

Failure or Perseverance? A Case Study of a Legislative Initiative by the Utah Academic Library Consortium

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Introduction

In 2015, I was asked to help organize a legislative initiative for the Utah Academic Library Consortium (UALC). UALC was established in 1971 as a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization that consists of all public and private academic libraries in accredited institutions of higher education in the state of Utah. Although the two private institutional members of UALC do not receive public money for database purchases, they do qualify for price breaks on consortium purchases. The UALC board is composed of the deans and directors of each of these institutions. As the consortium notes, “UALC members work together to enhance resources provided to Utah’s higher education communities.”¹

The proposed initiative was, and still is, to increase the budget allocation that all public colleges and universities in UALC receive from the state of Utah. The state legislature finalizes the budget appropriations during a six-week legislative session in late winter each year. I was asked to participate and take the lead to plan this initiative because of my involvement in local politics over the last decade. In 2014, I ran unsuccessfully for a seat in the Utah State House and I am familiar with the political players and political culture of the state.

In the past, legislative initiatives by UALC were mostly informal public relations campaigns. During the late 1990s and up to the recession of 2008, these initiatives were moderately successful in educating state lawmakers as to the importance of purchasing electronic resources for academic libraries via a consortium.

Mirroring national trends,² in the recent past Utah public and academic libraries have not been at the forefront of activism on either federal or state legislation related to libraries.

When there have been movements to educate elected officials at the state and federal level, it has often been too little, too late. Although activism is often discussed within the Utah Library Association, it is rarely pursued, and the results of these few efforts of library advocacy have been negligible, at best.

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2016 and 2017

Beginning with the 2016 session of the Utah Legislature and continuing with the 2017 session, UALC leadership pursued an active effort to advocate for funding increases. In 2016, the first initiative for a funding increase received positive feedback from the Higher Education Appropriations Subcommittee of the Utah Legislature, but the request failed to pass the Executive Appropriations Committee in the legislature. The UALC appropriations request conflicted with other higher education funding requests from individual state colleges and universities. We learned from this experience that academic library deans and directors must be more politically savvy with their university administrations as well as their own representatives in the state legislature.

Immediately after the 2016 legislative session ended, UALC devised a plan with input from the government relations staffs at the consortium’s public member institutions. In the fall of 2016, a majority of the library deans and directors met with their respective elected state representatives to discuss the UALC funding initiatives concentrating on the following issues:

- A request for an additional \$1.5 million to fund consortium

database purchases for Utah's academic libraries

- Education of elected officials that STEM journals increase in cost 7–9% annually; the cost of maintaining the current collection of UALC journals is currently increasing by \$55,000 a year.
- Reminders that UALC's last budget increase was in 2008, before the onset of the Great Recession, and the consortium sustained budget reductions in 2010, 2011, and 2012. Without an increase in funding in 2016, there would be a reduction in subscriptions that would affect the smaller institutions in rural areas the most.

In addition, the leadership of UALC and its legislative advisor met with representatives of the Governor's Budget Office to advocate for an increase in the governor's budget, although the governor's budget is advisory in nature and mostly symbolic. It is the legislature that can add and omit items from the governor's budget and ultimately approves the final state budget, which is then signed or vetoed by the governor. In 2016, the appropriation increases sought by UALC did not make the governor's budget because revenue forecasts predicted that there would be little new money in the state budget; these forecasts would later prove wrong.

The 2016 election brought forth new membership in the Utah Higher Education Appropriations Subcommittee, as well as new leadership within the Utah Legislature. The new committee membership included representatives who were employed at higher education institutions in Utah, including an adjunct instructor of political science, a tenured associate professor of sociology, a retired university president, and a senior development officer. At no point in the conversation for a funding increase for UALC did library deans and directors ever assume that pursuing a funding increase for UALC would be easier because of the new composition of the Higher Education Appropriations Subcommittee. Rather the new makeup of the committee was looked upon as an opportunity to work with elected officials who understood firsthand the challenges libraries face when it comes to funding in higher education.

Beginning in the fall of 2016 and immediately up to the commencement of the 2017 Utah Legislature, UALC leadership held meetings with the provosts at various member institutions. The primary purpose of these meetings was to assure college and university administrators that the UALC did not mean to undermine any direct asks to the legislature by individual institutions.

As the 2017 session of the Utah Legislature began, hopes were high for a budget increase for libraries, because a majority of the Higher Education Appropriations Subcommittee members who agreed to meet with the UALC representatives supported the increase. State revenue estimates posted midway through the legislative session forecasted an increase in additional revenue brought in by sales tax. In the end, however, for the second year in a row, the request was forwarded to the Executive Appropriations Committee only to be set aside to fund athletic scholarships at small colleges and universities in the state.

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Conclusion

The question now stands, Does this count as failure? Although one of the definitions of the term “failure” in the Oxford English Dictionary is, “The fact of failing to effect one’s purpose; want of success; an instance of this,”³ the bigger picture of this legislative initiative is that more elected representatives with an interest in higher education are aware of the critical funding issues that UALC faces.

A majority of the academic library deans and directors have been advocating for increases in the UALC budget with their respective presidents and provosts in 2017. Other members of the leadership of UALC will meet with representatives of the Governor’s Budget Office. This includes two new library deans and directors who began

their respective posts during the summer of 2017. At the same time, the support of industry groups in the state of Utah who advocate for increases in STEM education funding has been achieved and meetings with members of the Higher Education Appropriations Subcommittee and select members of the Executive Appropriations Committee have been held—and there is now commitment to fund UALC. The consortium is optimistic that the consistency of the message for increased funding will bring success in the 2018 legislative session.

Endnotes

1. Utah Academic Library Consortium (UALC), “About UALC,” accessed September 6, 2017, <https://ualc.net/about/>.
2. John N. Berry III, “Fix Library Advocacy,” *Library Journal* 137, no. 14 (September 1, 2012): 8.
3. *Oxford English Dictionary (OED) Online*, s.v. “failure (n.),” accessed July 15, 2017, <http://www.oed.com/view/Entry/67663>.

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To cite this article: Peter L. Kraus. “Failure or Perseverance? A Case Study of a Legislative Initiative by the Utah Academic Library Consortium.” *Research Library Issues*, no. 292 (2017): 37–41, <https://doi.org/10.29242/rli.292.6>.