

Steven J. Bell

## Grassroots leadership

Alive and well in ACRL

**M**y year as ACRL president now winds down to its final few weeks, and I find myself reflecting on the many great opportunities and experiences that constitute a whirlwind year of having the privilege to serve all the members of this dynamic association. Among the most memorable of them are visits to ACRL Chapter conferences. Over the course of my three-year term I will have traveled to no less than 13 chapters. Each offers a chance to meet members and better understand what that chapter contributes to its constituency and ACRL. These visits fit well with this leadership series message: good leaders strive to continuously learn for constant improvement in order to more effectively respond to and lead those they serve. Many of the chapter member-leaders that I met are putting this philosophy into practice in leading at the regional level. One of the themes that emerged from all these visits is that grassroots leadership is essential to the sustainability of our chapters. This “bottom-up” style of leadership is helping to make chapters and ACRL better partners in building an association that consistently delivers great value to its members.

### Leading and not waiting

Attending multiple chapter conferences opened my eyes to the significant diversity among the chapters, not only in size but also in programming, member engagement, community building, and more. While all the chapters I visited do good work for their members thanks to dedicated Boards, some stood out owing to the greater depth and

breadth of their local activity. I witnessed some extremely well-attended programs that offered a robust conference experience. Other chapters are developing ways to engage all academic library staff through committee participation. Some have the resources available to offer scholarships to LIS students. What these chapters appear to have in common is strong grassroots leadership. Eager to serve their members, they move forward using local resources and energy. While support from ACRL, when needed, is appreciated, these chapters demonstrate their independent nature and ability to acquire the resources they need locally. As is typically the case with grassroots leadership, they have a bottom-up style for getting things done, not waiting to be asked or directed, but instead leading the way.

### Qualities of grassroots leadership

Supplementing my chapter visit experiences, I discovered a book titled *Enhancing Campus Capacity for Leadership: An Examination of Grassroots Leaders in Higher Education*.<sup>1</sup> It examines how grassroots leadership is taking hold in higher education, and the positive change resulting from the emergence of informal leadership on campus. The observations of the authors and the case studies they provide parallels what I see happening in our association and the libraries of our

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members. Instead of waiting for those with formal power or authority to create change, individuals throughout the organization are accepting the challenge to satisfy an unmet need, to fill a gap or develop a solution for a problem we may all acknowledge but which few have the wherewithal and persistence to tackle. Here are some of the qualities that define grassroots leadership:

- counterbalances top down leadership where a rigid administration may serve as a barrier to innovation or experimentation;
- focuses attention on a campus issue or challenge currently being overlooked or ignored; this can include service or ethical challenges;
- contributes to the betterment of the institution by creating needed change, especially that which advances student learning;
- accomplishes tasks that top-level administration lacks the ability to achieve owing to institutional or organization barriers;
- advances social justice on campus by helping the institution to fulfill the higher education mission of creating equal opportunities for all students to succeed academically; and
- improves the quality of relationships between members of the campus community and those who live within the local community surrounding the campus.

### Examples from the field

My appreciation of the possibilities that arise through grassroots leadership enabled me to begin noticing academic libraries in which it was being practiced. At the ACRL 2013 poster sessions, I learned of a library that took the initiative to help globalize the institution by establishing relationships with the library of a Chinese university. In time, that venture led to closer relationships between the two campuses, along with more students from China enrolling at this college. It was grassroots leadership from within the library that advanced the institutional effort to globalize. Multiple academic libraries, seeing the need to provide relief to their students in the form of textbook affordability, are developing alternate textbooks projects. Whether sup-

porting faculty to write open textbooks or enabling them to create customized sets of digital learning materials using library and other content, we see academic librarians leading the way at their institutions to help give faculty the tools and methods needed to ditch their commercial textbooks in favor of free or low-cost alternatives. In each case it is the library that is identifying a need, recognizing that no one on campus is filling it, and taking the risks to position the library as a hub of academic leadership. Grassroots library leaders are taking the initiative to create change.

### Leaders on campus

These and other grassroots leadership efforts speak to the essence of this series. New thinking about academic library leadership means identifying where the opportunities exist on campus because no one else is developing solutions to the problems crying out for attention. In the age of grassroots leadership it is unnecessary to wait to be asked to solve a problem. Instead library staff must take the initiative to establish themselves as leaders who can, from the grassroots level, create change on their campus.

I began this series with a call for ACRL members to think of themselves as member-leaders who would help ACRL to advance the Plan for Excellence in whatever capacity they were serving their fellow members. Whether the good work they do is on their campus, within their chapter, or at the national level, this is the time when good grassroots leaders are needed. Thank you for allowing me to have the honor and privilege of serving you as your association president. I hope to see you in Chicago at my president's program where the topic, quite expectedly, is leadership.

### Note

1. Adrianna J. Kezar and Jaime Lester, *Enhancing Campus Capacity for Leadership: An Examination of Grassroots Leaders in Higher Education* (Stanford University Press, 2011). 