

Lisa Janicke Hinchliffe

The value of academic libraries

A look forward

A good friend of mine has a saying “grateful not grumpy,” which always brings a smile to my face with its gentle rebuke. Certainly there are many things one could be grumpy about at the moment—the economic downfall and fallout, uncertainty, increased workloads, the chaos of the beginning of a new school year, threats to privacy, etc.

What I see, however, is that academic and research librarians have chosen the grateful route—focusing on the positive and working proactively and collaboratively to create a vibrant and exciting future for our users and our profession.

As ACRL president, one of the most rewarding parts of the role is the opportunity to talk with our members. Through such conversations, as well as chapter visits and complementary online exchanges, I have learned about the many creative and innovative ways librarians are responding to the challenges that face us. I find this same positive and future-focused perspective prevailing on the ACRL Board of Directors and in my interactions with ACRL staff.

It is truly a privilege to lead our professional association as we work to take strategic actions that leverage our collective strength to catalyze positive change and to create programs that support and engage our members. By working together, we strengthen our relationships with one another and accomplish more than we could alone.

The initiative

Under the leadership of our past-president,

Lori Goetsch, the ACRL Board of Directors took bold action to begin the Value of Academic Libraries Initiative. Spurred on by a briefing paper authored by Director-at-Large John Lehner, this initiative is a multiyear, multifaceted project intended to empower academic librarians with data and methods for demonstrating library value relative to institutional goals and objectives.

During the 2009 ALA Annual Conference, ACRL hosted a meeting on the value of academic libraries with representatives of the ACRL leadership, ACRL staff, and library research community who have studied return on investment and the value of libraries. From the lively and provocative discussion at this “think tank” emerged the vision for the Value of Academic Libraries Initiative.

The report

The ACRL Board of Directors moved quickly to allocate funding for an in-depth, comprehensive, and systematic review and analysis of the current state of research on library value and return on investment.

ACRL contracted with Megan Oakleaf, assistant professor in the iSchool at Syracuse University, to produce the recently released “Value of Academic Libraries: A Comprehensive Research Review and Report” (www.acrl.ala.org/value/).

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Anticipated to become a touchstone document for research on academic library value and for academic library advocacy, this report summarizes what is known on this topic as well as identifying research and data gaps.

Library leaders are encouraged to share the report with their library staff, campus leaders, and colleagues. In fact, the report features a “tear out” Executive Summary that can stand alone as the Board recognizes that most campus decision makers are extremely pressed for time. Likewise, library leaders might share the research agenda with faculty researchers in library and information science, education, sociology, and other fields as well as staff in institutional research, assessment, and faculty development in order to engage a broader community in answering questions about library value.

Your feedback is needed

In the coming months, ACRL will be moving forward with creating professional development opportunities for training in methods to document and communicate value, posting a complementary toolkit of resources, seeking funding for additional research, and providing opportunities for librarians to share their findings through conference presentations and publications. We also want to hear from our members. How have you used the report? What would be most useful to you in the next phases of the Value of Academic Libraries Initiative?

Your feedback on “Value of Academic Libraries: A Comprehensive Research Review and Report” will inform the ACRL Board of Directors as we move to create a new strategic plan.

The Board will also be considering the inspiring report “Futures Thinking for Academic Librarians: Higher Education in 2025” (www.ala.org/ala/mgrps/divs/acrl/issues/value/futures2025.pdf) by David J. Staley and ACRL staff member Kara Malenfant as well as input from discussions at the ACRL

Leadership Council meetings during the 2009 ALA Midwinter Meeting and 2009 ALA Annual Conference.

The current strategic plan, published in 2004 and updated annually since then, has been a powerful roadmap for the association. The report documenting our activities and accomplishments is impressive—more than 40 pages of ACRL member and staff contributions to improving the profession and the association. With so much accomplished, it is time to set new goals and objectives. A draft of the plan is anticipated to be released in the late fall and will be discussed during the 2010 ALA Midwinter Meeting.

ACRL 2011

I cannot end this column without making mention of our upcoming ACRL 2011 conference (www.ala.org/ala/mgrps/divs/acrl/events/national/2011/program/). This signature event is, as I would have expected, shaping up to be an outstanding professional opportunity with the highest-quality speakers, exhibitors, and events. Pam Snelson, chair of ACRL 2011, her team of more than 200 volunteer members, and the ACRL staff have really out-done themselves.

I am proud to be sponsoring a scholarship for one of the attendees along with Joyce Ogburn, vice-president/president-elect; Lori Goetsch, past-president; and Erika Linke, past-past-president and chair of the ACRL 2013 conference (yes, we are planning ahead for that next conference already!). I look forward to seeing you at ACRL 2011.

If you have the ability to contribute to the ACRL Friends and the scholarship fund, your generosity is most appreciated. But, just as important is your contribution through sharing the value of ACRL to your professional career with other colleagues and encouraging them to join you in Philadelphia or through the virtual conference option as we explore our theme of “A Declaration of Interdependence!” *Z*