

## **Academic Librarianship in Louisiana, Fire, Gusto, and Departing from Dystopia**

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“The grand thing is to plunge ahead and see what your passion can reveal.”  
--Ray Bradbury, A New Introduction to *Fahrenheit 451* (2003)

For many academic librarians in Louisiana, it is difficult to plunge ahead. Past budget cuts have eliminated positions in academic libraries, wiped away already a limited number of travel and conference reimbursement opportunities, and created stress from looming budget cuts; these have been depressing and a challenge to endure. Added to these problems were the proposed closure of the LSU MLIS program and the Board of Regents' cutting of LOUIS's funding. Some academic libraries have been in a stop-go-stop mode in regard to daily work, like cataloguing and collection development. At this level the messages are mixed: there is no budget for purchasing library resources, but then emerges some semblance of a budget and everyone is directed to spend all available funds (making librarians wonder, at what expense to colleagues). After the spending begins, librarians are instructed to purchase what is necessary only. There are also paradoxes: due to cuts in the collection, research will rely upon interlibrary loan, yet ILL costs money that some fear spending; reference librarians are helping more library users than ever, but no new reference books can be purchased to support cutting-edge research; library classes are more numerous, but instructional positions that would help handle the additional load have been either frozen or lost; instructors of courses across the curriculum are demanding more than ever to have a librarian guest lecture on highly specific subject matter, but libraries are hiring fewer and fewer specialists; in order to attract and retain students, the university needs a better variety of courses, but bureaucratic red tape makes it nearly impossible for librarians to

teach some courses in order to help their institutions. In toto, academic librarians in Louisiana are certainly living in a dystopia. While librarians in other states are also feeling the pinch of austerity, for many reasons—past hurricanes, incomplete recovery, and a glimpse of constructive progress at educational institutions that seem to be on the verge of extinction—the hurt is felt more profoundly here.

Experiencing these problems, combined with being given no cost of living raises for two or three years, has caused some academic librarians to go from panic to paralysis. Each budget year means that familiar faces are now missing from work, meetings, and conferences. Research, writing, and other kinds of creative work have slowed to a trickle not just because there is no merit pay, but because these worrisome concerns are draining and distracting.

Being old enough to have been through a few economic depressions and downturns prior to this one, I am wary of this paralysis; it has a tendency to cloud judgment. When one is so worried about making ends meet and keeping a position, it may make sense to react by ceasing to attend conferences or workshops, maintaining a low profile, and avoiding travel. These decisions may appear to be part of survival mode, but they are also self-destructive, since they cause librarians to lose the passion that once motivated them. In their newfound cocoon, they cannot develop. They ignore opportunities that could change their libraries' (and their own) situations for the better. They eschew any chance to learn about fellow librarians' work or studies, to experience how colleagues work in different academic settings, and to become known and respected in their own professional communities.

### **Burning Bright?**

After reading these first two paragraphs, some readers will be quick to point out that there were a few bright moments in academic librarianship last year: LOUIS did manage to find some

temporary funding and is working towards attaining more sustainable funding; it is applying for large grants, which brings more hope to the situation. Attendance at this year's statewide conferences (LOUIS and LLA) was for better than expected. Initiatives have been launched to benefit academic libraries and to help them recover from setbacks caused by the statewide budget cuts. Yet too many of the state's academic librarians heartily defend a sideways approach to contributing to the field—arguing that when times get better and economic hardships subside, they will be back at events and will become active again. After all, the same people who organize events from the ground up are still in place, and *they* will not let academic librarianship in the state die. The danger, however, is that fewer of these people are staying in this state; they have also been facing the same crises and disturbing issues.

Those working behind the scenes of many of this past year's events know that a good deal of recruitment was involved to get academic librarians to do presentations, participate on panels, work on committees, and serve as officers. ACRL-LA scheduled two events: a Poster Session competition for students (that offered monetary awards and non-monetary recognition) and a workshop on LOCKSS (Lots of Copies Keeps Stuff Safe) and CLOCKSS (Controlled LOCKSS). ACRL-LA worked with LOUIS to coordinate both events with the LOUIS Users Conference (LUC). In preparation, earlier this year Past President Tony Fonseca and I presented on giving poster sessions in an Academic Librarianship class at LSU's SLIS; ACRL-LA also posted our presentation, "A Poster Session Pedagogy," to its website for students' reference and use. As the deadline approached, just one student expressed interest in the competition. The Chapter had to cancel the event. Only in retrospect did we come to realize that the most important factor for the lack of participation in this event was that LUC met during LSU's autumn recess. Apparently, more students were either away from campus than anticipated and/or

they were determined to take a much needed break from coursework. Several graduate students contacted me after LUC and explained that the Poster Session needed to be at a more convenient time, perhaps closer to the beginning of the semester. In response to their needs, ACRL-LA in future intends to host the Poster Session competition at a more convenient time for students.

The problem with the Poster Session was understandable; however the need to cancel the ACRL-LA LOCKSS/CLOCKSS workshop due to lack of interest was a shock to all involved; my own theory is that this lack of interested was related to the aforementioned crises-related feelings of paralysis. When the workshop was advertised, ACRL-LA made it very clear that this workshop was not just about technology and that it was not just for Information Technology people. While ACRL-LA did explain the technological side of the workshop on its website and postings to listservs, it also clearly outlined the overall importance of the digital preservation of owned online content to all academic libraries—*especially those suffering from budget cuts*. In other words, by incorporating LOCKSS technology in Louisiana, academic libraries in the state could keep and have access to all their owned online content both while they have a contract with a database vendor and afterwards. In the worst case scenario that LOUIS cannot find funding for the databases and thus the databases disappear, libraries that use LOCKSS boxes would be able to have continued access to the articles, web content, and other resource materials they have placed in their repositories. I personally am excited that Nicholls State University's Ellender Memorial Library will be the beta testing site for LOCKSS in this state. Many officers on the ACRL-LA Executive Board and LOUIS are enthusiastic supporters of the fact that academic libraries in this state would be able to do something proactive to prevent devastating consequences from the budgetary plug pulling. In addition, since LOCKSS/CLOCKSS is an international community-based initiative that has the goal of preserving e-content for the long

run, academic libraries in Louisiana would have the opportunity to network and exchange ideas with academic libraries outside the state, as well as with leading scholarly publishers, in order to benefit the greater global research community.

From the perspective of academic rigor, Louisiana's academic libraries becoming a valued member of an international library and scholarly community could become a reality. To communicate the importance of this cost and resource saving workshop, ACRL-LA contacted library directors to encourage librarians (and staff) to attend the event. Understanding that expenses are now not being covered at most Louisiana academic libraries for librarians to attend useful and necessary workshops, ACRL-LA brought down the price of this workshop significantly (by some 150%, in comparison to previous years). The price of the workshop was \$25 (and that included lunch); for students participating in the Poster Session, it would have been free. And since the workshop was to take place just after LUC, finding the workshop venue (it was held in the same room as some of the presentations at LUC) as well as travel should have been of little concern to most LUC attendees. Timing was also of little issue, since this workshop would have ended by 5 p.m. Despite our posting registration deadlines and repeat postings, by the time the workshop was only a week away, there were virtually no registrants.

The kind of paralysis I describe here is informed by fear so deeply felt that possible options (and actions) to help one get out of this condition or to broach problems become overlooked. This cutting edge ACRL-LA workshop would have introduced realistic solutions for electronic resources, now the bulk of many library collections at institutions across the state. Academic libraries in Louisiana need to become early adaptors of LOCKSS and other kinds of new technology and methods scholarly exchange, such as electronic theses and dissertations. On such issues, as well as on open access initiatives, we have to ask ourselves if it makes sense to

continue to lose ground. We have to question the current practice of overlooking professional development opportunities, regardless of hurdles such as austerity. We must condition ourselves to not let this paralysis affect our passion.

**Gusto!**

In writing about this kind of paralysis, my sincere hope is that I hit a nerve or strike a chord with some readers. My thoughts continue to return to that librarian who chooses to stay in the burning library (instead of escaping) in Bradbury's *Fahrenheit 451*. I find her gesture symbolic of a passion that academic librarians often share. Past Presidents Mike Matthews, Tony Fonseca, and I had an enthusiastic discussion after the news that the ACRL-LA workshop was cancelled—all of us thrilled to know that some academic librarians will go the extra mile, engage themselves thoroughly, and work towards making academic librarianship better in Louisiana. But we were gravely concerned that the number was overwhelmingly too small. Our greatest fear is that there aren't enough academic librarians who are willing to metaphorically stay behind to battle the fire.

It takes gusto, chutzpah, real nerve, and passion to remain in the fire, to not passively allow for time to pass into a better time. It involves remaining conversant and current in the field, and networking with scholars both in and out of the discipline, despite the fact that some of our colleagues will question us for doing it. But we must get to the point where our drive surpasses our need to simply survive in academia. Ultimately, in order to preserve academic library positions at the tenure track faculty level, we will have to adapt to producing scholarship that can be recognized as being on the same level as other tenure track teaching faculty. We will have to adapt our way of thinking and our technologies to actively preserve resources, so that knowledge is never replaced by a dark void. We will have to bravely confront the lack of cutting-edge work

that sometimes results from paralysis, and articulate to teaching faculty why it is disastrous to sit idly by as research databases disappear. In short, we must be willing to stand in that fire, rather than do nothing more than survive. Letting time pass, believing that it is essential for survival, in other words, just keeping the ship afloat, only serves to fan the flames. We must continually remind ourselves that our professional organizations, like ACRL-LA, exist solely to help the brave and adventurous from having to stand alone when fighting the good fight against paralysis.

### **Departing from Dystopia**

No matter the cause, academic librarians must overcome fear and paralysis and find ways to take up the battle cry. They need to continue to fight to make the state's academic libraries the cultural centers of academe, the heart of the state's university systems. Doing so will involve both local and global engagement, as well as scholarly exchange—not just working in isolation. This is not the easy route. This is not the path of least resistance. But it is what academic librarianship should be about.