflation in the cost of library materials has exceeded the growth of funding. Michigan’s university libraries have been at a particular disadvantage vis-a-vis many other states; Michigan does not have a central body of regents that can
mandate or at least encourage cooperation among institutions. Universities like Western Michigan University are at another disadvantage inasmuch as the larger institutions with larger library budgets have historically had little reason to enter cooperative purchasing agreements with their smaller counterparts. However, important changes have taken place during the past years including the AccessMichigan project, and formation of the Michigan Academic Library Council, which have made consortial purchasing a reality. The WMU Libraries, I am proud to say, has been at the forefront in these statewide efforts. Consortial purchasing, combined with computer technology, has enabled us to make important progress in our goal of enabling our students and faculty to obtain the information they need when and where they need it.

Services to users have always distinguished the truly strong libraries from the rest. At WMU, the library staff takes special pride in providing excellent services. These include, among many:

- acquisitions and processing of materials, which can be effectively retrieved through use of our Web-based, cutting-edge online catalog and WWW site;
- expanded library hours with professional staffing as well as number of hours open to users;
- specialized services for our off-campus students that are on a par with services provided to on-campus students;
- constantly evolving and improved WWW access with a state-of-the-art home site (http://www.wmich.edu/library/);
- multiple creative uses of the latest technology to facilitate information literacy projects, location of resources, searching internal and external databases, online subject guides to discipline-oriented data, interlibrary lending; and reference services of all kinds including online reference;
- a preservation program for special collections and the Libraries that involves the conditions in which books are housed and repairs to books themselves; and
- a Visual Resources Library that is fast becoming known and respected nationally for its access to local and international graphical/pictorial data.

Given such a list of developing services, one comment must be added. I am concerned that our relative low level of staffing (WMU ranks among the two or three worst of the fifteen Michigan universities in ratio of librarians and library staff to students) will limit our ability to continue to provide the level of services our users have come to expect and will need in the future. The academic research library is a labor-intensive enterprise where, like the rest of our society, technology has not reduced our need for skilled staff. Rather, technology has enabled the University Libraries to offer better collections, expanded access to information, and more responsive services to our users.

In the age of the Internet, we are drowning in information, but we are starving for knowledge. One especially significant focus of the University Libraries is an information literacy initiative that is designed to enable our students to become independent information seekers. The program is designed to enable our students to decide between what information is most appropriate to their needs—and not simply the information most readily available. This requires the cooperation of our instructional faculty in the design of the courses and assignments. While we have achieved promising results in a number of selected courses, the University and the Libraries still have a long way to go toward educating students to become information literate. This essential goal inevitably requires an institutional commitment toward a measurable outcome rather than the course by course approach. While I am proud that more students receive bibliographic instruction in more classes than at any other public university in Michigan other than University of Michigan, Ann Arbor, I am disappointed that WMU has not pioneered in making information literacy a requirement for its graduates as it did with computer literacy in the 1980s.

As I look back over the past seven years, I believe we in the University Libraries have achieved much. I believe we have been successful because we have concentrated on the fundamentals of excellence in collections, access, services, and instructions. We have remained focused on the needs of our users, the students, faculty, and staff. Supported magnificently by a central administration and faculty that recognizes and values strong libraries, a talented library faculty and staff have achieved as much as can reasonably be asked of them. We have built a solid foundation toward achieving one of the unchanging realities of higher education: there has never been a great university without a great library.