From the Chair

Developing Advocates—Communicating Value

Suzanne Sears

I was recently asked to speak on how to create an elevator speech to advocate for depositories. It seems that this topic comes up every year as more depository collections are seen by administrators as "taking up valuable space" instead of as important pieces of their overall library collection. I wish I could wave a magic wand and all the international, federal, state, and local government documents would be forever preserved and safe from budget cuts. The reality is that this is a situation that will continue to be addressed for years to come.

My current position at the University of North Texas, has given me a little more insight to the problem than I had four years ago. I am now part of the administration at my library, making decisions related to budget cuts and increasing demands for space and services. In conversations with other administrators, I often find myself jumping on my soapbox about the value of historical government information and why it is important to keep these collections accessible. I get exasperated by the indifference to the collections that these very intelligent individuals seem to have. How can they not be as passionate as I am about these valuable primary resources? It is in the answer to this question that I think you can find the biggest problem we face as government information professionals. They are not as passionate about these resources because they are not aware of them.

Government documents librarians have a tendency to be super involved in advocating for no-fee permanent public access to legislative bodies, but too often they stand alone as a group. Very few non-documents librarians get involved. The question is how do we get non-documents librarians, administrators, and community members involved in our advocacy efforts? I think that we have to educate them in the value of the collections. The ALA GODORT Legislative Committee is currently working on one-page educational pieces in response to the ALA COL FDLP Task Force report. By the time this column is published, the first draft of these papers will have been presented at ALA Midwinter and be publicly available for feedback. I personally feel this will be a big step forward in helping to educate ALA members about the issues surrounding government information. This is a wonderful first step, but we need to do more.

Communicating with administrators and the community are two vital parts of keeping government information collections off the chopping block when libraries are faced with budget cuts and space demands. Passion for your collection is great, but it will only take you so far. Community support, data, and relation to the overall mission/strategic plan of the institution are the things that are going to speak to administrators.

Most documents librarians are very good at garnering community support. We are aware of our main user groups and ask them for letters of support when faced with decisions to reallocate or eliminate our collections. Where we often fall short is in keeping more than transactional data on community use of the collection. Data that backs up the need for tangible, as well as digital collections and government information specialists to facilitate access to those collections. Return on investment (ROI) is the newest buzzword circulating among administrators. How do we demonstrate the ROI of a documents collection? How do we demonstrate the social as well as monetary value of our services and collections? How do we tie our collections to the mission and strategic plan of our governing institution? The answers to these questions will be vital in gaining the support of administrators for the collections and services we offer as government information professionals.

When administrators are faced with increasing demands for space and budgets, they use data to make decisions on what services and collections can be reduced or eliminated. They have to justify to their governing body what the measurable benefit is for every dollar invested. These benefits are going to be very different for public libraries, academic libraries, state libraries, law libraries, and special libraries. That is why it is essential to tie in the mission and vision of the institution as well as the needs of the communities served. Reports to administrators on the value of the collections need to include context-sensitive data that pertains to individual libraries and their value systems. This is one of our main problems. Most discussions at the national level are trying to find a single model that can be used by different institutions to determine value. Such a model would have to be flexible enough to be locally applicable to demonstrate how a library meets the needs of its institution or community.

To be strong advocates for government information collections, we must take a step back and try to put ourselves into the mind of those making the funding decisions. We have to articulate the importance of our collections and services in terms that they can understand. For years, we relied on the monetary value of the collection. That alone will no longer suffice as tangible distribution is diminishing and space is at a premium. It is very difficult to measure the indirect benefits of a depository collection. How does the collection impact economic outcomes in the area served? What can having a government documents collection do for the prestige or reputation of a library? How do researchers use the collection? How do the collection and services enhance quality of life for the community? These are just some of the questions we should be gathering qualitative and quantitative data to answer.

It is up to us to communicate the value of the collections and services to those making funding decisions. One of the best things we can do to show our worth is to provide great services that help our users work more effectively. Another is to be proactive in gathering evidence of the difference that current and historical government information makes in the lives of our community of users and communicating this information to those responsible for making budget and space decisions for our institutions. Hopefully, this column will serve as a starting point for discussions among our members on ways we can communicate more effectively the intrinsic value of libraries providing no-fee permanent public access to government information.

Errata

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Items were mistakenly left out of the student issue. Several student's biographies and emails as well as information on some of the illustrations. Please find this information below. We apologize for any inconvenience this oversight may have caused.

Jessica Blanchard, Student, University of Washington, jjb26@uw.edu

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Image 1: "Drawing of the small intestine showing villi" from the publication "What I need to know about Celiac Disease." Downloaded from NIDDK Image Library. http://digestive.niddk.nih.gov/ddiseases/pubs/celiac/index.aspx.

Image 2: Cover of the Celiac Disease Awareness Campaign publication entitled "What I need to know about Celiac Disease." Published March 2011. http://digestive.niddk.nih.gov/ddiseases/pubs/celiac_ez/WINTKACeliacDisease_508.pdf

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