

Carrington Powell

1/14/24

LIS 598

850 words

Exploration: ARL/ULC comparison

Success means different things to different people, and organizations based around “achieving success” are no different. Libraries necessarily have to balance the ideals of creating a more knowledgeable and enlightened world and the reality of needing money to make that happen. The Association of Research Libraries and the Urban Libraries Council are both organizations that participate in professional development, DEI, and advocacy, but the philosophy behind their models completely changes how they pursue these goals. Through comparison we can see the Ying and the Yang of the library world, and show how both are needed in the world of academic advocacy.

The ARL has a banner on their homepage that reads: “Advancing an equitable, enduring, research information environment. Meeting scholars’ needs now and in the future.” And while this does hit a lot of points, a more accurate elevator pitch would be: “Providing high quality research and scholarship opportunities for libraries using data, advocacy, and professional development.” It is a 124 member (35,000) nonprofit organization (mostly university libraries) spanning about every state in the union. It isn’t clear how exclusive they are, as their applications are on hold until they finalize the updates to their “vision and mission.” The ARL is headed by an executive committee and a board of directors. Both are staffed entirely by university librarians, shedding light on the mindset behind the organization.

First, high quality research and data are a big selling point of this organization. The website showcases multiple statistical surveys and analysis that are collected via its member libraries. If this was a command and conquer style video game, the ARL would be the “science” branch. Its committees reflect this, with a good portion of them dedicated to emerging technologies like AI and virtual teaching. The target of ARL’s

advocacy is to use technology and data to pursue the high ideals of DEI, intellectual freedom, and open science.

Secondly, the ARL provides many opportunities for scholarship and professional development. It has networking events and leadership programs. It has association meetings (invitation only of course), but also assessment conferences, and IDEAL conferences. Additionally it provides talks on its interest areas, namely copyright issues, e-learning, and equitable access to resources.

The ARL believes that the world can change for the better with the right information and professionalism. The URC, on the other hand, believes that our societal issues will be solved with the right application of capitalism. Its elevator pitch is: “Promoting education and innovation through entrepreneurship, economic development, and Action.” While this ARL believes that it can change the world by providing the right resources, this organization takes a much stronger stance, not as a tool, but a catalyst for change. It is a 164 member (45,000 staff) organization spanning both the U.S. and Canada.

The URC is all business. There are no mentions of the word “training” but there are dozens of events related to entrepreneurship and economic development of libraries. Its committees are not focused on abstracts but instead on very practical things like public safety and human resources. These groups serve as the base for networking and intra-library partnerships, but few details are given as to what exactly they do or accomplish. It is also very open about its corporate partnerships, which range from digital distributors to collection development groups. Membership in this organization is very practical. Annual dues are based on the budget of the individual library, with no minimum.

Its leadership base is extremely interesting. The board of directors is staffed by a mix of industry players (mayor of the Metropolitan Government of Nashville, Senior Media Consultant with Cox Media Group) and genuine public advocates (NYPL Merryl

and James Tisch Director, director for the San Diego Public Library). This feeds into the idea that this is an organization of money and action, driven by measurable impact.

That is essentially the major difference between these two organizations. One firmly believes in the power of knowledge, and that the right research and way of thinking will propel society forward to utopian ideals. It wants to passively empower people to change the world. The other wades into the mud, actively placing itself in a position of change, believing that it and its ideas should be the ones to change the world. However they are, in many ways, the same. Both advocate for libraries of course, but also digital learning, DEI values, and the role of public libraries. These organizations are attempting to achieve the same goals, just starting from two different mindsets.

They are also both quite exclusive, though it is not clear exactly why. The small number of libraries could be a logistical problem rather than a gatekeeping one, but there is language that suggests they are only looking for partners with “major” “thought leaders” in the industry. These organizations, like many, are social clubs first. People, whether they be research librarians or entrepreneurs, want to hang out with people who think like them. It is good that they will come together in groups like these, which advocate for a better world in their own ways.