

Deborah B. Dancik

Borrowing from the balcony

The ACRL/Harvard Leadership Institute from a longer view

“The week long institute was a wonderfully thought-provoking experience. The combination of excellent instructors, sharp colleagues willing to discuss real issues, and an atmosphere that encouraged reflection was super.”

—Ann Riley

“. . . it was remarkably helpful to discuss in small groups creative and intelligent strategies for shaping positive outcomes to difficult issues . . .”

—Michael Somers

“I am now more able to step sideways from issues, to look at an issue again or from another perspective. It is often hard to manage the political issues and I find I can use the framing concepts to help me.”—Carlos Melian

The ACRL Harvard Leadership Institute, which began in 1999, now has a wealth of testimonials to its credit. It has become known as a significant educational experience, one that effects change in those leaders who attend, enabling them to better address the myriad issues challenging their organizations and themselves. The curriculum of the institute is well-established, built around the concepts of framing issues from institutional, human resource, political, and symbolic perspectives from Lee Bolman and Terrence Deal’s book *Reframing organizations: Artistry, choice, and leadership*. The text is the base. Upon that is layered the analysis of complex case studies, the here-and-now issues owned by institute participants and explored in small-group discussions, and the examination of leadership’s “cluelessness” and the resistance

to change inherent in ourselves and those with whom we work. But it is much more.

As previous authors attest, there are two significant factors that make attending the ACRL Harvard Leadership Institute such a rich and rewarding week: the quality of the instruction and the caliber of the participants. As my colleague from the 2005 class Carlos Melian succinctly put it, “It’s the best teaching I’ve had in my life.”

The faculty lineup in this program has been remarkably consistent over the years, and where it has varied, it is obvious that a great deal of effort has gone into enabling newcomers to participate on par with the existing team. And it is a team. While each instructor has his or her expertise to share, each knows the style, examples, and pedagogical thrust of the other, making one day or one topic flow seamlessly and logically into the next. All the teaching is integrated and there is humor, high energy, and amazing connectedness with the class. Through this teaching, case studies, which could seem dry on reading, become first interesting, then complex, and finally rich stories and lessons in leadership success or failure.

The 90 or so participants in each year’s class contribute an equal share to the learning environment. The institute is not about being a library director. Participants come from a variety of academic library leadership positions, which, in fact, contributes to a deeper examination of topics with multiple perspectives represented. Intelligent, creative, thought-provoking are hallmarks of class discussion. Willingness to be self-revealing contributes to

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the collective understanding of what is really going on for those of us in leadership situations. Whether working with seatmates or in the morning discussion groups, colleagues provide to each other insights, remedies, strategies, solace, or humor for the topic under consideration.

Value over time

The faculty provide the framework, and the participants provide the creative practice. And it is the colleagues, in fact, who remain the connection to the institute experience. They become a network of connections that grows. Even beyond one's immediate class, participants across the annual cohorts have a common language that facilitates the continuing application of the four frames well beyond the institute in circumstances where professional lives intersect.

There are now a number of well-regarded programs in addition to the ACRL Harvard program for library leaders. Given this, and the excitement that is reflected in post-institute conversation and articles, it might be useful to assess the value of the experience several years out. Borrowing from one of the institute's pedagogical metaphors of "going up to the balcony" to get a broader view, here, in their own words, are comments of institute alumni from across the life of the program on the enduring value of their week at Harvard.

"The idea of reframing is one I use everyday—it's a very powerful tool for analyzing the impact of your actions on other constituencies, as well as for understanding their needs. I'm able to frame proposals in relation to the university's broader needs, or my department's culture, and because of that, I think I've been much more successful in promoting the library's interests."
—Rebecca Donlan, class of 2001

"Since attending the institute I have stepped out of library administration as dean. Now, as dean emeritus of University Libraries at the University of Dayton, I use the resources and insights gained

through the institute in two ways. First, I have developed and teach a doctoral course in Strategic Planning and Institutional Effectiveness, as well as another graduate course on leadership in higher education, where one of the required books is Bolman and Deal's *Reframing Organizations*. Secondly I have used many of the insights, approaches, and strategies gained through the institute in my consulting practice, which focuses on providing academic libraries and nonprofit agencies with resources in planning, facility renewal, and quality assurance."—Ed Garten, class of 2003

"The Harvard Leadership Institute was a wonderful networking experience and is a great group to turn to when issues arise and you need feedback . . . I have had contact with one of the faculty in another setting . . . and she has been good resource for me in preparing presentations for a librarians retreat . . ."
—Linda Masselink, class of 2004

"The value for me is the network of relationships that grow and deepen. My special group is the seatmates I had, and we meet twice a year at ALA. Because these individuals are in institutions not geographically close, which means the circumstances and situations of our respective institutions are not familiar, the group provides a neutral and objective forum for considering questions. These are professional friends who have become personal friends; they walk with me through issues. Because we shared a common experience at the Institute, there are metaphors and language that make for a common set of understandings that have lasted and enrich our perspectives."—Lee Van Orsdel, class of 1999

"The ACRL Harvard Institute was the best education experience that I have had, and

(continued on page 176)

2. Denise E. Agosto, "Girls and Gaming: A Summary of the Research with Implications for Practice," *Teacher Librarian* 31 (2004): 8–14.

3. John C. Beck, *Got Game: How the Gamer Generation is Reshaping Business Forever* (Boston: Harvard Business School Press, 2004).

4. Kurt Squire and Constance Steinkue-

hler, "Meet the Gamers," *Library Journal* 130 (2005): 38–41.

5. "The Big Bang," "OCLC Newsletter" No. 267 (2005): 7–12.

6. Games @ Your Library. Available at www.nexgenlibrarian.net/popculture/2005/04/games-your-library.html. ♪

("Borrowing from the balcony," continued from page 167)

I managed to attend at a pivotal point in my career. I had been in a director position for more than five years and going through the personal questioning of whether I was in the right position. However, it is always great when some of your leadership behaviors are affirmed, and you are able to tell yourself that indeed you can successfully do your job. As the same time, one discovers new insights, and I began to appreciate approaches I had never consciously considered before. The faculty delivering the program were exceptional teachers and they and the program required you to stretch. Intensive programs like the institute are a marvelous way to get reinvigorated and refocused. The position of director of libraries is very isolated within the academy, and over time it is possible to lose direction, or at least be following a tangent that is not core and for me; it is necessary to step away from the day-to-day and take the time to re-evaluate. Realizing this need, attending the institute was a major personal benefit . . . I have utilized the lessons of reframing many times . . ."—John Teskey, class of 1999

It is clear from my conversations with alumni that the value of the institute is enduring, given its focus on developing within attendees a framework for analyzing situations and developing strategies to address them regardless of the nature, size, or circumstance of an institution or an individual's leadership position. Whether one is a new leader or a mature leader, continuing to broaden and

deepen skills is essential to professional vitality. The ACRL Harvard Leadership Institute understands and fosters this; how remarkable to see past participants still inspired by what they learned years after their week in Cambridge. That's a remarkable educational experience of real value.

Thank you

I would like to thank institute alumni Lee Van Orsdel, John Teskey, Rebecca Donlan, Ed Garten, Linda Masselink, and my colleagues from the 2005 class, Michael Somers, Ann Riley, and Carlos Melian for sharing their perspectives. ♪

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