



# Public Relations in Academic Libraries: A Descriptive Analysis

by Nancy J. Marshall

**The need for public relations in academic libraries has often gone unrecognized. This article analyzes the results of interviews with 13 library directors on the subject of public relations. While most grasped the importance of establishing a strong public image, many have not actively pursued an organized public relations program.**

**F**or most organizations, public or private, a positive public image is vital to their overall success. Educational institutions, and specifically libraries, understand the necessity of positive relations with their various publics as insurance for the continued financial and emotional support that will lead to their ongoing growth and success.

The concept of effective public relations as an essential component of a well-managed library is not new. As early as 1958, the importance of public relations was discussed in the professional journals of the field.<sup>1</sup> Since the early 1970s, most public libraries have implemented at least some public relations strategies to interact better with their many constituencies including patrons, community members, and governing bodies.

Unfortunately, academic library administrators have not been as discerning as their public library counterparts in the implementation of formal public relations programs. In the present era when competition for funding in all aspects of higher education has increased dramatically, college and university library administrators must recognize the value of strong public relations efforts as a means of gaining support from their parent organizations. The importance of the college or university library is clearly evident to its staff, but administrators, faculty, other staff, and students may need some persuading to share this belief. Developments in information and communication technologies provide numerous opportunities for the library to position itself as a leader on campus by integrating these new technologies into the library's traditional roles.

Public relations performs the important function of communicating necessary information to various publics. In the academic setting, this includes informing fac-

ulty, staff, and students about new or existing library services, resources, and materials. Unless coaxed by the library, these groups may not effectively use the full range of services that the library offers to them. Any librarian can tell of interactions with upper-level undergraduates or graduate students who finally discover at the library the availability of the most comprehensive bibliographic database in their field only months before completing their degree. Their most common response to this discovery is "if I'd only known about this resource a few years ago." Informing users and potential users about the many materials available at the library is a basic, often unrecognized function of public relations.

The lack of research on the functions and effects of public relations in academic libraries prompted this study. Specifically, the study analyzes interviews with library directors about their perceptions of the role and extent of public relations in their institutions. The objectives were to discover who in each library was responsible for public relations, what public relations activities were conducted, and how effective these efforts were deemed to be.

## LITERATURE REVIEW

In their book, *Strategic Marketing for Educational Institutions*, Philip Kotler and Karen F. A. Fox define public relations for educational institutions as "efforts to obtain favorable interest in the institution and/or its programs, typically through planting significant news about them in publications; through obtaining favorable unpaid presentation on radio, television, or in other media; or through the institution's own activities or events."<sup>2</sup> This definition is particularly useful in the library setting because it addresses the role of public relations in a very broad sense and

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encompasses public relations in both external and internal arenas.

### **Importance of Public Relations**

A number of authors have addressed the need for public relations activities in academic libraries. Some even believe that it is costlier *not* to have a public relations program than it is to invest in one. Maureen Pastine states that "if we do not put staff time and energy into the planning and advocacy roles, we lose out in fiscal terms and in a potential negative image."<sup>3</sup> T. A. Aitufe echoes this idea with the comment that "it should not be forgotten than nowadays there is competition from many sources for the time and interest of students and staff. If no effort is made to capture the attention of students and staff, students may feel that the library is no better than a bookstore."<sup>4</sup>

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**"If a strong public relations program is, in fact, a necessity for academic libraries, why have these institutions been sometimes reluctant or hesitant to embrace public relations efforts?"**

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If a strong public relations program is, in fact, a necessity for academic libraries, why have these institutions been sometimes reluctant or hesitant to embrace public relations efforts? Charlotte Dugan, who responds to this question, blames this reluctance on several misconceptions. One of these is the argument that academic libraries have "a 'captive audience' in members of the academic community who need to use the library in order to be successful in their academic areas of teaching and research."<sup>5</sup> Dugan lists additional rationalizations: the belief that library funding is not a concern because it is linked to overall institutional funding, that promotion is not a part of the library's purpose, that promotion of the library and its services will create expectations and demand that are beyond the library's capabilities, and that reliance on the university's communication or development office to perform a public relations role will suffice.<sup>6</sup> In an article summarizing their library's observance of National Library Week, two librarians from Bowling Green State University state that "too often, the attitude that 'we

have a captive audience' or 'public relations is beneath us' interferes with a commitment to creative, relevant programming."<sup>7</sup> Their informal survey of 10 libraries found that only two observed National Library Week, probably the easiest library-related event to publicize.

### **Available Public Relations Information**

Very little research has been published on the effectiveness of public relations in public, academic, school, or special libraries. Although many volumes of "how-to" books and articles have been published specifically for librarians on the topic of public relations, these items have been written with the assumption that the reader has already been convinced of the necessity of a public relations program and fail to present actual evidence to support the benefits of such a program.

Vikki Ford's article on public relations in libraries is an exception. It has received substantial attention because it both reports research findings and focuses on public relations in academic libraries. Her research is cited frequently in other articles about public relations in libraries. Although the data are more than 15 years old, her study remains as one of the few research articles on the topic. She surveyed 48 academic library directors about public relations practices in their libraries and identified several trends based on the 41 responses. While nearly all of them reported that their library performed some form of public relations (PR), "less than half reported *planned* PR programs assigned to one person."<sup>8</sup> When asked to rate the effectiveness of their public relations efforts, the majority of respondents viewed their programs as "moderately effective,"<sup>9</sup> which seems a lukewarm response, at best.

### **Service Outside the Academic Community**

The groups served by academic libraries are often clearly defined as the faculty, staff, and students of the institution. Many libraries, however, do, in fact, serve a larger population. Academic libraries located in small communities frequently do so, for example, because access to information resources is limited. Other institutions have formally adopted a mission of service to the residents of their community, region, or state. Finally, some institutions simply see the benefits of serving all who are willing to make the effort to use their collection. Although there are

legitimate concerns that the library maintain its commitment to and emphasis on serving the information needs of its academic community, there is some evidence that the relatively small step of providing service to those who are not directly affiliated with the institution brings tremendous public relations benefits to the library. The experiences of a community college library in North Carolina are illustrative. Its efforts to provide information for local businesses as a means to support the local economy were so successful that the college administration even increased the library's budget.<sup>10</sup>

### **Specific Public Relations Tool**

A variety of public relations vehicles are available to libraries. One of the most common is the newsletter, which allows library staff to communicate information to many people quickly and efficiently. Sylverna Ford stresses that "if well thought out and properly planned, the library newsletter can be a valued source of useful information and a good public relations tool." However, she cautions that "if it is not done for the right reason, not directed to the right audience, or not properly presented, the newsletter will simply become another addition to a growing accumulation of worthless paper and an exercise in futility for the staff members who labor over it."<sup>11</sup> Obviously, the decision to implement a newsletter as part of a library's public relations effort should be given careful and thoughtful deliberation.

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### **Public Relations and Fund-raising**

Libraries have successfully employed public relations techniques as part of larger fund-raising campaigns. To some extent, all public relations efforts have an impact on the library's finances. In their article "The Ten Principles for Successful Fundraising," Gary A. Hunt and Hwa-Wei Lee maintain that the first step in fund-raising is to develop a positive image. Not only is a good image important, but the library "must take steps to communicate the library's accomplishments to the public in order to prepare the way for successful fundraising."<sup>12</sup> Patricia

**Table 1**  
**Summary of Institutions**

Library	Holdings (Total Volumes)	Type of Institution	Enrollment <sup>1</sup>	Community Population	Carnegie Classification (1994)
A	222,500	Private	1,750	120,000	Baccalaureate II
B	80,000	Private	947	120,000	Baccalaureate II
C	165,000	Public	2,900	13,000	Baccalaureate II
D	543,300	Public	9,150	15,000	Master's I
E	180,000	Public	2,092	5,600	Baccalaureate I
F	100,000	Private	1,116	100,000	Baccalaureate II
G	702,500	Public	7,577	10,000	Doctoral II
H	480,800	Public	9,598	160,000	Doctoral II
I	1,400,000	Public	11,274	60,000	Doctoral II
J	500,000	Public	9,102	51,000	Master's I
K	360,000	Public	6,194	160,000	Master's I
L	131,000	Public	1,302	7,000	Baccalaureate II
M	124,000	Private	1,269	5,000	Baccalaureate II

<sup>1</sup>Enrollment numbers gathered on July 13, 2000 from the Career Guidance Foundation's CollegeSource ONLINE database.

Berger found a positive correlation between public relations activities and budget allocation in public libraries. In addition, she learned that employment patterns such as a public relations expert on staff and a high involvement of directors and trustees further increased funding levels.<sup>13</sup> While her research looked at public libraries instead of academic institutions, it is clear that there could be some positive financial gain from an aggressive, well-planned public relations effort.

## PROCEDURES

### Selected Libraries

The population for this study consisted of academic library directors from various educational institutions in the Upper Midwest. In an attempt to achieve a balanced and fairly representative sampling, a mix of small, private colleges and mid-sized, public universities was selected. Fifteen library directors in Iowa, Minnesota, North Dakota, South Dakota, and Wisconsin were initially identified for the project. Thirteen of these directors ultimately agreed to be interviewed. Table 1 presents basic demographic information about each library, its college or university, and the community in which it is located.

### Data Collection

The researcher made personal visits to 11 of the 13 institutions. Interviews with

the directors of the other two institutions were conducted through a combination of telephone, fax, and e-mail. Before the interviews, all the library directors were faxed a shortened version of the survey questions. This allowed them to gather any needed statistics and samples of public relations materials. Each interview lasted between 40 and 75 minutes with the majority lasting about one hour. During the interviews, the researcher took notes on the survey form and tape-recorded the sessions for later reference.

The interviews all began with an explanation of the project followed by a series of questions. Each interview was unique, allowing the researcher to gain distinctive insights into each institution. Directors were asked who in their academic libraries (if anyone) had primary responsibility for public relations functions and what training or education in public relations that person might have. In addition, they answered questions about what public relations practices had been implemented and the perceived success or benefits of those practices. Finally, the directors were asked to rate the value of their library's public relations efforts using a five-step Likert scale. These ratings measured their perceptions of public relations' effect on funding, awareness, and use of the library. A small spreadsheet was constructed to compile the ratings

and calculate the mean rating for each factor.

## LIMITATIONS

The interview method of gathering data were selected specifically because it brought high-quality, in-depth information to the research project. However, this method did have several limitations. The interviews focused on library directors and did not involve other library staff. Likewise, the interviews did not include members of the libraries' constituency groups such as students, faculty, staff, administration, and community members. Finally, while the interview method gained information about the library directors' perceptions of the effectiveness of public relations in promoting awareness and use of the library and augmenting funding, it did not collect quantitative data as evidence of the effectiveness of these efforts.

## FINDINGS

When asked to participate in the study, the library directors were very accommodating. Initially, some of the directors expressed concern that their library did not really do any public relations and wondered what input they could provide. However, once the interview began and specific public relations activities were mentioned, it became clear that every li-

brary in the study performed at least some public relations.

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The interview questions effectively stimulated open discussions of the activities in use at each academic library. Plainly, many of the library directors in the study were uncomfortable with the public relations aspects of their job. Several directors questioned the necessity of public relations and wondered what benefits it could possibly bring to their library. One director had a particularly negative view of public relations. He believed that it is a tactic used by big companies or government to hide the truth. He considered sharing positive or upbeat news with the campus community a waste of his time. In his opinion, having faculty complain to the college's administration about the lack of materials in the library was the only effective way to bring about change. Complaints got attention and, therefore, results.

Many of the library directors stated that public relations, particularly internal efforts within the college or university, was very important for the library. All 13 library directors reported that they had at least some involvement in public relations. For nine of the directors, the responsibility for public relations was shared between the director and one or more professional staff. A student intern at one library was the only non-library professional mentioned as having some public relations responsibilities within the library.

#### **Public Relations Training**

Each library director was asked what training, if any, those who are responsible for public relations in their library might have had. Only six of the 13 respondents had received any formal education in this area. Of these six, five had attended workshops or conference presentations. Only one director had coursework or other more extensive training in public relations. The directors who had attended conferences or workshops reported that the sessions were primarily geared toward public librarians and that only a limited

portion of the information was relevant to an academic institution.

#### **Service Outside the Academic Community**

As anticipated, all of the academic libraries in the study allow community members to use their facilities to some extent, because of the limited information resources available in the surrounding region. Even the libraries located in larger cities are often one of just a few academic institutions in the area. With limited information resources available to community members, it is only natural that the academic libraries be expected to share their wealth of information. However, the researcher found that the libraries are even more open and responsive to their communities than had been foreseen. Comments from the library directors indicated that they recognized the high rewards that building positive community relationships can bring to their libraries.

#### **Public Relations Activities**

Typically, the library directors indicated that public relations efforts for their libraries focused on the campus community. They stressed the importance of maintaining a service-oriented staff and providing a quality product to patrons. Disseminating information about the library is seen as an important public relations goal, whether through newsletters, brochures, e-mail, or the World Wide Web. Public relations activities that bring campus and, in some cases, community members to the libraries include receptions held to celebrate major events such as completed renovation projects and National Library Week. In addition, many of the libraries sponsor special events, including bringing in guest speakers.

Every library director reported that, at some time, his or her library had published a newsletter, and eight of the 13 libraries in the study currently publish a newsletter for an outside audience such as faculty. Several of the library directors emphasized that this is an effective public relations tool. They appreciated the ability to reach a large audience with an instrument that is controlled by the library.

Each institution has a general Web page for the college or university, plus a separate Web page specifically for the library. The extent to which these pages are used for public relations purposes varies widely from basic information such as hours and location to complex presentations of electronic newsletters, special

collection descriptions, and friends of the library pages. Some of the librarians responsible for their library's Web page clearly recognize that users from a distance may access the site. They have carefully considered the amount and type of information that is made available. Others have taken a more parochial approach to their Web page design and have either chosen to ignore the needs of nonaffiliated users or have not even considered the possibility of others using the page. Contact information for the various libraries and their staff is one specific example of the differing levels of information provided.

The services of campus public relations departments are available to all of the library directors. When asked about library interaction with these departments, the responses varied from fairly high to minimal. For the most part, the library directors relied upon these professionals to assist with large events, usually receptions or guest speakers, and to send press releases to appropriate media outlets.

#### **Public Relations and Fund-raising**

Several of the library directors perceived that their public relations had an impact on fund-raising. Specifically, efforts of the libraries at two institutions generate considerable additional funding for the libraries. The friends of the library group at one library routinely raises between \$30,000 and \$40,000 for the library from ticket sales to special events and in response to donation requests to individuals or corporations. The fund-raising efforts at a second library are not focused on special events or a friends of the library group, but instead target donation requests to numerous constituencies at different times of the year.

#### **Effectiveness of Public Relations**

Twelve of the 13 library directors answered the questions in which they were asked to rate the effectiveness of public relations efforts in their libraries (see Table 2 for a summary of responses). One director declined to complete this portion of the survey. Because public relations efforts were not a conscious activity for the library's staff, he felt that public relations was not an ingredient in the success or failure of any of the factors. In addition, several of the library directors were unable to provide a rating for one of the seven factors.

The effectiveness of public relations efforts on the library's budget received a



**Table 2**  
**Effectiveness of Public Relations Efforts**

	Not Effective 1	2	3	4	Highly Effective 5	Mean
Library Budget <sup>1</sup>	0	3	3	2	3	3.45
Outside Funding/ Donations	0	2	3	4	3	3.67
Student Awareness	0	3	3	5	1	3.33
Faculty Awareness	0	1	1	7	3	4.00
Increased Use	0	1	4	5	2	3.67
General Campus Attitude toward Library	0	0	3	4	5	4.17
Community Awareness and Use <sup>1</sup>	0	3	3	3	0	2.64

<sup>1</sup>Only 11 respondents assigned a value to this question.

range of responses. The mean response was 3.45, with 3 out of 11 directors rating their public relations as a five, the highest possible score. Public relations was rated as having a slightly stronger effect on outside funding and donations than on the libraries' general budgets. The mean score for this question was 3.67.

Student awareness of the library's activities was rated as the second lowest of the seven categories. The mean score was 3.33 (see Table 2), although almost half of the directors rated their library public relations effectiveness in this area as a four. Faculty awareness of the library's activities was rated higher than students' awareness. The mean score for this factor was four, with 10 directors rating it a four or a five.

The directors had mixed opinions about the effect of public relations on increased use of the library. The mean response for this question was 3.67, with 75% of the directors rating this factor as a three or a four. The effect of public relations on general campus perceptions toward the library received the highest scores; the mean was 4.17 with nearly half of the directors rating their public relations efforts as a five. This was the only factor that did not receive any responses lower than three. The effectiveness of public relations on community awareness and the use of the library had the lowest scores of the seven factors. The mean score was 2.64. Three directors rated their libraries' public relations effectiveness in this area as a two, and it

was the only category that did not receive any ratings of five.

## DISCUSSION

The mean scores reinforce the general comments made during the interviews. Many library directors acknowledged that public relations can be effective in some instances, but felt that other factors are either outside of their control or are the result of multiple elements and, thus, not directly attributable to public relations.

Directors' reactions to the questions about the effects of public relations efforts on the library budget and on outside funding/donations are cases in point. Several reported that their budget is set using specific criteria such as enrollment and/or inflation rates. They believe it is simply not possible for them to get additional money from the campus administration. Public relations, they felt, would not have any effect on the budget. Outside funding and donations, however, are much more under the direct control of the library staff. In this area, public relations is seen as an important activity that can directly bring about increased funds.

At first glance, it may seem surprising that the ratings for the effectiveness of public relations on student and faculty awareness of the library were somewhat far apart (student mean = 3.33, faculty mean = 4.00; see Table 2). After all, both are campus groups that should be receptive to information about the library. The difference in scores, however, is consistent with the comments of the library di-

rectors at other points during the interviews. They observed that students can be a difficult group to reach with public relations efforts. An immediate research need is often the catalyst that brings them to the library and forces them to learn about the resources and services that are available. Most students do not share the ongoing concerns for the library's quality and growth that faculty members would have. Moreover, faculty can often be reached easily through both traditional and newer electronic means such as newsletters, invitations, and e-mail.

The library directors' middle-of-the-road responses to rating the question of increased use of the library were expected. It is difficult to explain use patterns in a library. The availability of computer labs or study space may generate increased traffic, but this may not be directly related to public relations. In addition, faculty requirements that students use library resources or even visit the library to read designated materials in the reserve collection may be a big factor in defining use.

The library directors rated the general campus attitude toward the library as being highly influenced by public relations. They indicated that, to whatever extent faculty, staff, and students actually use the library or are familiar with specific materials and services, publicity about the library and its resources can generate an overall positive impression.

## Public Relations Activities

In general, the public relations activities considered effective by most of the library directors were those reaching the largest audience. Newsletters and e-mail messages were often mentioned as being particularly useful, although the fact that five of the libraries do not publish a newsletter speaks to the high levels of staff time and financial resources that are needed for such an effort. Both newsletters and e-mail are used as instruments for library staff to reach appropriate members of the campus community. Newsletters reach large numbers of people. E-mail, on the other hand, quickly and efficiently targets either small groups such as individual faculty members or large groups such as the entire campus community. Successful receptions and special events, those with either large attendance or good media coverage, are also considered useful. However, many of the directors indicated that activities requiring a high amount of staff time and attention and not

generating large crowds are not effective. Several library directors commented that they would like to be doing more public relations but feel that they have other duties more important and demanding. Public relations is one activity that is often considered a luxury and is, therefore, subject to neglect.

The reason for the low level of interaction between libraries and their university's public relations departments could not be clarified from the information gathered during the interviews. It is possible that the librarians do not approach these communication professionals and ask for needed assistance. On the other hand, it may be that the public relations departments do not appreciate the many exciting and innovative activities that are occurring in modern academic libraries and are not aware of the potential that libraries have to generate news. Library staff may wish to consider establishing stronger and more dynamic relationships with university public relations departments for a mutually beneficial association.

### **Service Outside the Academic Community**

The fact that every academic library in the study provides extensive service to community members is encouraging. The level of service to this group is much higher than expected and reflects the strong ties that all of the institutions have with the community. Service to the community is a very important public relations tool whether recognized as such or not. The libraries are accepted as part of the larger community and act as a bridge between the community and the college or university campus. Library staff, however, rarely target community members for public relations. Understandably, academic library directors may be wary of over-publicizing their libraries and creating more demand for materials and services than can be met by existing resources and staff. They may also be concerned about competing with local public libraries. These are valid concerns not to be ignored. On the other hand, older community members can be thought of as potential financial and/or material donors while younger ones may be future college students. Both groups are thus important to academic libraries. Balancing

the concerns with the potential advantages can be difficult, but the promise of long-term benefits for the libraries exists.

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### **FURTHER RESEARCH**

Clearly, public relations is an important topic that needs additional attention in the literature of librarianship. In particular, research-oriented information providing evidence of the benefits of public relations would be welcomed. The nature of this research could take many forms. One area to be considered is further analysis of the effectiveness of public relations in academic libraries. Do library patrons know what is available in the library and how did they gain this information? What are the attitudes of various campus and community groups toward the library? Also, worthy of consideration are the effectiveness of specific tools such as newsletters, press releases, or special events and the potential of electronic tools such as e-mail and the World Wide Web. It would be useful to know which groups respond to these newer public relations tools as opposed to more traditional vehicles. Finally, this study asked the opinions of library directors while future studies might focus on other library staff members such as reference librarians or public service librarians. It is quite possible that their views of public relations efforts would be entirely different than those given by library directors.

### **CONCLUSION**

None of the libraries included in the study have a formal, written public relations plan in place. This lack of planning not only limits the effectiveness of public relations, but it also reinforces critical statements that are often made about public relations. Because some of the library directors openly shared their reservations about the importance of public relations, it is not surprising that they have not implemented public relations plans. The lack of public relations training of academic library directors also may have hin-

dered their ability to generate a public relations plan. Without the confidence that their public relations abilities and strategies are adequate, library directors may not feel that it is wise to pursue an active public relations effort. This is an unfortunate circumstance because effective public relations has the capacity to bring so much to libraries.

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