Excellence in Academic Libraries: Recognizing It
by Larry Hardesty

These are all headlines that have confronted The Chronicle of Higher Education readers in recent years. Combined with other articles on how search-engine companies such as Google and Yahoo have joined with several major academic libraries to digitize books, it is no wonder that some administrators, classroom faculty members, and members of governing boards have begun to harbor some serious doubts about the future of the academic library.

No doubt “times they are a-changin” for academic libraries. If fact, the transformations in academic libraries over the past 15 years or so have been nothing short of revolutionary. As a result, to paraphrase Mark Twain, the reports of the demise of academic libraries are greatly exaggerated. One need only examine the resources and services now offered by the excellent academic libraries, as identified by the Association of College and Research Libraries’ (ACRL) Excellence in Academic Libraries awards program, to acquire an increased appreciation for the vibrancy, creativity, and resiliency of the staffs of academic libraries in ensuring that academic libraries continue to play a crucial role in the educational process.

Far from becoming inconsequential, these excellent libraries demonstrate that academic libraries have become even more essential in supporting the missions of their institutions. They are models that others would do well to examine and to emulate in seeking to improve the quality of their institutions.

How do we identify such libraries?
Annually for the past eight years members of an ACRL committee has carefully reviewed numerous worthy applications and has made the difficult decision as to which libraries to recommend to the ACRL Board of Directors as recipients of the award.

Each year there can be only one recipient library in each of three categories (university, college, and community). The intent is to recognize academic librarians and other library staff who work together as a team to develop academic libraries that are outstanding in furthering the educational mission of their institutions. The ACRL committee bases its recommendation on criteria that supports this intention. To date, 23 libraries have received the award (see inset box).

The specific reasons for receiving the award are as varied as the nature and missions of the institutions. Nevertheless, the libraries do have some common attributes that make them excellent. The winning libraries usually receive the award because of a multiplicity of efforts often sustained over an extended period of time. These efforts typically reflect:

- Ready adoption and creative use of technology
- Development of the library as “the place” for communication and collaboration among users
- Clear sense of service and dedication among the library staff in both anticipating and responding to individual user needs through personal attention

Technological Advances
Probably the most noticeable change in academic libraries during the past generation has been the greatly expanded adoption and use of technology. These excellent libraries clearly reflect this change. All provide access to myriad electronic databases. These, of course, are well-received, and, most students would probably
both understand and echo the comment of a student at Mount Holyoke College who observed, “The databases rock!” Increasingly, particularly at the university level, the libraries are going beyond subscriptions to commercial databases to the creation of institutional repositories to highlight and support scholarship at their own institutions.

A few examples include:

- Rochester Institute of Technology’s (RIT) Publishing and Scholarship Support Center,
- University of Arizona’s publication of electronic journals and creation of the “Tree of Life” database
- North Carolina State University’s Learning and Research Center for the Digital Age (LRCDA)
- Cornell University’s international efforts to digitize collections of rare or fragile materials that would not otherwise be available to students, scholars, or the public.

Such efforts, however, are not entirely confined to the larger institutions. For example, Augustana College has established the digital collection of high resolution scans of historical photographs from the Upper Level Mississippi Valley.

Often these libraries are leading adopters of technology at their institutions. The Baruch College Library had installed the first proxy server at the College and the first one in the City University library system enabling students to access full-text research materials from over 150 databases. At all levels, these “excellent” libraries have used technology to expand access to information resources. For example:

- University of Washington has used technology to further its vision; the “Any Time, Any Place Library”
- Anne Arundel Community College has termed a similar vision as “Research Anytime and Any Place”

**Library as Place**

Significantly, while technology has had a major impact on academic libraries, the applications for the awards and various library constituencies mentioned many services and resources going far beyond merely taking advantage of technology. Augustana College’s Library typified this effort in stating its goal “to develop the Library not only as a repository of resources or a gateway of information, but as a place where faculty, staff and students communicate and collaborate intellectually, culturally, and socially.”

In recent years, librarians have come to describe this concept with the shorthand phrase “Library as Place.” In fact, even at a highly technology focused institution, the creature comforts can eclipse the technologically advantageous offered. Commented Katherine J. Mayberry, Vice President for Academic Affairs at RIT:

> At an institution where ‘virtuality’ is highly prized, it may seem paradoxical that one of the great strengths of our library is its very distinctive sense of place. RIT students can access many of the library’s resources from a distance, but it is a credit to the spirit, ambience, and centrality of our library that our students prefer to visit it physically.

Increasingly all types of academic libraries have added longer hours, more comfortable seating and even cafés to better serve the needs of their users. For example, both the North Carolina State University and the University of Arizona main libraries began operating on a 24-hour schedule four days a week. Probably most of the institutions receiving the award have installed cafés in their libraries—many with creative names such as the North Carolina State University’s “Hill of Beans” coffee bar near the main D. H. Hill Library and Mount Holyoke College’s Rao Café.

This increased attention to users’ “creature comforts” has had some interesting probably unanticipated positive effects, as described by a recent graduate of Oberlin College who reminisced:

> [The Library] even played a role in my decision to apply to Oberlin in the first place. As a senior in high school, I was flipping through the brochures when I saw a picture of the rainbow couches. I had never seen a super-sofa like that before, and the idea of sitting on one was so appealing that I sent in for more information about Oberlin.

A student from Mount Holyoke succinctly and cogently reinforced that the library’s Internet café had achieved its purpose in noting, “Rao creates traffic but [it also creates] community.”

At RIT the library has raised the “library as the place to be” to a new level with its motto “Strive to be the place to go when RIT needs to know.” To a large degree it has succeeded. Reports an RIT professor, “Students gather around to compare and distinguish the differences among the interests, ideas, cultures and visual interpretations of images and writing descriptions. [The library] has helped students to exchange ideas and open up new ideas.” From a student’s perspective, this means a variety of seating to fit their needs, as observed by a Mount Holyoke student:

> One of the really nice things about the library is that there is space to accommodate just about every person’s study habits. There are noisy spaces like the Info Commons where people who like chatter can get work done, but there are also really quiet and intense spaces like the Stimson room where everyone is focused on studying, and there are nooks where you can be totally alone if that’s what you need.

**Personal Attention to Individual User Needs**

The characteristic most obvious among these excellent libraries is the personal attention given to user needs. While the Cornell University Library is a leader in digitalization efforts, then president, Hunter R. Rawlings III, noted the importance of “personal attention, as part of the three key elements of an excellent library.” In his address at the awards ceremony he stated, “The Cornell Library provides a very congenial mix of creature comforts, high-tech resources, and personal attention.” Sometimes libraries can be viewed largely by their collections and the building itself, but it is the staff of the library that makes both the collections and the building meaningful and appealing to library users.

Such comments were common among faculty, students, and staff of the excellent libraries. For example:
Oberlin College faculty member:  
Here I feel like the library staff are colleagues, and I feel secure in the knowledge that they will do everything in their power to make things easy for me, to get me the resources I need, to make them available, to make sure I know how to use them. I feel like I own Mudd (Oberlin’s Library); it is my turf, and all its impressive resources are marshaled for my benefit. It’s very empowering.

Anne Arundel Community College faculty member:  
My students return to the library long after I had taken them for an instructional session. There is no doubt in my mind that a big reason for this is the library staff’s positive attitude, their sincere desire to help, and their wealth of knowledge.

Mount Holyoke faculty member:  
What is strikingly visible to me is the LTIS staff’s intense concern for everyone’s access—and I mean that—from the brand new first year student whose most pressing problem is getting her computer hooked up for e-mail to the most scholarly active faculty member writing a major new book every two or three years.

Perhaps an Anne Arundel Community College student paid the highest compliment to the library staff in writing in response to a “How Are We Doing?” comment card, “If you can get better than this, more power to ya.”

Impact of an Excellent Library  
In addition to serving individual faculty members and students, an excellent library can have an impact in other ways. As already suggested by an Oberlin student, an excellent library can be an important recruiting resource. Perhaps it is no surprise that, for example, at Loyola University New Orleans, the Dean of Admissions wrote, “[My job is] made easier because of the excellence of our libraries and library faculty and staff.” An excellent library can even help in recruiting faculty members. At Loyola University New Orleans, a history professor observed:

One of the reasons I came to Loyola was the library. I remember that when I came for my job talk I was impressed by the library’s facilities and its staff. After walking through the stacks, touring the multimedia rooms, and talking to the research librarians, I knew that this was a school committed to excellence in research and teaching.

The impact on the institution can be very significant. At the college level, Earlham College has a more than 40-year history of the librarians working with classroom faculty to integrate information skills into the curriculum and to prepare students for lifelong learning. According to Len Clark, Earlham College’s Provost, “The Earlham College Library has transformed the education programs, the teaching of the faculty, and the learning of students.” This is confirmed by faculty members at Earlham. For example, the anthropologist who wrote, “The library has led the way in establishing a community that is information literate. Before coming to Earlham College, I could have never imagined a small liberal arts college leading the way in information technology.”

Importance of an Excellent Library Staff  
Whether it is taking advantage of technology or creating a better library environment for study and exchange of ideas, neither would happen without the librarians and the rest of the library staff. The positive comments about the library staff are echoed throughout the excellent libraries at all types of libraries and from all categories of library users. A professor of English at Hope College wrote of their library staff, “The faculty frequently congratulate themselves on how lucky they are to have you guys at the helm in the library. I can’t believe how helpful you’ve been—not just in alerting me in to sources and images, but in taking the time to sit down with me and teach me skills.” A faculty member at RIT wrote, “Their infectious love of their work influences change in the

Winners of the ACRL Excellence in Academic Libraries Award  
Each winner has an on-campus ceremony where a representative of ACRL presents the engraved glass award and a representative of Blackwell’s Book Services (sponsor of the award) presents a $3,000 cash award. In addition, each year ACRL purchases a full-page advertisement in The Chronicle of Higher Education to recognize the award recipients.

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The other excellent academic libraries out there are encouraged to take the opportunity to “tell their story” and be nationally recognized for their excellence. For additional information see: http://www.ala.org/ala/acrl/acrlawards/excellenceacademic.htm
classroom and exploration on the part of faculty which trickles down to the students themselves. Today’s RIT librarians are friendly, accessible, informative and engaging.”

An Oberlin College student wrote, “When I have an appointment with a reference librarian, she’s truly interested and excited by my research topic. It also means that the library pampers me. In a way, everything is tailored to fit my needs. Really, being served by an excellent library is about being spoiled, being overwhelmed with information and help and services.” Perhaps a faculty member at Anne Arundel Community College put it most succinctly, “If I had to sum of my feelings up in one sentence I would have to say simply that the Truxal Staff are awesome because they ‘get it’—they understand how to support faculty and students.”

Excellence Award Impact

The award itself has an impact. Several library directors reported that while it did not change attitudes towards the library, it did reinforce existing positive attitudes. One director observed that it certainly did have a “See, I told you so” kind of effect. Others reported approval of additional positions and, at a minimum, sustaining of budgets when the budgets of other campus units were being cut.

Mary Lee Sweat, Dean of Libraries, Loyola University New Orleans reported another impact. She wrote, “Even though we won the award in 2003, we had a banner up proclaiming the award until Katrina blew it away last August. It is as if, once you win it, you are stamped with excellence forever and you have both an honor to proclaim and a set of values to uphold.”

The award also gives an opportunity to recognize those who have supported the library. The ceremonies are typically attended by the institution’s president, chief academic officer, members of the institutions governing board, donors, faculty members, librarians from other institutions, and even local and national legislators. Often the ceremonies serve as public recognition of the success of the behind the scene support given via the budget and other venues by presidents, chief academic officers, governing boards, and others.

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How the $3,000 award is used often typifies the creativity and commitment of the library staff. Several recipients used the funds to support the awards ceremony.

The College of DuPage Library staff decided to share its award monies with the community through information literacy grants to school libraries in the community college’s district. The library staff at Wellesley College donated the monies to a local elementary school for the purchase of books for the Early Literacy Learning Initiative. The Augustana College Library staff donated the funds to a partner elementary school that draws from many low-income parents.

Pierce College also used some of the funds to support three awards to students for essays on information literacy. The Oberlin College library staff and the Austin Community College library staff decided to use the award to purchase artwork for the library. Cornell University Library added to the award funds and purchased for every staff member (over 450) a briefcase emblazoned with the words “ACRL Excellence in Academic Libraries Award 2002.”

The award also serves to identify libraries with standard of excellence for other academic libraries. This is echoed by another library director of an excellent library, University Librarian Karin Wittenborg of the University of Virginia, who wrote, “All of us in the Library are deeply committed to helping students, faculty and other researchers in their academic endeavors. The staff is our greatest asset. All academic library users should expect such excellence from their library staffs.”

Far from going away, these excellent academic libraries demonstrate that academic libraries can be (and should be) a vital part of an institution, helping to support it at all levels. They work to provide easy access to information in a variety of formats, to provide within the library comfortable locations for students to study and to work together, and to provide to students and others the personnel attention to meet their individual needs. They make good use of resources available to them. They should serve as inspirations to other libraries.

References