

Top issues facing academic libraries

A report of the Focus on the Future Task Force

by W. Lee Hisle

In the spring of 2001, Deanna Marcum spoke to a group of academic librarians at the ACRL National Conference in Denver and challenged us to think beyond our everyday issues. She admonished us, and the profession in general, to concentrate on the big issues facing academic librarianship.

Over the next couple of days in Denver, several of us who attended the lunch agreed that we should focus our intellectual energies on this challenge. As a result, in the fall of 2001, ACRL President Mary Reichel established the Focus on the Future Task Force to "help the association meet the challenge of keeping our focus on the big questions—those questions which have the potential to help academic librarians shape and change their services to further improve learning and research."

From the beginning, the task force was to be an inclusive effort, involving representatives from other academic library associations, such as the Association of Research Libraries, the Coalition for Networked Information, the International Federation of Library Associations, and the

Council on Library and Information Resources.

Over the past year, the task force has collected data concerning the most important issues facing academic libraries. Librarians at open forums, both online and face-to-face, have articulated the issues they believe are most pressing,

the issues we must deal with effectively to retain the important role of academic libraries in the academy. Some 300 librarians have been involved in generating ideas for this list. Their thoughts have been reviewed and similarities noted. The following list represents the most often expressed issues (not necessarily in priority order).

Top issues for academic libraries

1. Recruitment, education, and retention of librarians.
2. Role of library in academic enterprise.
3. Impact of information technology on library services.
4. Creation, control, and preservation of digital resources.
5. Chaos in scholarly communication.
6. Support of new users.
7. Higher education funding.

Top issues

1. Recruitment, education, and retention of librarians. The need to find and retain quality leadership for libraries is a core issue for the future. Even as retirements seem to increase, fewer librarians are entering the profession as a whole, and fewer librarians are entering the academic library field in particular. Ensuring education of new librarians and reeducating existing librarians with skills and knowledge to support new roles in a digital

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information age, especially roles involving teaching and library promotion, is a challenge for the profession. Indeed, the continued relevance of the MLS to academic librarianship may be in question. In addition, low salaries and the lack of diversity in the profession were relevant subtopics, often mentioned as problems that need collective action.

2. Role of library in academic enterprise. Librarians are dedicated to maintaining the importance and relevance of the academic library as a place of intellectual stimulation and a center of activity on campus. Even so, some feel that libraries are becoming marginalized. Librarians believe that it is essential that we emphasize information literacy instruction and the importance of the teaching role of librarians. We must find ways to promote the values, expertise, and leadership of the profession throughout the campus to ensure appreciation for the roles librarians do and can play. Though access to information is increasingly decentralized, and computer labs now compete with libraries as campus gathering points, librarians must demonstrate to the campus community that the library remains central to academic effort.

3. Impact of information technology on library services. Librarians are aware that an appropriate institutional balance needs to be maintained between traditional library materials and services and those services (which sometimes overlap) represented by instructional and information technology departments.

Should libraries house campus information commons? Should libraries report through an "information czar," rather than through the traditional academic hierarchy? These are among the challenging questions for the profession and the academy. It is also important, though difficult, to maintain technological currency in the

face of decreasing resources, rising costs, and differing views about institutional funding priorities.

4. Creation, control, and preservation of digital resources. Methods to determine what should be digitized, to find resources to do the work, and to develop appropriate bibliographic control mechanisms for digital materials offer complex challenges. In addition, librarians want to ensure that digital materials are preserved appropriately and that permanent access to those materials can be provided.

5. Chaos in scholarly communication. Librarians advocate the need for fair scholarly communication models as copyright laws change or are reinterpreted and challenges to fair-use in a digital context continue to be made. Traditional library/publisher relationships may change substantially. The consolidation of the information industry under a few large vendors is a substantial threat as it represents possible homogenization of information and the potential for monopolistic business practices. The rise of the Web as the first choice for student and faculty researchers represents a departure from traditional scholarly research patterns. Overcoming the apparent lack of commitment by the commercial information industry to future access of information will be an ongoing challenge for librarians.

6. Support of new users. Librarians articulate the need to provide appropriate services and resources to new users, whether distance education students or those involved in new teaching and learning methods. The organizational patterns of academic libraries are thought to be a barrier to providing these students with access to instruction and information appropriate to their educational style. Librarians would like to take advantage of student enthusiasm, creativity, and technical skills. At the same time, librarians observe the general and growing lack of literacy among students, along with flexible ethics that tolerate plagiarism and copyright violations and show a general lack of respect for scholarship and research.

7. Higher education funding. Considering the current state of the economy, librarians face the possibility of reductions in funding that could have a deleterious effect on library programs, salaries, and resources. Creative thought and action will be required to

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Share your thoughts and ideas

Future issues of *C&RL News* will include responses and commentary on this list of big issues. In particular, the task force is seeking creative thought on how to move the profession forward to address the challenges facing us. Please contact any member of the task force to express interest in contributing. For a list of task force members and contact information, go to <http://www.ala.org/acrl/dol-taskforce.html>.

child collections of any public garden in the South. The peak season is February through April. Nearby is the seven-acre VanLandingham Glen, with 3,000 hybrid rhododendrons, 1,000 trees, and the largest collection of native plants in the region.

Best places to go with kids

• **Discovery Place** (301 N. Tryon St.). Hands-on science museum and Omnimax theater.

• **New Museum of the South** (200 E. Seventh St.).

• **Charlotte Trolley** (2100 South Blvd.). Take the family for a 30-minute ride on a fully restored 1930s streetcar. Board the trolley behind the Southend Brewery (2100 South Blvd.). Call (704) 375-0850.

Getting around Charlotte

Uptown (Center City) Charlotte is a visitor-friendly, compact locale—set within tree-canopied plazas and streets—and is easy and safe to explore on foot. If you are a fan of public transportation, you will be delighted with



Aerial view of Lowe's Motor Speedway, considered the hub of NASCAR in the Southeast.

Charlotte's free **Trolley Car buses**, which provide 43 stops on a round-town loop, with free pick up at each stop, every seven to eight minutes.

Notes

1. "Towers, trees and more: Charlottes's best, worst," *Charlotte Observer*, 9 May 2002, sec. A16.

2. Pat Borden Gubbins, "Bank on Fun in Charlotte" *Atlanta Journal-Constitution*, 4 August 2002, sec K8. ■

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compensate for the already low pay of librarians, as well as the rising costs of materials and technology. The question asked is, "How can libraries provide access to the information students and faculty need when the cost of resources is rising so precipitously?" In addition, librarians must face the challenge of competition from other organizational units during these times of scarce resources.

What's next

The task force sees this list as the first iteration of an ongoing effort; plans are being made to institutionalize the data collection and reporting for a regular feature in *C&RL News*. In addition, the task force, due to disband after the 2003 ALA Annual Conference, is making recommendations for an "ACRL home" for this effort. It will also make recommendations on using the information collected in association programming.

The task force will present a program at the ACRL National Conference in Charlotte: "Focus on the Future: Big Issues for Academic Librarians," involving the executive directors

of ACRL, ARL, CNI, and CLIR. They will speak about their perceptions of the real and ideal roles their associations will play in dealing with the big issues in front of us.

The task force hopes this first list of top issues will generate reaction and discussion, both positive and negative. Ideally, libraries, associations, and individuals will look to their actions on how to respond to the issues presented. Strategic planning and conference planning might be built around these issues. ■

A special thanks

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