A Great Library ... A Great University

By Lance Query

Dean Lance Query arrived at Western Michigan University in 1993. His first commentary in Gatherings was published in the Fall 1993, issue and was entitled "A Great University ... A Great Library." Seven years later, Dean Query is leaving WMU for the position of Dean of Libraries and Academic Information Resources at Tulane University, New Orleans. The following commentary reviews some highlights of his WMU career.

In the Fall 1993 Gatherings, I observed that Western Michigan University had elected the most ambitious of all courses in higher education: to be a research university while at the same time recognizing the importance of quality teaching for undergraduate and graduate students, traditional and non-traditional students. In support of the University's mission, the Libraries, too, had to undertake a most ambitious course. We needed to build quality collections (starting from a more modest base than most research universities), and provide access to information in all formats whether paper, electronic, or multi-media. Moreover, we had to educate our students and faculty in the use of the powerful tools that enable them to obtain the information they need not only for today, but, also, and equally important, for their future roles as productive and fulfilled members of our society.

Nearly seven years later, it is appropriate for me to take a measure of how far we have come in meeting our goals, and how far we have yet to go. Let's look at our collections and access to information, our services to our users, and our instructional programs.

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.

While there is no substitute for healthy budgets, money alone cannot explain Western Michigan University's strengthening of its collections. Discernment and intelligence in collection management by librarians aided by instructors and staff are the real stuff of which responsive collections are built. A revitalized liaison program between librarians and the teaching faculty has done much to insure that our collections meet the curricular and research needs of our students and faculty. Careful analysis of the impact of new degree programs and research trends on our collections has enabled us to anticipate where we need to obtain new resources. We have attempted, with considerable success, not to respond by cutting back some parts of the collection in order to support new programs. Qualitative and quantitative analyses by librarians, and a recent inventory provide reasonable assurance that our collection funds have been expended judiciously.

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

Lance Query, Dean of University Libraries, 1993-2000
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.

Friends’ Annual Meeting

By Laurel Grotzinger

April 12, 2000 marked the calendar for the annual spring meeting of the Friends of the University Libraries. Some 30 members and guests gathered in the Meader Rare Book Room to hold the annual business meeting and election. President Betina Meyer chaired the meeting that included two special presentations with certificates: the first went to Laurel Grotzinger for her service as Editor of Gatherings, and the second was given to William Combs, who was honored for his many contributions as a member of the Board.

The annual elections for the officers and Board of Directors were also held with the following slate unanimously approved:

President: Dr. Richard Brewer
Vice-President: Dr. Robert Hahn
Secretary: Mrs. Marilyn Gosling
Treasurer: Mr. David McKee

Board of Directors:

Dr. Mary Ann Bowman 2000-2001
Dr. Nicholas Hammer 2000-2003
Mrs. Phyllis Buskirk 2000-2004

Following the business meeting, Dean Lance Query spoke on his tenure as Dean of the University Libraries at WMU: "Where We’ve Been, Where We Are, and Where We Are Going." Dean Query, who arrived at WMU in the fall of 1993, will be leaving the University to accept the library deanship at Tulane University in New Orleans on July 1st of this year. Dean Query reminisced about "doing the right thing," and that the staff here has been able to "keep their eyes on the prize." He reiterated the theme that great libraries and great universities go together, and outlined growth and advances in the Libraries' collections and services. He noted that the Libraries has a very different look and feel as technology plays an increasingly prominent role. Query gave special recognition to the role of the "well-seasoned staff"; they have responded effectively to students who, increasingly, bring a customer-based attitude to their study and research. Finally, he noted a number of initiatives that are "online" for the next few years.

The meeting concluded with a reception for all, and a general small-group discussion of Friends' hopes for the future.