ACRL's new scholarly communication initiative

Addressing a growing crisis

by Ray English and Deborah Dancik

ACRL will embark on a new scholarly communication initiative beginning with the ALA Annual Conference in Atlanta (June 13–19, 2002). Addressing issues that are critical to the future of all academic libraries, the initiative is designed to enable ACRL to play a prominent national role in working to reshape the current system of scholarly communication.

Major activities that will be part of the initiative include educating librarians, faculty, and higher education administrators about scholarly communication issues; encouraging scholars to assert greater control over the system of scholarly communication; building partnerships and coalitions with other organizations concerned with these issues; and advocating policy and legislative change.

Through these efforts, ACRL will contribute to the development of a new system of scholarly communication that is more responsive to the needs of the scholarly community, one in which scholarly information is both more affordable and more accessible.

The system of scholarly communication

The new initiative addresses a growing crisis in the system of scholarly communication. The crisis is in large part an outgrowth of the "serials issue," which has been with our profession for decades. But in recent years we have begun to realize that the serials problem, however vexing it continues to be, is intertwined in complex ways with the entire system by which scholarly research is produced and disseminated. In other words, we have begun to see that the serials issue is part of a growing crisis in the broader system of scholarly communication, which will be resolved only through a fundamental restructuring of the system itself.

Reshaping the system will be a long and difficult process requiring the combined efforts of faculty, librarians, administrators, and concerned organizations in this country and abroad. Working for change in the system involves analyzing and dealing with complex issues that are economic, political, and sociological. The issues range from the extraordinary concentration of economic power in the hands of a few scientific publishers, to the politics of legislation to protect fair use in the digital environment, to cultural aspects of the tenure and promotion system.

Despite inherent difficulties, there are many reasons why the system can indeed be reshaped through concerted and purposeful action. Examples include the success of SPARC (the Scholarly Publishing and Academic Resources Coalition) and growing interest in these issues by faculty researchers and higher education administrators.

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ACRL's Scholarly Communications Task Force

ACRL's scholarly communication initiative grew out of the recommendations of the ACRL Scholarly Communications Task Force, which was established by the ACRL Board in June 2000 to explore how ACRL might address these issues. Chaired by Ray English, with James Neal, Karlye Butcher, Cathy Wojewodzki, and Deborah Dancik as members, the task force's charge was to examine and make recommendations regarding the role that ACRL could play in shaping the future of scholarly communication.

Task force members believed that it was important to understand how ACRL members viewed scholarly communication issues and the role that the association might play in addressing them. To this end, the task force conducted an e-mail survey of members to gain input on these questions. The survey results indicated that ACRL members assign a high priority to scholarly communication concerns. The results also provided a general priority ranking of specific issues and ACRL's potential role in addressing them.

Working from the survey data, the task force held six focus groups with association members and leaders to envision what form ACRL's commitment might take. The task force also canvassed other associations and organizations to learn what they are doing to address scholarly communication issues and to determine how ACRL might best complement work or initiatives that are underway.

A new role for ACRL

From this research the task force began to conceptualize a new scholarly communication role for ACRL. It concluded that the association's activities should be prioritized into four main areas: 1) education of librarians, faculty, and higher education administrators, 2) advocacy of various kinds, 3) coalition building and developing an action plan within the higher education community, and 4) research.

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 librarians to advance learning, teaching, and research in higher education. The priorities also recognize ACRL's broad membership base, its strong record in member programming, its existing liaison relationships with higher education organizations, and its established partnerships with SPARC and ARL.

Given the complexity of scholarly communication issues, and the importance of working on them in a sustained way over time, the task force recommended that ACRL mount ongoing programs to educate academic librarians about scholarly communication issues and that ACRL create support mechanisms, programs, and publicity efforts to help make faculty researchers and higher education administrators more aware of the importance of these concerns.

The task force identified an ongoing need for advocacy on legislative and policy issues. Recent mergers in the publishing industry and legislation related to copyright and database access are examples of concerns that require coordinated political educational efforts. These efforts need to be coordinated with ACRL and ALA units that have responsibility in legislative areas.

The task force also recommended that ACRL conduct research that will support its educational, advocacy, and coalition-building efforts. It is important to know more about how scholarly communication issues have affected all types of academic libraries, particularly smaller universities, colleges, and community colleges where less research on the issues has been done. Data related to smaller institutions will be an important component in determining how they can contribute to the development of a new system of scholarly communication.

Making it happen

Fulfilling these new roles will require ACRL to develop new internal structures and to devote significant time and financial resources to these issues. Initiatives need to be coordinated with those ACRL committees and sections that are interested in scholarly communication issues. ACRL also needs to build on broad-based collaborative efforts with other organizations concerned about these issues. To coordinate the association's efforts, the task force thought it would be necessary to establish a standing committee on scholarly communication.

Most participants in the focus groups agreed that ACRL could not be successful in

dealing with scholarly communication issues unless it had strong leadership from the president and the board as well as active participation from the members at large. Because the scholarly communication agenda will require time, visibility, and an in-depth knowledge of the issues, the initiative cannot rely solely on volunteer efforts.

In view of these factors, the task force recommended that ACRL engage a visiting program officer to work actively on scholarly communication issues and have primary responsibility for carrying out the association's scholarly communication agenda. The officer would also serve as a visible spokesperson for the association on these issues.

In order to facilitate member participation at the grass-roots level, the task force recommended the formation of an ACRL scholarly communication discussion group. The group should provide an opportunity for general member participation and education and function as a source of ideas as the scholarly communication agenda is developed.

The success of ACRL's strategic initiative on information literacy has shown that significant initiatives need to be supported by a firm financial base. Accordingly, the task force believed ACRL should establish an annual budget for scholarly communication that addresses all planned areas of activity.

Board action

The report of the ACRL Scholarly Communications Task Force was submitted to the ACRL Board in January 2002, and its recommendations were unanimously approved by the Board at the 2002 Midwinter Meeting in New Orleans. The Board resolved that working to reshape scholarly communication will be one of the organization's highest strategic priorities and that activities will include broad-based educational work, political advocacy, coalition building, and research. A standing committee will be established, a visiting program officer will be hired, and ACRL will budget up to $90,000 annually for the initiative.

In a separate action, the Board approved the establishment of a scholarly communication discussion group, based on a petition of members that was submitted at the Midwinter Meeting.

Next steps

Real work on the initiative begins at Annual Conference with the initial meetings of the standing committee and discussion group and the confirmation of the first year's budget. ACRL will then solicit candidates for the visiting program officer position to begin in September.

ACRL has taken strong action to address the ongoing crisis in scholarly communication. This new initiative will allow the association to play a prominent national role in shaping the future of the scholarly communication system in partnership with other groups. We ask all ACRL members to follow and support this initiative as it develops. ■

("The value of . . ." continued from page 348)

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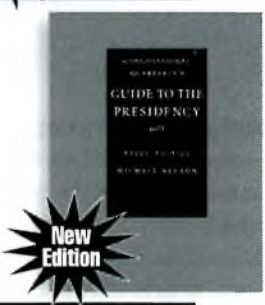

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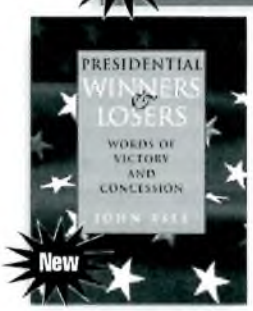

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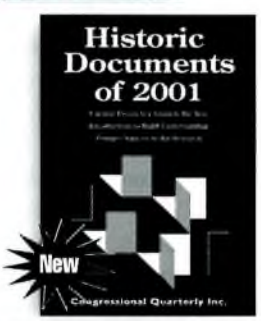

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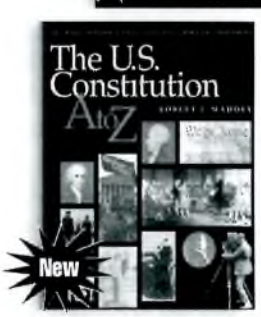

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