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Providing complimentary ACRL membership to LIS students

The strength of ACRL comes from its membership. Nevertheless, ACRL and other membership-based professional organizations face many challenges in terms of recruiting and retaining members. Of course, membership and involvement in ACRL contributes to an individual's career success. But academic and research libraries also benefit when their employees are engaged in their professional associations. Membership and participation in professional associations provides valuable mentoring and professional development opportunities. This is true at every stage of one's career, but it is particularly critical to help new professionals understand the value of these activities. Many would agree that graduate school is the perfect time to introduce students to their future professional associations, yet membership often remains out of reach financially for many students.

In an effort to make ACRL more accessible and affordable to students currently enrolled in library and information science graduate programs, the ACRL Board of Directors approved a reduced student membership rate of \$5 in 2017. ACRL Associate Director Mary Jane Petrowski wrote about this limited-time offer in a recent issue of *C&RL News*.¹ Given all of the costs associated with a graduate education, particularly student debt loads,² membership in a professional association is not always the first priority for students even at a reduced rate.

Having recently completed a term on the ACRL Board, the university librarian at the University of Iowa (UI) was familiar with all these challenges and thought the UI Libraries was poised to pilot a test program that would

provide an ACRL membership at no cost to incoming students in the University's School of Library and Information Science (SLIS).

The pilot

Our SLIS generally enrolls between 25 and 50 new students each year. Some of these students attend classes in person and others are enrolled in the department's virtual teacher-librarian program. The current cost for a student to join both associations is \$43 (including mandatory ALA student membership at \$38 and ACRL student dues of \$5). Assuming a class size of 35, this equates to just about \$1,500 to cover the membership fees for all students in the new first-year cohort.

Given this data, the UI Libraries decided to pursue a donor who would provide funding to cover the cost of ALA and ACRL membership for students entering the program. The university librarian and the assistant university librarian for advancement interact with a wide variety of university alumni and supporters over the course of each year. During such conversations, these prospective donors relate their experiences and how they would like to make a positive impact on students, the library, or other areas of the university through philanthropic gifts. A \$1,500 gift is well within the range of many individual donors or easily shared by two or three donors.

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Successful stewardship of such a gift can even lead to larger gifts in the future.

It didn't take long for us to realize that the ideal donor for this project had already identified herself to us. We had recently met with an UI alum who described the value of engagement in professional associations, especially early in her career—not only did she join early but she participated regularly. When we pitched the idea, it immediately resonated with her. While this donor had regularly supported the UI Libraries' annual fund, this project inspired her to make a five-year pledge in support of student memberships in ALA and ACRL.

Although our initial idea revolved around ALA and ACRL at the national level, we believe that membership and participation in state library associations is also important and valued. The Iowa Library Association and its ACRL chapter offer free memberships to students. We decided to enroll incoming students in all of these associations at once, easily providing opportunities for students to learn the value of participating at both the state and national level.

Students were asked to complete the appropriate membership forms during their orientation meeting the week before classes began. UI Libraries collected the applications and coordinated payment and processing. The orientation meeting was also the perfect time for a first mentoring opportunity. In describing UI Libraries' pilot membership program, we reminded the new students that networking and service opportunities in professional associations will be crucial to success no matter what specialty of librarianship they pursue.

UI Libraries also partners with SLIS to provide mentoring opportunities. When mentors are meeting with library school students, we will encourage them to check in regarding involvement in ACRL or the other associations. We will remind students that our donor, UI Libraries, and SLIS partnered on the student memberships specifically to help them learn about our associations. We hope professors and our librarian mentors talk with

students about the best ways to get started in any of these organizations.

As SLIS graduates begin applying for their first jobs, mentors will remind them to indicate ALA and ACRL membership on their resumes. Professional participation is best, of course, but the mere indication of membership on a resume can send a signal to search committees that this early-career candidate understands the value of professional associations. This may help new graduates stand out to potential employers, especially if they are competing in large candidate pools.

Going forward

The UI Libraries will work with ACRL to monitor the retention rate of this cohort of student mem-

Complimentary membership delivers information that I probably wouldn't receive until actually in a library job because of the cost. It provides an exciting view of how wide the librarian-ship field really is and in what directions my career might go.—Jeanne St. Christian, MLIS candidate 2020

bers over the years. SLIS students are enrolled for two years as they pursue their Master of Arts in Library and Information Science degree. We have sufficient funding available and intend to renew the first cohort's membership next year, as well as enroll incom-

ing students in 2019. Ultimately we hope this program helps ACRL achieve its goals of maintaining membership levels but, more importantly, we want to positively influence these new professionals in getting involved and staying engaged throughout their careers. We are optimistic that our pilot project to provide free memberships to library school students will serve as a proof-of-concept for other libraries and library schools.

Notes

1. Mary Jane Petrowski, "Start your career by joining ACRL," *C&RL News* 78, no. 8 (September 2018): 424–25.

2. Jennie Rose Halperin, "A Contract You Have to Take: Debt, Sacrifice, and the Library Degree," *Medium*, August 11, 2018, retrieved September 18, 2018: https://medium.com/@little_wow/a-contract-you-have-to-take-debt-sacrifice-and-the-library-degree-5dbdfe1f6661. 