

ACRL from the Inside: An Interview with Recent ACRL President Mary Reichel

Dr. Mary Reichel, University Librarian at Appalachian State University, recently completed a term as president of the American Library Association (ALA)'s Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL). In this interview with *Lagniappe: North Caroliniana* editor, Suzanne Wise, Reichel reflects on her experiences during the past year.

Wise: How did you come to run for ACRL president?

Reichel: I served on the ACRL Board from 1994 to 1998, and really enjoyed that experience. It solidified my belief in the importance of ACRL and its representing academic libraries and librarians. When I was asked to run for president, I must admit I was delighted. I am very appreciative of the support from the administration and my library colleagues at Appalachian State that allowed me to do it.

Wise: What types of activities did you engage in as president?

Reichel: As president I got to do a number of things. I was chair of the ACRL Board and the Board's Executive Committee. I took it as my particular role, as my predecessors have, to help the Board coalesce, to understand its function and operate effectively. The president chairs meetings of the Board twice and the Executive Committee twice, so you really have to get in there and move; you don't have many chances! Another major responsibility, which I really enjoyed, was giving presentations at ACRL chapter meetings and state conferences across the country.

Wise: What issues did you focus on in your presentations?

Reichel: I was able to swing back to my dissertation topic of scholarly communication and the research I did for it in the early 1990s that projected scholarly communication and faculty use of information to 2001. I also gave a number of presentations about academic libraries as learning communities. I am someone who loves to interact with the audience, so I really enjoyed meeting people and hearing what they're doing in their libraries and what their concerns are. I think I gave about four presentations as vice president-president elect of ACRL and eight as president.

A third activity, and one of the most important, was working with ALA. As an officer of ACRL, I had the opportunity to meet with the other division officers in my "class" and with the ALA staff to discuss issues that needed attention from the division officers. I also recommended people for ACRL committees.

The fourth major activity was being a spokesperson for ACRL. I was surprised, and I think Mary Ellen Davis, the Executive Director of ACRL, was as well,

at the number of news opportunities we had. I was interviewed by probably 3 or 4 national papers. Deanna Marcum, who is president of the Council on Library and Information Resources, and I did a “Colloquy Live” Web session for the *Chronicle of Higher Education* on trends in student use of academic libraries. I also did a Web cast on “The Changing Library” sponsored by the TLT Group (Teaching Learning Technology). It was difficult to do live conversations in a Web forum, but I enjoyed it.



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Wise: How prepared were you to carry out the duties of the office? Are there additional skills or knowledge you wished you had?

Reichel: I had served on the ACRL Board for four years and been active in ACRL since 1977, so I had an excellent grasp of the division and its Board. Where I wish I’d had a quicker start out of the gate is in understanding the division president’s responsibilities in interacting with ALA. I would have been more effective if I had been more knowledgeable there. I had the privilege of working with Mary Ellen Davis and her colleagues in the ALA offices, and they were very helpful and supportive, even in the face of staff vacancies.

The thing most different from my normal job was the interaction with the press. ALA provides some training on public relations and presswork for newly elected division presidents, which helped a lot. Also I, my family, and the library people at Appalachian knew going in that the ACRL

presidency is a lot of work, and we were right! The associate university librarian at Appalachian and the rest of my colleagues took on a tremendous burden while I was doing ACRL work, and for that I’m very grateful.

Wise: What were your priorities as ACRL president?

Reichel: Presidents are asked to work within the context of the ACRL strategic plan, which is easy to do because it is a good strategic plan and covers the areas of importance for academic libraries. So within that context I followed up on my own lifelong professional interest in information literacy — working with students and faculty and promoting the importance of academic libraries. I chose learning communities as my theme — “ACRL: The Learning Community for Excellence in Academic Libraries.” I chose that because it capsulized for me and I hope for others the idea that through active participation in ACRL all of us come together to improve services and collections in our libraries. In my more than 25 years of involvement in ACRL, I can’t tell you how many times I’ve seen a good idea and then been able to implement it or suggest implementation at the library I was working in. It has really helped me understand how to provide the best library services possible. The learning community theme was also a good umbrella for promoting the instructional role of academic libraries and our involvement with students as well as our assistance of faculty in their teaching and research.

The culmination of the year is the president’s program at the summer meeting (Atlanta, 2002). That program, “Transformational Learning Communities,” featured Barbara Leigh Smith, a national expert in learning communities from Evergreen State College, and was attended by nearly 900 people. I was very pleased, considering that we had a Monday afternoon slot. We were highlighted by *LJ Academic Newswire* as an outstanding program, and they gave us a very nice write-up. In addition to a panel of reactors, the program featured poster sessions, which got the audience up and walking around and talking with the people who presented the poster sessions. It also gave librarians who are younger or spread across the country an opportunity to participate — in fact there was a poster session by a librarian from France —and it fostered a lot of discussion among the session attendees.

Wise: What is it really like inside the ALA bureaucracy?

Reichel: Many of the readers of *North Carolina Libraries* know as much or more about it than I do! ALA is a complex bureaucracy, with more than 60,000 members, a Council of about 180 members, and an Executive Board elected by Council. I think it should be an ongoing concern for all ALA members to do what they can to help ensure that Council is an effective governing body for the association. I served on Council 1990 to 1994, and of course have observed it since. It does seem that Council can become the hostage of people who have special agendas that are not representative of the membership. ALA does a lot of its work through committees. It is a large political organization, so it is very complicated.

Wise: What did you enjoy the most about your year as president?

Reichel: I really loved interacting with academic librarians across the country when I did presentations. During Larry Hardesty's term as president a few years ago, ACRL established an Excellence in Academic Libraries award. The award, sponsored by Blackwell's Book Services, is given each year to a community college, a college, and a university in recognition of the accomplishments of its librarians and staff in supporting the mission of their institution. The recipients receive a \$3,000 award. I was able to present the awards for community colleges and colleges. The ACRL president goes to the institution along with representatives from Blackwell's, and the institution's president and board of trustees' members are there, as well as library faculty and staff. It is just a fabulous event.

As it happened, Appalachian State University was named the regional university of the year by *Time* magazine in 2001, and it was fun to be president the same year and share the Appalachian story with my colleagues nationally. I also really enjoyed working with the ACRL Board and staff; they were a great group of colleagues.

Wise: What did you like least?

Reichel: As my colleagues at Appalachian would know, I hated having to read all the email! Also, I have a husband and a fifteen-year-old son, and they spent a lot more time on their own than during a typical year! I have to say that I am glad that my son got to know a professional association and meet people who are giving of their time and talent. As he finishes his education and goes on to whatever career he may choose, he'll recall his experiences and understand the importance of being involved, so I think that's a real plus.

Wise: What was the most surprising thing about your year as president?

Reichel: You know, I had a lot of fun! I thoroughly enjoyed being president of ACRL. Because the University Librarian at Appalachian has an endowed professorship, the income from it allowed me a little flexibility to do some fun things, such as sponsor receptions that involved a lot of people in the association. I also enjoyed being in a position as president to appoint individuals who had not previously served in the association to committees and to interact with some of the younger librarians.

Wise: What can ACRL do to improve?

Reichel: I would say that there are a couple of things, and they are in line with my priorities as president. We need to value members, and we really did a great job this last year, but it is something that I think always has to be present. ACRL is a volunteer organization, and everybody does the work that they do for the association using personal time and often their own money. We need to make it as easy as possible for members to contribute, for their work to be noted, and to get the kind of responses they need as quickly as possible. Another track that I, current ACRL president Helen Spalding, and everyone on the Board are concerned about is that we continue to promote the importance of academic libraries in the higher education enterprise, and the importance of collections and services and instruction for students' education and faculty's research. So that's why ACRL has advertised in the *Chronicle of Higher Education*. We did three ads

last year, one featuring faculty, the second administrators, and the third students, in which they talked about the importance of academic libraries from their perspectives. We need to continue to do things like that as well as work with higher education organizations. One of the accomplishments that I don't really take credit for, but that happened during my tenure, is that ACRL has developed a new vehicle to promote scholarly communication. Scholarly communication has been largely the purview of the Association of Research Libraries (ARL), and they've done a great job. But scholarly communication issues affect a much broader range of academic libraries than the major research libraries, so it's great that ACRL now has a Scholarly Communication Committee. We are going to hire a scholarly communication contract officer.

Wise: How did the experience change you?

Reichel: Professionally, I consider myself an articulate person, but I would say I grew in my ability to present an argument in a concise, effective way. The experience of working with the press and with people outside the library and higher education communities was a real growth experience for me.

Wise: Was it worth it? Do you believe you truly made a difference?

Reichel: Yes, I do feel I made a difference. I am a person who is eager to meet new people and interact with them, and I think I made a difference by being a very accessible representative for ACRL and making opportunities both for new members and less active ones to meet and talk with the president in a different way.

Wise: What advice would you offer librarians who aspire to professional leadership?

Reichel: That's an interesting question, because I think what we worry about as officers and elected Board members in the association is whether the generation of librarians who are now in their twenties and early thirties will WANT to be as involved as we have been. I have a continuing concern that we make ACRL relevant for librarians who are close to their graduate degrees and are just starting in the field, so that they will see the benefits of being involved in their professional organization, as do those of us who are "no longer in our twenties and thirties!" Professional organizations of all types are having to examine how they are structured so that young people will find them relevant. For instance, doing more work electronically and accommodating an in-out-in volunteer pattern for individuals whose time available for participation varies during their careers. Your question actually makes me very reflective because I have a kind of good pat answer for how to become involved, but the concern is whether people will want to be involved. For those who have already identified the importance of being active in ACRL or another professional association, I would say it really pays to be a regular conference attendee and to participate in different types of committees. Through the years I was chair of the Appointments Committee, chair of the President's Program Planning Committee, served on the Board of ACRL, and served on a number of section committees. That kind of exposure to the different activities really is helpful. You know, people start recognizing you after 25 years!

Wise: Do you have a word for North Carolina academic librarians specifically?

Reichel: Yes. I think involvement in state and regional associations is really important, and I encourage those librarians who are able to also get involved in ACRL or other appropriate sections and divisions of ALA. I really value going to the state and regional meetings and being involved there, but there is something about bringing the strength of the Southeast to the national level that is so exciting. Librarians in the Southeast should showcase our attributes of great collegiality and wonderful diversity at the national level. And last but certainly not least, I hope to see many, many North Carolina academic librarians at the biennial ACRL conference in Charlotte next spring. We have the opportunity to shine! COME TO THE ACRL CONFERENCE IN CHARLOTTE, APRIL 10-13, 2003!