

PR: The State of Public Relations in Academic Libraries

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This article presents an overview of current public relations (PR) efforts in academic libraries. The results of a survey on the use and effectiveness of PR programs offer a series of interesting findings. The responses show that PR is regarded as important and can be effective in helping academic libraries to reach targeted audiences.

A library is not a luxury, but one of the necessities of life.—H. W. Beecher¹



Beecher's statement is particularly true in the United States, yet our libraries today are beset by the same budget shortages that threaten many other vital public service agencies.

Faced with financial woes, librarians have joined representatives from other types of institutions across the nation in telling their stories through public relations (PR) as a means for increasing public awareness of and support for their services. A review of the literature on library PR suggests that public libraries adopted this response to financial problems long before academic libraries.² However, no surveys have been conducted to gather statistics that would support or refute this assumption.

In 1979 library PR consultant Alice Norton found only three college libraries with full-time PR positions.³ This situation may have reflected legislative restrictions against funding PR positions or campus structures assigning responsibility for aca-

demically library PR to existing public information offices.⁴

In 1981 Sally Brickman cited three reasons for academic libraries to reach out for public attention: (1) to inform users about collections and services; (2) to demystify academic libraries and make them more user-friendly; and (3) to generate funding to meet the skyrocketing price of books and journals during a period of budget cutbacks.⁵

Libraries are often considered the heart of the university.⁶ Even so, many campus communities are unaware of their library's resources and fail to challenge its potential.⁷ Citing the combined need to provide better user information, to build a positive image, and to project that image to users and potential support groups, Carroll urges academic libraries to join the communications era of the 1980s.⁸

To fill the information gap surrounding library PR programs, a survey was conducted to characterize and determine the scope of the current state of academic library PR. Forty-eight library directors at universities with student enrollments of nine to twelve thousand were surveyed. A

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questionnaire was designed to determine

- If the library had a PR program
- What elements comprised the program
- Who was responsible for its operation
- How effective it was

The conclusions of this study are based on the results of the survey and a review of the literature.

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE

Two major tasks that face libraries today are informing users of the resources available and maintaining adequate financial support in the face of inflation and budget cuts.⁹ Both require solutions to communication problems that result from out-moded stereotypes of libraries as dusty storehouses for ancient tomes of little interest to anyone except historians.¹⁰

Academic librarians may no longer take for granted the existence of a built-in support group in the university structure.¹¹ In fact, most librarians recognize that libraries have no *raison d'être* unless they are used. This has led to the increasing utilization of marketing surveys as a basis for matching library services to user needs.¹²

Today, it is generally acknowledged that academic libraries must join the PR trend started by public libraries. Increased public understanding of the mission and value of academic libraries is important for maintenance of quality higher education. To increase this understanding requires communicating effectively the role of the library to the academic community—to professors, students, and administrators, as well as legislators and the general public.

Ironically, part of the reluctance to use PR in the competition for public attention and funding comes from that very lack of funds.¹³ PR programs cost money and institutions coping with a shortage of funds often are unwilling to part with money for items not viewed as necessities, such as PR.

To understand PR's history in academic libraries, it is helpful to view the stages all institutions go through. Daniel Carroll calls this process organizational aging.

During their early years, organizations are concerned with image and audience

appeal because acceptance means survival. During this stage, considerable emphasis is placed upon effective communication with the public.

During the middle years, following the initial period of success and rising confidence, public relations efforts tend to decrease. Only a limited number of marketing surveys are conducted and few user education and information programs are available. But organizations communicating inadequately during these years will find themselves on the defensive later, fending off threats to their existence because they have lost touch with their audiences.¹⁴

Academic libraries appear to fall into the category of elderly nonprofit organizations whose value to society has not been questioned in the past. Now, however, libraries, universities, and other educational facilities face mounting criticism. Their role and value in a complex, information-oriented society often is misunderstood or underrated.

Whether academic libraries are middle-aged or elderly, their PR efforts appear to have increased in recent years. Literature devoted specifically to academic library PR was nonexistent ten years ago. Since then, the topic has received some attention, although most books are devoted to public library PR programs with only an occasional chapter on academic libraries.¹⁵

Recent articles recommend that PR efforts should begin with and receive the commitment of library administrators.¹⁶ Directors are instrumental in gaining support from all library personnel for the PR effort and in developing understanding and support for library goals among college officials and influential community leaders.¹⁷ Thus, the director acts as the primary salesperson for the library and for its PR program.¹⁸

Of all user groups, teaching faculty are perhaps the most vital. Faculty understanding of library resources and services will have the greatest impact on their own and student use.¹⁹ Alsmeyer outlined methods for reaching faculty and communicating vital information; these include personal contact and the use of print and broadcast media. He encourages use of

two-way communication with all user groups to help stay in tune with their needs.²⁰

In spite of an increase in literature addressing the need for academic library PR programs, little research could be found to show whether college librarians agree on the need for such programs. In 1977, Vreccat conducted a regional study of 424 library PR programs, 16 of which were in academic libraries, and commented that few academic librarians participated in the study and that many seemed unaware of the possibilities available.²¹

More recently, Frank Wylie, director of public affairs at California State University and ex-president of the Public Relations Society of America (PRSA), completed a national survey of library PR programs. The results were presented at the American Library Association's 1983 Annual Conference in Los Angeles.²²

Academic libraries composed 34 percent of the population of this study, which generated a 50 percent response rate. Results show that public libraries are *three times* more likely to have PR programs than academic libraries. The other results of the study did not distinguish between academic and public libraries, but a review of the statistics gathered gives a general picture of library PR today.

Of all libraries surveyed, 58 percent have PR programs. More than two-thirds of those programs were coordinated by library staff rather than through outside sources or agencies. The survey did not ask whether library staff meant PR professionals or librarians.

While 90 percent of the programs had management backing, only 19 percent of the respondents claimed to have a formal PR program. Existing programs focus two-thirds of the PR efforts on external communications and one-third on internal.

Two major problem areas in library PR programs emerged from this survey: adequate planning, i.e., designing activities to reach targeted audiences with specific information, and evaluation of results.

Commenting on the survey results, Richard Sweeney, director of public libraries in Ohio's Columbus and Franklin

counties, said libraries need professional PR practitioners.²²

Wylie's review characterizes PR programs as being in the toddler stage in public libraries, but still in their early infancy in academic libraries. To provide direction for current programs and future research, more information on the number of university libraries having PR programs would be useful. Determining the amount of interest in the topic and the problems now being experienced will provide a basis for future research.

THE STUDY

For this study of the state of academic library PR, forty-eight state university libraries were surveyed. All receive state and federal funding and have student enrollments between nine and twelve thousand.

A questionnaire was designed to determine what elements academic library PR programs have in common, who administers them, how long they have existed, how effective they are, and what the results have been. These questionnaires were sent to the directors of the forty-eight academic libraries chosen. The results necessarily reflect administrators' opinions on the usefulness of the programs.

Forty-one of the forty-eight directors responded. This resulted in a response rate of 85 percent, extremely high for any survey.

Responses confirmed that planned PR programs are still new to academic libraries. Only one administrator has had a program for more than fifteen years (thirty-three years). Three have had programs for more than ten years (eleven, twelve, and fourteen years).

The rest fell below the ten-year mark, with most indicating they *never* had a planned PR program administered by one person.

Of those who do, four are one year old, four are two years old, two have existed for five years, and four for ten years. It may be assumed that the twenty who did not respond to this particular question do not have planned programs assigned to one person or did not understand the question (see table 1).

TABLE 1
PLANNED PR PROGRAMS
ADMINISTERED BY ONE PERSON

Years Program Has Been in Existence	Number of Programs
None	13
1	4
2	4
5	2
10	4
11	1
12	1
14	1
33	1
Total	31*

*Ten respondents to the survey did not answer the question from which these data are derived.

The majority use library-trained staff and campus information offices, often in combination, to perform PR tasks (see table 2). Only five use staff with backgrounds in journalism or PR. Twenty-seven use "other library staff," twenty-three use the campus information office, and eighteen use the two in combination.

Of the six "other" answers, two use committees, one depends on the director, another on both the director and assistant director, and two said their programs do not depend on one person or are not coordinated.

The favored channels of communication are through displays, exhibits, and posters, with thirty-six of the forty-one using these methods. Next in priority order are press releases, courses in using the library, complaint boxes or boards for library users, in-house publications, slide/tape shows, and receptions honoring faculty and donors (see table 3).

More direct forms of communication

with targeted audiences, such as employee, faculty and student newsletters, speakers for community groups, radio and television, and interaction between library staff and Friends groups, are used less frequently. The five who checked "other" did list more personal forms of contact for targeted groups. One arranges monthly lectures by out-of-state guest speakers in the library. Another has tours, workshops, and speakers in the library, while two others listed informal coffees and memoranda to department chairs.

One library indicated a good response to a series of informal receptions for groups of community leaders. The first was designed for lawyers, and more receptions, as well as follow-up activities with interested guests are planned.

Overall, academic library PR programs were considered "very important." This is particularly true when programs are for the purposes of informing users, increasing use, improving the image of librarians on campus, generating financial support, and increasing the library's budget. Fore-stalling criticism of the library and recruiting first-rate library faculty and staff were rated low. Few rated PR programs as "not important" in any of these categories, although recruiting staff was rated the most unimportant purpose (see table 4).

Thirty-three academic library directors view their PR programs as "moderately" effective; only five rated them as highly effective, and two stated that their programs are not worthwhile.

Directors who gave high ratings to their programs commented as follows:

- "We've raised over \$350,000 this year on our own. Good PR helped greatly."
- "Our PR program has resulted in in-

TABLE 2
COORDINATED PR PROGRAMS

Number of Libraries	Who Coordinates PR Program?
5	Staff member trained in journalism and/or public relations
27	Other staff member in the library
23	Campus information office
18	Combination of library staff and information office
6	Other

TABLE 3
FAVORED CHANNELS OF COMMUNICATION IN PR PROGRAMS

Number of Libraries	PR Program Components
36	Displays, exhibits, posters
34	Press releases 34 = campus-wide publications 34 = local newspapers 1 = state and national publications 12 = specialized publications (library journals)
33	Courses in using the library
28	Complaint box or board for library users
24	Other in-house publications (information leaflets, brochures, etc.)
21	Slide/tape or film presentation on the library
21	Receptions honoring faculty or donors
19	Newsletter designed specifically for faculty
18	Speakers from library staff to the community
18	Employee newsletter
13	Speakers from library staff on radio or TV
12	Public service announcements (PSA) for radio or TV
11	Friends of the Library program
5	Regular column in student newspapers
3	Newsletter designed specifically for students
1	Paid advertising
5	Other Monthly lectures by out-of-state guest speakers Informal coffees Memoranda to department chairs News stories in student newspapers Tours, workshops, and speakers in the library

TABLE 4
IMPORTANCE OF ACADEMIC LIBRARY PR

Points	Category
110	Help library users by informing them of services, hours, etc.
100	Generate more use of services and collections
98	Make library faculty and staff more effective by strengthening their image on campus
86	Generate private financial support
82	Generate increased library budget
72	Forestall criticism of the library
62	Attract and recruit first-rate faculty and staff

creased budgets, has protected funds during state-wide freezes in spending. It has made possible the purchase of more than 100,000 books in the last 10 years."

- "Value received for dollars expended is very high. Very difficult to allocate optimum amount of financial support for

this purpose. Competing demands for dollars prevent realizing full PR potential."

Those who rated their programs as moderately effective (see table 5) agreed that one of the major problems is lack of funds for PR staff:

- "Value of regular program is great, un-

fortunately it is very hard in the face of budget reductions to manage consistency."

- "It is of great value in the library. Unfortunately, we don't have the personnel and resources to do much."
- "I believe PR programs are becoming increasingly essential parts of a library's program of activities."
- "We have too small a staff to assign the PR function to a single individual. Therefore, the burden falls on the director to prepare most of our press releases, newsletters, etc."
- "I am not aware of any academic library of any size with a coordinated PR program with a specially assigned staff member to carry out the program."

One director cautioned that PR should not promote services beyond the capacity of the library. Another stated that more is being done than in previous years, and still another expressed hope of doing more in the future.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Three important trends surfaced in this study.

First, of the forty-one respondents, forty said their academic libraries are conducting some form of publicity, but less than half (seventeen) reported *planned* PR programs assigned to one person.

Second, the majority (thirty-three) see their programs as only moderately effective.

Third, the extremely high response rate seems to indicate high interest in PR programs among academic librarians.

While academic librarians are becoming more interested in PR programs, they have not adopted them wholeheartedly. From the comments, it seems that the reason for this is lack of funds for PR staff and programs, yet one of the most highly rated programs raised \$350,000 in one year. The time has arrived for academic librarians to *take a leap of faith*. If partial PR programming is meeting with "moderate" success, academic librarians, to gain the most from their efforts, ought to seriously consider implementing complete, planned

TABLE 5
EFFECTIVENESS OF PR PROGRAMS

Number of Libraries	Effectiveness
5	Highly effective
33	Moderately effective
2	Not generally regarded as worthwhile

programs with professionally trained PR staff.

A planned program consists of four basic steps: (1) *research* into the particular communication needs of the library, (2) *planning* the most effective methods of meeting those needs, (3) *communicating* selected information to targeted audiences, and (4) *evaluating* each step's success in the PR program.

Planned programs insure that PR efforts are not wasted. Specific audiences are targeted, messages are sent directly to them, and results are evaluated so adjustments can be made to perfect the programming.

Public relations experts recommend emphasis on direct communications with targeted audiences. The personal touch should be used whenever possible for the best results. Whether or not academic libraries can afford a full-time PR professional, it is recommended that more effort be spent improving methods of communicating. By borrowing the best from the best, academic librarians can adopt PR programs that have been proven effective.

Effective academic library PR programs include communicating with employees, faculty, and students. Speakers sent into the classrooms and the community could also appear on radio and TV. Emphasis on Friends programs, receptions, and coffees may have more influence toward getting targeted audiences involved in academic libraries than any number of displays and news releases, although the latter should not be eliminated. Direct mail campaigns also have proven highly effective.

Good evaluation techniques improve the efficiency of PR efforts, insuring that precious time and money are not being wasted on fruitless activities. Evaluation techniques may be as simple as mention-

ing a book title in a campus newspaper and tracking the increase in demand. More complex methods compare donations from Friends and other community groups before and after specific campaigns.

If this survey accurately reflects changes over the past four years, then interest and activity in academic library PR have increased since Alice Norton discovered

only three college libraries with a PR staff person.

But the greatest benefits are yet to come. With continued administrative support, trained PR professionals, planned programs, thorough evaluations, and more sharing of successful ideas and activities, public relations can help resolve some of the financial dilemmas faced by academic libraries.

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