Choosing to act: The 1997 ACRL National Conference

By Liz Bishoff, Catherine Larson, and Robert Renaud

Librarians must define the future or someone else will

In his keynote address at the ACRL National Conference in Nashville, Cornell West asked, "Will we survive?" He responded, "Yes. How depends on what we do." The preconferences, contributed papers, panels, and poster sessions held between April 10 and 14, 1997, responded to this challenge, a challenge summed up by the conference theme: "Choosing Our Futures."

That theme places responsibility for the future of libraries with us. We are painfully aware of the fact that we are living in times of great change. As Paul Saffo stated, "we are living in a moment between two revolutions—one of print not quite spent and another electronic not quite under way. . . . Libraries face the twin challenges of trying to maintain and sustain the paper medium while exploring and parenthetically, adopting, the new paperless media. . . ."[1]

In order to focus the energies of conference attendees, Liz Bishoff, of OCLC, and the late Paul Evan Peters, of the Coalition for Networked Information, were asked to put together a program that would expand individual involvement and commitment to a future. Using a technique developed by Peter Schwartz in his 1991 *Art of the Long View*, conference planners put together a program that would allow attendees and nonattendees to discuss several scenarios for the future of academic libraries, define what environmental factors will affect the outcome of a selected scenario, and discuss the scenarios with their faculty and library and nonlibrary colleagues.[2] They then identified three key activities that their library needed to undertake to assure the desired scenario, what three activities they needed to undertake personally, and what three activities ACRL could undertake. These discussions, which were held over three days of roundtable sessions, began the process of identifying actions to determine the future.

Predicting the future

Predicting the future is difficult for all of us. The following predictions, made by reputable thinkers, illustrate this fact.

- The sun does not move.—*Leonardo da Vinci*

- Who the hell wants to hear actors talk?—*Harry Warner, 1927*

- While theoretically and technically TV may be feasible, commercially and financially I consider it an impossibility.—*Lee De Forest, inventor of the vacuum tube*

- There's no reason for any individual to have a computer in their home.—*Kenneth Olsen, president and founder of Digital Equipment Corporation, 1977*

Although the future is always difficult to predict, it is critical that we seek ways to improve our likelihood of success. Futurist Joel Barker stresses that we need to anticipate, not just recognize, paradigm shifts.[3] If we do, we can better control our future. He goes on to say that if we don't control our future, someone else will. Of course, this leaves the crucial question of how we recognize paradigm shifts. The scenario-building methodology responds

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to this dilemma and helps us embrace the fact that we can and must assume responsibility for our future.

Scenarios for the future

In 1995 Paul Evan Peters developed four scenarios for a North American Serials Interest Group (NASIG) conference.[4] A summary of these scenarios appears as a sidebar in this article. These alternative predictions about our future became the basis of the roundtable discussions in Nashville. The roundtable participants did not reach agreement on the most probable scenario. However, they agreed that scenario 4, "Ivory Towers in Cyberspace," has the greatest potential for a continued presence for libraries. It should also be noted that some of our colleagues preferred or accepted a diminished role for libraries on their campuses. This fact suggests that we are a reactive profession, whereas tomorrow's competitive world requires a proactive predisposition.

Who do we have to talk to about the future of universities, future roles of electronic universities, the role of cable and telecommunications companies, the role of scholarly societies? Not if, but when will scholarly publishing change? What factors do we look for that may be outside our immediate sphere that will affect the future of academic libraries?

What can libraries do?

What can libraries do? During the roundtable discussion the groups discussed actions that can be taken by libraries, and also by individual librarians, to bring about a desirable future.

The attendees identified some of the following actions that libraries can take:

• strengthen connections with faculty, campus computing, the external community, and other libraries;

• pursue consortial agreements, both academic and multitype;

• proactively market the library's role in the academic community;

• become stronger advocates of intellectual property;

• undertake strategic planning and refocus priorities;

• take leadership on campus, promoting the functions and role of libraries in the new environment;

• focus on user-centered/learner-centered service.

These quotes demonstrate some of the common actions many participants intend to pursue once back in their home institutions, including partnering with other organizations and campus units; focusing on users rather than on internal issues; and reprioritizing work and time to achieve the most important strategic goals. Not reflected, however, are the great number of participants who intend to take action in the electronic front by increasing access for their users. These actions include everything from ministeps (create a Web site for a library) to major rehauls of front-end and online catalog systems. Also not reflected is another significant theme, that of focusing on learning: on sharing new information learned at conferences and workshops; on improving communication within the library; and in setting up and conducting learning opportunities for all staff.

Within the realm of strategic planning, many people intend to reexamine how their library uses space, recognizing that customers are using our libraries differently than they used to. Others hope to engage more librarians and staff in supporting annual plan efforts and to incorporate their input on what needs to be done.

Aggregating our resources

In partnering, librarians are recognizing more and more that aggregating our resources will result in outcomes that are ultimately beneficial for all of our users. Some ACRL attendees specifically mentioned setting up resource-sharing agreements with nearby libraries. Others intend to increase their outreach efforts to network within the campus, for example, with faculty, with computing centers, and with other units that work with students.

On an individual level, librarians cited the following actions that could be taken in the short term to respond to these challenges:

• increase scope of reading to include areas beyond library professional literature;

• reprioritize work and time;

• place priority on training and learning for staff and self;

• expand political activity;

• maintain technology currency;

• articulate library vision;

• convince ourselves that we have power;

• get out of our library nests;

• make our library essential—make sure everyone knows it;

• participate with faculty in instructional design.

For a profession that inherently values reading, we cannot seem to do enough of it! Reading more and improving our awareness of trends in and outside the profession arose as a theme over and over again. It is apparent that as busy professionals, we need to spend more time "sharpening the saw" and learning those things that will allow us to be successful not just today, but also in the future.

In support of radical change

Finally, the attendees suggested ways that ACRL could, as a professional organization, support libraries and librarians undergoing radical change:

- partner with other professional conferences;

- advocate/lobby for libraries;
- promote education and training for librarians and staff, provide educational opportunities beyond conferences;
- provide opportunities to exchange ideas;
- update/educate about professional standards;
- promote/support needed research;
- expand collaborative work with other associations and reach out to businesses;
- shed bookish image;
- include all library staff.

Defining our futures

The three roundtable sessions that took place

Alternative scenarios for the future

Summary of Paul Evan Peters's "Alternative Scenarios for the Future of Academic Libraries."

Scenario A: Another marketplace for global enterprises

- Global Information Infrastructure dominated by corporate investors.
- Scholarly communication controlled by large commercial firms.
- Dependence on tuition leaves few resources for new, strategic activities in higher education.
- Libraries confined to serving selected institutional priorities.
- Libraries continue to organize information, train scholars and students, and operate within consortia.
- Libraries "out of the loop" of scholarly communication.

Scenario B: Mass customization for and by individuals

- Global Information Infrastructure makes access to networked resources more affordable to larger population.
- Artificial intelligence stretches computing capabilities.
- Scholars and scientists affiliate with higher education institutions project-by-project or course-by-course.
- Libraries continue to organize access to information but depend on consortia affiliation for access to consolidated collections.

Scenario C: Knowledge guild reigns supreme

- Wide-area networks organized for focused clientele make resources available to scholars.
- Scholarly societies key providers of network services to members and holders of joint ownership of intellectual properties.
- Higher education, still in slow financial recovery, concentrated to geographically close clientele.
- Libraries subscribe to networked information and serve as payment managers.
- Libraries provide access for students across disciplines and across networks.
- Select libraries partner with societies for preservation.

Scenario D: Ivory towers in cyberspace

- Global Research and Education Network (GREN) succeeds as successor to Internet.
- Research institutions principle providers of education and access.
- Academic, not commercial, standards govern intellectual property use.
- Complex negotiated agreements govern access by non-GREN to network.
- Libraries play key role in life cycle of information creation and distribution.
- Libraries play key role in organization and preservation of GREN resources.