

Scenario Planning: Developing a Strategic Agenda for Organizational Alignment

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The university provost role is without peer in the corporate world or any other sector for that matter...[the] challenge is finding the right levers for getting the academic and research enterprise to respond quickly to an emerging set of challenges—rising demands on undergraduate education, declining research funding, the challenges of globalization, and a chorus of outside voices demanding that universities demonstrate their value to students, their communities, and the nation as a whole.¹

Rapid change and university administration go hand in hand. Universities are challenged by forces of economic and social change within the context of an increasingly global learning and working environment. Research universities compete for shrinking federal funding for research, for increased funding from corporations, for top graduate students, and for ways to advance interdisciplinary efforts and multiply knowledge across institutions and sometimes across continents.

Residing within the broader context of higher education and the specific environment of their larger institutions, research libraries serve as vital players in this ever-changing landscape. As universities are called upon to demonstrate value, service, and innovation, research libraries must seize any and all opportunities to align with the university's strategic agenda. In order to plan effectively, library leadership must be able to navigate the complex and uncertain environments in higher education. "Confronting uncertainty in a rapidly changing environment is essential if research libraries are to continue to be valued and valuable contributors to the advancement of new research and the creation of new knowledge."²

To address this critical uncertainty, and to support member libraries in planning for change, the Association of Research Libraries (ARL) launched its scenario-planning project, *Envisioning Research Library Futures: A Scenario Thinking Project*, in the early spring of 2010. The project began with a **scenario building** retreat designed to create a resource for member libraries to use for enrichment in strategic planning. ARL concluded that the project should expand beyond scenario development and also include a selection of activities to assist members in learning about scenario planning and how best to use the process to support their own organizational goals. In October 2010, ARL unveiled a user's guide as a central blueprint for the application of scenario planning.

In choosing scenario planning, ARL embraced a strategic process with a substantial history and an expanding future. Used by the US military in World War II and further pioneered by the Shell Corporation in the early 1970s,³ scenario planning continues to gain momentum with higher education institutions, nonprofit groups, and research organizations. The International Council for Science (ICSU), a non-governmental and global group of national scientific bodies representing 40 countries, has recently developed a set of "foresight scenarios" based on what they believe are the primary drivers with major influence for science in coming decades for the purpose of helping member institutions explore their roles in international science.⁴

At its core, **scenario planning** is designed to help connect the dots between future possibilities and present action.

Scenario planning is a structured, disciplined technique for identifying key driving forces in the environment that have an impact on the organization and then using that information to design a series of scenarios or stories that describe possible futures. Using these stories, managers can design strategies that will help the organization reach its goal under a variety of circumstances. The stories help managers identify their own assumptions about the future and test those assumptions as they review and renew the scenarios.⁵

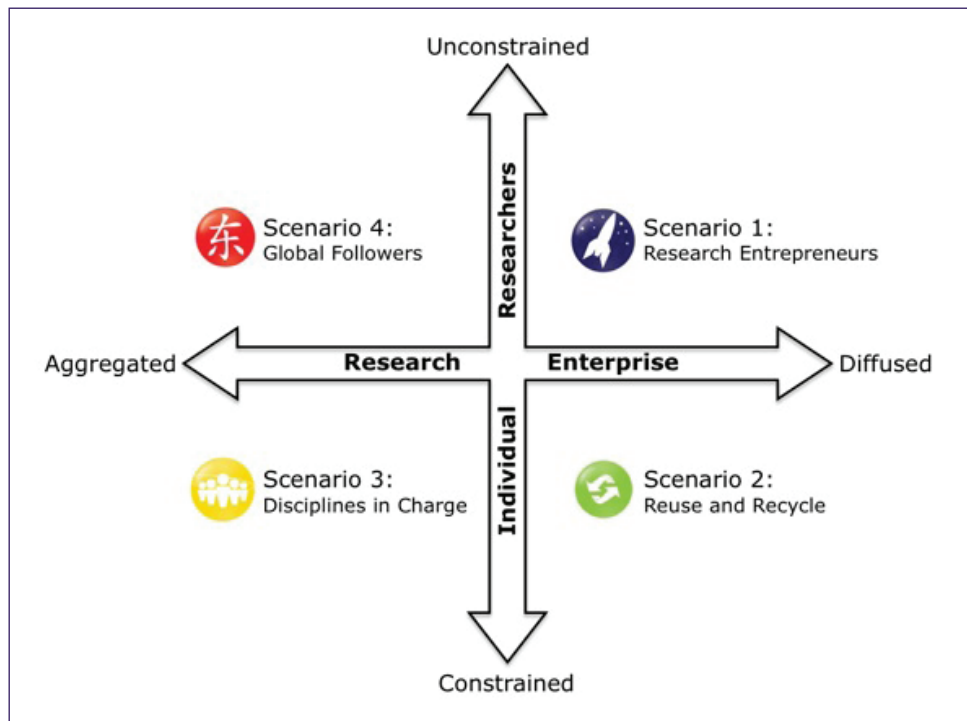
Unlike traditional strategic planning, with its focus on a single anticipated future, scenario planning provides alternative versions of that future, to be used as lenses for viewing and focusing different organizational possibilities. As a result, scenario planning is not about forecasting or making the right prediction. Instead, it is a tool to help organizations make better decisions in the face of many important uncertainties. For the ARL project, four scenarios were designed.

The ARL 2030 Scenarios are rich descriptions of four possible futures. Each presents a particular exploration of many critical uncertainties in a way that considers the dynamics that might unfold over a twenty-year time frame, as well as synergies and interactions between uncertainties. As a set, the four scenarios are designed to tell widely divergent stories to explore a broad range of possible developments over time.⁶

The four scenarios offer similarities and differences represented by their position along two axes: the state of the research enterprise and the environment in which individual researchers operate. No one scenario represents a complete picture of the future and none of the scenarios specifically mention libraries. (See Figure 1.)

- **Research Entrepreneurs**—Research is shaped by the rise of entrepreneurial research; individual researchers are the stars of the story.
- **Reuse and Recycle**—Recycling and reuse predominate in research activities. Disinvestment in the research enterprise has cut across society and government's ability to fund research and research-intensive education has become limited to non-existent.
- **Disciplines in Charge**—Computational approaches to data analysis dominate the research enterprise. Scholars, whether humanists or scientists align themselves around data stores and computational capacity that address grand challenges and large-scale research questions, often operating at a disciplinary and sub-discipline level.
- **Global Followers**—The locus of the funding that drives the research enterprise migrates from North America and developed Western nations to nations in the Middle East and Asia. These Middle Eastern and Asian cultures, which are able to build technical infrastructures that catalyze breakthrough research and attract top talent, can organize the activity into projects of relevance to their societies.

Figure 1: The ARL 2030 Scenarios



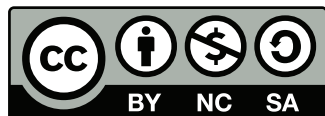
The ARL project culminated in an intensive workshop at Georgia Tech in March 2011, designed to prepare member institutions for local implementation and equip them to use the scenario set effectively. Since this time, a number of ARL libraries have engaged in discussions and activities using the ARL 2030 Scenarios. Three examples are presented in this issue of *RLLI*, offering several approaches that other libraries might adapt to their own circumstances. The article about the University of Kansas (KU) experience describes the workshops held with staff to contribute to KU’s current strategic planning process. Two other libraries, Johns Hopkins University and McMaster University, share how they are joining scenario planning with their balanced scorecard activities.

Another activity worth mentioning is the research project led by three 2011–2012 ARL Research Library Leadership Fellows—Jon Cawthorne (Boston College), Vivian Lewis (McMaster University), and Xuemao Wang (Emory University). They are leading conversations using the ARL 2030 Scenarios within their organizations, with other members of their Fellows class, and with ARL library directors to explore workforce transformation. If ARL libraries are to meet the needs of the 21st-century research enterprise, they will need to transform their workforce. Demographic trends—retirement of large proportions of staff, intergenerational conflict, introduction of new kinds of professionals into the workplace, and gaps in core competencies—are creating challenges for libraries. In addition, the ever-increasing global competition in the world of higher education and research calls for a new research library workforce that is agile, multicultural, and interdisciplinary.⁷

The ARL 2030 Scenarios can engage library staff in new ways of thinking about the future of the academic research library. The resources created by ARL provide a variety of frameworks for implementation that are flexible and easily adaptable to a library’s environment. The challenge for libraries is determining what actions within the current environment best position the library to thrive across a majority of the future scenarios.

- 1 "University Leadership Council," Education Advisory Board, accessed July 11, 2012, <http://www.educationadvisoryboard.com/ulc.asp>.
- 2 Association of Research Libraries and Stratus, Inc., *The ARL 2030 Scenarios: A User's Guide for Research Libraries* (Washington, DC: ARL, 2010), 7, <http://www.arl.org/bm~doc/arl-2030-scenarios-users-guide.pdf>.
- 3 Joan Giesecke, "Scenario Planning and Collection Development," Faculty Publications, University of Nebraska–Lincoln Libraries, paper 65 (January 1999): 82, <http://digitalcommons.unl.edu/librarianscience/65/>.
- 4 International Council for Science, *ICSU Foresight Analysis Report 1: International Science in 2031—Exploratory Scenarios* (Paris: ICSU, 2011), <http://www.icsu.org/publications/reports-and-reviews/icsu-foresight-analysis/icsu-foresight-analysis>.
- 5 Giesecke, "Scenario Planning and Collection Development," 82.
- 6 ARL and Stratus, *ARL 2030 Scenarios*, 8.
- 7 Jon Cawthorne, Vivian Lewis, and Xuemao Wang, "Transforming the Research Library Workforce: A Scenarios Approach," slides presented at the 160th ARL Membership Meeting, Chicago, Illinois, May 4, 2012, <http://www.arl.org/bm~doc/mm12spring-scenarios.pdf>.

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