MCFADDEN,
ROCKLIN, AND
ASSOCIATES

Report to the Executive Director of the Association of Southeastern Research Libraries

September 27, 2019

Executive Summary

The Association of Southeastern Research Libraries (ASERL) is a healthy organization, well-regarded by the membership, and perceived as delivering value to member libraries through the provision of high-quality, relevant professional development, interlibrary lending, networking opportunities, coordinated government documents and related shared print solutions. ASERL is a lean, cost-efficient organization, with a strong record of sound management of the resources entrusted to it by the member libraries. The Board and membership have confidence in the staff and organizational leadership. This excellent foundation bodes well for continued success.

As with any organization, there are opportunities to sharpen some aspects of the operation, and a number of practical steps are suggested within this report. Additionally, the Board has at least one key strategic question to address and we particularly draw attention to that need here. Specifically, the small size of the staff and budget, coupled with the large number of libraries served, creates a very cost-efficient operation that (necessarily) constrains additional program and service development. The Board should develop and document an understanding about the circumstances and triggers for any expansion of the organizational operation or services.

This report contains eleven recommendations for consideration by the Board, in addition to the key strategic question (organizational size and scope) identified above. The report is intended to aid the executive director and the Board in discussing and agreeing upon the organizational focus and direction for the next several years. The recommendations focus on building upon the solid foundation of service level activities that the members have said they appreciate and depend upon (professional development, government documents, professional networking, interlibrary lending). Further, the report emphasizes the need to ensure the success of the diversity, equity, and inclusiveness initiative as a proof-of-concept for deeper levels of engagement. The recommendations purposely do not include any new high-profile, high-investment activities such as shared facilities or infrastructure, but rather asks the Board to contemplate and document the conditions necessary to trigger investment in such initiatives.

Following the Board retreat, McFadden, Rocklin and Associates revised the report to represent the final, agreed-upon strategic directions.

Background

The Association of Southeastern Research Libraries (ASERL) is a consortium of 38 research libraries, located in ten U.S. southeastern states (i.e., Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Louisiana, Maryland, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee, and Virginia).

For more than 60 years, ASERL member institutions have collaborated to increase their efficiency and effectiveness, primarily through structured resource sharing, interlibrary loan, staff networking, and professional development.

ASERL is governed by an elected Board of seven university library deans or directors, who guide the overall direction of the organization on behalf of the larger membership. The executive director of ASERL works with this Board to then implement strategy.

The organization is funded through member dues and assessments, with each member library paying an equal share of the annual budget (currently approximately $12,000 per member). The consortium employs a staff of 1.66 FTE (soon to be 2.66 FTE). Staff are tasked with organizing, coordinating, and evaluating the work of the organization.

The organization has undertaken a variety of surveys and inquiries with the membership in the past 24 months to gauge satisfaction, conduct comparisons with other library consortia, and identify potential new directions for the work of the organization. During that time, the Board approved the addition of a fulltime staff position to take on the management of the professional development portfolio and to introduce new programing aimed at diversity, equity, and inclusion in the member libraries.

Having now initiated steps to start this new initiative, the Board has paused to consider the strategic future of the organization, with an eye toward bringing greater clarity and focus to the expected outcomes of collaboration. The executive director hired McFadden, Rocklin and Associates to assist the Board in this process. This report is the culmination of that engagement.

Methodology

McFadden, Rocklin and Associates was engaged to help ASERL identify strategic directions for the next few years. In developing our recommendations, we relied on two complementary data sets.

Document review

ASERL was unusually well-prepared for strategic planning. The organization had collected a variety of helpful information from both internal and external sources. We reviewed and analyzed the following documents:

- Results of a summer 2018 survey of the deans of the member libraries
- Notes from small group discussions held at the annual membership meeting in November 2018
- Results from large group polling at the annual membership meeting in November 2018
- 2019 draft mission, vision, and values statements
- Recent financial reports and budgets
- Documents describing benchmarking investigations conducted by the ASERL executive director

- Proposal for the creation of a new professional development position on the ASERL staff focusing on diversity, equity, and inclusion.

Interviews

We conducted telephone interviews with all seven members of the ASERL Board of Directors and both members of the ASERL staff. Interviews lasted approximately 30 minutes each and both principals of the firm participated in each interview. We began interviews with an assurance that nothing that we heard in the interview would be attributed to the particular interviewee and encouraged candid responses.

We asked each person we interviewed five questions:

1) Why is your library a member of ASERL? (or, for staff, Why do you work at ASERL?)
2) What data or evidence would you look at to determine if ASERL is succeeding?
3) Is there anything ASERL is doing now that they should stop doing?
4) Is there anything you would like to see ASERL start doing?
5) Two or three years from now, what one statement would you like to be able to make about ASERL?

We also provided an opportunity at the end of each interview for the interviewee to add any additional information they thought would be useful.

After each interview, we produced notes summarizing the interview and shared them with the interviewee, requesting corrections or amplifications to assure that the notes accurately represented the interviewee's views. Both of the principals analyzed the final notes to extract relevant themes.

Summary of learnings from organizational documents

A review of the organizational documents and various surveys (including membership survey and benchmarking survey) reveal that ASERL is a lean organization, serving a large number of member institutions with the lowest level of dues and the smallest staff of any comparable organization. This leanness is one of the organization's strengths (most members perceive a positive return on investment and high value for membership) though it constrains growth.

Members identify competition with other consortia serving ASERL's membership and the small size of the organization's staff as challenges to the development of new services, but there does not seem to be a consensus that there is, in fact, an appetite or a need to develop services beyond those already provided.

The member library staff and board members express confidence in and satisfaction with the staff and leadership of the executive director, with many noting that the success of the organization can be traced to (and is dependent upon) the executive director's long tenure and excellent organizational skills. A key metric here is that in a recent survey, 23 of 38 ASERL

Deans (61% of the member Deans and Directors) reported strong overall satisfaction with ASERL value (4.7 on a scale of 5).

The financial record indicates that the organizational resources are well-stewarded and ASERL is financially healthy, operating with peak efficiency given the financial resources available.

In comparison to other library consortia, ASERL serves more member libraries with the smallest staff and budget of any comparable group, though it must be said that each consortium is unique, and direct comparisons are difficult.

In short, the organizational review reveals a healthy organization, well-positioned to meet member library expectations and to establish and commit to clear future direction.

Summary of learnings from interviews

McFadden and Rocklin interviewed all seven members of the ASERL Board over a two-week period, as well as the two current ASERL staff members. Each interviewee was asked the following questions:

1) Why is your library a member of ASERL? (or, for staff, Why do you work at ASERL?)
2) What data or evidence would you look at to determine if ASERL is succeeding?
3) Is there anything ASERL is doing now that they should stop doing?
4) Is there anything you would like to see ASERL start doing?
5) Two or three years from now, what one statement would you like to be able to make about ASERL?

Board members value their colleagues and place a high value on the opportunity to network and consult with others they perceive to be peers and leaders. Elements of this were expressed as an appreciation that the membership is regionally specific, focused on research library services, and possess a shared ethos and approach. For many, ASERL is their "focal point" for resource sharing and collaboration, even though many belong to multiple library consortia and service organizations. Six of the seven Board members stressed the value of this community to themselves (the networking among the Deans) as well as for their staff. As one Dean said: "Even though ASERL members vary in size of staff and budget, they are involved in the same issues and want to evolve in similar ways." Another Dean went on to say: "Many member libraries have limited budgets for professional development, and the range of structured webinars and established contacts and community is so important."

The membership has very high confidence in the leadership of the executive director. Two related concerns were expressed: 1) can the organization succeed without the incumbent's

leadership; and 2) how can the organization more successfully focus so that the executive director is not pulled in too many directions?

The Board values a small, but significant, set of program offerings from the consortium. After the opportunity for peer networking, the next most popular effort appears to be professional development, followed by a cluster of programs including interlibrary lending, coordination of government documents and other shared storage efforts.

When asked how they determine the success of the organization, a range of measures were suggested, including: 1) Member engagement and participation in program offerings; 2) member satisfaction with programs; and 3) financial health of the organization. Virtually every Board member said it is difficult to determine a specific dollar return on investment, but rather satisfaction as determined by periodic surveys and program reviews would be very useful.

In discussing their aspirations for the organization, a range of interesting responses were offered. It's actually interesting to see all of the responses to the question, "Two or three years from now, what one statement would you like to be able to make about ASERL?"

1) Member libraries solved "pressing problem X" together, and it happened because of ASERL.
2) ASERL has managed to evolve into an organization that is more active on more issues, without losing its collegial nature.
3) ASERL was integral to our institutional development and facilitates deeper collaboration with other institutions.
4) ASERL has proven value and accountability beyond networking and professional development.
5) Members place ASERL among their top valued memberships, and participation in ASERL efforts is high across the board.
6) Organizationally, we're responsive to the changing needs and desires of our membership.
7) ASERL is getting national attention for its diversity, equity and inclusion programming.

Turning to current programming, the Board made observations about what the organization should stop doing, with the following mentioned multiple times as opportunities for pruning: 1) gathering annual statistics; 2) the visiting program officer; 3) creation and aggregation of digital collections; and 4) pruning the number of and attention to various interest groups and committees. One Dean also noted that, assuming active participation and engagement is one measure to be used in the future, it would be useful to track and report such measures at least for a limited time for a number of activities in order to get a "map" of participation and satisfaction.

With respect to efforts that ASERL should consider launching, most of the Deans expressed a commitment to the success of the new staff member and programs around diversity, equity and inclusion. Indeed, several Board members expressed a desire that all energy be devoted to that effort in the short-term before exploring any potential new efforts.

Additionally, a variety of potential activities were mentioned, with very little overlap among the Board. For example, shared storage; e-resource management, preservation and licensing; opportunities to discuss the future of higher education and libraries; advocacy for research libraries in the region; advocacy for the libraries on their home campuses; and collaborative grant seeking were all mentioned (though only e-resource management was mentioned by 2 Board members with the rest receiving one mention).

Finally, a few of the Board members mentioned the fact that some ASERL members are also members of ARL, and that distinction is important to keep in mind.

In contemplating the Board responses, reviewing the organizational documents and then interviewing the staff, we arrive at a number of recommendations for consideration.

Strengths, Weaknesses, Threats, Opportunities

A review of the various organizational documents, coupled with interviews, reveal patterns of the traditional "strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats" analysis that may helpful to the Board's understanding.

Strengths

- Board members value and respect each other as peers – high trust among the group
- High confidence in executive director's leadership and organization skills
- 60-year history of collaboration
- Member surveys indicate satisfaction with and appreciation for services
- Efficient and effective central operation

Weaknesses

- Compared to other consortia, ASERL has more members, fewer staff, and a smaller budget – this will hinder growth or development of new programs.
- Uneven expectations about program and staff expansion
- Lack of administrative/clerical task support at headquarters

Threats

- No obvious succession plan should the current executive director leave
- Competition (real or imagined) from other consortia, and also competition for time and attention from Deans and Board members
- Turnover in Deans and other leaders

Opportunities

- Recent collaborations with other consortia may lay groundwork for additional, beneficial partnerships
- New Deans and Directors can provide energy for new initiatives

- New position (1 FTE) devoted to professional development and diversity, equity and inclusion initiatives may free up some of the executive director's time for other initiatives.

Recommendations

In this section, we present recommendations in three categories: Member engagement, focus on signature programs, and administration.

Reinforce member engagement

As we spoke with staff members and members of the Board, we were struck by a truth about ASERL that is obvious, but that deserves to be made explicit. ASERL is a voluntary, membership organization. In some sense, the only purpose of ASERL is to satisfy needs of the members. Member engagement is both a measure of the success of ASERL, and the engine that drives that success. We have three recommendations relating to member engagement.

Recommendation 1.   Strengthen Board member and dean engagement

ASERL is fortunate to have a strong elected Board. Our interviews with Board members revealed a group of well-informed and committed deans who valued ASERL enough to devote some of their scarce time to the governance of the organization. This is a strength to build upon. At the same time, Dean and Director level positions are turning over more rapidly (and that trend will likely hold). Developing and deploying a standardized "on-boarding" process for all new Board members and all new Deans will be important to establish expectations and bring these leaders into the organization as quickly as possible. The Board should also consider implementing a process whereby each new Dean and Board member is paired with another Dean who will personally call to welcome and introduce the member to the network.

Recommendation 2.   Develop simple tools to help Deans and AULs serve as advocates

A number of the Board members identified the need to strengthen awareness of ASERL's contributions at the campus level for members and within and throughout member libraries. Having all the Board members prepared to share the positive story of ASERL's impact with their library and campus colleagues is a first step toward strong advocacy efforts. Additionally, brief highlights that can be shared through member campus library staff email lists or newsletters, or campus newsletters, can also be helpful in highlighting the value of ASERL collaboration as well as the Dean's commitment to that collaboration.

Recommendation 3.   Ensure that events are meaningful and strategic

Any event that ASERL puts on will involve a substantial investment of staff time as well as a substantial investment of time on the part of participants. Each event must contribute to

advancing the organization's mission of collaboration and innovation and, importantly, must be perceived as such by participants. Our sense from the evidence available to us is that the annual deans meeting meets these criteria, and the same can be said for Board meetings. Many of the interest group events seem to have fallen short. Two Board members made good cases for assessing the value of interest groups with an eye to reducing ASERL's investment in these groups.

The main thrust of this recommendation, though, has to do with the creation of new events. It is our experience that at one time or another, nearly every specialty group within an organization is likely to propose an event, likely a recurring event to serve their interests. ASERL is a reasonably large consortium with a very small staff. The staff, with the support of the Board, needs to be prepared to push back against events that are not mission rich. The Board should consider encouraging and codifying the emerging practice of members planning and hosting ASERL-branded events with the awareness of but with minimal work conducted by the headquarters.

Focus on signature programs

Recommendation 4.	Focus on delivery of high quality, signature programs and decommission or deemphasize some that have outgrown usefulness.

Emphasize:
- Well organized, high impact Dean meetings
- Diversity, equity and inclusiveness
- Professional development
- Interlibrary lending
- Shared print
- Government documents

Reevaluate:
- Visiting program officer
- Digital collections
- Annual statistics gathering
- Interest groups that are not mission rich

Recommendation 5.	Establish reporting on data related to signature programs to focus staff and member library attention

Identify simple reporting metrics and report those metrics on a regular basis to the Board and membership. This serves a two-pronged service of directing attention to those services of highest

value to members, and keeping energy moving toward strong oversight and management of those activities.

We suggest some possible metrics for each service.

Government Documents	Size of collection Shelving space saved Use data by institution
Shared Print	Size of collection Shelving space saved Use data by institution
Interlibrary Lending	Use data by institution
Professional development	Events hosted Attendance by institution Survey data on satisfaction
Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Programming	Events hosted Attendance by institution Survey data on satisfaction
Well organized, high impact Dean meetings	Satisfaction survey of Deans

Administration

> **Recommendation 6.** Agree on handful of communities of practice and committees to be supported and decommission the others

Supporting communities of practice and committees is a significant effort on the part of a limited staff. Our sense is that only a very few of these groups can be expected to significantly contribute to the advancement of the ASERL mission. The Board may want to develop explicit criteria for which groups will be supported. One of those criteria may be that any group must be sponsored by a university library dean or director, with the responsibility for monitoring and reporting to the Board on the activities. Some groups may be well served by a simple roster with contact information that allows members of the group to contact each other to ask for advice or suggest collaborations. Establishing a roster of supported groups, the terms of that support, and the process by which groups are started or stopped will be useful.

> **Recommendation 7.** Set up professional development DEI position for success

By creating this position and agreeing to increase dues to support it, ASERL members have identified professional development, particularly around diversity, equity, and inclusion issues as the organization's central strategic thrust over the next few years. The executive director and members of the Board will need to devote energy and attention to creating the conditions for success for this initiative. In addition to hiring an outstanding candidate, the organization will need to
- Engage members in defining the nature of the programming to be provided
- Develop specific, measurable goals for the programming

- Create a process and a schedule for assessing the effectiveness of the programming
- Closely monitor the effort and be prepared to make adjustments

Recommendation 8.   Regularly review job descriptions and compensation for all staff positions

One of ASERL's key advantages is an outstanding (if small) staff. Maintaining the effectiveness of that staff is essential to the continued success of the organization. The Board should take responsibility for actively maintaining the staff's job descriptions and assuring that the staff members are appropriately compensated.

Recommendation 9.   Develop leadership succession plan for executive director

Our interviews identified the current executive director as one of the most important factors in ASERL's success. The organization needs to be prepared for the eventuality of his departure. The Board should review and update the existing succession plan as soon as possible, then review the plan annually.

Recommendation 10. Explore opportunities for partnerships with other consortia to "outsource" services such as licensing

ASERL's current infrastructure is too small to support significant new programs (e.g. licensing, shared storage facility) and it seems unlikely that the membership has the appetite to add new headquarters staff again after just expanding. However, it may be possible to build on existing efforts in other consortia without necessarily adding infrastructure to ASERL.

Recommendation 11. Establish Board level policy on how any program or organizational expansion will take place (using the recent DEI experience as a guide to this).

While most Board members are in agreement regarding the "core programs" that should be supported, there was not unanimity of opinion on the need for – or the definitions of – new services. Additionally, some of the new services (e.g. licensing or shared storage facilities) suggested would require a significant increase in institutional or headquarters investment. Rather than jumping in to figure out what specific new services should be developed, we suggest the Board have a candid conversation about the conditions that would cause them to want to increase an investment in the organization. The Board members are in the best position to identify those conditions, but they may include expected cost of the effort, determined over a five year period; expected investment in staff and other contributions from member libraries, expected cost, space or time savings over the period of the service, and stated measures of success for the effort.

The staff could implement a relatively lightweight response to Board members raising ideas for new services. If the Board member recommending the action could also identify an existing exemplar in the area, the executive director could do a quick benchmark survey with colleagues and get some basic information on costs of effort, for example, to help steer conversations in

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productive ways. It should also be the practice that any new ideas moving up to the Board should come through the office of a library Dean or Director, thus ensuring any idea has at least been vetted on at least one member campus before moving forward.

Summary

ASERL is a healthy organization with a strong, competent, cost efficient central operation, effective and successful executive director, a cadre of strong peer libraries, engaged member staff, and a smart and strategic Board. ASERL also enjoys a very strong financial position. The organization supports several exemplary and very useful services for member libraries. There are ways ASERL could tighten certain aspects of the operation that would help steer the organization toward shared expectations about services. The successful implementation of the new professional development and diversity, equity and inclusion program is critically important and significant effort should be devoted to that in the coming year. The Board should also contemplate the conditions necessary for program or operational expansion.

About McFadden, Rocklin and Associates

McFadden, Rocklin, and Associates LLC began operations early in 2018 when Barbara McFadden and Tom Rocklin joined to put their combined 59 years of experience in higher education to work helping universities, colleges, and the consortia they form with strategy development and implementation, governance, relationship management, and leadership development.

McFadden served for eighteen years as the Executive Director of the Big Ten Academic Alliance (formerly the Committee on Institutional Cooperation). In that role, she developed, led, and oversaw large-scale inter-institutional collaborations for the Big Ten Universities, including the creation of the OmniPop fiber-optic network and the large-scale Google book scanning project. Rocklin served as Vice President for Student Life and previously as Vice Provost of the University of Iowa. He was responsible for a broad swath of institutional priorities, including student success initiatives, and led a five-hundred-person division with a budget of over $100 million. He participated in and led strategic planning processes at levels from department to university.

Appendix A

Proposed Strategic Directions
2019-2022

DRAFT FOR BOARD DISCUSSION/ACTION
Strategic Directions
2019-2022

BACKGROUND AND ASPIRATIONS

The Association of Southeastern Libraries is a membership organization comprising 38 research libraries located in 11 states in the US southeast. ASERL is a governed by a seven-member Board elected from the membership, and activities are coordinated from a central office of 2.66 FTE, housed at Emory University. ASERL leadership intends for the member deans and directors to place ASERL among their top valued memberships because of its proven value. ASERL shall address pressing problems of its members by working together, and is accountable to the members.

MISSION

ASERL advances southeastern research libraries by fostering innovation and collaboration, sharing knowledge, and building community.

VISION

Because of their participation in strategic ASERL partnerships, the member libraries are the heart of their respective campuses, and serve unique roles that support innovative research, enhance student success, and build vibrant, diverse communities. Member libraries engage in forward-facing strategic initiatives with strong momentum and a collegial spirit.

OUR VALUES INCLUDE

Collaboration and collegiality
Mutual trust and respect
Welcoming environments
Diversity, equity, and inclusion

STRATEGIC THEME ONE: FULLY ENGAGE MEMBER INSTITUTIONS

A. Strengthen Board & member dean engagement
   a. Implement a formal dean-to-dean mentoring and welcoming process. Document this process.
   b. Develop a standard "on-boarding process" to welcome all new deans and quickly bring them up to speed about the organization (welcome binder, call, letter)

B. Develop simple tools to help Deans advocate for ASERL
   a. Develop talking points to share with all Deans that focus on ROI stories
   b. Develop at least one "story" annually that can be shared through member library email lists and through campus newsletters.

C. Ensure that member events are meaningful and strategic
   a. Develop checklist to ensure that all proposed events focus on or address strategy-rich issues or activities

STRATEGIC THEME TWO: FOCUS ON SIGNATURE PROGRAMS

A. Headquarters and member library efforts should focus on delivering high quality and high impact in areas where ASERL has a record of success and value to the members:
   a. Deans' meetings
   b. Efforts that contribute to the success of the diversity, equity and inclusiveness program
   c. Professional development, with an emphasis on webinars
   d. Interlibrary lending
   e. Government documents
B. Using relevant impact data, develop a concise report articulating the return on investment for signature programs.
C. Establish Board level policy on the conditions for diversification or expansion of program offerings, membership or revenue.

STRATEGIC THEME THREE: STRENGTHEN INFRASTRUCTURE TO SUPPORT SERVICES

A. Support the success of the diversity, equity and inclusiveness effort by regularly reviewing progress toward objectives and stated measures of success
B. Develop and implement Board policy defining the committees, groups or "communities of practice" that will be directly supported by headquarters.
C. Develop and implement Board policy on the process and timeline for review of headquarters staff job descriptions and compensation
D. Update the leadership succession plan for executive director
E. Explore opportunities with other consortia