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The Value of Libraries: An Association Leadership View

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The following is a transcript of a live presentation at the 2015 Charleston Library Conference.

Courtney Young: Good morning. Thank you so much for inviting me to be here. I see that the front seats are nice and available, just like when I do course-related instruction. That’s good. So, good morning. It’s really great to be here with you and at the Charleston Conference. As you can see from the title of my presentation, I will be talking about “The Value of Libraries: An Association Leadership View,” and this, of course, is going to be filtered very much through my academic librarian lens, but I will be talking a little bit about other types of libraries as well.

So, as ALA president, I worked with members from all different types of libraries and from all types of library-related roles to highlight areas of interest and emphasis with the Association’s mission and vision, and for me that is diversity, career development, engagement, and outreach. I believe that these are the things that really bring value to being a member of the Association and, in turn, the work that we do in and for libraries. They also help us to have a positive impact on the communities that we serve, and in my case those are campus communities. I’ve come to realize that these three areas from ALA’s mission—diversity, career development, and engagement and outreach—are what have helped me, someone who is a frontline librarian in an academic library who is working with traditional- and nontraditional-age undergraduate students from around the world, to do my job better and to be a change agent for those whom I teach. This opportunity to see how libraries of all types are serving their communities has really allowed me to bring back some new ideas and to take different approaches to the way that I do my work. It’s also raised my profile among the campus faculty and staff whom I work with so they really get a better sense of the type of impact that librarians and libraries can have on the national level. They are really surprised that, “Wow, libraries are doing an awful lot. This is kind of an important role.” I would say, “Hmm, just a little bit.”

The chance to serve as the Association’s chief spokesperson meant, among things, speaking with the media about libraries. Often this was around that question of, “Do we still need libraries?” Yeah, exactly. I’m glad there was at least one chuckle. What do today’s libraries have for 21st-century users? In many cases they were talking about the country’s over 16,400 public libraries, but often when I talk about libraries that is what they are thinking about. They’re thinking about the public library. And that’s okay on a certain level, but academic libraries, which in some communities function as the public library, are just as dynamic and exciting, but also as at risk and challenged as their public counterparts. Which brings us to questions about the value of libraries.

If I look back on my presidential year, I do have a few thoughts on this. First, the value of academic libraries. Now, the Association of College and Research Libraries, ACRL, produced The Value of Academic Libraries: A Comprehensive Research Review and Report in 2010. This report provides “1) a clear view of the current state of the literature on the value of libraries within an institutional context, 2) suggestions for immediate ‘Next Steps’ in the demonstration of academic library value, and 3) a ‘Research Agenda’ for articulating academic library value” (ACRL, 2010, p. 11). Many of the next steps in that report reflect a national dialogue on public and school libraries. These include linking libraries to improve student retention and graduation rates, enhancing library contribution to student job success, and demonstrating and developing library impact on student learning. This is likely because the executive summary states in the report’s scope, “this report includes significant research from other library types: school, public, and special libraries as they offer,” and I quote again,
“examples of numerous library value approaches and lessons learned from each” (p. 11). I’d also like to note that the report purports the need to promote and participate in professional development and leverage library professional associations. ALA went on in this by adding professional and leadership development to its new strategic directions that were approved by the Association’s council in June of this year. This for me is a real recognition of the fact that professional and leadership development of librarians and library workers is essential to ensuring high-quality professional practice and the future of libraries and information services, increasing the diversity of library professionals and sustaining their professional growth through multiple strategies, and aligning leadership development and continuing education with the best thinking about the changing information environment. And I think that there are a few people in this room who know a little bit about that changing information environment.

I had the opportunity to attend the 2014 South Korea Library Association conference. And in her presentation, “Skills for the Librarian of the Future,” the US information resource officer, Alka Bhatnagar, noted the service philosophy for 21st-century librarians as being “user-centric, high-quality resources and services to meet the exponentially growing recreational and knowledge needs of the globally networked current, potential, and future diverse community users in a conducive environment” (Bhatnagar, n.d., p. 31). So, if you think about those pieces that she calls out, it’s user-centric, they’re high quality resources and services, it’s growing recreational and educational needs, it’s globally networked, it’s current, it’s future, it’s also potential, it’s diversity as well—all taking place in an environment that is conducive to all of these things. Now, even though I know that she was talking about public community-focused libraries, this sounded a lot to me like the experiences that we’re shaping in today’s academic libraries. It’s that intersection of resources and services to support our students’ academic and social personal needs that connects them with the world. It recognizes and celebrates diversity all in the right locations that are outfitted appropriately. So, for this morning I’m going to share a few thoughts about libraries’ value through advocacy, through partnerships, and through diversity.

First, I’m going to start with advocacy. Now see, advocacy is the foundation of that value piece. It is defined as a public support for, or recommendation of, a particular cause or policy. It is one of ALA’s new strategic directions. So, when it comes to advocacy, the American Library Association aims to advocate for the public value of librarians, libraries, and information services and seeks to focus on its mission and priorities working with three key constituents: ALA members, libraries, and the public. Now, the key components of this area are to bring support for libraries and librarianship through public awareness—providing a vision of innovation, enabling the future of libraries and promoting libraries as centers of community engagement and participatory librarianship—and also by promoting ALA’s core values and emphasizing the impact of libraries to form a basis for advocacy and community conversations. If we start with that educational piece—when you first tell someone that you are a librarian, so that they won’t say, “Do we still need librarians? Do we still need libraries? You must really like to read”—an effective advocacy campaign on behalf of libraries of all types will remind their communities of the vital roles that libraries play. It will raise that community’s profile and ultimately will build support. We need to build support with our faculty, both those who are full-time as well as part-time, our students, who are often based in their department or discipline, or their student groups that they are associated with, as well as our campus staff. They often work directly with our students via academic affairs and student affairs, as coaches, and as part of the writing center staff. Another advocacy piece that is related is library spaces. The themes I highlight when I speak to the media regarding public library centers and library projects, either new or renovated, include new technologies, including computer centers and wireless access. It is more community and performance spaces, like the one we’re in this morning. It’s about auditoriums and meeting rooms, as well as vibrant and
comfortable spaces. So, our advocacy for transformed library spaces are also key in terms of the advocacy work that we do on campus.

Once our libraries were constructed to be warehouses of printed volumes that would not even leave the confines of the building. Our academic libraries are now dynamic, multipurpose, multifunctional spaces. Who has the best hours on campus? Likely, it’s the library that has the best hours on campus. At some colleges and universities we are the first to open and we are the last to close; and then, of course, in some places we are open 24/7 and perpetual access to the library is just a given. Academic libraries are being reconceptualized to allow students to work directly with each other as well as to effectively engage in virtual collaboration. There are quiet study areas which we still do need. Group study areas which our students are demanding more and more; computer and other digital media labs. Our print collections still have a real role to play in the student’s life on campus, and so access to those materials is also part of that design. The beauty of the way 21st-century libraries are being built or renovated is that they are not only setting students up for academic success while they are in college or at the university, but also for life after college. These blended spaces for group work and quiet study with access to various technologies and experts, often referred to as knowledge commons or information commons, look a lot like those modern-day office spaces where students go to work once they graduate. We need to create and seize opportunities to advocate for the library and articulate its value. This means that all members of our library staff must become advocates and they should be empowered to speak to the library’s strengths and contributions to the campus community. It’s not just the job of the dean or the director or the associate university librarians, it’s everyone’s job to have that advocacy role. So, just as I have been prepped to talk about why libraries are still important in the age of Google, and the types of services and resources that are available, everyone on staff needs to be educated and encouraged to articulate the value to our constituents.

Next: partnerships. This might not seem earth shattering, but sometimes a reminder is a good thing. During my presidential year, I observed how important advocacy and partnerships are for libraries, and the unique role that partnership plays in the US versus in other countries that I had the opportunity to visit. So, for example, through a lot of hard work and advocacy, public libraries were included in the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act, ensuring that public libraries are recognized as places where jobseekers can go for job search assistance and employment training. My international travel demonstrated to me that this notion of partnering with other agencies—other social agencies, government agencies, other folks in the community—was not necessarily the norm. In our academic libraries, we are also partnering with other groups on campus and across the campus—sometimes with departments, sometimes with specific faculty. We are partnering with those units so that we can help in providing tutoring to our students through our tutoring centers and our writing centers, as well as our international programs for those students who often come to our campuses ahead of when other students arrive on campus. My year as president demonstrated to me that it is important to continue to be aggressive in building those partnerships and even expanding on the partnerships that we currently have in place. I also think we need to recognize partnerships that we have with publishers and vendors who are also a part of our library community, many of whom possess library school education and started off in our library schools as students alongside us. As publishers, in addition to developing products and functionality, often with librarian input, we are also working with many members of faculty to help them publish their research and facilitate access to their work. Some of our biggest supporters in the library advocacy arena have been our publishers, and for that work I am incredibly grateful.

Diversity, inclusion, and equity. Now diversity, which is also beginning to include inclusion and equity, is becoming more inclusive when we say it these days—a little ironic. It is a programmatic
priority in the American Library Association, and it focuses not only on fostering the diversity of the profession but also on working to ensure that we are serving all members of our communities, all segments of our populations. The 1990 Diversity and Collection Development Interpretation of the Library Bill of Rights states, and I will quote, “Librarians have an obligation to select and support the access to materials on all subjects that meet as closely as possible the needs and interests of all persons in the community which the library serves. This includes materials that reflect the political, the economic, religious, social, minority, and sexual issues” (Office for Intellectual Freedom of the American Library Association, 2006, pp. 117–118). Libraries and librarians are critical to literacy and multicultural awareness. Library programming is an opportunity to foster intellectual and cultural enrichment. Again, our libraries are an opportunity to foster intellectual and cultural enrichment. So through speaker series, One Campus, One Book projects, even art installations—these are all examples of library programming that is taking place that not only brings the academic community together, but also provides opportunities for diversity and inclusion, particularly when you consider that libraries are designed as destinations for our undergraduates, our graduate students, faculty, staff, and community members. Now diversity and librarianship really go hand in hand, and I believe this is essential for everyone who is working in a library, or pursuing a degree in library information science or a related field. Those librarians or libraries whose librarians and staff or volunteers have a significant impact on their communities, they not only understand this but they embrace it as well. And they are showcasing that their libraries are not only a rich source of diversity but are places where difference is truly welcome. Now ethnic and racial diversity are usually what come to mind first when people mention the term diversity, but it means a whole lot more. There is, of course, gender, gender identity, gender expression, national origin, religion, social class, age, sexual orientation, physical and learning abilities. And of course in our university setting, we’re talking about our students who are coming to us as traditional-age students, because they’re undergraduates, adult learner undergraduates, our graduate students, our international students, our first-generation students, and then of course our faculty, our staff, our administrators, our alumni, our community users. These reflect all the ways in which our communities exist and all the ways in which our communities are changing.

Over the course of my career, I’ve come to realize that libraries are probably the richest source of diversity in our communities, and in some cases I would even go as far as to say that they are the richest, most untapped source of diversity in our communities. The richest untapped source of diversity. A place where the potential for successful understanding, inclusion, and equity can exist. I have to take a moment to recognize the fact that we are in Charleston and that we are a very short walk away from the Emanuel African Methodist Episcopal Church. Cynthia Graham Hurd was a public librarian who, along with eight members of her congregation, lost their lives on June 17 as a result of a senseless, racially motivated hate crime. We have a long way to go as a society, but when it comes to getting to that place where equity and inclusion are a valued way of life, I strongly believe that libraries and librarians can lead the way and play an active role in healing our communities and creating those much-needed safe environments for all.

The changing demographics in the United States have, and will continue to have, a huge impact on our communities. In 2012 the US Census Bureau numbers showed that the population aged five and under was at 49.9% minority. The nonwhite population increased by 1.9% to 116 million, which is 37% of the US. The fastest percentage growth is among multiracial Americans, followed by Asians and Hispanics. Non-Hispanic whites make up 63% of the US, Hispanics 17%, Blacks 12.3%, Asians 5%, and multiracial Americans 2.4%. Now trends indicate that the United States will become a majority minority country in a rapidly approaching future and communities nationwide are seeing demographic shifts that impact programming, collections, outreach, and staffing. Of course these figures do not provide us with snapshots of other dimensions of diversity. For
example, physical and mental disabilities are increasingly visible. In a 2012 disability status report from Cornell University, 12.1% of the US population was indicated to have a disability.

Now, going back to another thing that Alka Bhatnagar noted in her presentation in South Korea, she said, and I’ll quote, ”The relationship between libraries and their communities is at a critical intersection. There has never been a more rapid period of change affecting libraries and their communities. As a result, there has never been a better opportunity for library employees to act as leaders for positive change” (Bhatnagar, n.d., p. 10) So, as academic librarians, staff, and supporters, we are uniquely positioned to build a community of advocates to collaborate and build partnerships and foster diversity, equity, and inclusion. Our collections, our programming, the services that we provide, the resources that we provide, these all lend to that opportunity within our academic libraries.

One final thought, particularly since this session is being streamed: When I became president, I knew one of my unique contributions could be in the area of social media. I personally was participating in this space in a way that other presidents had not, which isn’t to say anything about previous presidents, but just to say that that’s just part of who I am, particularly as a “Gen Xer.” I know that social media is related to library services, marketing, and the like and can be hit and miss, but I’m also so proud of this profession’s willingness to experiment and model the aspirational behavior that is so important in our communities today. I also discovered social media’s power as an advocacy tool. It is a strong partnership tool and it is also a way to engage diverse populations in groups in real conversations, not just a one-way output for information. I’m excited that by using social media we can make connections, we can build relationships, and we can improve our professional skills by tapping into an amazing personal learning network. And on that note I look forward to the work ahead and continued improvement of my skills as an advocate, a partner, and a champion for diversity, equity, and inclusion. I look forward to spending time with each of you during this conference and, of course, on social media. Thank you.

References

