

**Thinking Critically About Librarianship in Critical Times: On The Proposed Closure of the LSU MLIS Program, ACRL’s “Assumptions About the Relevant Future,” and ACRL-LA’s Definition of the Professional Academic Librarian**

*Tony Fonseca, ACRL-LA President*

“... knowledge counted for nothing until some teacher should show how to apply it.”

“Nothing in education is so astonishing as the ignorance it accumulates in the form of inert facts.”

---- Henry Adams, *The Education of Henry Adams: An Autobiography* (1918)

**I. Critical Times Require Critical Thinking**

On Tuesday, May 25th, *The Advocate* reported that LSU administration once again is considering closing its Masters program in Library and Information Science. Certainly all ACRL-LA members can appreciate the pinch that the state’s universities are feeling because of legislative short-sighted decisions to once more gut exclusively education and hospitals in order to address a budget shortfall; however, the subtext of the argument for shuttering the School of Library and Information Science (SLIS), fraught with implications that the program is a low completer program and that it loses the university money, both come across as disingenuous. But that is beside the point. Any decision by university administration to close a program must be scrutinized—and examining LSU administration’s argument results in seeing lots of holes, and very little substance. In fact, one cannot help but believe that there can be no financial

justification for closing one of only five such masters programs in the entire Gulf South. This would be done in order to save—according to LSU Chancellor Michael Martin’s own figures—what would amount to less than five percent of its projected budget cut. For the moment, let’s put aside the negative effects that this decision will have on university students, both in the state and nationally, as well as on communities throughout Louisiana. Let’s not take into account the damage such an action would do to LSU, since it hosts the only MLIS program in the state. That same program graduates an average of 70 students per year and was recently awarded a \$763,901 grant to recruit and educate 30 new librarians to address staffing shortages due hurricane damage. Still, it seems that the elephant in the room is once again stomping around invisibly, trumpeting a simple truth that administrators apparently are unable to hear: no educational institution, from the tiniest elementary school to the largest university, is worth much if it does not have a viable library, staffed by skilled, professional librarians. But the prevalent mind set exhibited by those clamoring to close the program seems underscored by a belief that the academic library is a building, a bunch of books, and an array of computer labs, not that the *academic library is the professional librarian*, whose thoughtful decisions and knowledge base supports students and faculty, even highly paid administrators. Such a belief in the primacy of the physical building, or even the virtual space of the library, is as ludicrous and short-sighted as believing that the textbook teaches the class, that the spreadsheet does the accounting, or that the four walls of an office advise the student. The administration's announcement may as well have been “LSU no longer thinks research is important to the flagship university, or to any university for that matter.” Or it could have been “LSU administration gives the green light for students to do all research in Google,” because closing the MLIS program bellows those messages loudly and clearly.

I realize that by publishing this in an academic journal, I am preaching to the choir here, but it seems there are some in the back rows who still do not quite understand what a professional academic librarian does. Unfortunately, those most ignorant of our function also control our status. Simply put, these LSU SLIS graduates, these professional librarians of all types (academic, public, and special) go out to work, live, and keep libraries alive and viable, often in their home communities, and often at their undergraduate institutions. This localization, not coincidentally, is the reason that we need an MLIS program *in this state*. As for imminence to the university, the fact is that LSU SLIS graduates are in demand nationally, as well as throughout Louisiana, making up the bulk of the school and public librarians that our children encounter during their K-12 years and during their college careers. Yet these and other significant contributions made by librarians, such as preserving the history of the state in government and local archives, seemingly have little value to LSU administration.

The administrative decision also signifies one other disturbing trend which, as ACRL-LA President, I feel I must address—the de-professionalization of librarianship. Martin’s announcement mirrors a wrongheaded trend towards one of two disastrous decisions for any academic library. The first is redefining positions in the academic library so that most are filled not by librarians, but by civil service workers who are given no education in database management, information theory, educational theory, or information literacy. Granted, I personally work alongside some highly competent non-MLIS degreed library staff, as I am sure we all do, but they are neither prepared nor responsible for professional librarian duties like teaching information literacy, making managerial decisions about collection development, dealing with accreditation issues during a financial crisis, creating a library’s virtual presence on the web, keeping a library’s online public access catalog and its databases running smoothly and

securely, or helping a confused patron who doesn't even know how to properly phrase his/her question. It should go without saying that they also have had no education in locating information and then determining how accurate or authoritative that information is. This list of responsibilities, which readers all likely realize is the tip of an iceberg, rightfully belong with the professional librarians with an MLIS. They have had both theoretical exposure and practical training in management theory and practice, abstracting and indexing, educational theory, and networking and programming, to name a few knowledge-based skills, and they actively participates in professional responsibilities like conferencing and publishing, in order to share knowledge that makes libraries worldwide more responsive to patrons.

This brings me to the second of these disastrous trends sweeping the nation's academic libraries. In its *5-10 Year Planning Horizon ~ Assumptions about the Relevant Future for Academic and Research Libraries and Librarians*, the Association of College and Research Libraries notes, in both its "Social Values/Politics" section and its "Global Business Climate/Economics" section, that "the concept of tenure will be increasingly challenged" and that "there will be fewer tenure-track jobs."<sup>1</sup> This step backwards is not inimical to academic libraries; rather, faculty in all departments are being faced with the possibility that no matter how often they conduct scholarly research, no matter how prestigious the journals or national conferences in which they share their findings, no matter how active they have been in sharing in their university's governance responsibilities, no matter how well they have done their jobs in the classroom or in the library, they can be denied the job security that comes with tenure-track appointments. Those who argue against tenure have short memories: they forget that tenure was created to, among other things, prevent faculty from being dismissed because of an unpopular intellectual or political stance. Without tenure, faculty can be dismissed because of their taking a

stand against an administrative decision. And without tenure, faculty can be fired simply because they chose to use their right to freedom of speech and expression. As for academic librarians, we are painfully aware that denying tenure-track positions specifically librarians is a slippery slope that will ultimately be used to justify denying us any type of faculty development. Our travel budgets will disappear, since staff positions seldom include independent, ongoing professional development as a responsibility. Our committee assignments will vanish, since staff are not required (and some may deduce not desired) on university governing committees. Our productivity will reach an all-time low; we will begin to view ourselves as 9-to-5 workers rather than as scholars and professionals with a calling. And the overall morale in the academic library will reach rock bottom. If tenure disappears, this will be mirrored in other departments, with an exponentially negative effect on the university as a whole. In the long run, students will get a lesser education; parents will be less enthusiastic about their decisions to use hard-earned money for such; employers will find themselves hiring people who know facts (if they're lucky), with little to no sense of how to apply or interpret them.

As a recognized ACRL chapter, ACRL-LA echoes the national organization's call for librarianship to remain a scholarly profession, fighting against the tide of the penny-pinching mentality that is spearheading the privatization of universities as well as the move towards de-professionalizing librarianship. While I certainly agree that money can be saved by hiring librarians as staff rather than as tenure-track faculty, I question both the cost-effectiveness and the ethics of such a practice, with the phrase "you get what you pay for" repeating itself in the back of my mind. Towards the end of (re)professionalizing academic librarianship, ACRL-LA has, in a self-study, determined to what extent it has met the goals set forth by the national organization during the 2009-2010 calendar year. The results of that examination, both positive

and negative, are hereby offered for your consideration. As you read the priorities of ACRL and the methods in which ACRL-LA meets those priorities, a snapshot of how the chapter defines professional librarianship will develop.

## **II. ACRL's Strategic Plan and the Chapter's Role: (Re)Professionalizing Librarianship**

### **ACRL Goal Area: Learning**

According to the ACRL Strategic Plan Implementation Form (sent via e-mail to all Chapter presidents), its members aim to be recognized internationally as collaborative leaders and partners in ensuring that “students leave with lifelong learning skills, improving techniques for assessing learning outcomes, and in creating environments for discovery by expanding regional, national and international adoption, use and development of information literacy standards.”<sup>2</sup> To meet this goal, ACRL-LA has expanded its efforts in encouraging adoption of the ACRL Information Literacy Standards in Louisiana by creating an extremely active committee to investigate issues dealing with the information literacy skills of freshmen. Examining inconsistencies in the transition from high school to college, this committee has already presented at two statewide conferences, to audiences consisting of school, public, and academic librarians. Chair Debra Cox Rollins led these panels, made up of a mix of school librarians, academic librarians, and teaching faculty.

Another objective of the national organization is to seek “to strengthen relationships with higher education organizations that are important to faculty and administrators in order to develop institutional understand of librarians’ roles in enhancing teaching and learning,” and to

increase “member abilities to create and manage physical and virtual spaces and services as environments for discovery.” Although the chapter has only begun to strengthen such relationships, it does indirectly empower members to (re)invent their own libraries, learning commons, and digital venues. The chapter offers as an aid its completely revamped web presence, which, thanks to web administrator Karen Niemla, now allows for the following: forums and bulletin board discussions on both general academic librarianship issues and items specific to job descriptions and tenure requirements, file downloads (sharing), an introduction to the chapter's projects (services), and information about the chapter's publications.

### **ACRL Goal Area: Scholarship, Research, and Creative Activity**

ACRL prides itself on the fact that “its members are recognized internationally as authorities on the integration of content, tools, and services into the evolving workflows of scholars and creators at all stages from initial discovery, to individuals organizing their own resources, to the creation, sharing, publication, aggregation, and preservation processes, including associated intellectual property issues.” In fact, it sees itself as a catalyst for “transformative change” in the scholarly communication systems. In addressing how the chapter could meet these objectives, Past-President Michael Matthews came up with a brilliant idea: he applied for, and won, the opportunity for ACRL-LA to host one of the five Scholarly Communications Roadshow workshops facilitated by the national organization in the summer of 2009. This free discussion of copyright licenses, open access journals (OAJs), and the relationship between the two was attended by some 90 chapter members. As a follow up, the chapter is working towards a collaborative effort to establish a Louisiana electronic theses and dissertations (ETD) consortium. Both the chapter’s incoming president (Melissa Goldsmith) and

I will be presenting on institutional and consortia roles in ETD libraries at the forthcoming National Digital Libraries for Theses and Dissertations (NDLTD) conference, and one of ACRL-LA's Executive Board members, Boris Teske, has already produced an ETD report to his the Louisiana Tech Graduate Council (on which he serves), at the request of his Graduate Studies Dean. The chapter sees this as a solid first step towards achieving the ACRL objective of enhancing members' abilities "to provide education, advocacy, and coalition building to support transformative change in scholarly communication systems."

In addition, ACRL-LA has identified copyright issues and open access as two topics for its October 2010 workshop. To address the objective of enhancing members' understanding of scholarly communications (namely how scholarship is created, aggregated, organized, preserved, accessed, and exchanged), the chapter, at its summer workshop, made available to members information about options authors have in the publishing/licensing process. Finally, to meet the priority of strengthening ACRL's "relationships with learned societies to expand membership knowledge of disciplinary practices in scholarship," Goldsmith and I have routinely attended conferences in tangential disciplines, such as education, popular culture, and music scholarship over the last few years. Finally, the chapter is making plans to revisit a 2008 theme of "liaisonship," or subject specialist librarianship.

### **ACRL Goal Area: Advocacy**

The national organization identifies as objectives to achieve this goal the "seeking [of] greater influence on the higher education and research environment," in order to do the following: increase librarians' influence on campus information and communication technology



priorities; increase currency by communicating major trends and issues; strengthen partnerships with other organizations; increase its political influence on issues of higher education and accreditation; and increase members' ability to and maintain excellence in accreditation requirements. To meet these objectives ACRL-LA hosted an October colloquium on Return-On-Investment, and the chapter has worked to strengthen partnerships with three other professional organizations in the state: the Academic Section of the Louisiana Library Association, LASSAL, and the LOUIS Users Group. The chapter has already presented at LASSAL and LUC, and has plans to partner in conferences with LLA-Academic in March 2011. Both Goldsmith and I have submitted our names for the Southern Association of Colleges and Schools Commission on Colleges (SACS-COC), and I have been allowed to serve on offsite and onsite teams, thus gaining an insider's perspective on the academic library's role in accreditation. In addition, the ACRL Executive Board has positioned itself squarely behind the ongoing argument for information literacy as a core competency that should be the purview of General Education, rather than an "informal agreement" that seems the sole property of the academic library.

In 2009, the chapter created a Peer/Experts Network to serve the purpose of information exchange on issues such as information literacy, accreditation, publishing, conferencing, and professionalism. On a personal note, three of ACRL-LA's executive officers—myself Goldsmith, and Jessica Hutchings—have been involved with publishing peer-reviewed articles on the library's relationship to general education faculty, its role in the larger campus and scholarly community, and the value of specialized librarianship.

### **Goal Area: Continuous Learning**

ACRL strives to provide “continuous learning opportunities enabling members to strengthen their effectiveness and achieve recognition as valued contributors to their academic and research communities,” with hopes to expand learning opportunities based on data, member needs, and strategic priorities. In mirroring this concern, the chapter continued its practice of allowing its membership to determine important initiatives and workshop topics. As a case in point, the chapter completely revamped its mentor program due to chapter interest, creating instead a Peer/Expert Network. It surveyed its membership in order to determine both its topic for the October 2010 workshop, as well as the preferred date/time (changing from its traditional Wednesday before LUC to the Friday following).

In addition, ACRL has strategic priorities, which include “providing direction and guidance for academic libraries to meet their most vital, relevant and pressing obligations.” Towards this objective, the chapter has positioned itself to bring national issues, standards, and experience to Louisiana. In efforts to meet the national organization’s desire to increase the accessibility of learning opportunities based on best practices, the chapter continued to, and will continue to, sponsor not only keynote speakers and workshop experts in the state, but also various workshops at the LUC.

Two other ACRL objectives in this area include increasing “its agility in providing cutting-edge content for learning programs and publications” and expanding its continuous learning opportunities on advocating the value of the library, librarian, and information. To address this, the chapter followed up the 2009 workshop by Scott Walter on Return-on-Investment for academic libraries by taking steps towards partnering with the LSU School of

Library and Information Science to work towards creating an academic library ROI calculator that can be applicable to any size academic institution, something which has yet to be done by any entity. I have submitted an article for this issue which will become the backbone for this calculator.

ACRL also seeks to promote research and publication in the discipline, and in response to this objective, ACRL-LA unveiled *Codex: The Journal of the Louisiana Chapter of the ACRL*, its open access peer-reviewed journal, edited by Megan Lowe. The first issue included articles by LOUIS's Ralph Bo  ; two current SLIS faculty members (one from The University of Iowa and one from Louisiana State University); and four academic librarians (representing Louisiana State University, Towson University, and Nicholls State University). The second issue is currently under review, and it will also contain articles by both nationally recognized scholars and Louisiana librarians. This journal also includes comprehensive reviews of publications in the literature; these reviews come from librarians both in and out of the state.

### **Goal Area: Leadership**

ACRL recruits and develops future academic library leaders by meeting objectives like developing leadership opportunities, offering professional development and making accessible tools that "empower [members] to communicate the value of their contributions to learning and scholarship." To develop new leadership opportunities, Goldsmith has already begun plans to bring three new academic librarians onto the chapter Executive Board. In addition, ACRL-LA will continue to offer workshop opportunities for library administration, as well as peer reviewer opportunities for its members. The chapter began actively courting students in the state's only

MLIS program at LSU, visiting three times to classes and twice to student socials. The chapter is also currently pursuing an active relationship with Alma Dawson, the faculty advisor to the academic librarianship specialization area. Both Dawson and a student representative are invited to every Executive Board meeting.

### **Goal Area: Information Technology**

ACRL identifies as its goal in this respect as aiding academic and research librarians in becoming leaders in using instructional technologies to create, manage, and educate users on resources. Its objectives include supporting the development of academic librarians by offering educational opportunities, building its “capacity to partner with other technology-oriented higher education organizations to identify standards and best practices for managing digital libraries and digital library services,” and supporting members in their implementation of new and emerging information technologies. To meet this goal, Niemla and Lowe, both members of the ACRL-LA Executive Board, continued to routinely present at the LUC and the Louisiana Library Association Conference on the relationship between information technology and librarianship. A case in point, in 2009 they presented on statistics-keeping methods for reference. In addition, Goldsmith has already identified the creation and maintenance of a digital library for theses and dissertations in the state as one of her two priorities she will pursue during her presidency.

### **Goal Area: Membership**

ACRL acknowledges that membership growth hinges on appeal and identifies as its objectives in this area increasing membership, especially from underrepresented ethnic and racial groups, as well as broader (non-librarian) communities. By doing so, the national organization

hopes to achieve another objective, to recruit new and diverse talent and encourage “research and programming on the changing workforce in academic libraries,” which includes considering the implications for leadership, middle management, and staff recruitment/retention. The chapter has taken the bull by the horns here, by not only holding the usual membership drives, but by creating a new membership level. These Associate Memberships will be offered to non-academic librarians, such as teaching faculty in other departments, as well as to non-university related librarians—school librarians, retired librarians, and out-of-work librarians. In 2009-2010, ACRL-LA also began a partnership with the LSU School of Library and Information Science that involved creating a committee to investigate partnership initiatives. To that end, the student liaison from the SLIS program (Mark Zelesky, now graduated) identified various needs of MLIS students, which resulted in guest lectures by chapter officers, librarian-led discussion groups, and focus group surveying. The chapter also sponsored four students to attend its 2009 workshop on Return-On-Investment, and two students for its Scholarly Communications Roadshow. In addition, in April 2010 the chapter agreed, at the request of Dawson, to act as a liaison between LSU SLIS and the LOUIS Users Group, since the two entities have no official relationship. As these new librarians are recruited, they are given the opportunity to enter our Peer/Experts program.

**Goal Areas: Organizational Vitality & Effectiveness  
and Sustainability**

ACRL states in its Strategic Plan that it will “have the fiscal resources, staff expertise, and organizational structure to advance the association’s strategic plan by deploying data-driven

decision making to drive entrepreneurial activities,” and that it will pursue various objectives towards this end: increasing and diversifying fiscal and human assets; increasing the mutual benefits of the ACRL/ALA relationship; and increasing and improve ACRL’s organizational use of information technology. To this end, the ACRL-LA chapter created a Funding Committee whose charge is to develop alternate methods of renewing the chapter’s treasury so that it could continue to fund initiatives such as the Scholar Librarian Award and the annual keynote speaker. Incoming President Goldsmith has identified as her platform increasing the membership base and bringing in new Executive Board members through standing committee chair appointments. In addition, ACRL-LA’s web presence has become more pronounced in 2009, with additional offerings: *Codex* (publishing opportunities), a forum area (discussions and information exchange), the use of Survey Monkey (membership feedback and priorities), the use of online nominations for elections and online voting (speed and ease of vital decisions), and communications software such as Skype (sustainability and feasibility of meetings).

ACRL also identifies sustainability as a goal area, calling for commitment to adopting green and sustainable business practices. Aside from its move towards virtual meeting space for decision making, the chapter’s Executive Board has been and will continue to make small contributions to sustainability literacy through Niemla’s ongoing advocacy (including presentations) on responsible printing.

### **III. Conclusion: ACRL-LA’s Role in the Future of Librarianship**

The chapter has adopted as its mission a complimentary stance to the missions of both LOUIS and LLA-Academic, and, as such, plans to be one of the leading organizations for academic librarians in Louisiana. Our strengths, which mirror the strategic priorities of ACRL,

are promoting scholarship on academic libraries, promoting an understanding of and dialogue on the implications of faculty status and tenure-track academic status, and promoting the overall multidisciplinary nature of academic librarianship. The chapter's current focus is on firmly (re)establishing, and in some instances formalizing, the academic library's centrality to the functionality of higher education. Our initiatives will position Louisiana's academic libraries in an expert role with staples of academic culture, including (but not limited to) the following: information literacy as a general education core competency, rather than as an informal "on the fly" skill; open access scholarly communication as the (r)evolutionary alternative to proprietary scholarship; professional development of the whole academic librarian as a fully-accepted faculty member, rather than as a lesser scholar and/or service point only; and academic librarianship scholarship (especially pertaining to information and media literacy education) as a theoretical discipline, as well as a method of sharing methods and applications. The chapter's focus on these priorities will further solidify both its stability, and the stability of the profession as a whole—and hopefully will reify the importance of supporting the education of librarians, rather than questioning its validity and necessity to the state's well-being. But for any of this to occur, academic librarians must realize that preaching to the choir seldom converts non-believers. To that end, ACRL-LA will continue to make inroads to the rest of academe, including those faculty and administrators who sit in the back row and look for any opportunity to quietly tiptoe away.

---

<sup>1</sup> Library and Information Technology Association, "Assumptions about the Relevant Future for Academic and Research Librarians and Libraries," [http://www.lita.org/ala/mgrps/divs/acrl/about/whatisacrl/strategicplan/Revised\\_Assumptions\\_2006\\_FINAL.pdf](http://www.lita.org/ala/mgrps/divs/acrl/about/whatisacrl/strategicplan/Revised_Assumptions_2006_FINAL.pdf).

<sup>2</sup> The *ACRL Strategic Plan Implementation Form* is only available to members. All quotations are taken from the *Form*, unless otherwise noted.