# TIPS AND TECHNIQUES: PROMOTING AN ACADEMIC RESEARCH LIBRARY

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*I*n some ways, a university library is the only game in town: academic research libraries exist to serve students and faculty. Where else will a faculty member go to obtain an article in *ChemAbstracts*? Or where else can an undergraduate find more than half a million online images from the Associate Press photo archive? Who else has 6.3 million books, 7 million manuscripts, thousands of scholarly journals, and electronic databases—all to generate new knowledge and teach the next generation of students?

A library at a public university is, however, a discreet unit within a large institution struggling for limited state income. Whereas schools and colleges within the university bring in funds from tuition, the library does not. Somewhat like a public library supported by taxpayers, an academic library is supported by the tuition-generating schools and colleges of a university. We must work daily to prove our value and worth to the people who use our services and who help to support our enterprise.

That said, libraries are also nearly universally appreciated by the people who rely on them everyday. With a collection that ranks 13th in the nation in the number of volumes, with hundreds of electronic databases, and the expertise of some of the state's finest librarians, the Indiana University (IU) Libraries offer scholars nearly everything they could hope for. Libraries make faculty research more productive, graduate study more fulfilling. And it's no exaggeration to say that these groups are attracted to IU because of the strength of the IU Libraries. I hear time after time about researchers who go off to other institutions, only to find the library services at IU are so much better.

Just one example: An IU Bloomington student researching Victorian paintings at the venerable British Library still sought assistance from Indiana University. To prove the existence of an obscure reference book, she dialed up IUCAT, the university's online electronic catalog. And to identify the names of the materials she once used in Indiana, she e-mailed B.J. Irvine, IU's fine arts librarian. "If you go to the third reference shelf in the Fine Arts Library," the student typed from London,

"what are the names of the books with the red binding?" She said of the IU librarians: "I can't think of a time when I really needed something when whomever I approached didn't say, 'Let's see what we can work out,' or 'Let's try to find it for you.' You just know someone is going to help you. They could get me the Magna Carta if I asked for it—or I know they'd try!"

An academic library belongs to everybody and nobody. At Indiana University Bloomington, everybody uses library collections and services (or we hope they do), but nobody's diploma credits the Main Library or any of the 19 libraries on campus. We do not admit students the way that other tuition-generating units do, so there's no natural constituency of alumni that, say, the School of Business or the School of Journalism may have. Graduates from schools like those develop lifelong ties, a sense of belonging and loyalty that their alumni associations have long known and courted. Ties to a library are far less compelling. (In fact, under a complex scheme of prospect management to which all Indiana University schools and units must adhere, the IU Bloomington Libraries are only permitted to solicit donations from alumni if those alumni have not given to another IU school for five years!) Consequently, we have to work harder and think smarter.

We try to do so by following the reminders below.

• **Know your audience (or at least know who they are).** Who needs to know about your library's collections and services? At a university, the obvious answer is the students and faculty. That's true to a point. Adam Corson-Finnerty, the leading library fundraiser at the University of Pennsylvania, however, suggests that his audience is 1) the university president and 2) everyone else. The president defines the priorities of the institution and, consequently, the direction of the library. He or she sets the university's legislative priorities, determines the budget, and directs growth. It's essential that the president share your vision and support your objectives.

That leaves everyone else: faculty and students, state legislators and campus deans, alumni and donors, and many others. We decided at the Indiana University

Libraries that the External Relations and Development Office (which handles the centralized media and community relations functions for the system of 19 campus libraries in Bloomington) should focus on the external audience. Consequently, our brochures for visitors, friends, and potential donors are targeted to an audience with an interest in, but less specialized knowledge of, the IU Libraries. They are marketing pieces. The dozens of handouts created to teach the academic community about databases and services are best produced by instructional librarians. Of course there's often overlap in the audiences, creating a veritable Venn diagram of our market. We like it that way. The greater the number of links to the IU Bloomington Libraries, the greater the interest in what we do.

• **Do your research.** We try to know what our audience wants and the best way to present information to them, and we learn this in part through occasional focus groups and formal surveys. The plans for renovating our Main Library were guided, in large measure, by focus groups and an e-mail survey of undergraduate and graduate students. Our undergraduate library has a suggestion box; our Web team installed a pop-up survey on the Web and has done extensive usability testing on the Web site. More recently, the IU Bloomington Libraries participated in LibQual+, a nationwide survey organized by the Association for Research Libraries to measure local user satisfaction. These are all broad efforts undertaken by many departments and individuals who strive to base programming, products, and marketing on solid data.

We could do better, and we try. You can, too. Your users will thank you for asking them their opinions—and then acting on the information you obtain.

• **Follow Your Mission.** Without question the IU Libraries support the university's mission of teaching, research, and instruction. But how exactly do we do so, and how can we improve?

The IUB Libraries engaged in a deliberate and inclusive process to determine an institutional mission, strategy, and goals to accomplish them. From these goals, the Office of External Relations and Development (which has broad public relations responsibilities) determined its focus. We said: Look, this is what we as an office need to achieve for the good of the IU Libraries, and this is how we're going to do it. Community and media relations activities emerged from this focus. We documented eight fundraising priorities, a marketing plan detailing strengths and weaknesses, and identified tactics to address them. We're at the point now where we are thinking beyond our office to the institution as a whole.

• **Plan Your Work and Work Your Plan.** From the mission statement, decide what the overriding messages will be in the next year. What special events can you host that will support this message?

Sure, any publicity is good. But seek out opportunities and outlets to hammer the messages that are important to you. The IU Libraries received a large challenge grant to fund positions in our preservation department. Consequently, our annual report, our yearly appeal and telephone solicitation, and many of our news releases focus on the theme of preservation. As a result, we're gaining traction—and the support of colleagues in the university who are in a position to help us reach a broader external audience. Colleagues included an article in the faculty/staff newspaper about our rare books conservator, for example, and featured the Preservation Department's impressive new box-making machine in one of the video promotions broadcast during basketball halftime shows. The need to stay focused sounds obvious, but we're all busy, and it's easy to be distracted by the fires at your feet that must be extinguished daily. Be careful not to be so narrow in your approach that you miss opportunities for good publicity. Just don't let those opportunities consume your time at the expense of what's really important.

• **Develop a logo - or at least a look.** A university library is a subset of a large institution. At IU, we benefit from that association, but we also strive to make our mark within it. If our key audiences are also a part of the university, we necessarily need to distinguish ourselves from others on campus while still maintaining the look of the university.

Does it make sense for the IU Libraries to have a unique logo, to create a unique visual identity? After all, IU has a seal, first created in 1841, and a well recognized wordmark. The university frowns on renegade logos, and rightly so, because the university strives for consistency in visual identity just as we in the library do. In our case, we needed something to link together all our publications—from user guides to library maps to endowment solicitation brochures. Because the IUB Libraries are really a system of 19 campus libraries (including departmental libraries and the University Archives and a historic house museum), creating a visual identity system was a bit of a challenge.

We conducted focus groups about how people perceived the library. (Describe the IU Libraries. If the library were a person, how would it act?) The responses helped to shape, but not determine the logo, which was created by an award-winning identity designer. We looked at other library logos and how they related to the institution. We tested several versions on administrators, librarians, support staff, and users, and finally

narrowed it to the finalist, which has begun to forge our identity. It gives us a common look and links us successfully with our parent organization.

Our solution was to incorporate a typographic treatment with the university wordmark, thereby reinforcing our relationship with the university. We also incorporated the graphic representation of a book taken from the university seal (again reinforcing our relationship through repetition of the institutional visual identifier).

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• **Thinking Inside the Box.** We in libraries sometimes have a tendency to look inward. We think that the community at large understands what we do, or even cares. The external audience—in the case of an academic library, those people beyond the academic community of students and faculty—doesn't always understand the role of a research library, and thinks that it operates as a public library does, only that it's bigger and more intimidating. One example: in touting subscriptions to e-books (which are full text), we confused even our university-wide communications team. To test the electronic service, university marketers searched for novels like Margaret Mitchell's *Gone With the Wind*, thinking the popular fiction they knew to be in a public library or on a bedside table would certainly be among the electronic resources we offer. No such luck. Though the e-books available in our netLibrary currently include novels by Ernest Hemingway and Charles Dickens, the majority of the offerings, at least for now, include more academic titles like *Buddhism After Patriarchy* and *Environment as a Focus For Public Policy*. The lesson here, and always, is to try to see things as an outsider does. Remember that your readers aren't saturated in the day-to-day world of libraries the way most of us are. Educate first. Tailor messages to the correct audiences.

• **Be nosey.** The best promotional ideas or news items bubble up from the people who are working with students and faculty everyday. Period. My job in this large library (with more than 150 employees) is to filter these ideas, repackage the most interesting ones to make them more appropriate to a larger audience, and get the word out. Getting good media play is no easy task, and story ideas come to me from savvy librarians more frequently than not. A new acquisition? A national

grant? A leader in the state? These are the stories that turn my wheels. A local newspaper reporter who has the university beat says that news is often defined by being the first, last, or only. Think in those terms. Promote the stories that your audience is interested in, not stories you are interested in or the ones that are politic for your dean or your board. Think of your audience first and your message will be more successful.

• **Say No. (Don't Try to Be All Things to All People.)** Public relations is a catchall term, used freely by people who assign the term to anything that means doing a good deed or somehow improving the institutional image. But there's a great difference between media relations and community relations, and public relations is a fuzzy concept at best. If a project seems to contain any public component, or if it falls outside a predefined budget area, one may be tempted to call it public relations. You've heard it yourself: "Hosting this event is good PR." What does that mean? If it means you can attract the right audience, reinforce your message, and open the door for more meaningful associations, then it's probably worth committing the resources and time to ensure the event's success. If it means people will love you because you serve them appetizers, then you may want to rethink your plans. Consider what you really want to achieve and act to support your strategic thinking.

Academic research libraries offer incredibly rich opportunities for media and community relations, for promoting the value of knowledge and work. The results can be rewarding. Remember the audience, plan your action, and go for it.

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