History of the Iowa Community College Library Roundtable

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A few months ago, which was a year into my first full time position at a community college library, I queried my colleague Judy Mitchell of Hawkeye Community College Library, how the Roundtable got started. I wondered in particular why this group, made up of academic librarians, was not under ILA ACRL, but instead under the larger ILA. I asked in particular because the first Iowa Academic Library Directors’ Summit held in fall 2014 at DMACC Ankeny laid out some great opportunities for all academic libraries to collaborate, and the other academic libraries are all affiliated with ILA ACRL. Judy contacted Jan Dellinger, a previous director at Hawkeye, who in turn asked her predecessor and this background begins our story. As I collected more and more information as vice-chair of the Roundtable, realizing that there was no one place where even our meeting minutes were kept for posterity, it seemed like this was a story to pass on. As colleagues retire, and before any more organizational or institutional knowledge is lost, I thought it prudent to document the history of the Roundtable. This is of interest not just to community colleges, but to all academic libraries, so that we can understand each other and best work together.

Maude Jahnke, the first library director at Kirkwood Community College, suggested a need for a community college library group, according to Bob Chittenden. Bob was the original and longtime library director at Hawkeye. Maude had been Bob’s mentor while he was in graduate school. At that time, Iowa community colleges were only a decade old and most, Bob
said, had not had a library or librarian at the outset. After colleges had their first accreditation visits, may added libraries and librarians. In most cases, only a solo librarian was brought on, with a small staff.

Many community college librarians recruited at the time were members of the Iowa Educational Media Association, along with “media specialists” which was the term for K-12 librarians. That organization’s focus was K-12 only, so most also then joined ILA to broaden their knowledge and find professional development opportunities. The group adhered to the 1986 guidelines established by the IACCP: Iowa Association of Community College Presidents, which outlined the twice-yearly meeting plan. Telenetwork meetings were strongly encouraged by those guidelines. Each year, if two face-to-face meetings were held, one of the two meetings was required to be within 50 miles of Des Moines. The new group began to meet at each fall ILA conference and each spring at one of the community colleges or sometimes the State Library in Des Moines. They brainstormed on “what could be done with little,” and enjoyed the camaraderie of their unique and talented peer group.

The meeting minutes from October 1989 state that “the consensus was to assimilate into ILA/ACRL as long as the group, Community College Librarians, will be able to continue meeting during the ILA and ILA/ACRL meetings.” But that doesn’t seem to have happened. Bob Chittenden mused in his 2014 reflection that, “ultimately, perhaps that is where all community college librarians belong, rather than having their own section of ILA.” We revisited that question in spring 2015 after surveying our membership about it. CCLRT members voted against moving the group from ILA to ILA ACRL. How and why community college librarians identify uniquely from other academic librarians is perhaps a question to explore in a conference
session sometime. Members did vote to move the group’s listserv from one of the community college servers as a host to the ILA server, however, and that seems to be working well.

Between Judy Mitchell, who retired this year from Hawkeye, Cheryl Talbert of Indian Hills, Rebecca Funke of DMACC and Deb Seiffert of North Iowa, I was able to collect most meeting minutes of the group over the years. We anticipate that the minutes will be archived on DMACC’s new institutional repository site.

In 1990, the CCLRT encouraged members to submit articles to a newsletter called Growth Notes, the title of which implies that Iowa community colleges or community college libraries were expanding. Most of us, at least if examined from a budget standpoint, are not in growth mode now and feel lucky to have consistent budgets from year to year. “Flat is the new growth,” OCLC sales representative Craig Johnson quipped to me recently.

Community colleges and their libraries have historically been aware and kept abreast of technology. This was a fun couple of paragraphs to read in retrospect from October 1991:

Tina Herb [Kirkwood] shared information with the group regarding INTERNET, a data communication network that links up all kinds of different smaller networks throughout the country. Among other things, INTERNET would provide electronic mail capabilities, allow users to have access to library catalogs, and also permit the transfer of files back and forth.

Start-up costs are then listed, to share INTERNET with ISU or UNI, at $7,000.00 A stand alone INTERNET system (for many “terminals”) was $11,000.00.

It was fun for me to come across the librarian after whom my library was named, Betty Harrison, in the January 1992 minutes. Betty served Marshalltown Community College for nearly four decades and passed away last year. I learned about her from family when I attended her funeral.
Over the years the relationships between community college libraries and AEAs (Area Education Associations) and the Iowa Department of Education were detailed in the minutes. There was discussion of a “Regional” system with which I am not familiar. There was concern in January 1992 about what might happen to the Regional system. Since those notes, we know that some AEAs have been eliminated. As of this writing we know that one community college has converted its library completely to electronic books (Iowa Western), and another no longer employs a librarian (Iowa Central). Another community college district employs librarians but the position descriptions for the heads of the libraries do not include the MLIS or MLS as a requirement (Iowa Valley). Some of us wonder about new Iowa Department of Education accreditation requirements regarding facilities and whether we may use them as leverage to help secure our professional place in the community colleges.

Moving forward despite obstacles has been documented in our CCLRT history. March 1992 saw a rejected Title II grant, and October of that year saw “dissatisfaction with the wasted effort” toward Department of Education standards that were not finalized.

The ILIN (Iowa Library Information Network) for linking public catalogs between the libraries and the IREN (Iowa Research and Education Network) for method and resources to connect to the Internet were mentioned from 1993 on. The Iowa Cooperative Preservation Consortium began in 1990. Pony Express delivery service came up several times in the minutes. Currently, the Iowa Academic Library Alliance group (directors) is talking about a shared book delivery service. It would appear we had some things going in the past, they went away, and are now being re-invented.
Flood recovery booklets were distributed in 1994 after the epic floods of 1993. That year also saw discussion on how to serve distance learners without any funding to do so.

In April 1996, community college librarians had “a lively discussion” regarding “the [Iowa] Department of Education’s near total disregard of libraries, especially at the community college level.” This had been prompted by a DOE visit to Kirkwood. That year only three community colleges provided email accounts for students, critical on every campus now. Nancy Kraft of the Iowa Historical Society stressed the necessity of Iowa community colleges to carefully preserve their history, as the community colleges were then 30 years old. How many of your schools have archivists now?

In 1995 and 1996, the Roundtable scheduled spring meetings in conjunction with the statewide teachers of English group, per a March 3, 1999 letter authored by Hawkeye’s Jan Dellinger that is in our files. There are gaps then in our meeting minutes, with an agenda for the spring 1999 meeting, and then the next document we have is April 2004. If you or anyone you know may have the intervening minutes, please forward to sandra.greufe@iavalley.edu.

A replacement for SILO, our interlibrary loan system for books within the state, was sought in 2004. We still have SILO in 2015. A joint meeting with English instructors was proposed in spring 2005. More discussion of SILO and clean up needed there ensued. 2005 saw talk about the increased need for proctoring tests in the libraries for distance education courses, and copyright issues with which librarians need to be familiar for electronic resources. 2006’s meeting minutes included discussion of various ILS vendors and problems, and the first mention of a frozen librarian position that was vacant for three years at Southwest. Also, there was talk of the high schools that did not have professional library media specialists and that
high school standards did not address library issues. Another first in our Roundtable that year was talk of library instruction for faculty members. Interestingly now as we look back, at that time Iowa Central was developing online courses with The University of Phoenix, a for-profit institution that by now is considered controversial (Reed). It was reported that libraries across the state were facing budget cuts. There was concern expressed over Enrich Iowa funding. In 2006, only nine school library media specialists remained in the Des Moines Public Schools District, which today has over 60 schools.

In 2007, it was stressed again that reaching faculty for instruction was just as important as reaching students. In 2008, a wiki was mentioned, the information stored there to be helpful for completing IPEDS surveys. According to Ann Coulter, that ended up being a Google Doc. The motivation for that, said another member at our spring 2015 meeting while we reviewed a draft of this article, was to be able to share budget information and to advocate for more funding on our campuses. Along with a trend documented throughout libraries in the United States (American Library Association), in the spring of 2009, the State Library had a 8.3% budget cut. More cuts were expected there, according to our minutes, for FY2011. The October 2009 minutes spoke largely of budget cuts and staffing freezes and consolidations.

There has, in recent years, been discussion among some community college librarians as to the need for this Roundtable. Discussion to this effect is noted in the minutes of the October 2013 meeting. However, as Rebecca Funke has pointed out recently in her argument for its continuation, being a community college librarian can be quite different that an academic librarian at a Regents institution or a private college.
A few words from Bob Chittenden, with whom we started this review, may be appropriate here as we close this discussion and bring our CCLRT history up to the present.

This era is probably not much different than the early years. Early on, our role, especially in technical colleges, was not considered critical. We had to prove our worth, largely through building relationships with faculty and students. Today, as we have shifted to a digital world, I am sure the legitimacy and necessity of libraries is questioned as never before. The colleges need a brain trust to address this transition and to secure the legacy and future of libraries. Perhaps, that is the immediate agenda for today’s community college librarians.

Library literature certainly supports Bob’s sentiments. An Inside Higher Ed technology reporter provocatively queried in 2010, “Is your campus library valuable? Prove it.” (Kolowich). Librarians have responded with arguments for better high school and college libraries to prepare new college students, particularly underserved populations (Adam 2015), and shown evidence that using the library positively affects student outcomes (Soria, Fransen and Nackerud 2013).

Not only are today’s Iowa community college librarians facing budget and other challenges from inside their institutions, sometimes based on reduced support to their colleges from the state legislature and governor (Pfannenstiel), but the world of library technology and vendors is changing and consolidating rapidly so we need to keep up with that too (Schwartz 2015; Straumsheim 2015). One author suggests that in response, librarians need to take a pragmatic approach. In her review of The Machiavellian Librarian: winning allies, combating budget cuts, and influencing stakeholders, a Belmont University librarian explains that each section of the book focuses on an area to which we may apply a Prince-like “realistic approach to help control your (or your library’s) fortunes rather than waiting for chance or fate to bring about change” (Fuson 178). So if you are needing some inspiration, perhaps peruse that book,
“recommended for those looking for unique ideas on how to expand programming or services as well as for those dealing with difficult political climates at their institution” (Fuson 179).

Works Cited


