

LIBRAS Report
ACRL National Conference: Pushing the Edge: Explore, Engage, Extend
March 12-15, 2009

Terry Cottrell
Library Director
University of St. Francis Joliet, IL

Primary Acknowledgement

Thanks to LIBRAS for generously granting me funding for this conference. This year's conference was a valuable experience, and left me with many ideas to bring back to the various committees and groups on which I serve and can make a positive influence toward our profession.

Attended Sessions Of Note

1. Brother can you spare a dime? The 2009 ACRL trends for academic libraries.
2. Reinventing research guides: LibGuides at two academic libraries.
3. Extending the conversation: The liberal arts scholarly repository.
4. Who am I this time? A shared library serving multiple clientele.
5. Conflict and consensus—Clusters of opinions on e-books.
6. Advancing your claim to campus leadership: Reaching the summit one toehold at a time.
7. Fishing for information: Using focus group research to discover student perceptions of library services and resources.
8. What really are student learning outcomes?
9. Resolved: The master's degree in library science is not relevant to the future of the academic library.
10. Social networking literacy competencies for librarians: Exploring considerations and engaging participation.
11. I would sort of appreciate a little more understanding: Engaging Net Gen students in virtual reference.
12. The academic library as publishing agent: Showcasing student, faculty, and campus scholarship and publications.
13. Academic library support staff competencies: What should support staff know and be able to do?
14. Few Exhibits (all days)
15. Many Posters (all days)

General Remarks and Report

Due to my current teaching/class schedule, I'll been away from the conference circuit for a while and looked forward to attending this year's ACRL for two purposes: 1) To see what type of impact the current economic trends might be playing out in our field today, and 2) To get reactions for my poster session (with Julie Dahl) entitled: "Senior Saturdays: Providing Engaging Academic Programming for Senior Communities."

I see many academic library sessions at ALA National, and have attended those particular conferences to a larger degree ever since the beginning of my career. When looking at ACRL, I'm always very interested in finding what I might have missed. This is the second national conference for me, and this time I found myself wading in and out of a lot of sessions in favor of more intimate one-on-one discussion and the posters.

A few of the sessions seemed so important to my colleagues that I resolved to not spend much time actually in session vs. making a commitment to send my staff exploring immediately. LibGuides is a clear standout in my mind here along with student surveys ala Valparaiso University's presentation on focus groups. We've immediately begun trialing LibGuides, and from what I can tell, it's going to have a substantial impact on our student's use of resources. The potential is exciting. Our library surveys student satisfaction through a variety of instruments created and disseminated by other campus departments. We, however, have not released our own instrument in a few years. I think a focus group, like what I saw from Valparaiso, might be in order for our institution. We see many anecdotal comments filtering through our suggestion box, and our community discussion boards. I'd like to have the results of an official instrument ready to benchmark against some of the more typical surveys administered by our internal data collection department.

Gaming was an issue in the beginning of the conference that piqued my interest simply because I've yet to see gaming applications in an academic environment that I think students would find appealing. Literacy, in general, was also a huge issue in one of the sessions. As an instructor, and as a person sitting on numerous assessment committees, I find myself facing the reality of why many of our students scrutinize their reading assignments much more than previous generations. Getting students to read and be interested in research literacy is something that I'm trying to get our institution to look at as a multi-year process vs. a single-shot library instruction session or one semester course. Sessions at ACRL helped me formulate new ways approaching this timely topic as I'm displeased by faculty frustrations on the issue and feel I can be of some assistance; I'm just not certain how.

Funding was an overarching concern in many of the conference sessions. As library director, I find myself thinking about money much more than I find myself thinking about anything else in the library. Being constantly bombarded with differing opinions and views are par for the course, but when looking at financial constraints it's nice to know I'm not alone. One session focusing on serving multiple clienteles really helped me solidify my opinion of certain types of budget-supplementing partnerships. After attending this session, however, I sat through a debate on the value of the MLS degree itself. One thing I found lacking in this discussion was on the other side of the budget coin: the salary budget. So, I'd say 90% of the budgetary aspects I heard discussed at the conference dealt with operations. What about salaries? What does the MLS degree say about this issue? That particular session left me with more questions than answers.

In the middle of the conference, Jack Fritts was kind enough to invite me to a luncheon sponsored by EBSCO. At that luncheon, EBSCO showed us a product that looked as if it could compete with WebFeat. I plan on pursuing this further as I become more involved with CARLI.

For me, the posters at this conference were much more of a draw than many of the panels and papers. I thought the posters this year were great. There was one particular poster on mashups of librarians and English faculty that I was able to directly support as a grant proposal for our education department. There was a single librarian using a hunting tracking device to keep count of foot traffic in his library that I could use to count traffic in specific areas of mine—at a much, much lower cost than many of the large gate counter solutions from some of the typical library vendors. As a “librarian of color,” I was intrigued by a diversity-based poster that was the answer to many of the frustrations I've had with diversity issues in our profession and on my own campus. There was a poster directly looking at how non-main campus library services

impact disparate users, and how their management fluctuates as budgets and administrative turnover impact operations. Having two different sets of non-main campus users, I found this particular poster to be really interesting.

The plus side with the posters this year, for me, was logistical. I could get access to the presenters very quickly, ask questions and then move on. This was golden when needing to prepare for my own presentation, and when coupled with the fact that I spent a good amount of time conversing with colleagues from around the country outside of the sessions. As for my own poster session . . . I had quite a bit of foot traffic, and the reaction to it was split about 80/20. 80% of onlookers really liked the idea our program, and 20% really did not. The positive visitors each had more of a qualitative view towards the senior service program we provide. They saw it as a way to serve an often forgotten group, and could see the altruism in place at our institution. The negative viewers were mostly concerned with the budgetary impact of the program. They expected the program to prove itself to be revenue generating or not worth doing. All comments were appreciated, of course. One thing that was great about the experience was the reminder of just how different the operations of any particular college (and its library) may be from town to town, state to state, or even year to year—even within the same institution.