

Means, not ends

I have been going to basketball games. This is extremely unusual behavior for me. Except for a brief flurry of interest in the St. Louis Cardinals (baseball) in the late '80s and a positively miserable experience with little league baseball as a kid, I have never had any interest in, or paid any attention to, organized sports at any level.

College sports are a big deal in this part of the country—particularly football, of course, but basketball as well. One gets the unfortunate impression that for some schools, the academic programs are a somewhat distracting sideline from the real business of the institution. Both Auburn University and the University of Alabama (that's the original land-grant campus over in Tuscaloosa) have gotten much more press over the years that I have been here for their various National Collegiate Athletic Association (NCAA) infractions and difficulties and the high-profile scandals involving various coaches and athletic boosters than they have for their academic achievements. The rivalry between the two schools is intense—I recall walking into a fine restaurant one Saturday evening during the annual football contest between the two schools and being startled to see that several tables had portable television sets on them. No one thought it odd or inappropriate.

Here at the University of Alabama at Birmingham (UAB), however, that has never been the case. We have had a basketball team for twenty-five years, and it has done reasonably well, appearing occasionally in the national tournaments. There has been a football team for ten years, and it has struggled in the shadows of the two big schools, but it does okay. And there has been the full range of other sports that comprise the typical portfolio of Division I college athletics. I have never paid much attention.

In the past couple of years, though, the issue of the appropriate

place of athletics at UAB has gotten more visibility. There have been some on the board of trustees who have questioned whether UAB should have an athletic program at all. Since many people suspect this is raised only because the trustees do not want any competition with the program at the Tuscaloosa campus, the suggestion just makes people here more protective of the UAB program. So, the university president has made a concerted effort to increase support, and part of that effort has been to explain to those of us in the leadership who are ignorant of these matters how a college sports program works and what impact it has on the overall life of the university.

I have been persuaded. I understand now that it is the "big" sports, football and basketball, that anchor the program, that provide the basic infrastructure for all of the other sports and for all of the intramural programs that students enjoy and that are part of the overall campus life of a vibrant university. I am satisfied that the leadership of UAB balances athletics and academics properly, and I am pleased to find that our athletes graduate at reasonably high rates. At least at this university, basketball is not an end in itself. It is a means: it helps to anchor an athletic program that enables a whole host of other activities and that enhances overall campus life, making the experience of being at this university a richer and more desirable one for the students we want to attract and keep. And I have come to appreciate the importance of having the senior leadership of the university be visible supporters of the program. At Christmastime, when the president sent me a UAB polo shirt with the team mascot emblazoned on it, so that I would have something of the proper color to wear at the games, I got the message.

This year, I am participating in the NLM/AAHSL Leadership Fellows program, serving as a mentor

to Nancy Allee, from the University of Michigan. A key feature of the program is that the fellow spends two weeks at the mentor's library, so when I put together the schedule for Nancy's first week at UAB, I included a basketball game. It was not because I thought she might enjoy it (although, thank goodness, she did), but because it is symbolic of an important aspect of my job.

The morning after the basketball game, I took Nancy to the biweekly meeting of the Academic Programs Council. This group, chaired by the provost, includes the senior academic leadership of the university: the deans of the twelve schools, the two library directors, the chair of the faculty senate, and a number of vice presidents, associate provosts, and the like—some thirty people in all. As it happened, I did a presentation that day on plans for reorganizing support for online instruction. We are in the early stages of preparing for our university accreditation and figuring out exactly where these new technologies fit is a key part of the planning.

The discussions are intense. I am constantly pushed to think about what the role of the library is in the future that we are trying to imagine. What are the particular things that we have to offer? How do we align our services with the mission and goals of the university as a whole, and the schools in particular?

The world of libraries is changing radically. As I suggested in my editorial in the April issue of the *Journal of the Medical Library Association* [1], we are now in the process of reinventing librarianship—a reinvention that is as substantive as that which occurred in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries. Everything is up for grabs. This requires rethinking everything we do, and we can only do that when we put our services and priorities in the context of the larger organization that we serve.

For the last couple of years, I have been involved in a project for the

Association of Academic Health Sciences Libraries (AAHSL) called "Charting the Future" [2]. Several years ago, AAHSL and the Medical Library Association (MLA) produced a joint publication, *Challenge to Action* [3], that was intended to serve as a guide to medical libraries in setting their goals and priorities. The original impulse behind Charting the Future, when it was first conceived two and a half years ago, was to update that document. As the project has evolved, however, it has become a way of defining nearly everything that AAHSL is trying to do.

The group that did the major drafting of the report focused on the core missions of our academic health centers. The report is about *those* missions. It is not really about library missions, because library missions are easy: whatever the organization needs that we can figure out how to supply. Strategic planning exercises can be a lot of fun, and the discussions can be very fruitful in thinking about where we see the profession and the larger society going, but there is also the danger that we get lost in thinking that the library is an end in itself. It is not. The library is a tool.

It is easy to complain about heartless and narrow-minded administrators who do not see the value of the library. But what have you done to prove the value of your library to them? How are you making sure that they see ways that the library can solve *their* problems? Libraries cost money, and, if the administrator cannot be shown why spending that money improves the overall health of the organization, then the administrator has an *obligation* to shut the library down and spend that money elsewhere. That may turn out to be a bad decision, but it is still a rational one.

It was with this attitude in mind that Charting the Future was developed. The document looks at four major themes—education, research, clinical care, and community service; explores trends in those areas; discusses the ways in which knowledge management is, and will be, important for an institution to

achieve excellence in those areas; and provides examples of ways in which libraries and librarians can be integral success factors in moving an institution forward. It is intended to be a guide that helps librarians think critically and creatively about what they are doing, as well as a tool to help administrators think about their libraries and librarians in nontraditional ways. While the focus of the document is on academic health centers, the basic concepts should apply to all libraries.

I have long held the belief that hospital libraries have the opportunity to make the most radical uses of the new technologies and to transform their services the most dramatically—and effectively. I sigh every time I hear a hospital librarian fussing about how to "get more people into the library." "Why," I want to holler, "aren't you asking them what information services they need and figuring out how to get those services to where the people are?" We have the tools to do that now!

I am reminded of an ongoing conversation among faculty in my medical school about how we can get the students to come to lectures. Medical students do not attend lectures very much anymore—not here, not at any other medical school. They use note services and tools they find on the Web and the informal study groups they develop with their fellow students. The faculty debate making the lectures mandatory. Eventually, someone has the temerity to ask, "How are their board scores?" "Well, the board scores are doing fine, but. . ." The unspoken sits there on the table: *lectures are boring and the students are doing fine without going, so maybe they're making a rational decision NOT to go? And maybe we should be thinking about how to more effectively give them the information and the educational experiences they need?* But if you have been doing lectures in the traditional manner for twenty years, that is a very scary proposition. I suppose it is the same for the librarian trying to figure out how to get people back into the library.

When I go to the basketball games, I spend an hour beforehand in what we call the "Blazer Club" (our team mascot is a dragon). I have a drink, eat barbecue, and chat with faculty, fans, and students. We rarely talk about "the library." We talk about the team and what is going on at the university and "how is your school year going" and "what's happening with your kids. . ." And I listen and I learn, and it all goes into the mix of thinking about what my staff and I should be focusing on. If I had to make a list of how I do "needs assessment," hanging out at the Blazer Club would have to be near the top of this list.

I am writing this editorial two days after the NCAA tournament brackets were announced. UAB is going for the first time in five years. A lion's share of the credit goes to Mike Anderson, now in his second year as coach. In an astonishingly short time, he has built an extremely disciplined team that focuses on just a few things. Anderson was named coach of the year in our conference, and one sportswriter pointed out that one of the indicators of how much he deserved it was that none of his players made the all conference team. Oh, they're good—they're just none of them superstars. But Anderson has been able to pull them together in a very effective way, keeping them focused, working to their strengths, and building a winning team. Basketball is not an end in itself for any of them. It is part of their educational experience, and they will all go on to other things. Basketball is not an end in itself for UAB, either—it is a piece, an important piece, of building an overall university community that provides students with a full range of educational, cultural, and community experiences.

Libraries are like that, too, and librarians need to think of themselves that way. Libraries are not ends in themselves, and they should not be supported because they have intrinsic value. We have talents, resources, and skills that are essential for the success of our

institutions. All of our efforts should be focused on doing whatever we have to do to make the most of those opportunities. That means getting out of the library and talking with the people we serve about what they are doing and what their goals are. It means thinking about what the institution needs and not what the library needs. Sometimes, it even means going to basketball games.

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