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The Persistence of Perception-Against the Grain

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The Persistence of Perception

Tennessee State University, along with several other historically black institutions, was founded as a land grant college in 1890. It began its academic life in 1912, as a “normal” school for descendants of Africans brought to America, usually aboard slave ships in 1912. It opened its doors to students as Tennessee Agricultural and Industrial College in 1927 and earned a reputation throughout the region as a teachers’ college. Due to the achievements of Wilma Rudolph and the Tigerbelles Track Team, who earned several gold medals in the Olympics and the notoriety of Ed “Too Tall” Jones of Dallas Cowboys fame, the school gained a lot of recognition for its athletic programs in the 1960s and 1970s.

Along the way, the Tennessee A & I underwent several changes that culminated into its transition to Tennessee State University including a court ordered merger with the University of Tennessee at Nashville in 1979. Today, TSU has two campuses and five colleges: The College of Engineering and Technology, The College of Arts and Sciences, The College of Business, The College of Health Sciences and The College of Education. It also has three schools: The School of Agriculture and Consumer Sciences, the School of Nursing and the School of Graduate Studies, as well as an Institute of Government which grants graduate degrees in Public Administration.

The Brown-Daniel Library on the Main Campus was built in 1977, and like many state university libraries, its book budget flourished under in the 1960’s and 1970’s, allowing it to purchase multiple copies of many titles. However, as the state’s budgets decreased in later decades, its allocations to TSU dwindled and the university, in turn, gave smaller allocations to the library for books and other resources. By 1996-1997, the

library had a state allocated book budget of \$97,803.20 and after gift funds and carry overs from deposit accounts with book vendors were added in, the total came to \$151,969.94. This was the amount that the library received to support nearly 40 majors, including several masters programs and at least two doctorates. It had a very limited number of basic databases such as ERIC, Infotrac, OCLC Firstsearch and H.W. Wilson CD-ROMs.

Needless to say, the library was battling spiraling prices for books and periodicals and therefore, could not afford to purchase sufficient books or pay for new periodical titles to effectively support the expanding curriculum and meet the needs of approximately 8000 students. Classroom faculty routinely told their classes to visit other area libraries such as Vanderbilt or the Public Library of Nashville in order to locate the information needed for their research. Many of the faculty failed to visit the library on a regular basis to become familiar with new resources and services or schedule their classes for library orientaton.

During 1998-1999 the situation changed dramatically. The university underwent a self-study as a part of its preparation for the renewal of its accreditation by the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools (SACS). The Brown-Daniel Library's longtime Director of Libraries and Media Centers, Dr. Yildiz B. Binkley, used this opportunity to draw attention to the library's limited space, precarious funding, and the need to update the collection. The next year, the book and periodicals budget was doubled and it has been over \$1,000,000 in the years following.

This has allowed the book collection to flourish. Not only did we update the collection with new titles, but we were able to do some retrospective purchasing and fill

in gaps from previous years using Choice Recommended Titles lists, OCLC/Amigos Collection Analysis CD and other bibliographies. The university has aggressively sought funding from Title III, a government grant that supplements historically black colleges and universities. Under Dr. Binkley's leadership, the library has been successful in gaining Title III multi-year commitments for the purchase of databases, microfilm, and expensive journals in the fields of biology, agriculture, and nursing.

The university's allocation for the library's book budget is now more than four times what it was during 1996-1997 and seventy five per cent of the budget is allocated to the academic departments for faculty selection. In addition, to our print collection of more than 437,000 book titles and 1520 active serial subscriptions, we also have e-book collections such as netlibrary, safari books and Books 24/7. We subscribe to 136 databases, funded from a million dollar budget. The Library has an active library liaison program and encourages department chairs to hold at least one faculty meeting a year in the library's Smart Classroom and place a library orientation on the agenda. We offer an orientation for faculty at the annual Fall Faculty Institute, as well as a library orientation for new faculty, once the semester gets underway. We also visit department chairs and departmental meetings. We provide off campus access to all of the library's resources, including items in Special Collections Dept, which has had a digitizing program since 1996. Yet, we still find that some of our faculty continue to refer students to go to other area libraries, without bothering to check our holdings.

There are several key factors that contribute to the misperception that we have a less viable book collection than some of our area peers. Older faculty refuse to relinquish the impression that our collection is still inadequate. They seldom visit the library and

will not browse our website. Newer faculty will send orders for books we already have in the collection and have been there for quite some time, because they refuse to check the online catalog. They simply assume that the books are not there. Newer faculty are also sometimes influenced by word of mouth from their colleagues and often do not take the time to come to the library. They would rather go straight to Vanderbilt University and try to use their collection. I also believe that there is a perception among a minority of our faculty, students and the public that because we are an HBCU, we are poor and simply cannot compete with the peer institutions in our area.

At the annual Fall Faculty meeting in August 1999, the library director requested a slot on the agenda to demonstrate our web page. Afterwards, she received an overwhelming number of telephone calls from faculty who were not aware of the updated resources the library could offer. In the following years, the library faculty at TSU has been fighting an ongoing battle to market available resources and inform the university community that we have the means, materials, and expertise to meet their research needs. We advertise new services on the university listserv that goes to everyone on both campuses. We notify departments of new services that directly support their curriculum. We have had great success advertising our new course reserve system with Docutek and the relatively new "Ask A Librarian" online reference service has helped us reach out to our users in new ways. We are trying to entice potential users to the library by enhancing our popular periodical browse area, establishing a books of popular interest area, initiating a library book club and maintaining an Art Corner for the display of local artwork. The Public Services Department is getting more involved in information literacy and have compiled several subject modules. In conjunction with the information

literacy modules, the Library Director has requested that Deans and Department Heads allow librarians to come into their classrooms to teach course related bibliographic instruction.

We have also created a library committee that specifically deals with library public relations. Our librarians feel that the best way to combat the persistence of perception that our collection has insufficient resources is to take every opportunity to emphasize our capabilities. The perception of inadequate resources was not born in a day and it will not go away quickly. However, if we proactively seek means and methods for keeping our patrons informed about our services and collection, the perception will gradually vanish.