

Guest Editorial

Working Together for a Better Tomorrow



The 1995 holiday season was a very special one for my husband and me, and one we shall long remember. We had the opportunity to celebrate not only with our six-year-old granddaughter (and her parents) but also with our five-month-old grandson (and his parents). It was a time not only for rejoicing but also for remembering what is truly important in life and reassessing the value of our assorted enterprises.

Of what value, I might well question myself, are my efforts as Dean of Libraries and the Library and Information Science Program at Wayne State University to the future well-being of these precious young people or for the grandchildren of other men and women? And of what value are my efforts as ACRL President? In the greater scheme of things, does it really matter that ACRL has a new Strategic Plan? Surely my professional work must bear some relationship to what is most important in my life or I could not justify the level of investment I make in time and energy. So this is a special message for those of you who, like me, also question from time to time the value of your work as an academic or research librarian.

I believe now, as never before, that academic and research librarians have a strategic role to play in contributing to the well-being of current and future generations. Our abilities to organize, provide access to, and preserve information have always been of public value. However, the realities of the ever-expanding information glut of our data-rich/knowledge-poor society require more aggressive leadership on our part in order to ensure that people from all backgrounds and lev-

els of society can locate, access, evaluate, and effectively use information to address the decisions and problems in their lives. I can not expect a good future for my grandchildren if they must live in a world populated largely by the have-nots.

I also think that most librarians share in my belief of the potential value of their contributions to the well-being of individuals. (In all my speaking engagements, I have yet to find a single person who became a librarian for fame or riches!) Most of us entered librarianship because we had a work experience in a library that caused us to believe that, as librarians, we could make a positive difference in people's lives. Of course, the constant budget cuts, the unending stream of half-awake students needing to be introduced to the research challenges of an academic library, and the necessary business aspects of library operations can weary us. And sometimes it is the seeming, or real, lack of appreciation for our contributions—particularly by faculty—that causes us to question the value of our efforts.

The latter is almost ironic given that, increasingly, leaders in K-12 and higher education are acknowledging the importance of resource-based learning that actively engages students in learning from the very information resources that will be available to them after graduation or drop out—when the lectures and the textbooks are no longer available. Last November, for example, California State University held a systemwide conference on information literacy, with faculty and librarians from all of its twenty-one campuses participating. But while there is

growing concern among higher education leaders for more active undergraduate learning (frequently prompted by state legislators' concerns for faculty productivity and businesses' demands for graduates who can communicate well and be effective problem solvers), many leaders still do not see the relationship between the role of librarians and improved undergraduate learning.

What can we do to make sure that our potential contribution will be called upon to improve undergraduate learning environments? What can we do as a professional association to enhance our collective contribution? My answer is the same as that recently expressed to members of the National Association of State University and Land Grant Colleges by its president C. Peter Magrath. In a December 1995 letter, Magrath called for an expanded focus on addressing state and local governmental relationships. Quoting from University of Virginia president John Casteen, he emphasized three points: (1) "unity within the state higher education systems is essential for public support," (2) national organizations must be willing "to work on a partnership basis with key state interests," and (3) "advocacy for higher education must attract third party supporters who will state our case because, in part, we are meeting their needs."

It seems that the dilemma of academic librarians parallels that facing higher education in general. Librarians have a lot to offer, but that potential will come to naught unless librarians can act in unity within states, unless we can work in partnership among our state and regional chapters and ACRL, and unless we can get other nonlibrarian advocates to champion our cause. What does this mean for individual ACRL members and for our association? Let me suggest a number of things.

First, our newly adopted Strategic Plan is right on target. Two of its four goals, developed by our membership, acknowl-

edge that we must operate in the broader higher education and information policy environments, that we must help shape those environments, and that we must build partnerships to promote desired outcomes. Just as ACRL cannot accomplish the above goals without support from its members, another goal acknowledges that academic and research librarians from across the country need support—specifically in the area of continuing professional development—from ACRL. (The fourth and final goal commits us to be wise in the use of our resources in accomplishing our endeavors.)

Second, I believe that Magrath's comments speak to the absolute necessity of rethinking the relationship between ACRL and its chapters. We need to shake out the mental and historical cobwebs and clearly define what chapters want and need from ACRL and what ACRL wants and needs from its chapters in order to accomplish its membership's priorities as articulated in the Strategic Plan.

This defining process is far from complete. For example, just this fall a task force made up of two members from Chapters' Council and three members from the ACRL Governmental Relations Committee, and chaired by ACRL past-president Tom Kirk examined what can be done to streamline and strengthen the impact of ACRL's Washington efforts—their report was accepted by the ACRL Board at Midwinter and will result in changes for both groups. In addition, informal discussions have been taking place for over a year among Chapters' Council and ACRL leadership to define wants and needs—some of which are becoming clearer. The following is what I have been hearing:

Chapters' Needs

- Quality continuing education offerings that can be available at the state/regional level.
- Quality publications.

- Information on a wide range of topics (many of these requests come from individual institutions).

- Good representation and good results in issues related to information policies and federal legislation that affects higher education and its libraries.

- Support in influencing state legislation and regional accrediting efforts.

ACRL's Needs

- A way to meet the continuing education needs of librarians and non-MLS library employees who cannot attend national conferences.

- Support from the state level on national policy and legislative initiatives.

- Support from the state level on regional accreditation initiatives.

- Proven chapter leadership to move into ACRL positions.

This informal list of chapters and ACRL's needs appears to be quite complementary; but the challenge will be to set up a relationship that facilitates productive interactions and that provides appropriate incentives. I believe that there is no more important challenge facing us than this.

Finally, I believe we need to take more seriously Magrath's call to unity. Historically, librarians have had little political clout. If we cannot come together for the common good—the common advancement of librarians as partners in the provision of quality education and economic development—then there is little hope for the realization of our potential contributions. While my particular focus is on academic and research librarians, the coming together must embrace librarians from all types of libraries. The respect, or lack thereof, that is accorded to school and public librarians has everything to do with how academic librarians are perceived and even more to do with how the information needs of people are met.

Elizabeth Martinez's call for ALA to be the champion of people's rights to intellectual participation should be our rallying cry. Can we do less than respond by emphasizing what we have in common rather than emphasizing our differences? I hope not; for, to a large extent, the quality of my grandchildren's futures is dependent upon our response.

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