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ACRL: the learning community for excellence in academic libraries: the presidential theme for the coming year

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ABSTRACT

My purpose in writing this column is to share why I chose the presidential theme of "ACRL: The Learning Community for Excellence in Academic Libraries" and to explain why I think the learning community concept is such a powerful one. I also hope to set the stage for the coming year's columns, which will share this common theme.

ARTICLE

While looking ahead, I want to look back and thank immediate past-president Betsy Wilson for her excellent leadership, her inspiring column "The Lone Ranger is Dead: Success Today Demands Collaboration,"(FN1) and the engaging series of articles on "Community and Collaboration" in the 2000-2001 C&RL News. The commonalities in presidential themes is intentional and based on ACRL's Strategic Directions 2005 as the common denominator for the primary goals of the association.

POWER OF THE IDEA

For me, the idea of learning community is a powerful concept. Learning community captures the shift that has occurred in the last decade in higher education from teaching to learning. Emphasizing the importance of learning has done a number of things.

First, it puts teaching into perspective in the sense that good teaching has to result in learning. It is not enough to have a finely crafted lecture if students do not learn from the lecture or from activities that follow.

Second, part of the focus on learning recognizes that people have different learning styles and that good teaching takes into account learning styles and the differences among learners.

Third, the focus on learning provides a balance between learning the subject matter and the process of learning. Academic librarians know that learning how to search for information and ideas and how to evaluate the worth of the information found is crucial for an educated person.(FN2) Information literacy also focuses on the learner and the process of learning as well as the ideas, knowledge, and facts to be learned. Librarians collaborate with faculty in promoting information literacy to create meaningful learning experiences for students.

Fourth, to tie learning with community provides meaning for the higher education experience. Learning is both an individual and collaborative experience. The value of traditional colleges and universities is that they provide faculty, resources, and the atmosphere that encourage learners to explore new knowledge, concepts, and their own beliefs and abilities. Learning is certainly at times a solitary pursuit, but to have a learning community reinforces the idea that something is really learned when it is shared, just as we know that teaching is really the best way to learn.

In higher education, learning community refers to specific innovative curricular links. The 1990 book *Learning Communities* defined them this way:

A learning community is any one of a variety of curricular structures that link together several existing courses--or actually restructure the curricular material entirely--so that students have opportunities for deeper understanding and integration of the material they are learning, and more interaction with one another and their teachers as fellow participants in the learning enterprise.(FN3)

A 1996 article in *Liberal Education*(FN4) noted that many learning community initiatives had been started including Freshman Interest Groups (FIGs) and those geared to students in general education, developmental studies, honors programs, and in major or minor disciplines. The authors conclude that "a growing body of research demonstrates that learning communities are successful because they help build a sense of group identity and community."(FN5)

Students and faculty who participate in learning communities benefit from the intentional and coherent nature of clustering the courses, as well as the engagement with each other and the learning process. Learning communities have been geared to undergraduates to help reform undergraduate education, but there is an implicit link that graduate students as they enter programs form their own learning communities.

Learning community also applies to the whole enterprise of higher education. I first began to think more deeply about learning communities when Appalachian State University used the phrase to summarize its vision of the future as being a model learning community in its 1998 Strategic Plan(FN6).

As a member of the Strategic Planning Commission that drafted the vision and the plan. I realized how the vision aligned the library in the very best sense with the university's goals. Appalachian State seeks to function as a community of learners emphasizing that students, faculty, and staff are all learners.

ACADEMIC LIBRARIANS AS PREMIER LEARNERS

Academic librarians have been in the forefront of being learners on campus, and interested in Learning Communities. The Coalition for Networked Information (CNI), with ACRL, the American Association for Higher Education, and the National Learning Infrastructure Initiative sponsored a number of conferences on "New Learning Communities" in the mid-1990s.(FN7)

For me, one of the joys of being a librarian is that I can count on learning something new every day. Academic librarians are constantly working with students in the learning mode. and they also work with faculty as faculty recognize that they need to learn new literature for interdisciplinary work or new technologies to be effective in communicating with students.

In the area of technology, academic librarians have been the premier learners in applying technological advances to information processes and to the whole enterprise of the library as central to teaching, learning, and research. Who has learned more or changed more than academic librarians in the last 25 years? Librarians have led campuses in new ways of approaching and using technology.

One of my own learning experiences in this past year has been enriched by the community of academic librarians willing and ready to share their knowledge and experiences. At Appalachian State, we have the privilege of building a new library and information commons.

Visiting more than a dozen libraries in this past year has reaffirmed and strengthened my belief in academic librarians. New or expanded buildings offer the opportunity to articulate what makes the library valuable for students and faculty, and I have listened with admiration as librarians align the realities and potential of their buildings with the goals and needs of their institutions.

I have also marveled at the dedication and hard work of all these academic librarians who have carried on with their normal work load as well as overseeing major building projects.

Inspiration was found at every institution, but let me mention just a few, including the Tennessee college where the librarian literally could see the building project from her high-rise apartment and would dash to the scene if she questioned anything that the builders were doing; the California university where the building was used to improve campus and school relationships; and the Pennsylvania university where the building and services truly match the vision of the 21st-century library. This experience has reaffirmed my belief in the invigorating effect of learning something new and learning with others.

LEARNING AND PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

The learning community concept serves well as a backdrop for the values academic librarians use as they work with students and faculty. It serves equally well to represent the best of what we do for ourselves within ACRL as a learning community to develop, share, improve, and apply ideas that each of us brings to the profession. We use ACRL and its many activities to provide excellence in our own libraries. The whole concept of continual learning(FN8) can be promoted through ACRL and through individual academic libraries.

ACRL's 2000 Membership Survey confirmed that members really value ACRL for its professional development activities. In addressing which programs ACRL should continue, respondents ranked publications first and professional development second, and in truth publications can be viewed as the most regular means of professional development. As Melissa Cast and Shannon Cary wrote:

Our members see ACRL publications as an invaluable service. An overwhelming 92.7% of respondents indicated that they read College and Research Libraries News regularly, with 90.3% reading College and Research Libraries regularly.(FN9)

The survey continued "the second program ... that members feel ACRL should continue is professional development/continuing education opportunities ... [and] the ACRL National Conference stood out as an exemplary program."(FN10) From the membership survey, and from my own impressions, it is clear that academic librarians value ACRL as a forum in which to find new learning experiences.

The membership survey also substantiated what I have found to be true in ACRL in that members are very loyal to their original home within the association, be it a section, chapter, discussion group, or committee. These units provide a learning community of like-minded individuals where the conversations among members provide support and impetus to reach beyond what one is already doing.

ENCOURAGEMENT TO TAKE RISKS

The willingness to take risks and allow others to take risks is fundamental to the values promoted by the learning community concept. Learning, in the sense of going beyond what we already know, will involve mistakes and missteps. ACRL has a time-honored role of providing professional support for individuals to test risky ideas and ventures before they are proposed or implemented at the local library. Realization that we are all learners allows for a safety net when mistakes occur.

EXCELLENCE

Another value inherent in the learning community concept is that the process of learning can be approached in an intentional way. In this coming year, I hope we can use the learning community and excellence approach to ensure that we keep our sights on ACRL as an organization that can and must help academic librarians reach their full potential in providing quality services, collections, and facilities. Ensuring that the academic library is a fundamental part of the institution's learning community will ensure the library's relevance to the institution's educational and research programs.

ACRL, as an intentional learning community, can help academic libraries stay ahead of the ever accelerating rate of change while keeping our vision informed with the best of our values.

FOOTNOTES

1. Betsy Wilson, "The Lone Ranger is dead: Success today demands collaboration," *College and Research Libraries News* 61, no. 9 (September 2000): 698-701.
2. Patricia Senn Breivik and E. Gordon Gee, *Information Literacy: Revolution in the Library* (New York: American Council on Education/Macmillan Publishing Company, 1989).
3. Faith Gabelnick, Jean MacGregor, Roberta S. Matthews, and Barbara Leigh Smith, *Learning Communities; Creating Connections Among Students, Faculty, and Disciplines* (New Directions for Teaching and Learning, no. 41 Spring 1990. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass, Inc., 1990): 19.
4. Roberta Matthews, Barbara Leigh Smith, Jean MacGregor, and Faith Gabelnick, "Learning Communities A Structure for Educational Coherence," *Liberal Education* 82. no. 3 (Summer 1996): 4-9.
5. *Ibid.* 9.
6. Appalachian State University's Strategic Plan can be found at http://www.appstate.edu/www_docs/depart/irp/planning/plancont.html.
7. "New Learning Communities Conference" at <http://www.arl.org/newsltr/184/newlearn.html>.
8. Peter M. Senge, *The Fifth Discipline. The art and practice of the learning organization* (New York: Doubleday, 1990)
9. Melissa Cast and Shannon Cary, "Members assess ACRL. *College and Research Libraries News* 62. no. 6 (June 2001): 627.
10. *Ibid.*, 627.