The Library at Rice University: Toward a Strategic Vision

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This address was presented by Dr. Henry at the fall 1996 meeting of the Rice University Fund Council.

The library at Rice University, like any academic library in the late twentieth century, is a complex phenomenon that is subject to a variety of analytical perspectives. Rather than try to approach this from a broadly philosophical view—the idea of a library—it is more practical and illuminating to ask two related questions specifically of Rice University: (1) what are the issues and problems that confront Fondren Library in the late twentieth century, and (2) how might Rice address these issues in a productive and effective way that also embodies the great strength of the institution?

The problems and issues, which are many and often obvious, can be divided roughly into two categories: internal challenges and external influences (or, those which are local and those that originate beyond the hedges).

Internal Challenges

Most of the ‘local’ problems are readily apparent. They include a shortage of space, the need for improved services, the necessity of a more vigorous collection development program, recalculated budgets, and increased staffing, with concomitant enhancement of professional development opportunities.

When you walk into the library today, it is not without some difficulty that you orient yourself to a service point; where the books and journals are is not at first certain; special collections are at the end of a drab hallway and poorly marked; interlibrary loan, an increasingly vital service, is in the basement; and the new electronic text center is all but hidden in a corner on the sixth floor.

This is not in any way meant to disparage the enormous effort that has gone into the renovations in the late 1980s—and the promising opening of new spaces that is planned for next year, or to diminish the great efforts my staff take daily to make Fondren Library as friendly and accessible as possible. The fundamental problem is the absence of necessary space to expand and, more importantly, to be creative in the way we do business.

External Forces

At the same time there exists a variety of external forces that, unlike those of times past, entail enormous budget, organization, and program implications. These influences, frequently played out beyond the hedges, nonetheless can and will powerfully determine the development and longer-term strength of the libraries at Rice University.

To name a few: copyright law and intellectual property issues have now become a global concern. Although they are little discussed in the popular press or on the campus of most universities, these issues have many ramifications for libraries and higher education.

Related to this are recent telecommunications policies. Most of us are familiar with the recent 1996 Telecommunications Act because of its approach to online obscenity. What is not so often discussed is the conflation of content providers with cable providers in this bill. One way to see it is that the old distinction of a cable company leasing a line and HBO providing content is lost. A company can control both cable and content in the new world, and the profits could be enormous. The current state of affairs is often compared to the ‘robber barons’ at the turn of the century, when one company owned the railroads as well as the contents being shipped.

This bill is presently being discussed. Where are libraries in this legislation, where are universities, where are the arguments for universal access to educational materials online? Almost nowhere—another major concern for a library and a university as this century closes.

Other issues include computer corporations’ susceptibility to the temptation of taking fewer risks in a volatile, increasingly competitive marketplace; the slow metamorphosis of the academic publishing industry; and the historical tendency to drive technological advancement more in terms of a commodity, rather than a creative tool for educational enrichment.

( cont. p.2)
(Strategic Vision cont.)

Those of us charged with steering the library through this complex era—librarians, faculty, administrators, the board, and students—must also confront recent dynamics within the academic culture at large that will similarly influence and reconceptualize Fondren Library. These include the changing nature of authority and authorship; the reorganization of knowledge; and the intensification of questions that focus on the ways students actually learn, and who is teaching them, in a multimedia era.

The issue of budgets and costs permeates all of these phenomena. A typical research library which has been given an annual increase of 5% to its collections' budgets over the last fifteen years actually, today, has a decrease of 28% spending power compared to 1980. Fewer books and journals can be purchased despite the increased base, in large part due to enormous increases in journal costs, the unexpected dependencies on technology, and the obsolescence of computers and software that drive up amortization costs. With growing frequency, questions on the sustainability of a research university and a research library can be heard.

Steps for the Future

What should we do? What can Rice University accomplish in the face of these pressures and influences? As far as the local problems—space, collections, services enhancement—that is perhaps the easier of the two categories to address. We can add space, build collections, incorporate new technology, and hire staff for an improved response to campus needs. But this is just a part of the problem, and all of these concerns are contextualized by the forces and influences beyond Rice.

Fondren Library for many years has remained marginalized from the more formative activities and planning processes at Rice, a rather passive institution within a top-ranked university. It can remain so in the coming decade, content to listen to the debates that range the world and simply react to the prognostic legal, cultural, and social transformations as it scrambles to oblige each new and disruptive surprise.

More appropriately, I think, Fondren Library should shed much of its past and correlate its vision with the aspirations and talent of the university. The library should take on the responsibility of understanding, promoting, and influencing those determining forces that currently render its future so ambiguous. Fondren Library should take on this responsibility as it takes on the local challenges of space, collections, staff, and budgets.

A New Vision

There is no reason that this library cannot become, given the rank and status of Rice University, a national beacon, a place where these issues are routinely discussed, analyzed, and brought to the attention of a wider public. Fondren Library can and should become a catalyst for a much-needed organized voice in higher education and academic libraries that could better articulate the complex needs of teaching and learning communities as integral to the national good.

To shoulder this task, the next phase of Fondren Library should include appropriate instructional space; meeting places for visiting scholars and students; programs for lectureships, workshops, and interdisciplinary seminars that provide forums for intellectual exploration of these themes; a program of internships for foreign librarians; the integration of advanced technologies for archiving and disseminating the results of these programs; and means of strengthening ties to business and industry, to political organizations, to the government, to prominent libraries and institutes in the United States and abroad, including national libraries.

Such new emphasis could have a profoundly positive effect on the quality of staff, who should embody these aspirations, and the quality of services in support of the library's primary mission to the Rice community. We need to bring in the outside world to strengthen what we have to offer internally and to assure a more predictable future.

I was struck, when first coming to campus for my interview last February, by a small and unassuming poster for some program at Rice. This flier made the following point: "Rice has a commitment to honor William Marsh Rice's covenant to produce quality leaders ... leaders that the world will grow increasingly to depend on through our changing times." What an assured and powerful vision that simple sentence evokes! I thought at the time, and continue to think, that if you ask and expect this of your students, why not ask and expect it of the library as well.

It is exciting and reasonable to believe that Fondren Library could become an elegant and flexible laboratory for its own evolution, a place where the idea of a library is studied, enriched, and ultimately transcended.
An Interview with Nobel Laureates Curl and Smalley

On December 10, 1996, Rice University’s Robert Curl and Richard Smalley, along with Harold Kroto of the University of Sussex in England, were awarded the Nobel Prize in Chemistry for the discovery of Carbon 60, or buckminsterfullerene, the third form of carbon.

Robert Sabin, Fondren Library’s collection development librarian for chemistry, recently talked to Nobel prizewinners Robert Curl and Richard Smalley about libraries and about some of their experiences after winning the Nobel Prize in Chemistry.

Sabin: What role has the library played in your teaching and research?
Curl: With respect to teaching, I have always relied very heavily on the Reserve Room, both for keeping homework keys and exam keys and for having extra books students might want to refer to.
Smalley: For undergraduate courses you rarely need any more than that, except for a nice quiet place [to study]. Of course, scientists and graduate students who are doing research mostly use the library for access to the research journals. We wonder how many years in the future that will continue to be the case.

Curl: One of the things we probably don’t do enough of is teach our undergraduates how to use the library for research—how to track down references and use various kinds of bibliographic tools that a professionally trained person really needs to know.

Smalley: Actually, most of that you can do now on the Web. You go over to Fondren when you really want to find an article or go up and browse in the stacks, which all of us sort of viscerally enjoy.

Nobel laureates Harold Kroto, Robert Curl, and Richard Smalley display their Nobel Prize medals.

Sabin: What role has the library played in your teaching and research?
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Sabin: What would you like to see in a new library or a new library addition besides just the traditional print materials?
Curl: I haven’t thought of anything qualitatively different.
Smalley: I think having the stacks easier to walk through and [making it] easier to find things and having better places to sit and read throughout the library [would be improvements. For] a time while we’re still building up, the library will get bigger and bigger. Then, at some point, stuff will increasingly be available on the Web, and [the library] will shrink back. [It] could be another twenty years before it shrinks back.

Sabin: How do you see scholarly research and publishing changing in your fields?
Curl: Most journals are beginning to have [an] electronic as well as a paper version.
Smalley: The question [is to what extent] refereed archival journals are going to be the way things are published. I think most of us agree we don’t have enough time to read the archived journals, let alone the trash things out there on the Web. To find anything that’s relevant, you have to do a search, and those articles that are published in the premier journals—the ones that are hardest to get into—are the most interesting. Normally, you don’t really need to look at anything (cont. p.4)
(Nobel Interview cont.)

else. But it’s when you sit down to write a paper in this field or you’re doing research for one reason or another that you have to dig down deeper. I can imagine we may end up having a reduction in the number of journals at some point.

Curl: I think libraries are getting a little bit more resistant to buying the journals.

Smalley: In scientific circles we’re getting closer and closer to the time when you just don’t need a piece of paper. It used to be that graphics were a big problem; you could get the text, but not the graphics. Now you can get [both].

Sabin: How do you see the library aiding your future research or the research of future Nobel prizewinners?

Smalley: As long as you can’t sit at a good-quality screen [with] good access and good image quality of every paper ever published and get a printout—which is certainly not true now—you have to go to the library to find it. I see it mostly as the place where the paper stuff is held, and you go and find it.

Sabin: We have a few questions about winning the Nobel Prize. What is the most surprising thing that has happened as a result of winning the Nobel Prize?

Smalley: I’m surprised that people think that you’ve won the Nobel Peace Prize. Even in the local Houston stations when they announced it a third of them actually said, “They got the Nobel Peace Prize (or the Nobel Peace Prize in Chemistry).” [When] you’ve been in science for thirty-some-odd years, of course you know the Nobel Prize.

Another surprise was: I expected that after I won this prize every time I walked through the airport or any other public place, there’d be this hush. Frankly, I actually went out and got somebody to [have] buttons made that said, “Ask me about the Nobel Prize.” It isn’t as big a deal as it seems.

Curl: I don’t know why I was surprised about it, [but] it seemed to me that people were really genuinely happy about it.

Smalley: I don’t recall any time in the past three months that I’ve encountered anybody who sees a negative about it. It just makes you smile.

Sabin: What would you say was the highlight of your stay in Stockholm?

Smalley: Getting on the airplane to come home.

Curl: We were awfully tired when we got back. I certainly found myself most nervous in the ceremony, which was the strangest aspect of all, because all you had to do was not to fall down. It really wasn’t a tough role to play, but I just found myself incredibly nervous.

Sabin: What did you enjoy most about winning the prize?

Curl: I enjoyed the recognition the most. I guess the thing I enjoyed the least: you have a fear that no faults, no booboos, no screwups, no human things that you do are going to go unnoticed and unpunished.

Smalley: The thing I enjoyed the most was seeing how much the Rice community enjoyed it. This is really a wonderful event in the history of Rice University. I feel good to have played a part in that happening.

And to me the part I liked least was the day after the Nobel Prize ceremony when CNN had us on for an hour and a half for “Nobel Minds.” The whole concept of “Nobel minds” bothers me—these brains that are especially good, guaranteed to be the biggest geniuses around. And you sit there and you’re not allowed to talk about your research. So for an hour and a half, [on] live TV, all through Europe, recorded broadcast around the world, they give you these big softball questions about the frontier of your field—science in general. They didn’t ask us about world politics, but we probably would have said something stupid if they had. This, I found, was really distasteful.

Curl: I don’t know how to handle those big softball questions. I still don’t know the answer to the question I was asked by [one] gentleman. That’s the sort of question where, if you really knew the answer, you’d be working on it.

Sabin: What effect will the Nobel prize have on your future work?

Curl: One of the questions is, “Will there be any future work?” [Winning the Nobel Prize] does consume a fair fraction of one’s time. The other aspect I can see is it ought to be a spur to try to make sure the work you’re doing is good, that it’s not incomplete or a falloff from what you did before. It does provide sort of an incentive to examine what you’re doing and try to come up with something better.

Smalley: That tendency could actually completely freeze you. Last night I was reading a book about running. [The author was talking] about how he had enjoyed learning to write. [He] said one of the things that will stop you from writing is [that] you become such a critic of yourself; you can’t get a sentence out, because it’s never good enough. You just completely freeze. Now, with word processors, you can get in and edit that sentence endlessly. You may never be satisfied with any piece of research; it’s just not up to that level. You may not want to put your name on it. Obviously, you need to kill that particular bug because it will keep you from ever doing anything.

Curl: I hope that [the Nobel Prize] somehow helps Rice. I think that it will.

Smalley: [to Curl] Have you donated one of your replicas [of the Nobel Prize medal] to the university?

Curl: Yes.

Smalley: The university will always have two of these medals—Bob’s and mine.

Sabin: Thank you very much—for the medals and for the interview.
Behind the Scenes: Database Management

With nine staff members, Database Management is the third of the three sections that comprise the Technical Services Department of the library. Although this section originally dealt mainly with online data (hence its name), it now includes four separate units: a Database Management Unit, a Materials Labeling Unit, a Binding Unit, and an In-House Repair Unit.

The Database Management Unit is staffed by three people (including the head of the section). Besides handling all of the corrections to the online catalog, this unit works to ensure that only one form of author, subject, series, and, in certain instances, title (called a uniform title) is found on cataloging records. For example, works on medieval literature are listed under “Literature, Medieval” and all works by or about Vincent van Gogh are listed under “Gogh, Vincent van, 1853-1890.”

Helen Gibbs, Preservation Specialist
Rita Marsales, and Lisa McLean handle all commercial binding.

To keep track of decisions made on forms of headings, we make “authority records,” listing the correct form of a heading and any variant forms under which people may look for that heading. References are put in our catalog under variant forms of headings to direct people to the form of heading chosen as the authoritative form. Nationally maintained files of names, subjects, series, and uniform titles are consulted to establish the authoritative forms used in our catalog. If no form has been established in national files, the correct form of heading is established locally.

The Database Management Unit is also responsible for resolving call number conflicts, converting manual bibliographic records to machine-readable form, changing locations of materials, replacing pages lost to mutilation, and withdrawing materials. In addition, the change to a new automated library system has necessitated many cleanup projects in which the unit has been involved.

Two persons make up the Materials Labeling Unit, preparing call number labels for all new materials added to the library. Items are also stamped with ownership and other stamps, and date slips (for checking out materials) are inserted where needed. When call numbers of old books become hard to read or when books are moved to new locations, new labels are prepared.

The Binding Unit, with three people, is responsible for sending unbound materials to a commercial bindery located out of state. Journal issues in the Current Periodicals area are regularly gathered up for binding when a volume is complete. Some new monographs, as well as older volumes that have seen hard use, are also sent for commercial binding. Volumes sent to the bindery are out of the library for a month; pre-shipment preparation and post-shipment checks lengthen the period of time that items are off the shelves to six weeks. The unit binds about 10,000 volumes per year.

The In-House Repair Unit consists of one person, plus student help. Books that are damaged through use or mutilation are repaired here, unless commercial rebinding is necessary. Paperbound books which are not commercially bound have a protective plastic coating applied to them. Some new paperbound items, especially music, are inserted in cardboard covers, while older, more fragile items are frequently protected in boxes. In fiscal year 1996 this unit handled over 12,656 items.

Fondren Library’s Preservation Coordinator, who is charged with educating the library staff and the public about preservation issues, is also part of Database Management. In addition to other preservation duties, the coordinator has direct supervision of the Binding and In-House Repair units.

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Head, Database Management
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Collection Development Specialists

News From Fondren is beginning a series of profiles of library staff members who specialize in collection development for specific subject areas.

John Hunter

John Hunter has been an enduring member of Fondren Library’s Reference Department, watching the changes in the library and in Rice University for almost two decades. Currently John is responsible for collection development for six academic disciplines: civil engineering, computational mathematics, computer science, electrical engineering, geology, and mechanical engineering. In addition, he provides research assistance at the Reference Desk and upon appointment.

John left Rice briefly in the late ‘80s. His decision to return to Fondren Library was based on the collegiality of Rice and the potential he perceived for affecting the institution’s direction.

Milton Figg

Although Milton Figg has been a member of the Fondren Library team for a little less than a year, he brings a wealth of experience with him, having worked in academic libraries for almost fifteen years before coming to Rice. At the University of South Mississippi and the University of Tennessee, he assisted library users with information needs and worked toward implementing electronic products. Milton also had responsibility for collection development for a wide range of disciplines, especially the humanities.

At Fondren Library, Milton is responsible for collection development in classics, history (including most of the area studies), philosophy, and religious studies. Milton’s academic background is in history, with a particular interest in late 19th-century Germany. Besides his master’s degree in history, Milton has also earned a professional master’s degree in library and information science.

A goal of Milton’s first year at Rice has been to establish strong working relationships with the faculty. Besides providing regular assistance at the Reference Desk, he also helped in the baseline analysis of the library’s collections. Milton is looking forward to expanding his involvement with Fondren Library’s growing collection of electronic resources.

Kerry Keck
Coordinator, Collection Development & Electronic Information Resources
keckker@rice.edu

John Hunter and Milton Figg check a bibliographic source.

Fondren Library to Take Part in Web Week

The library will be participating in Information Technology’s Web Week, a celebration of Rice’s achievements on the World Wide Web. Web Week will span March 17 to March 21.

The week’s events open on March 17 with the Fondren Library/Information Technology Lecture Series. Ed Fox, of Virginia Tech, will speak at 4 P.M. in the Kyle Morrow Room of the library. Other special events will include a College Bowl, a Technology Fair, and a series of workshops and lectures highlighting some of Rice’s most impressive Web pages.

The library will also sponsor special sessions on Internet searching strategies, Internet resources in the sciences and fine arts, government documents online, and rare books and manuscripts on the Internet. In addition, Fondren Library is planning some new online resources, such as a selection of speeches presented at the recent Economic Summit and an exhibit of Rice memorabilia.

For more information E-mail Pamela Pavliscak at: pamelamp@rice.edu.
Symonds Laboratory Offers Multimedia Environment on the Rice Campus

Located on the second floor of Fondren Library, the Gardiner Symonds Teaching Laboratory is a new multimedia classroom used by a variety of groups on the Rice campus. The Center for Technology in Teaching and Learning (CTTL) manages the facility and receives support from Fondren Library and User Services. This classroom, which opened in the spring of 1996, houses full-time classes, presentations, and workshops from many academic disciplines.

The purpose of the Symonds Laboratory is to develop and evaluate innovative educational methods using the unique architectural and multimedia environment. The multimedia sources available in the space enable instructors and students to use richer and more individualized information in the classroom, including the World Wide Web, online databases, diverse communication systems, and a wealth of imagery, music, and oral materials. In addition, the architectural design of the space and furniture promotes small group discussions and collaborative student work, reflecting international trends in academia and professional organizations.

Through a grant from the Culpepper Foundation, both a librarian and a psychologist manage most of the daily activities of the lab. The librarian, Doralyn H. Edwards, works with faculty in the lab to find and develop a variety of Web, print, and multimedia resources for use in class. In addition, Doralyn teaches Internet searching techniques and strategies to many of the classes in the lab. She has been particularly active in working with a Physics and Astronomy Foundations course, in which she maintained the resources sections of their Web pages and taught students how to find electronic and print information. Janice Bordeaux, the psychologist in the Symonds Laboratory, observes and surveys the students and faculty in the classroom to find ways to improve teaching in such facilities.

Although Fondren Library does not manage the Symonds Laboratory, there are a number of projects on which library staff members collaborate. Recently, workshops have been taught by Fondren Library staff for local school librarians, as well as for other library staff members. In the spring semester, there will be even more professional development workshops and collaborative CTTL/Fondren Library projects. To learn more about the facility, visit the Symonds Laboratory homepage on the Web at: http://cttl.rice.edu/projects/Symonds.

Doralyn H. Edwards
Data Librarian
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Did You Know...

RILM Abstracts of Music Literature has been added to RiceInfo. RILM includes two hundred thousand citations on international music, with coverage from 1967 to the present.

Another addition to RiceInfo is Library Literature. This publication indexes more than two hundred library and information science periodicals published internationally, as well as more than six hundred books per year. Coverage is from December 1984 to the present.

The Life Sciences Collection, published by Cambridge Scientific Abstracts, Inc., has also been added to RiceInfo. This collection offers over 1.7 million citations and abstracts to the world’s literature in twenty life science disciplines. Coverage begins in 1982.

The CD-ROM collection at the Reference Desk has been enriched by the addition of Global Newsbank. This resource contains full-text newspaper articles on current issues and events, selected from over one hundred American and Canadian newspapers. In addition, Global Newsbank includes articles selected from American and international news wires.

Also available on CD-ROM at the Reference Desk is Arts and Humanities Citation Index. This multidisciplinary index contains entries from approximately sixty-one hundred journals. Coverage is from 1975 to the present.
**Association of Research Libraries 1994-95 Statistics: Selected Comparison**

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Statistics compiled by Jean Caswell  
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