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## The Issues that Find you and Refine You

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# The Issues that Find You and Refine You

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September 2011 marked a rather somber start to the academic year for the Oregon Chapter of the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL-OR). One of Oregon's community college libraries, Mt. Hood Community College (MHCC), was facing a major crisis. As part of the college's contract negotiations, the library's three librarians were among seven faculty members being laid off.

The reverberations from the Mt. Hood situation left their mark on the ACRL-OR board. The incoming president, Anna Johnson, was one of the three MHCC librarians laid off. Anna resigned her board position, as she needed to pursue other employment. While this turn of events was a little bit confusing and a little bit challenging for the ACRL-OR board, it also heralded a year which in many ways has been defined by the idea of advocacy.

Since that September, the ACRL-OR board has been asked to advocate for a number of Oregon librarians facing crises and challenges. With each new request, the board has learned more about navigating these situations: what resources and support we can best offer and how to connect ACRL-OR members to the support of their community. These opportunities have served to develop and deepen our understanding of what it means to be advocates for academic libraries and librarians in Oregon.

## Context

Like everyone else, Oregon's academic libraries are feeling pressures that stem from shrinking budgets, rising costs, and technologically driven change. Tuition-driven institutions face challenges when the economy makes it difficult for people to pay private school tuition. At the same time, when unemployment levels rise, Oregon's state-supported colleges find themselves in a classic bind: enrollments go up as people strive to make themselves more attractive to employers, while the state's contributions to their budgets shrink. All of Oregon's colleges and universities are facing challenges, but it is likely that no institutions are feeling this particular pressure more acutely than Oregon's community colleges.

Money has never been plentiful for most libraries in Oregon, and academic librarians are used to doing more with less. The importance of demonstrating our value and measuring our impact is a constant theme; academic librarians definitely do not think their future is certain or assured. But while we talk about the possibility that colleges or universities might someday get rid of their libraries, that threat is usually hypothetical, raised when someone wants to make a strong case that some new change (usually, but not always, technological) is going to threaten our very existence.

One reason the threat to academic libraries has seemed like a distant possibility is the accreditation process, which has always provided a type of safety net; to be accredited, an institution must provide adequate library resources. The accreditation body for most of Oregon's colleges and universities is the Northwest Commission on Colleges and Universities. This body's standards for accreditation include an entire section (NWCCU, 2.E) outlining the library's resources and services.

The NWCCU standards for accreditation specify that an institution must have adequate library and information resources, and that faculty with teaching responsibilities must partner with library personnel to ensure that instruction in the use of library resources is integrated into the learning process (NWCCU, 2.C.6). Accreditation standards for Oregon's colleges and universities do not articulate the term "librarian;" they do describe, however, library resources chosen by "data that include feedback from affected users and appropriate library and information resources, faculty, staff and administrators" (NWCCU, 2.E.2),



which reflects the professional work that librarians do regarding collection development. The standards also require library instruction that "... enhances ... efficiency and effectiveness in obtaining, evaluating, and using library and information resources that support its programs and services ..." (NWCCU, 2.E.3), reflecting the professional work that librarians do with regard to information literacy instruction and reference services.

In other words, while the accrediting language doesn't use the word "librarian," the professional acumen required to select and organize a collection, to teach and provide reference services, and to conduct data-driven assessments of resources and services, is that of a professional librarian. At the current time, all of Oregon's academic libraries employ at least one professional librarian, though, as the case studies we are about to describe illustrate, that fact is not a given.

Academic librarians in Oregon are represented professionally by ACRL-OR. ACRL-OR plays a unique, bridging role in our professional community because it serves both as a local chapter of a national organization for academic libraries (ACRL) and as the academic division of the statewide library association (OLA). ACRL-OR members are members of both OLA and ACRL-OR, and the ACRL-OR President sits on the OLA Executive Board.

This tight connection between the academic library association and the broader statewide library community does not exist in every state. In many states, including our neighbors to the north, the academic and statewide library associations operate entirely separately. In Oregon, academic libraries are part of the statewide association's lobbying and advocacy efforts.

### Issues that find you:

#### Case Study 1: Mt. Hood Community College

In April of 2011, Mt. Hood Community College (MHCC) was facing an anticipated \$5.5 million dollar budget shortfall for the coming school year and was in the midst of labor negotiations with faculty. It was at this time that the college administration gave layoff notices to seven faculty members, including all three faculty librarians.

Jeff Ring, the director of Library Services for MHCC, was quoted in *Library Journal* saying, "the layoffs would save \$380,000," and that, "the work of the faculty librarians would be picked up by other professional librarians on staff who do not have the title of faculty librarian," (Kelley, 2011). He also indicated the decision did not target librarians with faculty status. The faculty librarians believed that they were being targeted because of their response to a breach in data privacy that had happened earlier that year (Kelley, 2011). The librarians filed a grievance indicating the college had violated their contractual rights in a number of areas, and the faculty union supported their grievance (Tichenor, 2011).

The MHCC librarians were active advocates for themselves, and reached out to others for help. They began by contacting their union representation and following their counsel. They took their situation to the press and to their professional organizations. They spoke with the *Oregonian*, *Library Journal*, and the MHCC school paper, *The Advocate*. And they contacted the ACRL-OR board for support.

Our immediate response was that, as the group representing the professional community of academic librarians in Oregon, we should play a role. Because a situation like this had never come before the Board, though, we had to figure out that role as we responded to the situation; there were no existing policies or procedures to guide us.

Because ACRL-OR is connected to both ACRL and OLA, we started by contacting both of those parent organizations for guidance. ACRL indicated that advocacy should stay within



the framework outlined for organizations with a charitable 501c3 status. This was useful guidance in a broader sense, but given that the situation here was neither political nor legislative (as defined at [www.irs.gov](http://www.irs.gov)), it did not suggest a way forward on this particular question.

The Board decided a letter of support for the faculty librarians, directed to the President of MHCC as he was reviewing their grievance, was the appropriate response. The letter articulated the importance of faculty librarians to the educational mission of MHCC and outlined how this decision would negatively affect the students, faculty and reputation of the college. The Oregon Library Association Board voted to partner with ACRL-OR on this letter. The outcome was mixed. MHCC's President reviewed the grievance but did not stop the process, and the faculty librarians were laid off. State arbitration for the librarians' grievance was set for December. In the interim, one librarian found reassignment at MHCC before the start of the new school year, and the others engaged in part-time work or unemployment. In October, the librarians were notified by faculty union leadership that a settlement would be offered by the college rather than wait for arbitration. The librarians met to discuss the settlement, which included all back pay for two of the librarians as well as jobs as faculty librarians (albeit with different job descriptions). The librarian who had become an instructor in another department decided not to return to the library, and her faculty position was transferred to her new department. Both librarians who returned to the library in January, 2012, have since left. One retired and one is seeking employment out of state (T. Hazen, personal communication, March 16, 2012).

### **Case Study 2: Clatsop Community College**

In 2011, Clatsop Community College (Clatsop CC) learned that it would receive about \$1,000,000 less in state funding than it had expected; other revenue streams were also expected to be lower than they had been in previous years. Required by law to balance the budget every year, college administrators announced sweeping cuts in November, including layoffs for 15 of the college's 39 full-time faculty members (Stratton, 2011).

Included in the 15 faculty layoffs was the college's only faculty librarian. This would leave Clatsop CC as the only college or university in Oregon with no professional librarian on staff. The librarian in question reached out to colleagues in the Oregon library community, but not ACRL-OR. The library director at another community college, aware of this situation and concerned about the precedent it would set, contacted the ACRL-OR board to see if there was anything we could do.

Having recently gone through the experience with MHCC, the Board had some precedent to use in this situation and we were able to respond more quickly. The ACRL-OR President contacted the librarian at Clatsop CC and asked if a letter would be helpful. We found out that a public hearing was scheduled, and that while the librarian had been granted time to speak, having a letter to be read into the record would significantly increase the time devoted to the library issue. Given that the hearing was a matter of days away, we had a tight timeline to work with to maximize our impact.

The ACRL-OR President drafted a letter addressed to the College Board of Directors and to the college President and contacted OLA's President to see if he would be willing to co-sign. This letter focused on the important role a faculty librarian plays in student learning and faculty support and highlighted the accreditation requirements that would be impacted by this decision.



Meanwhile, the librarian found a respected member of her campus community to read the letter into the record at the meeting, and spoke directly on her own behalf.

The outcome in this situation was also mixed, but encouraging. Recognizing the significance of eliminating all professional librarians from the college faculty, the institution reclassified the librarian's position as Library Director and reduced the position to 70 percent, with a strong likelihood that it will be increased to full-time in the near future.

### **How they refined us**

In both of these cases, the ACRL-OR board was approached for help by people already in the middle of a crisis. They needed help immediately and we wanted to provide it, so we had to develop a plan for how to do it as we did it. It was really only afterwards, when it was possible to look back and reflect, that we realized how much we also learned about why we should be advocates.

### **It's in our Mission**

It is probably not surprising that ACRL-OR's mission statement suggests some of the ways that a professional association should advocate for the profession. Our mission is:

*to foster communication among academic library personnel; to promote the development of Oregon's academic libraries; to sponsor educational programs of interest to academic library personnel; to serve as liaison between academic personnel and various other academic and library constituencies; and to advocate for academic libraries and library personnel on the state level. (ACRL-OR)*

Advocacy represents an ethic of care within the professional organization. We are called to uphold and support others within our profession. Speaking into situations that impact individual members or the goals of the profession is part of shepherding the organization. The officers elected to serve the membership are called to interpret and frame the advocacy process as situations are presented.

### **Our Perspective is Valuable**

Academic librarians have been working hard to articulate the value we add to our institutions and to our communities. Advocacy means sharing what we know, as professionals, with decision makers who may be legitimately unaware of the implications of their decisions. We should look to give decision makers the information they need and then find ways to ensure they hear it. For example, in both of these cases, the Board's letters spoke to the ways that professional librarians in Oregon collaborate to increase efficiency and decrease costs. The Board also pointed to the existing anchors of accreditation and information literacy competencies and noted that removing librarians with expertise to access, evaluate, and use resources ethically has long-range consequences for the education of the student, the quality of the education at the institution, and the democracy education supports.

### **Accountability**

The ACRL-OR Board came away from these, and other, experiences with the strong belief that sometimes it is important to advocate even when you do not believe that the final deci-



sion will change. We know that colleges and universities in Oregon are facing legitimate crises, and that sometimes it is not a matter of “if they only knew, they would change their minds.”

Even in those difficult situations, it is important that our voices get added to the conversation. If there are people arguing that we should “eliminate the librarians,” and we respond, “Well, don’t eliminate all of them,” then the entire conversation shifts to how many librarians to eliminate rather than focusing on the impact librarians have on student learning and on their campus communities. We need to articulate all of the reasons our campuses need librarians, in many cases need more librarians, thus ensuring the conversation stays focused on the true issues.

Beyond this, it is important that our colleges and universities are held accountable for their decisions. Sometimes it’s just important to make sure they know that their decisions are noticed, and that any negative outcomes that result from those decisions will be noticed as well.

It also became clear to us that we needed to deal with each situation and each request for support individually. We do not believe that we can be as effective if we respond in a generic or general way. We may believe in the blanket statement that “all colleges need librarians,” but the reasons librarians are needed vary from campus to campus. It is important that our responses reflect that, and that decision makers in each situation know it is their specific situation that is being watched.

### **Offering Support**

Finally, some of the most important reasons for us to advocate are affective. It is important to us that our colleagues in crisis feel they are supported by their professional community. Whether or not we are able to change the outcome of a crisis situation, it is important to us that the people involved in situations like these know that they are part of a larger community and that they can find support in that community. When we explain why librarians are valuable, we are also explaining how these individual librarians are important to their campuses and their communities. This is another reason it is important to us that our responses be specific. When we go beyond “why libraries are important” to explain why these particular librarians are important, we also demonstrate to our colleagues that they are respected and valued by their professional community.

### **Conclusion**

There were several reasons, therefore, why we believe that it is important that the ACRL-OR board continue to embrace an advocacy role. We have learned a great deal about when and where we can be most effective as advocates.

In both of the described cases, we became involved because someone reached out to us for help. In one of those cases, however, the person who found us was an interested third party. This is a real concern. The librarian in question was actively seeking help and in a very real way it was just luck that we were able to connect with her. This situation raised the question: how many opportunities for advocacy have passed us by, simply because someone didn’t know we were a resource?

We realized we didn’t want people already dealing with crisis situations to bear all the responsibility for reaching out to ACRL-OR. Being proactive is important so people know we are a resource, and we need to put the information they need in a place where they’re likely to find it when crises arise. Therefore, the ACRL-OR board is working to create a proactive presence of advocacy resources on its web pages.



As we have worked through the cases described as well as others not described, we continue to be refined in the purpose and process of advocacy. The issues that surfaced in each case have reminded us of the value of our profession and the contributions librarians make to their individual communities and to our culture. As we embrace our role as advocates, we are mindful that in doing so we honor our mission, contribute a valuable perspective, encourage accountability, and provide support to our colleagues. 🌿

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