Libraries Are People

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When, in May of 2001, the Provost asked me to stay another year at the administrative helm of the University Libraries, I answered affirmatively, but quickly added that the past months of “maintaining” could no longer be the guiding principle of my “deaning.” There were serious issues that could not wait for another year to be resolved.

During my first year, I learned a great deal about the actual operations of the University Libraries, the individual and collaborative services, the capabilities of the academic and technical staff, and the needs and desires of faculty and student patrons. I had also made many welcome discoveries with respect to the modern, high-tech library driven by electronic systems and collections. Yes, I am still in awe of the evolution of the hard copy of “Hamlet” into the digitized format. Yes, I continue to be amazed by the nearly 200 online indexes and databases, in addition to our sophisticated online catalog, that locate innumerable references for users. Yes, I find an enormous wealth of subject guides and numerous user aids on the several thousand pages that make up our Libraries’ WWW site. But, in the end, the key factor that has marked my continued tenure here is the human factor—the supportive, dedicated, knowledgeable women and men who work in the University Libraries. These individuals are the University libraries; they are the best and the brightest and, indeed, without them, the technology is nothing.

Our University Libraries are, first and foremost, people serving other people. Public service is the raison d’être of our operations. First, we support the intellectual growth and development of patrons (students, faculty, staff, and general public) through the provision of information from our wealth of local resources, what we call the University Libraries. Equally important, there is an extended information environment. Through resource sharing (interlibrary loan) and the visible world of the World Wide Web and Internet I and II, not to mention all of the invisible worlds hidden behind the search engines and directories, we have almost unlimited online resources. All that we own and/or can access electronically can now be harnessed to serve our users.

Many library personnel and services are physically accessible and upfront to users, while an equally large number is not. The information desk in the rotunda of Waldo Library emblematically is the first line of service. Initial queries about library resources and functions commonly occur here. Patrons then fan out to pursue their research in the stacks or with personnel located in more than a dozen public service areas located on each floor of Waldo Library and in four branches. There they find faculty, staff, and students whose assistance demystifies our collections and the access to them.

But what the library user rarely encounters are the cohorts of individuals who acquire, catalogue, process for use, shelve, and maintain the electronic systems that really make accessible items (books, government documents, media, magazines and journals, online full text, Web pages, and more) for patron use. Without the dozens of guides, catalogs, indexes, and databases found on the Libraries’ Web pages, few could locate anything among the four million items that comprise the libraries’ physical collection—much less the infinite resources external to the University collections. There are dozens of employees hidden behind the doors of the Technical Services areas, Resource Sharing, the Systems and Web offices, the Administrative Offices, and other locations that provide essential support to every public service location. The technical staff members and heads of units are those in the “wings,” “scene shop,” and “front of the house,” while the “actors (public service staff)” interface the “audience.” All facets must function together to put on this “production,” but there would be little to “put on” if the behind the scenes individuals were not there!

Efficiency, patron-orientation, and a strong sense of humor characterize our staff. I know first-hand of these characteristics because more than occasionally over the last two years I have been a library user while wearing the Interim Dean’s mantle. Let me describe one small incident that illustrates the people synergy of the Libraries. Just before spring break, I was assisting my teenage son in finding sources for two school projects. Alex was to serve as a “theatrical consultant” producing the French comedy The Imaginary Invalid by Molière in a style reminiscent of Japanese Kabuki theatre. He also was to prepare a paper showing common ground between Julius Caesar and Napoleon Bonaparte. (The topics were of his own choosing, but his school media center was not built to provide answers.) Ever the helpful father researcher, I entered Waldo Library stacks with a list of references, found through WestCat, in

Continued on page 6
Libraries...

Continued from page 1

hand. Japanese literature is located some distance away from world theater and both are nowhere near history. I located and placed on a workspace both my references and the books I found in the Japanese section, and walked away to locate references on Caesar and Napoleon. Less than five minutes later, loaded with books, I returned to discover that my first selections had been reshelved and my notes, too, had disappeared. I muttered, "Damn efficiency!" It was all too evident that the staff was what it was cracked up to be!

Since I knew where to find "the behind the scenes" staff, I tracked down the Stacks Supervisor, and she assisted me in locating the vest-clad student who had been so untimely (for me) efficient. Perhaps fearful of my blue suit, the young lady tried to apologize, but I lauded her for carrying out her tasks appropriately. However, I still needed to find the second set of references that I feared had been recycled beyond recovery. The student led me in a floor-wide sweep of waste receptacles. She eventually located my papers and handed them to me with a broad smile: patron-orientation (and a sense of humor) at its best.

A little later, I shared my misadventures with the third-floor administrative staff who have been so supportive of my "interim" role. We all laughed together—each understanding the comedy of errors and requisite sense of humor that marked my efforts—and that of the library staff. However, the last laugh was on me. My wife, a school librarian, when told of the incident, chastised me for leaving my papers strewn about in the stacks. Still, from such a small example, I saw how a library-wide work ethic makes an unbelievably major operation function efficiently day after day after day. One small example, but one that is multiplied each day by the dozens of staff who work every day to keep the University Libraries functioning at its highest level. This IS people service—not virtual but human, every day, every way, and it's there for every one who visits our University Libraries either entering our physical environs or accessing our extensive WWW site.

The past months as Interim Dean of WMU's University Libraries have been a truly unique experience for which I am, indeed, grateful. Most of all, beyond all of the technological delights of this increasingly complex information age, I am especially grateful to discover, once again, that the age of humanity survives, and the warmth and personal touch of human "interface" is the keystone, the reach out and "touchstone" of our University Libraries.