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Winning letter: ACS Charleston Conference Scholarship

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Charleston Scholarship Winner



Congratulations to Lisa Rose-Wiles, Science Librarian and Assistant Professor at Seton Hall University, for winning the 2010 ACS Publications Charleston Scholarship.

Lisa's winning submission is an open letter in response to the following scenario: The University Librarian is a musicologist and wants to cut science budgets to allow for more humanities resources.

To whom it may concern:

The new dean of our library is insisting that we reduce our science subscriptions in order to expand our music collection. The thrust of her argument is that science resources are typically far more expensive than humanities resources, and our limited funds are better spent where we can 'buy more with less'.

It is undeniable that science resources are more expensive than humanities resources. Based on our recent orders, science books cost almost 3 times as much as humanities books - an average of \$126 compared with \$43 per book. The difference is even more pronounced for journals. The average cost of science journals in 2010 was about seven times that of humanities journals: \$2,506 versus \$356. Because currency (in tandem with accuracy and authority) is at a premium in science, we rely heavily on peer-reviewed journals, especially online journals. The humanities tend to rely more on books, monographs and other print journals, which show less of a price differential.

So why are science resources – especially journals – so expensive? I would argue that there are several related reasons, and that none of them justify cutting our science resources to make way for more humanities resources.

One piece of the puzzle is that many publications in the sciences are aimed at very specialized audiences, which translates into a relatively small number of sales or subscriptions. For commercial publishers, high prices ensure profits; for non-profit societies they are necessary to cover production and distribution costs.

Another piece is that the major customers for specialized science books and especially journals are large research institutions and science & technology based companies which have much larger budgets than ours. Typically these institutions also host the most prolific researchers, grant writers and publishers who

both need and insist on having immediate access to current publications in their fields. The fact that such institutions are willing and able to pay high prices for science books and journals helps to keep the price high: it is simply a case of demand for supply. An added factor is evidence that for academic institutions, there is a high return on investment (ROI) for such resources¹.

Finally, the prevalent system of academic tenure and promotion relies heavily on successful grant-writing and publication, especially in the sciences. Particular weight is given to publishing in prestigious and 'high impact' journals – which tend to be the most expensive in terms of subscription. Pressure to publish in these journals, combined with need to read and cite them, further contributes to the demand-supply equation.

Our problem is that on the one hand, we are not a large or well-funded research institution – we are a medium sized Catholic university offering a wide diversity of majors. Some publishers and database vendors base their rates on full time enrolment (FTE), which is of some help. However, in regards to science publications, basing prices on our entire student body ignores the fact that the sciences make up only a small part of our curriculum. Only 16 of over 80 majors are in the sciences (and almost a third of these are offered in conjunction with other departments or institutions); only 3 of our 67 Masters programs are in the sciences, and only 2 of our 16 doctoral programs are in the sciences (chemistry & biochemistry and molecular biology). In other words, only about 15% of our programs (and a similar proportion of our students and faculty) are in the sciences, but we pay the same price as institutions with a much larger science and research component.

It would seem that the relatively small size of our science programs supports the dean's case for cutting back science acquisitions and joining the ranks of small, non-research institutions which do not need – or simply cannot afford – good science resources. But there are compelling counter-arguments.

First, our science faculties are small but highly productive. Chemistry and Molecular Biology lead all other areas of the university in terms of publication and research grants, with each bringing in over \$5 million in grant money during the past four years. Although the library receives no part of these grants or associated indirect costs, library resources are an essential component of successful grant applications. These grants help fund not only research and equipment; they help fund graduate students and staff for the departments concerned, and add to the prestige of our university.

Second, many of the journals and databases that the library provides are required for program accreditation, especially for the doctoral programs. These programs provide valuable revenue and prestige for our university, and failing to meet accreditation standards would be a significant loss – especially if it became known that the failure was due to lack of library resources.

Third, as mentioned above, library resources provide a good return on investment, especially in the areas of science and technology. A recent study showed that ROI for library resources on grant money alone ranged from 15.1 to 0.64:1, and ROI for library investment in electronic resources ranged from 155:1 to 6.4: 1. The same study also found that “an increase in the library budget is correlated with an increase in library funding”¹.

In closing, I would argue that we should not be cutting science resources in order to fund our humanities collection. Instead, we should fight for a library budget that allows us to fund both our science and our humanities programs. Our library has been historically underfunded, as shown by our program review and those of other departments. Part of the reason is a failure to allow for rising costs and new publication formats, but the main reason is a failure to recognize that library resources are an investment, not an

expense. To that end, I strongly suggest that our university increases its investment in the library, especially for science resources that support our strongest grant-earners.

1 Tenopir, C., Love, A., Park, J., Wu, L., Baer, A. & Mays, R. 2010. University Investment in the Library, Phase II: An International Study of the Library's Value to the Grants Process. Library Connect White Paper #3, San Diego, CA: Elsevier. Retrieved from:

<http://libraryconnect.elsevier.com/whitepapers/roi2/2010-06-whitepaper-roi2.pdf>