FEA TURE: WORTH NOTING

The Opportunity for Research Libraries in 2018 and Beyond

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abstract: While the mission of research libraries remains constant, the nature of research libraries and what they do is changing. Research libraries are taking on new roles in digital scholarship, data management, and scholarly communications. More than ever, libraries know they must align their mission with the objectives of key stakeholders. This article highlights the valuable nature of associations in providing safe, collegial spaces for dialogue and experimentation, for agreement on shared agendas, and for initiatives to be piloted. It presents how the Association of Research Libraries delivers and seeks to provide even greater value to its members, research libraries, and the broader research ecosystem.

The Burning Question

Research libraries have a post-Internet, historic window of opportunity to steward knowledge from ideation through to publication and preservation while benefiting from the lessons learned during the past decades. The research library of 2018 and beyond is emerging in a time of significant technological innovation, evolving preferences of learning, and tensions between research systems of the past and present. The question hanging in our midst is: What will research libraries do to steward knowledge in a world defined by complex, digitally powered ecosystems? This article highlights ways in which research libraries generally, and the Association of Research Libraries specifically, answer this question, recognizing that there is much underway and a lot still to be done.

The fluidity of information today spurs seemingly endless opportunities for research libraries. It shakes us up. It demands clarification. It asks, “What do you stand for? What role do you play now?” While most experts agree that research libraries are multidimensional—a composite of expertise, services, spaces, and collections connected into a broad set of relationships—there is no “one size fits all” answer to the questions.
The diversity in research libraries is largely based on mission scope, governance, funding sources, and histories. Even within research library types, specific approaches need to address local requirements and work in particular contexts. Research libraries know best the needs of their audience—their scholars and teachers, their students, their public, and their senior administration. They also know that systems—including tenure, educational funding, admissions processes, defined learning outcome goals, and public policy—significantly influence audience needs.

While diverse, research libraries share a mission to ensure awareness of the world’s knowledge, to make learning accessible now and in the future, to help those in pursuit of information make sense of it, to facilitate the creation of knowledge, and to disseminate it.

No research library stands alone or contributes alone in a world such as ours. Today, to be relevant locally, research libraries must collaborate globally with a complex knowledge system—not all of which is accessible, knowable, or stable. Joint initiatives strive to create shared research library capabilities. These initiatives include the sharing of scholarly materials, such as HathiTrust, a repository of content digitized from research libraries, and shared directories such as the Directory of Open Access Journals. Other efforts seek to pool expertise, including the Data Curation Network, which brings together data curators from multiple academic libraries to encourage collaboration and standardized curation practices and to support researchers in the open and ethical sharing of data. These efforts benefit multiple audiences, including local university library users who are also public research library users, scholars who work around the world, and future generations. Research libraries do their best work with other research libraries and with partners in the research and learning ecosystem.

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**The Context for Answers**

The answer to the burning question—“What will research libraries do to steward knowledge in a world defined by complex, digitally powered ecosystems?”—is both easy and difficult. The research library mission, to collect human knowledge and to make it accessible for study by all scholars, remains true today. That is the easy part. How to carry out the mission is complex and requires a mind-set that is flexible and comfortable with unknowns. This work demands individual initiative delivering local value and collective action providing ecosystem value. It asks that research libraries and collaborators focus less on control and more on thoughtful leadership and influence in pursuit of a shared...
agenda. The work will best progress through iteration of bold visions with distinctive value added and through managing loose ties with interconnected parts. All of this is contingent on thoughtful acts of goodwill for the benefit of shared audiences, when local accountability is intense and competition for resources is real. This is the hard part.

The answer starts with contextual alignment. Just as libraries share a mission, their stakeholders have a mission and strategic objectives held in common with their colleagues—whether the goal is affordable education, credible thought leadership, job opportunities, or an informed society. Research libraries best contribute when they can articulate and demonstrate their value in the context of the broader mission and strategic objectives relative to the other parts of the ecosystem. Libraries must make sense of and act on knowable and unknowable movement in a “network of networks”—decision-makers, influencers, partners, and users. This complex network can shift at any time, from any part, making it difficult to answer a seemingly straightforward question.

Within complex systems, innovation is key. Diversity and inclusion increase the potential for innovation. Inclusion of various partners, experiences, and perspectives, all engaged in iteration, is critical. We shape the future every day by individually and collectively choosing diversity and inclusion in the pursuit of the broader mission. Research librarians are taking on new roles in publishing, digital scholarship, research data management, and scholarly communications—roles that build the connective tissue between libraries, archives, museums, and university presses, and thus join knowledge assets scattered across repositories. The nature of collaborations has expanded across geographies, among fields, and in some ways across time and cultures. For example, open science makes research data freely available so that others can collaborate and contribute. Many libraries advocate for net neutrality, the principle that Internet service providers should treat access to all content the same. Libraries also engage in initiatives to create a diverse, inclusive, and equitable workplace. Librarians are proactive: public policy, digital research and learning partnerships, new space designs for intellectual crossroads, shared collections, and equitable digital access predominate our shared work. The profession has agreed to codes of ethics, new standards of practice, and international treaties. Still, as research libraries have changed over the lifetime of the Internet, and as they step into new ways of delivering on their mission, change happens with new understanding and struggle. It is messy.

The Opportunity for Research Libraries in Associations

An association provides an important role, particularly in a time of historic shift. It creates a safe, collegial space for dialogue and experimentation, for agreement on shared agendas, and for initiatives that can be piloted and stopped or broadly adopted. An association like the Association of research Libraries provides the capacity to convene, shape, and contribute to a web of networks that benefit each member. It creates opportunities for individual institutions to choose where to best contribute.
and most benefit, while they count on others who may be better positioned to lead or prepared to partner. It fosters shared accountability, inclusiveness, open-mindedness, and courage. It provides the context needed to succeed in a complex ecosystem.

Necessarily, this article focuses on how the Association of Research Libraries (ARL) might contribute to the burning question. I became the ARL’s new executive director in spring 2018, and therefore this piece reflects knowledge at an early point in my tenure. Nevertheless, this essay represents commitment and initiative to deliver on the mission today and for the future.

The 2033 vision of the ARL is that the research library will have shifted from its role as a knowledge service provider within a university to being a collaborative partner within a rich and diverse learning and research ecosystem. Since the membership includes public and governmental research libraries, the vision is broader than an academic setting. This means:

• Shifting from a single institutional focus to a collaborative partner in higher education and the research enterprise.

• Becoming, as the ARL Vision Statement promises, “even more intimately engaged in supporting the full life cycle and activity range of knowledge discovery, use, and preservation, as well as the curating and sharing of knowledge in diverse contexts of the [institution’s] mission and of society more broadly.”

• As the Vision Statement also says, enabling and catalyzing research libraries “to leverage and mobilize individual assets toward the collective advancement of learning, research, and societal impact.”

Today, ARL contributes to the advancement of the research and learning ecosystem through shared collections, by acting as a research dissemination engine, and by functioning as a laboratory for innovation. It advances the research library community through the ARL Academy, which offers training in leadership and workforce development. These contributions are enabled by core capabilities in advocacy and public policy; diversity, equity, and inclusion; membership engagement; and a system of governance that supports the diffusion of ideas and their broad adoption.

As ARL’s member institutions and staff iterate on the chosen collective actions, we check in with the members on scope and priorities, and increase opportunities to move from experimentation to adoption. The organization has made substantial progress, albeit unevenly—no surprise given how messy such work is. As we define priorities that move us toward achieving the vision, we recognize the importance of focusing on value by catalyzing and developing the capabilities of research libraries and working with critical partners across the ecosystem.
Delivering Value

Mark Moore’s classic strategic triangle on public value serves as a guide for the prioritization work underway at ARL. Paraphrasing for our context, Moore describes value as the sweet spot where demand or need, legitimacy and support, and organizational capacity intersect. The focus of this article is on demand, given that legitimacy and support come from others based on credibility and trust in our capacity to deliver value.

The enormity of the change in research library leadership cannot be overstated. We have experienced a 54 percent turnover in ARL member representatives since 2013. This presents a huge opportunity for new leadership in a historic moment. New deans and directors benefit from decades of work carried out by those who led when digital information stewardship emerged concurrently with massive challenges in analog access and preservation—still unresolved. New leaders must thrive in an often murky, quick-moving, unpredictable ecosystem, with deep knowledge of research and learning (their knowledge and that of partners), and deeper understanding of the nature of information, knowledge creation, and preferences for its use. They must thoroughly grasp information’s usefulness and credentials, as well as its application in the service of a purpose often defined by shifting research and learning methods and measures. Intellectual, practical, and economic partnerships are essential, as is finding shared language and approaches. Flexibility, political savvy, and results orientation are also fundamental. Thank goodness, we continue to attract and retain passionate, smart, and courageous people.

Demand: Transformation at Scale

The 2033 vision demands transformation “at scale.” As Malcolm Gladwell notes, “Transformation isn’t about improving. It’s about rethinking.” Transformation “at scale” implies enlargement at a scale factor (versus a linear factor). It means advancing systemically on select areas in which ARL member institutions, in partnership with other associations and organizations, can substantively deliver value to the research and learning communities. At this time, our members’ shared objective is to deliver even greater benefits of research library leadership, expertise, shared services, infrastructure, and content for those who explore and generate ideas, express and share their knowledge, and consult the knowledge of others.

With eyes on the shared objective, the association knows that success is achieved by participating strategically in ecosystem partnerships. We use five levers: (1) increasing awareness of our stakeholders’ shared agenda and advocating on behalf of libraries with key stakeholder communities, (2) ensuring research libraries can demonstrate their impact and that their impact is understood in the context of the broader mission and strategic objectives, (3) informing and convening research libraries to collectively take actions, (4) participating in and providing forums for open dialogue and execution of shared frameworks among the diverse stakeholders in the research and learning community, and (5) creating and fostering partnerships to steward trustworthy knowledge today and for the future. A brief sample of the five levers follows.
1. Increasing Awareness

The fourth industrial revolution, marked by technology breakthroughs that fuse the physical, digital and biological worlds, might serve as an example of increased awareness and impact. The reader will be well immersed in the broadening adoption of such technologies as artificial intelligence, augmented reality, and robotics in research and learning. These technologies, along with “smart” technologies, predominate today. The unknown possibilities with quantum computing may create even more changes in our daily lives. Many studies, books, lectures, discussions, and careers are built as they evolve. Research libraries are involved to varying degrees as new forms of information emerge or are compounded by these developments.

As an association, we increase awareness of the value and impact for both emerging and commonly understood priorities through stakeholder communications, advocacy, public policy development, and education. We realize that not everyone knows how well research libraries are prepared to steward the new forms of information over time, appreciates how well they ready students and scholars to work with them, and understands the impact of research libraries’ efforts. We can contribute to understanding what it takes for information to be “scholar-ready,” how to adapt to and even anticipate changes in the nature of information, how to achieve “durable scholarship,” and how to increase research library capacity.

2. Demonstrating Impact

We operate in a time when tangible results are expected and sustainability is the goal. Both quantitative and qualitative evidence are required. Current programs that measure research library impact naturally start with an outward focus—demonstrating value for, and positive impact on, the priorities of target audiences, including parent institutions and the entire research and learning enterprise, and then assessing how the library can deliver even greater value.

Based on the recommendations of the ARL Assessment Program Visioning Task Force, we are creating a new set of analytics that align research library outputs and outcomes with the parent institution mission and strategic objectives, and more broadly with the wider mission and strategic objectives of the research and learning ecosystem. We will test the recently initiated Research Library Assessment Framework iteratively and will necessarily remain flexible. The shift from assessment to research and analytics includes an intentional focus on an agile community of practice that provides access to and development of new research, sharing of best practices, and use of convenient analytical tools.

Almost every conversation includes the question “Is it sustainable?” It is almost impossible to create sustainable value alone. Associations create avenues for partnerships where collective action provides the means to achieve bold visions. ARL focuses on where, in partnership, it can most successfully contribute to transformation at scale. We are learning from leadership work in such initiatives as HathiTrust and SHARE, a partnership between ARL and the Center for Open Science to make research more accessible, discoverable, and reusable. We will also learn from investments in changing public policy around digital access and copyright.
3. Creating a Shared Agenda

ARL is designed to enable and catalyze research libraries “to leverage and mobilize individual assets toward the collective advancement of learning, research, and societal impact.” The heart of ARL, like that of any association, is its member institutions. By connecting and convening members, the association enables individual libraries to converge on initiatives for collective action. Collectively, the association advances them as an engine of innovation.

Ideas can be diffused and adopted in well-known, proven ways, many of them underway at ARL. We strive to make it even more effective for members to share and expand on ideas, and to either spin them off to a better place for development or move them through a process that best facilitates the ideas’ chances for adoption. We have work to do here. Our check-in this year is assessing the current state and opportunities over the next two to three years. Our focus is on five areas currently identified by working titles: Advocacy and Public Policy, Research Communication and Collections, Workforce Transformation, Research and Analytics, and Member Experience. We are looking at how we can make it even easier to move from ideation to adoption.

4. Creating a Shared Framework with Diverse Stakeholders

To reiterate—the research library is one part of a dynamic, complex ecosystem. While research libraries now take part along the full life cycle of knowledge discovery, they have some way to go toward creating a shared framework with diverse stakeholders.

Our partnerships with the Association of American Universities and the Association of University Presses provide the means for open monograph publishing and professional understanding. Our work with Wikimedia, a nonprofit devoted to bringing free educational content to the world, convenes key stakeholders on the linking of open data to demonstrate its potential. Our work with the Center for Open Science, a nonprofit that works to increase the openness and reproducibility of scientific research, connects dispersed knowledge assets across all disciplines through SHARE. Our partnership with EDUCAUSE is an example of how we can support emerging fields, as is the case with the Coalition for Networked Information. We see significant opportunity for partnerships in open science and public policy development. Such partnerships involve leaders of research and national institutions on research data management and research infrastructure, learned societies on new forms of scholarship and publishing, and other associations focused on knowledge access. The essential decision is to ensure we lead in ways others cannot or do not, and that we partner to move shared agendas forward.
5. Partnering in Knowledge Stewardship

Transformation at scale needs stewards of knowledge assets that the learning and research community can access and trust. The assets are not always “durable,” not always accessible, and usually interconnected to other moving assets within and outside of any one domain’s control. Broadly, knowledge stewards push boundaries on access, grapple with dynamic sets of data not always connected other than through a presentation layer, struggle to economically preserve what is known, and work to identify long-term stewards with the financial means to do so.

As an association of research libraries, we work with and on behalf of our members to engage ecosystem colleagues in creating practices, supporting platforms, and adopting standards that make it easier to access knowledge assets now and in the future. Historically, our collective focus has been on stewarding the assets themselves (for example, journal articles or monographs) and on safeguarding the rights to that information (for example, through copyright, institutional repositories, and open access). Over time, research libraries have played a critical role in physical and digital asset management through such efforts as arXiv, a repository of electronic preprints of scientific papers; LOCKSS (Lots of Copies Keep Stuff Safe), a project to digitally preserve scholarly journals and other materials; and PubMed. Our attention now includes managing new forms of shared content as they are created. Such content includes open educational resources (OER), research data sets, electronic laboratory notebooks, and emerging forms of visualizations; common skills and competencies (for example, the Data Curation Network); and shared technology tools to connect collections, such as SHARE and the Digital Public Library of America (DPLA), a free discovery tool that makes digital collections and archives across the United States available in one place.

Conclusion

This article necessarily leaves unanswered questions about the exact role research libraries will play as stewards of knowledge in a world defined by complex, digitally powered ecosystems. That is not to say research libraries and their associations are standing by, only thinking about what makes sense for them to do. Quite the opposite: significant shared print and digital collections now exist. Leadership roles have evolved to encompass broader synergies with scholars, university presses, digital scholarship institutes, museums, and archives. Successful and extensive efforts in advocacy and policy have influenced, if not changed, the copyright and open access landscapes. Deeper partnerships have developed from the proliferation of new forms of information, changes in learning styles, and the tension between past and present research practices.
ARL is taking critical steps to provide research libraries individually and collectively with the means to achieve the shared mission. The association provides research libraries with information to strengthen their awareness and understanding of ecosystem priorities, to advocate and communicate about the value and impact of research libraries, and to partner with others to make a tangible difference. ARL creates the means to demonstrate the value of research libraries quantitatively and qualitatively, in terms understood and important to those who give libraries legitimacy and support. The association is a community that strives to model diversity, inclusion, and equity.

There is an immense opportunity—much larger than any knowledge steward can possibly address and sustain alone. Tough choices are needed. Research libraries will play a critical role by leading and collaborating in transformation at scale where a trusted knowledge expert is needed now and for the long term, an expert dedicated to the public good and to scholars and students of all types. Research libraries will succeed by collaborating in innovations that advance the research mission, by knowing when to engage other leaders, by realizing when to stop, and by shaping and influencing sustainable solutions. Associations play a critical role by providing a safe, collegial space for dialogue and experimentation, for agreement to shared agendas, and for ideas to grow into valuable, broadly adopted, sustainable benefits.

There is so much to look back on and celebrate. There is much to do. Knowledge continues to evolve, and so must research libraries.

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Notes
2. Ibid.