

Principles are tested and come away with a win

The \$52 million question

by W. Lee Hisle

Frances Maloy's theme for her year as ACRL president focuses on using original thinking as a leadership strategy for effecting change. This article tells a story about original thinking that did not modify library practices, but did encourage librarians at Connecticut College to rethink our principles and recommit to time-tested ideals.

Putting a price on the collection

Sometime last spring, as the Connecticut College budget and planning committee was deciding priorities for the coming fiscal year funding, I defended our request for collection maintenance funds based on asset reinvestment arguments. If the college made it a priority, I argued, that buildings and grounds be maintained with asset reinvestment funds budgeted each year, then shouldn't the college also protect the huge capital investment we have in library materials with similarly budgeted collection maintenance funds?

This had some resonance with the faculty, students, and staff on the budget and planning committee (we are a shared governance campus) and, in fact, the committee voted to include an annual collection maintenance

fund based on a rolling five-year average of the increased cost of materials at our college. For this argument, we assessed the value of the library collection at approximately \$52 million, were we to try to replace it.

I shared this information with my president, Norman Fainstein, as I reviewed the information services budget request with him. Some weeks later, he spoke at the ACRL New England Chapter meeting and used the information I had provided him.

In his remarks (designed, I dare say, for effect), he challenged the existing order of things in the academic academy—from tenure and promotion to the nature of campus libraries. And he asked librarians to consider this question: "If your collection was lost, and you have \$52 million in hand from the insurance settlement, would you replace the collection?"

Of course, he believed that we would not—basically, that not all those dusty books on the shelves are really needed—because of changing pedagogical strategies, increased digital materials access, and Web access to information.

And so, diligent lieutenant that I am, I considered how I might answer his question

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and shared the question with a number of librarians. I arrived at different conclusions than Fainstein expected. Were I faced with the quandary of whether to use \$52 million to replace a lost library collection or to provide support to the college through other means, e.g., existing digital resources, newly created digital resources, or maybe more comfortable seating, a coffee bar or a new reading room for our overcrowded facility, I would indeed (this can't be a surprise to the reader of this editorial) replace most of the lost materials.

For, amazing as it may seem, our students are still checking out books. They are still doing research. I was shocked, shocked I tell you, to find they are still writing papers and creating reports! They still find interlibrary loan, at two to three weeks, far too slow for their research timelines. They even find the two-day average wait for materials from our consortial partners, Wesleyan University and Trinity College, a hindrance.

In particular, students in the arts and humanities and social sciences make heavy use of our collections, and we know that the information they are finding is not available in other formats—not in electronic journals, databases, or e-books. Further, we know that over the past five years, circulation of physical materials has increased at Connecticut College—hardly an argument that the materials collection is no longer really needed. In fact, students who completed the LibQual survey last year support the need for additional books, as well as more nontechnology spaces in which to read them. (To be fair, some social science and humanities titles are available through our NetLibrary subscription, but students strenuously avoid using that service, even though they are embracing electronic journals.)

Meeting our mission

One of my staff members recently reminded me that there is a reason libraries do what they do, why the system has worked for thousands of years. The transmission of culture (through the printed page, clay tab-

let, or classroom experience) to succeeding generations is an essential aspect of the higher education mission. And students often can only get what they need through print sources—and they are not willing to wait two weeks for it.

Of course, if we had to replace the collection, we would make some changes: we would strengthen areas that get heavy use; we would use circulation records, and faculty consultation, to determine whether borderline material should be replaced; we would analyze our curriculum carefully and add materials to support new and emerging trends; we would even consider shifting some funds toward electronic access rather than replacing every print item lost. But we would, by and large, replace the collection, improving it as we go.

A college such as ours, with a heavy complement of student-faculty research efforts, honors papers, faculty research, and students curious about the world—present, past, and future—requires a quality library collection both in numbers and content.

Connecticut College prides itself on its academic excellence, and among the characteristics of an excellent college is a strong library program. At least here, a strong library collection is an essential part of a strong library program, and certainly an expectation of our prospective students and their parents.

So Fainstein did us a service. He challenged us with an original, and slightly outrageous, idea. He made us think and to defend our traditions and our time-honored strategies for academic support. Too many times in academe, we simply accept routine and procedure and strategy because “that’s the way we’ve always done it.” By considering a new idea, we may continue doing things “the way we’ve always done it” but we no longer do so blindly, without considering our reasons and alternatives for our actions. Reaction to an original idea can inform leadership regardless of the path chosen for action. ■