

Choosing our futures: ACRL's 8th National Conference

By Robert Renaud

The Nashville conference will offer strategies for the future

Urgency and excitement filled the air as the executive committee organizing the 1997 ACRL National Conference in Nashville met at Midwinter. The urgency related partly to timing. ACRL's decision to hold its national conferences every two, rather than three years made it seem as if every decision had to be made yesterday. The excitement arose as the committee got down to discussing the conference theme. Representing college and research libraries of every type, the committee formed a microcosm of the profession. What emerged was a remarkable consensus summed up in the conference theme, "Choosing Our Futures."

As committee members related their experiences and concerns, they agreed that academic librarians could no longer afford to wait passively for the future to happen. Downsizing, financial crunches, and increasing competition will force libraries to choose between alternative futures. Their position on campus and their ability to serve faculty and students will depend on their ability to choose and act.

In addition to the overall conference theme, the committee arrived at five subthemes which will attempt to capture the imaginations of academic librarians.

Partnerships and competition

In the 1990s academic libraries find themselves in a crunch that shows no signs of ending. The financial problems experienced by many colleges and universities have forced painful cutbacks. In order to respond to these pressures,

many libraries have entered into, or are considering, partnerships in various forms, including the outsourcing of technical service functions. Libraries also find themselves competing for scarce resources with organizations both on and off the campus. Some of our best suppliers are now attempting to bypass the library to serve our customers directly. Some of our campus colleagues are looking at how they can assume new roles as their old ones fade. The twin poles of partnership and competition challenge the basic culture of librarianship and push librarians into unfamiliar roles. How will we learn to compete shrewdly and use strategies like partnerships to our advantage?

Changing work, roles, and organizations

Technology, downsizing, and the new demands being placed on college and university libraries are forcing radical changes in work and organizations. Like private companies, many libraries are working to break down hierarchical structures in favor of flat, team-based organizations. Similarly, the nature of the work performed by librarians is changing. The need to be proactive and visible on campus is bringing librarians into closer and more continuous contact with faculty and students. What organizational structures will work best and how will our new work affect recruiting, library education, and career paths? How will we assume new roles and extricate ourselves from old ones?

Funding

Traditional sources of funding for academic libraries are under increasing pressure. Institutions seeking to balance strained budgets are cutting staff and acquisitions funds and demand-

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ing more financial accountability. In response, libraries are renewing their efforts to find alternative sources of funding through grants, donations, and ongoing partnerships with private companies and other units on campus. How can libraries ensure that their funding in the future supports quality collections and services?

Learning

Colleges and universities are revolutionizing the classroom. The cost of educating students in traditional classroom settings is forcing creative experiments and new approaches based on technology and the more effective use of faculty. In addition, growing knowledge of how students learn is prompting changes in teaching strategies. The resulting diversity challenges library services based on past "one-size-fits-all" approaches. How will libraries adapt to rapidly changing learning and teaching styles? What will the impact of the learning-centered university be on services, staff, and facilities?

Social responsibility, equity, and diversity

Throughout these subthemes run other concerns: social responsibility, equity, and diver-

sity. From the perspective of librarianship as a profession, the obligation exists to choose futures based on responsible and ethical grounds. But from the point of view of simple effectiveness, we need to recognize, celebrate, and respond to the diversity found in our profession and in our communities.

Join the debate

The 1997 ACRL National Conference will be challenging and fun. Nashville in the spring, with its restaurants, historic sights, and, of course, music will provide a wonderful setting. But it is hoped that the energy of the conference will extend beyond that. In the months leading up to April 1997, the conference executive committee will invite academic librarians to speak to the subthemes of competition, work, funding, learning, and social responsibility. The conference itself will be the culmination of a debate that will enable college and research libraries to plan for their success into the next century.

Make plans now to attend the conference in 1997 and be sure to watch for updates in *C&RL News* and on the conference's WWW homepage (<http://library.tufts.edu/www/mcdonald/acrl/home.html>). See you in Nashville! ■

Academic librarians can no longer afford to wait passively for the future to happen.



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