

Pamela Snelson

Communicating the value of academic libraries

The 2006–07 ACRL President's focus

While I was still a candidate for ACRL President, the keynote program at a PALINET annual conference sparked my interest in the issue, the value of academic libraries. At this meeting Michael Gorman, then ALA president-elect, and Keith Fiels, ALA executive director, were part of a panel presentation. Gorman spoke to the values of libraries and librarians, ideas such as stewardship, service, and intellectual freedom. As a good counterbalance, Fiels discussed the value of libraries and remarked that he had found little information on the value of academic libraries. "Could this be true?" I asked myself. After a bit of research I concurred with Fiels—there *is* a paucity of research on the value of academic libraries. Public libraries have had success with return on investment (ROI) analysis, and school librarians are able to measure the contribution of the library to student achievement. But academic libraries have more difficulty with establishing their value. I decided that day, if elected, I would make communicating the value of academic libraries the focus of my ACRL presidency.

Support of strategic plan

Having served on the ACRL Board during the creation of ACRL's current strategic plan—"Charting our future"—I knew that the value of libraries was a key component. My focus on communicating the value of academic libraries supports two strategic objectives in the plan's Goal Area of Leadership. These are:

1. empower members to communicate the value of their contributions to learning and scholarship, and

2. increase recognition of the value of libraries and librarians by leaders in higher education, information technology, funding agencies, and campus decision-making.

As I began to think about what I could do to further these objectives I came to the conclusion that the first step would be knowledge—What is it that is valuable about an academic library? Any measurement of value would be useless unless it measured something important to our provosts and presidents. School and public libraries have already developed useful metrics. ROI is meaningful to a city business manager or mayor; correlating test scores with library metrics can impress a school superintendent. But what is it about an academic library's achievement that can be used to communicate its value? And what is value, anyway?

Value from other perspectives

Going to a favored source, the online Oxford English Dictionary (OED), I find this definition of value: "The relative status of a thing, or the estimate in which it is held, according to its real or supposed worth, usefulness, or importance."¹

Is a library valuable just because it is a library? Or does our value change in comparison to other units on campus? The OED also offers this quote from Hobbes' *Leviathan* to illustrate the definition: "[Let men] rate

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themselves at the highest Value they can; yet their true Value is no more than it is esteemed by others. ”²

To be successful librarians need to explore the value of the library from the perspective of different types of administrators to gain a comprehensive understanding of the library’s value to the many constituencies on campus. These administrators may include presidents, chancellors, provosts, vice presidents for advancement and finance, and deans responsible for residential life. We need to develop a research base to determine what the higher education administration values about libraries, and values in ways that affect funding. Only then we can measure and assess our programs and services to effectively communicate the value of academic libraries.

I would like answers to the following questions:

- What do higher education administrators value about libraries?
- What is it about library programs and services that could make a compelling argument for funding?
- How do librarians translate the value a library brings to the higher education enterprise into advocacy?
- How do librarians demonstrate the library’s impact on student learning?
- How do librarians articulate that libraries are making a direct contribution to student learning?

As librarians begin to understand what value we bring to higher education, we can translate our requests for additional funding into programs, services, and new partnerships that speak to this value. I believe this understanding is predicated on conversations with those who sit at the highest levels of academic administration. It is a bit like doing a 360-feedback for libraries to learn where we could add value and where we might not be aware that we add value.

My presidential focus, then, is to start the conversation about, and add to the research base of, the value of academic libraries. To accomplish this, three activities will result during my presidential year.

Research with provosts

Upon my request, ACRL contracted with the Library Research Center at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign to conduct phone interviews with chief academic officers (CAOs). In an introductory letter, CAOs were told ACRL would like to know more about what the academic librarians should be communicating to them and their colleagues, and the types of information needed to help them make informed decisions about resource allocations for libraries.

Twenty-six interviews have been conducted. The CAOs in the study are from universities, colleges, and community colleges, and the range of institutions represents good diversity in size and location. The interview responses were notably consistent. To briefly summarize: quality, centrality, and demand are key.

“The findings suggest that librarians need to attend to the classic formula of measuring quality, centrality and demand—quality of services and collections as measured by outside authorities and responses of users; centrality of the library to the mission of the college or university as it evolves in a digital age; and demand for its services by faculty and students.”³

One practical piece of advice—Librarians need to be more aggressive in asking for resources. Librarians often assume we won’t get what we need. It is a fatal strategy to let this assumption guide our decisions about asking for funding. Additional information from this research will be forthcoming.

Program at the ALA Annual Conference in Washington, D.C.

My President’s Program Planning Committee⁴ worked with the Library Research Center on the CAO study. They are planning a program for the 2007 ALA Annual Conference in Washington, D.C., geared toward effective communication practices and learning how the library is valued by CAOs. A panel will feature three CAOs, plus a moderator. The panelists will hear brief, detailed scenarios involving academic libraries and respond by indicating what they would want and need

to hear from their librarians about the situation. There will be time for general audience discussion and a brief overview of the CAO research study.

“From the Inside” column in *C&RL News*

You probably know at least one academic librarian who changed fields and is now working in another area of higher education. I think we can learn a great deal from higher education administrators who know libraries. To this end I am editing a series of columns for *C&RL News* written by higher education administrators from all types of offices, who are former academic librarians. I will ask them to share their insights on how librarians can tell our story in terms our academic administrators will understand, and how ACRL members can communicate their value.

Questions I am asking include: From your “outsider’s” point of view, what is the value of an academic library? How do you see academic library/librarians contributing to the success of your students and faculty? Can you talk about how librarians can best

express their need for resources for the library? Which arguments are particularly effective?

I am very encouraged by the quality of the work to date and the response from ACRL members when I’ve discussed my presidential focus. If we can turn the answers to my questions about value into concise, yet powerful messages for our advocacy efforts, librarians will have the power to communicate the value of libraries, and we will be recognized for our contributions to learning and scholarship.

Notes

1. Oxford English Dictionary, dictionary.oed.com/.
2. Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, 1651. Ed. Michael Oakeshott (Oxford: Blackwell, 1960): 57.
3. Leigh Estabrook, Interim Report, 2006.
4. Committee members include John Budd, Mary Carr, John Collins, Sally Kalin, Michael LaCroix (co-chair), Loretta Parham, Celia Rabinowitz, and Lisa Stillwell (co-chair). *zz*

(“ACRL in New Orleans,” cont. from page 484)

Each speaker drew upon his or her extensive use of local historic resources to study the ethnic groups that make up the fabric of New Orleans. The program extended principally to European immigration and to those ethnic groups from Europe and Africa that have joined with immigrants from the Caribbean, Latin America, Asia, and other parts of the world in helping to form the unique society of New Orleans and surrounding areas.

Magill focused on the British influence, one of the West European influences one does not so often associate with French New Orleans. The English and Scottish were very much a part of the city’s financial community during its golden days. Meneray focused upon the settlement patterns, interethnic diversity, and the impact of the Civil War upon the immigrant population. Irish, Sicilian, and Jewish immigration formed part of this history.

Clark described her research on the period from 1700 to 1810, using archival resources to reconstruct the experience of the largest group of immigrants during this period: people of African descent, including Creole African Americans and free people of color. Although published scholarship on these early New Orleanians is still relatively sparse, the archival sources bearing witness to their arrival and lives are especially rich and were left relatively unscathed by Katrina. Details that emerge from these records about family, religion, and economic networks suggest new ways to “see” the iconic architecture of the French Quarter.

For more information and bibliography on ethnic groups in New Orleans, see the program Web site at www.lib.byu.edu/estu/wess/2006program.html.—*Barbara Walden, University of Wisconsin-Madison, bwalden@library.wisc.edu zz*