

Camila A. Alire

Advocating to advance academic libraries

The 2005–06 ACRL President's focus

A conversation I had with an academic library dean some time ago was one of the most telling discussions I have had. We were talking about an active component of my professional service agenda. That is, I continue to be a strong proponent of library advocacy (academic and public libraries) and provide workshops on that topic through ALA's Advocacy Now! program. The focus of the ALA program concentrates on advocacy with decision makers who can affect libraries in one way or another. Those decision makers could be individuals and/or groups, such as state and federal legislators, city councilors, county commissioners, board of trustees, board of regents, campus presidents, and provosts.

My colleague congratulated me on my efforts but inquired about what was being done to advocate with campus faculty, who could be a large group of proponents for the academic library. My immediate response was: "With everything else I have to do, I barely have time to do advocacy at the campus administrative levels and the state/federal legislative levels."

Immediately, I saw a problem with my response. And, I am a problem-solver. Just because I, as dean, didn't have the time to bring the advocacy program to another level, didn't mean that it shouldn't be done. I instantly saw a connection—why couldn't there be parallel advocacy efforts operating: 1) a grassroots effort of frontline academic library staff empowered to systematically advocate for academic libraries on campuses, and 2) the efforts of library administrators advocating at the other levels?

Advocating for academic libraries is critical. We are constantly challenged with realities such as reduced funding and budget cuts, for-profit competition, demand for more electronic resources and services, and so on. We can no longer act like we have a captive audience on our campuses. We need to become advocates and convince others to help champion our cause to meet the missions of our colleges and universities to better serve our students and faculty. We can't and shouldn't do this alone.

Another conversation

When I ran my idea by several frontline academic librarians, I didn't see the same passion in their eyes. Imagine that! What I saw was the "deer in the headlights" look; and rightfully so, as I soon found out.

Although they understood my passion to address this problem, they had legitimate concerns. One of these colleagues expressed concern that she was not prepared to do campus advocacy; she felt she didn't have the skills to be successful. The other colleague didn't think that he or others would be empowered (that is, allowed) to do frontline campus advocacy.

Soon after these conversations, I was asked to stand for ACRL president. I knew what my major platform would be.

What is advocating from the frontlines?

Advocacy includes "the concept of citizen-initiated action to improve the quality of life

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in their environment.”¹ Frontline, grassroots advocacy is having those academic library staff—who are working with students and faculty on a daily basis and who already have the competency and credibility in dealing with their customers—take the leadership in advocating for the library at the campus level.

Why are frontline library staffs the most appropriate people to handle grassroots academic library advocacy? Kaplan writes about the *scaffolding principle of learning* that can be applied to the process of advocacy. This learning principle connects new learning to previously acquired knowledge. In our case, scaffolding builds the advocacy message on the background knowledge of the advocates—the frontline academic library staff. “Action . . . is best implemented by the individuals who have a frame of reference on which to build advocacy.”² Library staff should be applying what they do best—linking information resources and users—to advocate for their academic libraries.

How do we prepare our folks?

It might seem that being a library advocate is natural, but many of us don’t know how to do it. Instilling advocacy skills in our frontline library staff requires a two-pronged approach: 1) prepare them with the persuasion skills to be effective; and 2) equip them with a systematic advocacy action plan that they can take to inform faculty and students about academic library issues. Advocacy should be based on a common vision that can be easily communicated and understood.

Not all academic library staff should be advocates. There are six levels of advocacy desire and determination. It is my hope that many of our library staff see themselves somewhere between Levels 2 and 6:

- Level 1 – You shouldn’t get involved in academic library issues with your faculty.
- Level 2 – You believe library staff should become advocates, but others are suited for this type of work.

- Level 3 – You strongly believe you should become a better advocate for academic library issues, but you don’t know how.

- Level 4 – You know how to become a stronger academic library advocate, but you wonder if you can make a difference and if it will take too much time from other important goals.

- Level 5 – You have already become an effective advocate.

- Level 6 – You are continuously advocating on behalf of academic libraries.³

What is important is that our library staff be prepared to support the advocacy effort for academic libraries. Not to be adequately prepared will lead to miscommunication and lack of understanding. Kaplan provides an advocate’s checklist of questions for frontline advocates to consider:

1. What ways have I defined the objectives and how to achieve them?
2. Have I assessed the background of the knowledge of faculty I want to persuade to support the academic library objectives?
3. How can I help the individuals to support advocacy points to reflect their own thinking?
4. How have I included the need to transfer the information communicated to other situations?⁴

One of my commitments as ACRL president is to encourage academic library staff to consider grassroots advocacy and then to offer the training necessary to prepare them with power of persuasion skills that will develop their self-confidence to advocate effectively for our libraries.

ACRL’s strategic plan: Charting our future

My focus this year is “Charting our future: Advocacy to advance academic libraries.” This is in line with the ACRL Strategic Plan’s strategic area: “Higher Education and Research” and the goal area of “Advocacy.”

I have assembled the Taskforce on Academic Library Advocacy, chaired by Pat Smith and Nancy Davenport. This group of folks

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is working hard to design and implement a strong grassroots academic library advocacy program. They will be offering a workshop at the 2006 ALA Annual Conference in New Orleans, as well as a toolkit for ACRL members. This process is modeled after the effective Academic and Research Library Campaign and, like this campaign, will be ongoing as we train folks to be advocates.

I encourage you to look for our 2006 ALA program “The power of personal persuasion: Advocating for the academic library agenda from the frontlines.” Hope to see you there!

Notes

1. William M. Harris and Aubrey Thagard, “University-Based Planning: Faculty Advocacy Roles,” *The Western Journal of Black Studies* 25, no.4 (2001): 189–93.

2. Sandra Kaplan, “Advocacy as Teaching; The Teacher as Advocate,” *Gifted Child Today* 26, no. 3 (Summer, 2003): 44–45.

3. Cathy Collins Block and Richard Long, “Strong Voices for Literacy,” *Reading Today* 21, no.5 (April/May 2004): 16.

4. Kaplan, “Advocacy as Teaching; The Teacher as Advocate.” *✍*