

69 Livingston Ave.,
Grimsby, ON L3M1L4
May 9, 2011

Mr. Patrick Deane,
President of McMaster University,
Hamilton, ON.

Dear Mr. Deane:

As a retired McMaster librarian with thirty-one years of experience, I feel compelled to write to you concerning developments in the McMaster libraries that I find deeply troubling. In a talk given on April 8th, 2011 at Penn State University, McMaster's University Librarian, Jeffrey Trzeciak stated, "My approach to the library in general is that we are a lab, we should be a place of experimentation." Later, "... the worst that can happen is you'll fail So what? Just try something new." This is exactly the problem. Mr. Trzeciak is using McMaster libraries as his grand experiment. While a few of the initiatives he has taken during his tenure have been positive, such as the digitization and upgrading of electronic facilities and resources, many are not. I fear that if Mr. Trzeciak is allowed to continue with his sweeping transformation for another five years, McMaster will be left with a library that is gutted and soulless.

I present to you his vision statement for the library. "McMaster Library will be recognized as Canada's most innovative, user-centred, academic library." One of his missions is "teaching students to be successful, ethical information seekers." Lofty ambitions. But how can Mr. Trzeciak claim to be "user-centred" when he has gotten rid of the majority of experienced librarians, many of whom used their experience in teaching students valuable research skills. Over the course of a career a librarian develops a broad and specialized knowledge base that cannot be replaced. It will take years for the new librarians to gain the same knowledge. I, for one, was a Government Documents Librarian. It took considerable time and effort for me learn what we had in our collection and its wealth of primary source materials. I often explained these materials to classes.

According to Mr. Trzeciak, it is unlikely he will be hiring any new librarians. Statistics from the Association of Research Libraries 2005/2006 show McMaster as having a total of 30 librarians (7 in the Health Sciences Library, 23 for the libraries under the University Librarian), plus 4 professional staff and ranking at the very bottom of their list of 113 libraries in terms of librarian numbers. The Canadian Association of Research Libraries showed in 2005/2006 the total number of librarians and professional staff at McMaster as totalling 34 compared to a provincial average of 48.95 and a national average of 49.98. Therefore, at the beginning of Mr. Trzeciak's tenure, the library was clearly short of librarians. During the course of his tenure,

however, the number has fallen even lower, reduced by almost a third. We have now a total of only 23 librarians (7 in the Health Sciences Library, 16 for the libraries under the University Librarian, 4 of whom are associate librarians in administrative positions). We are in need of more librarians to carry on the functions of the library. To fill that need, Mr. Trzeciak has hired four post-doctoral research fellows who are shared with other departments on campus. He intends to hire more in the future, but no new librarians. With respect, post-docs, while academics and scholars, do not have the same specialized training in library management, reference services, collections development, information technology and teaching research skills as librarians. Librarians are called librarians for a reason. They have been educated in a profession just as are teachers, lawyers and accountants. Their profession is librarianship. They have chosen this work as a career. They are dedicated, committed and enthusiastic about working in libraries.

McMaster students are being further disadvantaged by the elimination of face-to-face interaction with reference librarians. In Mills, in place of four former reference desks in the Reference, Government Publications, Serials and Music departments, there is now a situation of "blended service" consisting of only one service point for circulation, reserves, interlibrary loan and what is called "research help." The research help is provided by para-professionals, basically trained support staff who, as one of several other duties, answer students' questions, but do not provide in-depth research help. This is not their fault, as they were forced into this position in the restructuring. It is doing both the para-professional staff and library users a disservice to have them believe that anything other than basic reference service is being provided. So where is a student to go to find help with specific research needs? They are on their own, unless they specifically book a "research consultation" with a liaison librarian, if there is still one left in their subject area. This is about as far removed as librarians can get from the students. Also library instruction seems to be moving away from face-to-face instruction, where students can ask questions of the instructor. It is the intent of the University Librarian to "dramatically increase the use of online (versus face-to-face) delivery." While online instruction may be fine as one type of teaching method, it is not a replacement for the human interaction with teaching librarians who present a human face to the library. Without this the library will become for them nothing more than a warehouse for books.

Under the library's stated value is "inclusiveness and respect for the individual." This value has not been demonstrated by Mr. Trzeciak's treatment of the library staff. In his experimentation, he has restructured the entire library, even boasting that every single position in the library has changed, as though this were something to be proud of. Such radical change, made in such a short time, has completely demoralized the staff. He himself admitted that the

fourth year was “deadly”. Two highly talented, respected and experienced librarians were victims of his restructuring and downsizing. They were initially moved from their supervisory positions into newly created positions which a short time later were conveniently made redundant. Several waves of librarians and staff were forced to take early retirement or severance packages. An atmosphere of fear over job loss prevailed among all staff and prompted the formation of a librarians’ union. The same uncertainty and fear continues to this day as no one knows what will happen next. The ruthlessness and speed, coupled with the complete lack of forewarning or communication with which the restructuring and cuts were made is unprecedented and demonstrates little regard or respect for individual employees. Mr. Trzeciak seems to make decisions quickly without consideration of the consequences and without communicating adequately his plans or the purpose of his actions.

Another value cited on the Library website is “accountability for our actions and decisions.” There appears to be no accountability for Mr. Trzeciak’s actions or decisions. His autocratic, uncommunicative method of administration allows for little opposition or dialogue. This is not the collegial atmosphere of the library in which I once worked. Today library staff feel powerless to state their views or question decisions made. At the beginning of Mr. Trzeciak’s appointment, librarians had recommended a peer review for the University Librarian every five years, but no such official review was approved and never took place. Hence Mr. Trzeciak is free to do whatever he wishes for another five years, despite the fact that he had resigned at the end of his term and then changed his mind and was invited back. Where is the accountability?

Of very great concern to me as it should be to everyone at McMaster is the amount of precious library space that Mr. Trzeciak has given away to other campus teaching, learning and conferencing units most of which are not strictly related to library functions. It seems that Mr. Trzeciak wishes to ingratiate himself with everyone on campus to the detriment of the library. The entire third floor of the Thode Science and Engineering Library was handed over to the Integrated Science Program. Currently all science journals are being moved from the second floor to the basement. In Mills the most open and pleasant student study areas were surrendered to the Centre for Leadership and Learning, the Society for Teaching and Learning in Higher Education (a provincial group), the McMaster Health Forum, the Lyons New Media Centre, and the Bertrand Russell Research Centre. Future space give-aways are slated to accommodate a new Data Commons, and a Digital Commons.

At the same time, Mr. Trzeciak prides himself on doubling the library’s seating capacity. He plans to double it even further in the next few years. Where is all this space coming from? Without doubt, it will come from the areas housing the collection. The collection will need to

be radically downsized to achieve his goal of "reducing the footprint of the Library's physical collections." This process has already begun. It appears that Mr. Trzeciak's vision of a library is one that is full of computers, e-books and journals and video games, but very few books. While there is a trend toward electronic publishing, we are not yet at the stage of virtual libraries. Research libraries are judged on the strength of their collections in all formats, whether electronic or paper. It would be foolhardy to dispose of books and journals that are necessary to the research of faculty and students. By his own admission, Mr. Trzeciak states that circulation and reserve figures have increased, and they have done so quite dramatically. So obviously the collection is being used. Mills Library has a rich collection of books, periodicals and government documents that for over a century has been carefully built by faculty and librarians to support the university's course work and research. In Government Publications where I worked, the collection was one of the finest in the province holding valuable historical and current collections of Canadian, American, British and United Nations documents. But even if the collection is reduced to make way for more seating and new facilities, where will all the new in-coming material go? Will we stop buying books and journals? The Library has almost reached its capacity already. This is a situation of which Mr. Trzeciak is either unaware or chooses to ignore, while merrily giving away more and more library space.

The McMaster community deserves better than this from its University Librarian and library. It is incumbent on the university administration to become involved and act. Librarians, post-docs and library staff should be free to voice their views and concerns without fear of reprisal as has happened in the recent past. I have great respect and affection for McMaster and am proud to have been employed there as a professional librarian. However, I am saddened to see the reckless changes Mr. Trzeciak has been allowed to make, all for the sake of "innovation". He certainly has "shaken things up" as apparently he was told to do. But when you shake things up too much, too fast, things fall apart. This indeed is experimentation at its worst. I appeal to you to promptly initiate a review before any more library space is given away and the library staff, service and collections are compromised. I would like to be informed of any actions taken by the university administration in this matter. If there is no change, I will be withdrawing my financial support to the library.

Yours sincerely,

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cc Ilene Busch-Vishniac, Provost and Vice-President (Academic)

Jeff Trzeciak, University Librarian

McMaster University Academic Librarians Association

McMaster University Faculty Association

Canadian Association of University Teachers. Librarians' Committee