Friends of Waldo Library Keynote Address

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Opening

Good afternoon. I've been asked to talk about a couple of topics today:

• How libraries have impacted my own education and my views as a university president.
• How libraries are evolving through times of change.

Good topics, both, but wildly different when it comes to my level of ease in addressing them. I'll go with the easy one first.

My personal connection with libraries

• Because you are here as a "Friend of WMU Libraries," I'm going to assume you are, like me, a lifelong devotee of libraries and the traditional resources found within them--books. As a child growing up in a small, southern Illinois town, I learned early that the public library could be both a haven and a passport to other places.

• (I hope you have a good story about the Pinckneyville Library of your youth--or below about your use of libraries as a grad student.)

• My view of libraries, of course, evolved over the years. As a college student before the advent if the Internet and the ability to do research online, I perceived libraries first as a place of toil--late nights that featured long confusing hunts and the frustration of waiting for needed books to be returned.
Later, during my graduate study (still before the advent of the Internet age) I again came to see the academic library as a tool and a gateway to information of enormous depth and potential. As a young researcher, libraries and the information within again became a passport that took me deep within my discipline and connected me with colleagues around the globe.

• Simply put. I loved books early and still have great reverence for them. As an educator, I know and respect the enormous power and value of the information that can be found in a place like Waldo Library. There is a reason why we call the library the heart of a research university.

• There is an inscription over the door of the ancient Library at Thebes. It says, simply "The medicine chest of the soul." I embraced that description of a library for many years--until I found one that I liked equally well.

"A library," in the words of British politician and essayist Herbert Samuel, "is thought in cold storage."

While startling in their simplicity and similar sentiment, those two descriptions were written some 32 centuries apart. I find it of great interest that neither description says a word about the medium in use when they were written.

The authors of both short statements knew that the value of the library was not about the clay tablets, the scrolls or the books found within. The value was about the storehouse of information they contained.
Both statements talk about the life of the mind and the value of information that could be preserved and passed from generation to generation. Both statements embody the two great traditions fostered by great libraries—continuity and creativity.

**Times of change**

- Consider, however, how much change came to the concept of the library over the course of the 3,200 years that separate those two statements. Think about how many times someone's idea of what makes a good library was abandoned to make way for a better way to organize, catalog and preserve and guarantee access to old and new knowledge.

How many physical tools were used over those centuries to record thought and discovery? And think how dramatically the skill sets of those charged with preserving knowledge must have changed—and changed again.

- We are in such a time of change now. We are in the middle of a period in which new material available in digital formats has to be integrated with centuries of material still in print. Continuity and creativity may never have seen such a challenge as the one facing us now. As U.S. News & World Report put it, library and information science is "a field transformed by the cyber-revolution."

- This part of my talk will feature questions and not many answers, because that's where we are in this particular time of change. We have more questions than answers, and the questions are increasing exponentially. Here are just a few.
Will books, like the scrolls of earlier years, become obsolete as a transmission tool for knowledge?

As we work to digitize what is contained and cataloged now in books, who makes the decisions about which versions of which books and how much of each book needs to be digitized.

Are such digitization projects the purview of scholars in the individual disciplines or are they the responsibility of a new generation of library professionals.

Is a librarian's role now more of an information technology position, or will we see a hybrid profession emerge that assumes the role of information navigator?

With online access to the great libraries of the world from any laptop, what is the role of an academic library at a research university?

Dean Reish will appreciate the struggle inherent in this question. In an economic climate that leaves us with tight budget constraints, how do we manage the transition to digital media and services with a small existing staff?

And finally, are we talking about the "library of the future" or is the question really the "future of libraries?"

Stanford University has addressed all of these questions, especially that final question again and again as it struggles with the transition. A 2007 proposal to create a bookless new engineering library at Stanford was followed by a proposal
to tear down a seismically unsafe facility that houses both academic computing and the University's renowned East Asia collection of 600,000 volumes. The books would be digitized and stored off campus, accessed only by searching digitally and ordering an individual volume.

- A recent Chronicle of Higher Education article (4/3/09), appropriately titled "Blind Spots," detailed the turmoil triggered by that plan. Protests delayed the razing of the library, as faculty members, especially those in the humanities, perceived a threat to their vision of the library function.

The Faculty Senate formulated its own far-reaching plan for managing the "library of the future." That plan kept the paper copy but also dramatically expanded the digitization of material and development of customized virtual research spaces that could replicate the browsing environment. The author of the Chronicle article describes those virtual research spaces as "holographic information fields."

Missing from the plan were the answers to such key issues as:

- who should design and build those holographic information fields,
- is design and implementation the responsibility of information technology professionals,
- who will ensure that the needs of the discipline were first and foremost as digitization decisions were made, and
- how even an endowment-rich university like Stanford will manage to pay for such an undertaking.
• Again, lots of questions, but answers still to be found. And these are questions every university president needs to keep in mind for the future—even as we deal with the challenges of the present.

WMU's Waldo Library

These are questions and issues our own Waldo Library staff consider every day. I've learned in my nearly two years here that this library is one in which the leadership and staff has seen the future and embraced it.

• This is a library I consider a bridge in this time of change. Waldo is a storehouse for treasures of the past--rare books that date back to medieval times, for instance--but Waldo staff members are also embracing the future with a Digitization Center that is providing digital access for materials that are specialties of this university. They are preserving:
  - printed and handwritten Michigan historical texts from communities around our state.
  - texts from our Anglo-Saxon collections.
  - the designs of the 1920s-era Everyman's House created by Kalamazoo's own Caroline Bartlett Crane.

• I see our librarians as navigators—to borrow a term from the Internet. They facilitate individual knowledge-gathering by our students and the wide variety of audiences we serve. They are, in some ways our ultimate search engines.

They have learned to use a wide variety of tools to increase access for the audiences they serve. And they are able to retrieve information in an incredible array of formats and locations.
Just as important, though, I think is the work by Dean Reish and his staff to make the library a welcoming and comfortable environment for our students. That is the critical element we need to keep in the forefront as we face the challenges of changing times.

Let me close with a short passage from the late author and journalist Norman Cousins that expresses the kind of library atmosphere we are building here and must continue to nurture.

• "The library is not a shrine for the worship of books. It is not a temple where literary incense must be burned or where one's devotion to the bound book is expressed in ritual. A library, to modify the famous metaphor of Socrates, should be the delivery room for the birth of ideas - a place where history comes to life."

• Thank you for being here today and always remember. Knowledge is free at the library. Just bring your own container.