

Miranda Bennett

Charting the same future?

The ACRL Strategic Plan and the Report of the Commission on the Future of Higher Education

Two recent documents of potentially great significance for academic libraries have adopted the metaphor of charting to describe efforts to prepare for an uncertain future: the ACRL strategic plan, *Charting our Future: ACRL's Strategic Plan 2020*, and the Report of the U.S. Secretary of Education's Commission on the Future of Higher Education, *A Test of Leadership: Charting the Future of U.S. Higher Education*.¹ The shared metaphor invites comparison of the two and reflection on their key points uncovers several outstanding opportunities for librarians to work toward the strategic goals of ACRL and take leading roles in the future of higher education.

A Test of Leadership, released in pre-publication form in September 2006, is the work of a commission appointed by Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings to consider how best to improve our system of higher education to ensure that our graduates are well prepared to meet our future workforce needs and are able to participate fully in the changing economy.² Commissioners included representatives from the business, education, and government sectors, and they engaged in a national dialogue on issues relevant to the future of higher education, such as affordability, accessibility, accountability, and quality.

During its yearlong investigation and analysis of American higher education, the commission inspired controversy and criticism. For instance, its early consideration of mandatory standardized testing of college students met with outrage from many professors, and this recommendation does not

appear in the final report. Aspects of the report remain problematic, and it deserves critical scrutiny from anyone with an interest in higher education. Among its most notable weaknesses, it strongly emphasizes the economic value of higher education, while paying scant attention to less tangible benefits such as enriched appreciation for culture, more informed participation in civic life, and clearer understanding of the big questions of transcendent meaning.

Nevertheless, the report reflects common views of higher education today, and its recommendations ought to be taken seriously. Although its policy implications remain unclear, they could be profound. Given the emphasis the ACRL strategic plan places on advocacy, including the goal of increasing ACRL's influence in public policy affecting higher education, association members should consider carefully the ways this call for reform of higher education may affect their work. When policymakers turn their attention to the report, librarians' familiarity with it will enable them to argue cogently for the interests of their libraries and patrons.

The commission's report also offers college and university librarians a number of opportunities for leadership and partnership initiatives, which align well with the ACRL strategic plan's call for its members to be recognized as flexible, dynamic, and progressive leaders in their institutions and in scholarly communities and as essential partners in

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learning and scholarship with faculty and other colleagues. In particular, librarians can target the areas of student learning, innovation, outreach to the K-12 education community, and lifelong learning.

Student learning

The commission affirms that student learning is central to the future of U.S. higher education. Its report emphasizes the role of institutions of higher education in preparing students for success in their careers and notes that the academy is currently falling short, with [e]mployers report[ing] repeatedly that many new graduates they hire are not prepared to work, lacking the critical thinking, writing, and problem-solving skills needed in today's workplace.³ Librarians familiar with the ACRL Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education will see this as a great opportunity for working with faculty to improve students' skills in information evaluation and use.⁴

Assessment of student learning is also key to the report's recommendations, and here, too, librarians are well positioned to collaborate with teaching faculty and model exemplary practices. The report declares, "Faculty must be at the forefront of defining educational objectives for students and developing meaningful, evidence-based measures of their progress toward these goals."⁵ In the area of information literacy, librarians have an established track record of creating learning standards, both general and discipline-specific.⁶ As more colleges and universities (and accreditation agencies) require professors to build their courses around measurable outcomes, librarians can serve as valuable, experienced partners and support the creation of a campus-wide culture of assessment.

Innovation

A second broad area of opportunity is innovation, which, in the words of the report, encompasses "new pedagogies, curricula, and technologies to improve learning."⁷ Similar language appears in the ACRL strategic plan,

particularly with regard to technology. For instance, a strategic objective for the coming three to five years is to "[s]upport the development and recognition of academic and research librarians as leaders and experts in information technology applications in libraries.

In addition to working with cutting-edge technologies, including blogs, wikis, and other social networking programs, librarians can spearhead innovation in teaching and learning. Because librarians often teach under different conditions than professors, with single-session information literacy classes a common model, they have greater room for experimentation in the classroom. Centers for teaching excellence, especially if housed in the library, can also give librarians the chance to bring their innovative approaches before a larger audience.

Academic libraries, contrary to stereotype, have great potential as engines of innovation, and by using appropriate emerging technologies, trying out new approaches to teaching, and promoting collaboration with teaching faculty to develop and revise curricula, librarians can fulfill the commission's recommendation to "embrace a culture of continuous innovation and quality improvement."⁸

K-12 education

A Test of Leadership devotes considerable attention to the need for members of the higher education community to work together with K-12 educators to ensure that students are well prepared for the challenges of postsecondary academic life and aware of the opportunities available to them. College and university librarians can help their institutions meet this goal—and develop new ways to communicate their value to higher education—by creating outreach programs to the K-12 community.

As colleges and universities seek to implement the report's recommendation for "seamless integration between high school and college,"⁹ librarians can work with school media specialists and elementary and high school teachers to give students opportuni-

ties to become familiar with academic library resources well before enrollment in college. For instance, academic librarians can invite classes from local high schools to visit the library, participate in instructional sessions, and learn about resources available to them both today and in the future.

As part of its focus on the issue of the accessibility of higher education, the commission also addressed the need to increase awareness of educational opportunities, especially among underserved groups. While the report calls on businesses to partner with schools and colleges to provide resources for early and ongoing college awareness activities, academic support, and college planning and financial aid application assistance,¹⁰ this role could also be effectively filled by both academic and public libraries. By leading community outreach initiatives that build awareness of higher education, academic librarians can contribute positively to the reputation of their institutions and raise their libraries' profiles in the eyes of their colleagues.

Lifelong learning

While outreach to the K-12 education community addresses the needs of students before they get to college, lifelong learning initiatives seek to support students after they leave. The commission's recommendations in this area focus on the evolving requirements of the workplace, as more and more adults are looking for ways to upgrade and expand their skills in an effort to improve or protect their economic position.¹¹ Librarians can contribute to the national strategy for lifelong learning advocated by the commission in at least two general ways.

First, they can develop and support information literacy initiatives on their campuses. Members' ability to teach and assess lifelong learning skills appears among the strategic objectives of ACRL's *Charting our Future* plan, and, according to the ACRL Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education, information literacy forms the basis for lifelong learning. By

working with teaching faculty to incorporate information literacy knowledge and skills into curricula, librarians can contribute to students' ability to thrive in the emerging information economy.

Second, librarians can offer expanded access to library resources and services, ensuring that graduates, prospective students, and members of the general public can take advantage of the library's wealth of information sources. Increasing access to expensive resources, such as proprietary databases, will present challenges, but librarians should make a concerted effort to develop projects such as those described in the recent article "Alumni access to databases: The time is now," since these provide new options for lifelong learning.¹²

The commission's recommendation for colleges and universities to commit to lifelong learning, as well as to reach out to the K-12 education community, calls upon the academy to broaden its vision to include far more than the students of a college or university at any given moment. Academic libraries should also seek to serve not only their primary patron population, but also the wider community, since the future of higher education depends on support from all parts of society.

Conclusion

In each of these areas—student learning, innovation, K-12 education, and lifelong learning—librarians can use the recommendations of the commission's report on the future of U.S. higher education to accomplish the goals of the ACRL strategic plan, particularly the special focus of ACRL President Pamela Snelson on communicating the value of academic libraries.¹³ The changes to higher education in the wake of *A Test of Leadership* are not known, but librarians can use the report's chart of the future to ensure that they are not only in the same boat with others in the higher education community, but also capably and confidently at the helm.

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the Indian Ocean. The index covers articles from 1969 to the present and is searchable by author, work studied, country, article title, and issue. Article is not available in full text. *Access:* <http://www.adpf.asso.fr/librairie/index-articles00.html>.

Persée. Established by the Ministère de l'éducation nationale, Persée provides full-text access to the backfiles of French journals in the social and human sciences. The interface is available in both French and English. *Access:* <http://www.persee.fr/>.

Revues.org. Like Persée, Revues.org provides full-text access to French journals in the social and human sciences. It is possible to search all journals or a specific title. The entry for each journal title includes a timeline of dates for which only abstracts are available and dates for which full text is available. *Access:* <http://www.revues.org/>.

Discussion lists

Afrique. French language discussion list about African literature. *Access:* to subscribe, e-mail listserv@univ-lyon1.fr. Message: SUBSCRIBE Afrique rstname lastname.

Francofil. A bilingual general discussion forum based in the United Kingdom. It is intended for scholars and teachers of French and Francophone studies. Topics include social issues, linguistics, history, and philosophy, as well as teaching. *Access:* <http://www.bristol.ac.uk/francofil/>.

Professional organizations

American Association of Teachers of French (AATF). The largest national association of French teachers in the world with nearly 10,000 members. It is intended for both secondary and post-secondary teachers. *Access:* <http://www.frenchteachers.org>.

Association des Bibliothécaires de France (ABF). ABF, founded in 1906, is the oldest library association in France. Its members come from all types of organizations. *Access:* <http://www.abf.asso.fr/>.

Modern Language Association (MLA). MLA is the major national organization for students, teachers, and scholars of modern languages and literatures. *Access:* <http://www.mla.org/>. *W*

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Notes

1. ACRL Board of Directors and ACRL Executive Committee, *Charting our Future: ACRL Strategic Plan 2020*, ACRL, www.ala.org/ala/acrl/aboutacrl/whatisacrl/acrlstratplan/stratplan.htm (accessed November 6, 2006). The Secretary of Education's Commission on the Future of Higher Education, *A Test of Leadership: Charting the Future of U.S. Higher Education*, United States Department of Education, www.ed.gov/about/bdscomm/list/hiedfuture/reports/pre-pub-report.pdf (accessed October 31, 2006).

2. *A Test of Leadership*, 30.

3. *A Test of Leadership*, 3.

4. ACRL, www.ala.org/ala/acrl/acrlstandards/informationliteracycompetency.htm (accessed November 6, 2006).

5. *A Test of Leadership*, 23.

6. See, for instance, *Information Literacy Standards for Science and Engineering/Technology*, developed by ACRL's Science & Technology Section (www.ala.org/ala/acrl/aboutacrl/acrlsections/sciencetech/standards.htm), and *Draft Research Competency Guidelines for Literatures in English*, developed by ACRL's Literatures in English Section (www.ala.org/ala/acrl/aboutacrl/acrlsections/literaturesineng/lescompetency.htm).

7. *A Test of Leadership*, 24.

8. *Ibid*, 24.

9. *Ibid*, 16.

10. *Ibid*, 17–18.

11. *Ibid*, 8.

12. Catherine Wells, *Alumni access to research databases: The time is now*, *C&RL News* 67 no. 7 (2006): 413–16.

13. Pamela Snelson, *Communicating the value of academic libraries*, *C&RL News* 67 no. 8 (2006): 490–92. *W*