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Braving 21st-century challenges

ACRL, 2000–09

The first decade of the 21st century was one of great challenge for academic and research libraries. Technology was advancing at a rapid rate, the world was dealing with major economic issues, and people were struggling to adjust to a society in a post-September 11 world. Even though it was a new millennium, some of the issues facing libraries seemed perennial.

In 2000, ACRL presidential candidate Ray English reflected on the technological advances of the 1990s noting in *C&RL News*, “The new technologies have put us in a position to provide richer information resources . . . but the new environment is also more complex and more demanding, both for our users and for us. As we’ve provided library resources and services electronically, we’ve created whole new library functions at the same time that we’re continuing operations of the print based library.”¹

One has to wonder if English realized how relevant his words would continue to be 15 years later. The first decade of the new millennium saw an explosion of new technology, including social media. When the Y2K crash did not happen at 11:59:59 on December 31, 1999, the world stepped up to move into the future. ACRL was at

the starting gate.

Scrolling through an issue of *C&RL* or *C&RL News* in the 2000s is eerily similar to reading a current issue, with the focus on scholarly communication, distance learners, library assessment, and values-based librarianship.

The pivotal event of the decade was September 11, 2001. For weeks virtually everyone remained glued to their television as the world struggled to understand why.

In an essay that appeared on the Harvard University website, Sidney

Verba wrote, “The work of the library becomes more meaningful, more important. Libraries are the most humane of human institutions; the opposite of terrorist cells. Libraries are gentle, benevolent. They celebrate the best of what we are. True, they do contain the history of human folly and of human evil. . . . Terrorism is one of the most inhumane and uncivilized of all acts. But capturing the history of all we



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humans do (good and bad)—is one of the most human and civilized of activities.”²

Verba’s eloquent words spoke to the heart of what we as librarians, and the library as an institution, hold dear. The library is a safe haven, a place of refuge, and terrorism would not change that. In the last few years libraries have displayed this benevolence and generosity as they remained open and served the community in the face of tragedy and disruption.

After September 11 everyone, including libraries, was struggling to find ways to cope in a world that had been drastically altered. Libraries debated the need to protect patrons’ rights while also trying to serve the needs of our country. In the immediate aftermath of the terrorist attacks, Congress passed the USA PATRIOT Act. ALA immediately had concerns about the impact of the “expanded law enforcement surveillance and investigative powers.” Library advocates, including ACRL, began monitoring changes in the legislation and urging changes that would protect patron privacy rights and the confidentiality of library records. Throughout the decade and beyond, the “Washington Hotline” in *C&RL News* would closely monitor revisions and challenges to the legislation.³

Major initiatives during this decade included the creation of the Scholarly Communication Task Force to determine how ACRL could best support the growing movement, approval of the Standards for Libraries in Higher Education, and the founding of the Excellence in Academic Libraries awards.

Scholarly communication would become a major focus throughout the decade. At the 2002 ALA Midwinter Meeting, the ACRL Board of Directors approved the creation of a Scholarly Communication Discussion Group, a Scholarly Communication Standing Committee, and the recommendations of the Scholarly Communication Task Force, which called for ACRL to be “actively engaged as one of its highest strategic priorities” for the next three years.⁴ The

scholarly communication initiative would focus on four areas:

- education of librarians, faculty, and higher education administrators,
- advocacy of various kinds,
- coalition building and developing an action plan within the higher education community, and
- research.

The Board felt that “these priorities mesh nicely with ACRL’s strategic plan and the organization’s core values, which focus on enhancing the effectiveness of academic and research libraries to advance learning, teaching and research in higher education.”⁵

ACRL also developed a new strategic plan that sought to structure future goals around “four planning horizons: action planning (one-to-two years out), strategic planning (three-to-five years out), critical factors (five-to-ten years out), and envisioned future (ten-to-30 years out).”⁶ The plan was approved at the ACRL Board of Directors meeting at the 2004 ALA Annual Conference.

ACRL defined its core purpose as “lead[ing] academic and research librarians and libraries in advancing learning and scholarship. Core values included visionary leadership, adaptability, service, integrity, diversity, learning, and dedication to the “values of higher education, to intellectual freedom, and to upholding ‘The Library Bill of Rights.’”⁷

The plan posits an ambitious leadership goal, asserting that ACRL will be “responsible and universally recognized for positioning academic and research librarians and libraries as indispensable in advancing learning and scholarship.”⁸ Goals were created for strategic areas that encompassed higher education and research, the profession, and the association. The strategic plan remained in place until the development of the “ACRL Plan for Excellence” in 2011.

The 2000s saw the debut of the ACRL Virtual Conference, professional development webinars and webcasts, ACRL OnPoint

chat series, podcasts, adoption of ALA Connect for virtual committee work and networking, and a strong social media presence, including wikis, blogs, Facebook, and Twitter. ACRL ended the decade with 2,600 fans on Facebook, 1,050 Twitter followers, and 900 LinkedIn ACRL community members.

Membership increased 10.8% from 11,524 to 12,780 due in part to the creation of Interest Groups. In the aftermath of the near collapse of the economy in 2008, a recession, and ensuing financial fallout in higher education (and associations), ACRL faced a world of increased accountability in higher education and would embrace the growing challenge for demonstrating the value of academic libraries.

Notes

1. Raymond A. English and Mary Reichel, "English and Reichel share plans for ACRL,"

C&RL News 61, no. 2 (February 2000): 122–26.

2. Sidney Verba, "Thoughts about the library, librarians, and our hopes and fears." *C&RL News* 62, no. 10 (November 2001): 978.

3. Michele M. Reid, "The USA PATRIOT Act and academic libraries: An overview." *C&RL News* 70, no. 11: 646–50.

4. "ACRL at Midwinter Meeting: Actions of the ACRL Board of Directors," *College & Research Libraries* 63, no. 3 (March 2002): 185–88.

5. Ray English and Deborah Dancik, "ACRL's new scholarly communication initiative," *C&RL News* 63, no. 5 (May 2002): 356–58.

6. Ibid.

7. "ACRL Strategic Plan," *C&RL News* 65, no. 8 (September 2004): 440–42.

8. Ibid. *zz*

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