

ASSOCIATION OF COLLEGE AND RESEARCH LIBRARIES

Community College Librarian Focus Group Report

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Background

The Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) commissioned a focus group to be held during the ACRL 2017 National Conference in Baltimore. The focus group was intended to provide qualitative data to assist the Community College Engagement Task Force with fulfilling its charge: *To build ACRL's effectiveness in supporting community and junior college librarians. Work with the ACRL Board, CJCLS, and other ACRL units with the goals of (a) conducting a needs assessment related to professional engagement and professional development for community college librarians; (b) identifying barriers to ACRL membership, conference attendance, and other professional participation experienced by community college librarians; and (c) recommend next steps for the association to expand support for community college members and prospective members.*

This report summarizes the information gained from eleven participants who met with me on Friday, March 24 2017, 4:00–5:30p.m. The session followed a script approved by the ACRL Associate Director and members of the Task Force. The script is included in this document as an Appendix.

Audio of the session was recorded digitally to ensure the accuracy of this report. Direct quotes from participants are enclosed by quotation marks or in italics. All other wording is mine.

Key Findings

Community college librarians believe that they are on the forefront of change and innovation. Collectively, they serve nearly half of the nation's college students, an increasingly diverse group ranging from at-risk to Ivy-bound. They pride themselves on "wearing multiple hats" and "doing more with less" in order to provide the same level of service that four-year institutions with greater resources offer. Their unique role in higher education makes them a valuable resource not just to their own communities, but also to the academic library community. The academic library community does not seem to recognize this value. Community college librarians feel that both they and their students are stigmatized—seen as less qualified, less motivated, and generally less-than.

This stigma extends to and limits their engagement with ACRL. They are skeptical about fully engaging with an organization that seems dominated by the needs and perspectives of members from four-year institutions. They are frustrated when two of the very few conference sessions focusing on community college libraries are offered during the same time slot. They are surprised when other librarians warn them about being "snubbed" due to their institutional affiliation and disappointed not to see themselves better represented in ACRL's programming.

Community college librarians are seeking recognition of their value and contributions as well as information that directly relates to their needs. They want opportunities to learn from each other and to share their ideas, challenges, and successes with the greater academic library community. While lack of resources does limit their ability to serve and participate at the same level as some of their four-year peers, they are "eager to be part of the conversation" and want ACRL to invite them to the table.

Summary of Responses to Questions

Motivation for Focus Group Participation

Participants expressed three major motivations for accepting the focus group invitation. These motivations all indicate a desire to raise the status/profile of community college librarians and have a greater impact at a national level.

Change Perceptions

Participants described a major disconnect between how they perceive themselves and how others in the library and academic community perceive and treat them. They came to the focus group hoping to “dispel myths” about their work, their role in higher education, and their students. They see themselves as vital, innovative, and at the forefront of change. They feel “misunderstood” by their four-year peers, “underrepresented” within ACRL, and generally “undervalued” and “forgotten.”

Have a Voice

Participants viewed attending the focus group as a way to provide data about the vital work of community college librarians and influence decision makers at ACRL to offer more resources and programming targeted toward their needs. They saw the invitation to participate as an invitation to “step up and have more of a voice in this organization.”

Seize a Chance

Participants were “delighted” by the invitation to meet with other community college librarians at a national level. They saw the focus group as an important acknowledgment of their current and potential contributions to the library profession and wanted to play a part in building more cohesion among their peers.

Professional Networks

The most common drawing participants used to represent their professional network was a network node diagram. They placed themselves at the center, with the most proximate connections being to 1) peer library professionals (both at their home and other institutions); 2) faculty and administrators at their home institutions; and 3) local/statewide organizations, consortia, and professional associations. ALA and ACRL were the most frequently named national organizations, though ACRL did not appear at all in half of the images.

Participants acknowledged the role of geography in determining the shape and scope of their networks. Some community colleges are part of a strong regional network, while others “stand alone.” Some states have much more active ACRL chapters than others. Participants expressed a desire for more opportunities to connect with other community college librarians in their region, seeing those peers as most likely to offer meaningful information and support.

ACRL does not currently offer participants the kind of relevant connections and resources they are looking for (*there's not much related to community college students*). Some are involved with CJCLS, but this specific section was only named in one participant's network diagram.

Engagement at Three Levels (Broad Professional, Community College Librarian, ACRL Member)

Participants unanimously described themselves as *very engaged* at the broad professional level and at the community college level. They agreed that they were *not very engaged* at the ACRL member level.

As described by participants, engagement at the first two levels (professional/community college) sounds more abstract and open to interpretation and application; specific activities (such as “reading the literature” or “attending professional meetings”) were absent from the discussion. Engagement at these levels may, then, be shaped primarily by individual and institutional values, priorities, and needs. By contrast, participants described engagement with ACRL in more concrete, activity-driven terms. Engagement at this level may be shaped primarily by the resources and opportunities ACRL offers and the degree to which librarians find them relevant and accessible.

Engagement as a Professional

- Staying aware of what's happening in the field
- Contributing to a community
- Connecting to a higher purpose
- Developing professionally
- Embracing change & innovation

Engagement as a Community College Librarian

- Collaborating with peers & colleagues
- Focusing on student success
- Integrating into academic community
- Serving as the connector within the institution
- Staying on the forefront
- Expanding the traditional view of the library
- Believing in our value, even if others don't

Engagement as an ACRL Member

- Using the Standards and exchanging ideas on list serves
- Participating in conferences and professional development offerings
- Volunteering to serve
- Voting in elections
- Providing financial support through membership
- Taking a leadership role

Helpers and Barriers to Engaging with ACRL

Mentors and highly-engaged peers influenced participants to get involved with ACRL by steering them toward the groups they should join and encouraging them to volunteer for committees. Some participants felt “a real connection and a sense of community” through activity on the CJCLS list serv, while others had transformative professional development experiences (AiA, Immersion). The common denominator to initiating/increasing ACRL engagement seemed to be “finding another community college librarian.”

Participants equated ACRL engagement with time and money—resources they find in short supply. Most of them lack financial support from their institutions, feel duty-bound to put students first (*my students need me*), and do not want to overcommit themselves to external service. The necessity of interpreting and translating ideas from four-year institutions to the their own context requires community college librarians to piece together what they need from ACRL rather than easily finding it or, better yet, having it presented to them. Participants felt that relevance and communication were significant barriers to higher levels of participation:

- *[ACRL] doesn't always speak to community college librarians*
- *I had to find [information about Immersion] myself; ACRL didn't send me anything*

Participants with budgetary authority stated that they would refuse or hesitate to send their librarians to the ACRL National Conference because “there’s not enough” directly relevant programming for them to justify the expense.

Satisfaction with ACRL Engagement

Most participants described themselves as *undecided* or *somewhat satisfied* with their level of ACRL engagement.

Engagement has takeaway value for participants. Through exposure to what other library professionals are doing, they

- gather information to take back to peers
- discover new ideas to reenergize them
- experiment with applying new approaches to their work

Participants would like to have more contributory value through their engagement. They felt that they and other library professionals were missing out on the “expertise, energy, and great ideas” from community college librarians who weren’t represented at the conference. They want more opportunities to share what they know and do.

What ACRL Can Do to Increase Relevance & Engagement

Participants felt that attention to community college librarians was long overdue. They described the focus group as “a fabulous step in the right direction” and expressed hope that ACRL would reach out with a “sincere invitation” for greater participation. When asked what a sincere invitation would look like, they offered the following suggestions, mostly centered on making the National Conference more inclusive of, appealing to, and valuable for community college librarians.

- reach out and explicitly tell community college librarians, “we want to hear from you”
- in calls for publication, indicate that “papers on x about community college libraries would be welcome”
- accept more conference proposals from community college librarians
- encourage conference panels to include a community college librarian
- seek out conference contributions from/encourage collaborations between four-years and community college libraries
- offer networking opportunities for community college librarians: social events such as receptions, impromptu roundtables, or organized self-pay dinners during conference
- celebrate community college librarians in a way similar to the way international librarians were celebrated at this conference

While asking to be celebrated, participants also expressed discomfort around the idea of being “segregated.” They want their work and contributions to be highlighted, and they want to easily find each other, but they also want to be included with their four-year peers. Balancing these somewhat conflicting desires may present a dilemma for ACRL.

Message to ACRL Leadership

One participant summed up a general theme of the focus group with the exclamation, “You need us!” Participants wanted ACRL leadership to know that they and their colleagues have a lot to offer other librarians, and “it would be great if they sought to learn from us.” The following qualities make community college librarians an untapped resource for the benefit of the profession and the association.

- Community college librarians are “100% student focused,” preparing them to succeed both academically and in life and “inspiring them to think beyond obstacles.”
- Community college librarians are “vital change agents” in higher education, innovating to serve diverse students who “feel the cost of education, textbooks, and changing job markets profoundly.”
- Community college librarians do the same things their peers at four-year institutions do, but with “fewer staff, less money, and students who aren’t as prepared,” and “deserve the same respect and acknowledgement.”

APPENDIX

ACRL Focus Group: Community College Librarians

Background

Thank you for your time and your willingness to share your thoughts and experiences. [Introduce Self] Today we're here to find out what ACRL can do to support your professional engagement and development. What we learn will inform the work of the Community College Engagement Task Force. Your responses will be used to generate a report to ACRL; individual comments will not be identified. I will be recording the session to assist me in creating an accurate report, but I will not share that recording with anyone. I will sometimes ask you to write down responses on paper or cards; I will collect those at the end and destroy them after I have completed my report.

Introductions (with Question 1): To get us started, I'd like to ask each of you to briefly introduce yourself. Would you please tell us

- Your name
- Your institution
- **(Q1)** And a little bit about what brought you here today—what prompted you to sign up for this focus group?

Question 2: I'm going to ask you to think about your own professional network—the important relationships you have with other people and organizations. What does your network look like? Using the paper and pens I've provided, take a few minutes to draw something that represents your professional network.

Would anyone like to share your drawing and talk us through it?
[will ask for 2-3 participants to share and generate some open discussion]

Follow up questions for whole group:

- What are the important elements and connections within your network?
- Is anything missing from your network that you think should be there?
- What do you think these drawings tell us about professional engagement in the community college library world?

Question 3: I'd like to delve deeper into this topic of professional engagement. First, I'll ask you to think about engagement in the broadest sense—what it means to be engaged as a professional in any field. What does engagement mean?

- How engaged are you at this broad level?

Now let's think more specifically about engagement in your field. What does it mean to be engaged as a community college librarian?

- How engaged are you at this level?

Question 4: Finally, let's think about engagement within a professional association. What does it mean to be engaged with an association like ACRL?

- How engaged do you feel at this level—with ACRL specifically?

Question 5: I'd like to get even more specific about the ways you have and haven't engaged with ACRL.

- What has helped you to engage?
 - What or who led you to engage with ACRL initially?
 - What interactions and activities have been most meaningful to you?
- What's gotten in the way of being engaged?
 - What barriers have you faced in participating in the kinds of interactions and activities you feel would be meaningful?

Question 6: Based on everything we've talked about so far, how satisfied would you say you are with your engagement with ACRL as it stands now?

- For those of you who are more satisfied, what value/benefit do you feel you're getting from your engagement with ACRL?
- For those of you who are less satisfied, what value/benefit do you feel you're missing out on?

Question 7: What could ACRL do to be more relevant to you and help you be more visible within the library profession?

Question 8: As we wrap up, I'd like you to imagine that it's the last day of the conference and you find yourself riding alone in the elevator with Mary Ellen Davis, ACRL's Executive Director. She asks you to tell her about what community college librarians are doing these days. What message would you like to give her about community college librarians? Write down a short message on the notecard in front of you.