

Professional Association Review  
Association of Research Libraries

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Professional associations are evidence of the familiar adage that there is strength in numbers. Professional associations are typically non-profit organizations focused on advancing a specific professional field. They do this by supporting professionals in that field and promoting the public interest as it relates to the professional field of labor. Practitioners of a specific trade who join a related professional association benefit from the pooled resources and tools that the association provides. This better helps the professional as well as help those served by professionals. Professional library associations support librarians and libraries in the field of library and information science. These associations exist for various librarians, classified either by librarian position or by type of library where the librarian works. Professional library associations help librarians improve professionally and advocate for the communities served by libraries. The professional library association typically has some type of governing body that works to help accomplish the association's foundational principles and mission. Examples of professional library associations include the American Library Association (ALA), the American Society for Information Science and Technology (ASIS&T), International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA), and the Special Libraries Association (SLA). While some professional associations provide resources and benefits to individual librarians, the Association for Research Libraries (ARL) offers membership to select research libraries who meet the requirements and criteria of the ARL board of directors. This essay seeks to explore the professional library association ARL to better understand its value to research libraries and their staff in the field of library and information science.

ARL is a non-profit library association founded in 1932 in Chicago, Illinois by 42 university and research library directors. As of 2013 there are 125 member research libraries at research institutions across the United States and Canada. Membership to ARL is by invitation only from the ARL board of directors, the highest governing body in the association. ARL member libraries include university, public, national, and special libraries. Together, these libraries spend an enormous \$1.4 billion per year on library materials. Membership in ARL helps pool these member libraries' resources to better meet the needs of member libraries as well as those served by each member research library. The ARL website lists the following four principles as critical to its mission:

1. Open and equitable access to information is a fundamental tenet to society.
2. Research libraries are active agents central to the process of the transmission and creation of knowledge.
3. Research libraries have a responsibility to anticipate and prepare for the information needs of present and

future users.

4. Collaboration among libraries improves prospects for individual library success in fulfilling local needs.

These four principles (open access to information, research libraries as a major source of knowledge to society, identifying and acting on emerging trends, and meeting the needs of the communities served by each research library) provide a foundation for the ARL mission statement (About, 2013):

“ARL influences the changing environment of scholarly communication and the public policies that affect research libraries and the diverse communities they serve. ARL pursues this mission by advancing the goals of its member research libraries, providing leadership in public and information policy to the scholarly and higher education communities, fostering the exchange of ideas and expertise, facilitating the emergence of new roles for research libraries, and shaping a future environment that leverages its interests with those of allied organizations.”

The 2005 ARL strategic plan focused the organization on three major areas affecting research librarianship: public policy, scholarly communication, and transforming research libraries for the 21st century. These three areas are addressed in the ARL 2010-2012 strategic plan with specific strategies and desired outcomes for each area (ARL, 2012).

Research and knowledge sharing are key components of the ARL mission. The ARL website lists 15 research areas for the purpose of knowledge sharing (Focus Areas, 2013):

1. Accessibility
2. Copyright & IP
3. Court Cases
4. E-Research
5. Federal Funding
6. Open Scholarship
7. Planning & Visioning
8. Privacy, Security, & Civil Liberties
9. Public Access Policies
10. Research Collections
11. Scholarly Communication
12. Space, Facilities, & Services
13. Statistics & Assessment
14. Telecommunications Policies

## 15. Workforce

ARL performs extensive research to help describe and measure the performance of research libraries. This research includes salary surveys, library practice and policy surveys, library patron opinion surveys, electronic resource use statistics, measuring library staff workplace perceptions, evaluations of research library performance, identifying historical and future trends for research libraries, and assessing the role, character, and impact of libraries. ARL also supports its member libraries and their staff by providing lists of available job and internship openings. ARL also hosts an annual leadership symposium for master of library and information science (MLIS) students. It is geared to helping students understand current trends in information policy and library roles as well as helping them find employment in an ARL member library.

Professional library associations help establish industry standards, and determine policies and best practices for the trade. They provide funding and resources for improving library services, and build support communities that members can rely upon to improve their professional training and skills. ARL provides valuable tools and resources to help assess and improve member research libraries. ARL's efforts benefit both its member libraries as well as the communities and patrons served by these research libraries.

## References

- About ARL (2013). In Association of Research Libraries website. Retrieved from <http://www.arl.org/about>
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