

President's Address

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Contents

Part I: Lessons to Date	2
Pre-Flight & Prospectus.....	4
Caretaker's Dilemma	5
Liberia and Cultural Reconstruction	6
Part II: Purposes, Mission, and Values I	7
Founding Purpose	7
Mission.....	8
Values I.....	8
Part III: Values II & Vision	9
Values II	10
Vision.....	11
Part IV: Our Collective Power.....	12
Part V: Our Future Together	13
Conclusion.....	15

Introductory Note: This is the edited text of my closing remarks for the Center for Research Libraries (CRL) 2025 annual meeting. You can see the live talk online, stutters and and and uhms intact. In that talk, I called out a few 'off-script' moments that related to conversations over the course of the meeting. Since you may not have been there for that context, I have paraphrased and expanded from my verbatim remarks for this version.

Part I: Lessons to Date

I joined CRL as its President in November 2024. As I got into the data and talked with the staff to understand what this place really is and what it can be, I kept comparing CRL to a gracious old home, full of memories and full of hopes for the future.

It is a home that has had a thorough renovation recently. A place that is ready to be lived in, with great location, lovely neighbors in our 200 members across the US and Canada, but we still have to arrange some furniture and get a little paint on the walls.

And we have to unpack a few things.

I have heard candid concerns about our value proposition and our values, about the changes we have made, and about whether CRL is worth the investment in difficult budget times. These are fair questions. They deserve answers in the form of meaningful action. I moved here to take this job because I believe in what we can build together, and because there are concrete steps ready to be taken.

I do not have a big slate of initiatives to announce today, but I have been at CRL for about six months now, and in that time, one thing has become clear to me: very few people see the whole scope of this organization.

I mean that along every axis—the depth and diversity of our collections, the range of our services, the scope of our member network, and the possibilities still ahead.

So that is one of the themes for my remarks today: once we get the full picture—as we orient ourselves properly to what CRL is—we see just how big the opportunities are.

I have spent the last several months listening, learning, and traveling. I did a quick count the other day and believe I am getting into the statistically significant zone with four or five dozen calls with heads of member libraries, that many again with AULs and department heads, and something like a dozen campus visits to both current and prospective members.

I have walked through your stacks—I noticed a little overcrowding here and there, just in case you'd like to transfer some materials to CRL—and I have talked with librarians in licensing and acquisitions; in cataloging and collections management; in collection development and access initiatives; and in research, teaching, and learning—a crucial audience for us to have a working relationship with.

(And of course, I checked in with some old pals in the conservation lab.)

I have heard what makes your work more difficult, what you are excited about, and where you think CRL can help.

And that is the second theme I want to share: seeing the world through your eyes.

It is crucial for CRL to understand the pressures you face—across higher ed, in scholarly communication and publishing, in a complicated and fragile political environment—so our investments achieve do something to alleviate those pressures.

It is important for CRL to understand what you are excited about—in open access and infrastructure, in use of emerging technologies, in advancing the role of the library in the scholarly enterprise—so our investments achieve something meaningful for our profession.

Although I have officially held the role for six months, of course I started thinking seriously about CRL long before then. Amy Wood reminded me this is actually the second time I have given a talk at the CRL annual meeting. The first was in 2016, for the @Risk symposium.

So you know I am consistent about this investment metaphor; I looked up the recording, where I said “if you put something in shared collections... it’s like putting your money in the bank; it’s way better there than” —and here are words that are going to come back to get me— “way better than putting them in the mattress of the on-campus stacks.”¹

More recently, as I talked with the search committee and with Greg; as I did my homework and I talked with friends and mentors; as I got myself oriented here, I kept arriving at the same conclusion: CRL is ready to launch. In fact, I may need to change up my metaphor about the newly renovated home. I think we might have a rocket ship on our hands.

So that brings me to my third topic today: where do we go from here? What is ahead for CRL, and how do we make the most of this moment?

Off-script: A frequent topic during the meeting was how to discern when an idea is both aspirational and practical. One example that stuck with me was the difference between trying to make college affordable and colonize Mars. (We often use ‘moonshot’ in strategic planning, plus I’d gotten myself into this rocket ship metaphor.) Somehow a moon-shot and a Mars-shot live in different cognitive space for me. A moon-shot rallies people, it builds a community where everyone can lend their expertise to something that matters whether you’re on the rocket or not. A moon-shot is a story of exploration and return rather than a story of escape. That fits more comfortably with the cycles of care and renewal that are the business of a stewardship organization like CRL. We need to venture into the unknown and audacious as we chart CRL’s future, but if we’re following just one person’s

¹ @Risk: A CRL Collections Forum—Shared Print Repositories. Mark Jacobs, Jacob Nadal, and Densise Hibay. Chicago, 2016. https://youtu.be/GOXhgnPN4ik?si=ceOE_SfFEBr6nEgk

particular vision of what would be fascinating, we may be going down the wrong path with an organization like this.

Pre-Flight & Prospectus

As we get ready to launch, I am happy to report we are passing our pre-flight checks.

- A new global collections structure, open to all members? Check—Kevin’s got nine committees with dozens of participants signed up, and there will be no additional dues or fees for these programs: a direct savings for many members.
- New collections? Check -- We added over \$250,000 in area studies materials to the collection in the last quarter and we are talking with several members about transferring collections here, so they relieve overcrowded spaces, and we make those materials available to all.
- Investments in our licensing program? Check—Lanette’s been doing the hard work to make sure our program is sustainable and that we keep pushing for better deals.
- That includes adding capability for more data analysis and tools like Unsub to help our members get the best value possible.
- We are also running new working groups on AI usage terms, accessibility compliance standards, and updating our model license.
- Collections cataloged and ready to loan? Check—and a new ILS with it.²
- Half a million annual users of our open access content, all around the world? Check.
- Contingency planning for a volatile political and economic landscape? Check... though I will probably need to update again the next time I look at the newspaper.
- Bridge-year support for the Shared Print Partnership support? Check. Thermal scan of the building? Check. Systems migrations? Subscriptions? Scanners? Check, check, check, and check.

All of this baseline capability is documented in the **Prospectus** we released this month. That document, in essence, is our pre-flight checklist.³

There is a lot there—and let me re-emphasize that: *there’s a lot there*—but I hope you will spend time with it. We have broken it up into 1 or 2-page, single sheet summaries of CRL as you have it today. It captures much of what I have learned and signals where we are headed.

² CRL is completing its migration to TIND this year: <https://www.tind.io/ils>

³ CRL Prospectus and FY2024 Annual Financial Report: <https://digitalcollections.crl.edu/record/946235>

But the most important message of that document says is that CRL is yours. We decided to call it a prospectus because that is what you issue to investors, and we want you to see yourselves as co-investors in this organization. We want you to engage with CRL as a joint venture that exists to accomplish your shared goals.

That is a metaphor I want you to push on. Corporations sometimes form a joint venture to pursue new prospects when there is a benefit for them all and it is smarter to share the cost. Sometimes, companies do this when there is an essential service that many corporations need but does not give any of them a competitive advantage.

If you think of CRL as a content subscription, or licensing service, or shared print data registry, you will not be wrong, but you will miss the real value proposition of this organization.

Working with my team to build the prospectus was reassuring for two reasons. First, I recognized something familiar from my work in preservation. And second, as I get deeper into the data and the conversations, I see ways the work we do in our profession—and the ways that CRL can help us do that—are part of the solution to a larger problem: how to bring some equilibrium in our culture, and why libraries are essential to that work.

To start with preservation, of course I find that comforting because preservation has been the throughline of my career. But more precisely, preservation as an organizational function. Not just conservation treatments or environmental controls, materials science or reformatting programs, but the work of making sure the past has a future through budgets, policy, and practical decisions. My big wins are things like getting books off the floor and into good storage, getting a better position description in place, or just the bare diplomacy of sticking with it until everyone necessary comes to the meeting.

Caretaker's Dilemma

There is something stewardship organizations need to reckon that I think of as the caretaker's dilemma. It is one specific version of the problem of the urgent overwhelming the important. It's the dilemma of being responsible for something precious, handing that treasure to someone else, recognizing there's a risk in that, some degree of control no longer in our hands, and yet knowing if we don't take that risk in the present, the past recedes, the present itself loses meaning, and the future becomes impoverished.

In blunt terms: if preservation does not help the library meet its purposes today, there will not be an investment in it. And the same goes for CRL—if we are not solving present-tense problems for our members, there will not be investment here either.

But if we get that balance right—if we connect past, present, and future in a way that's practical and real to create a cycle of care—that's when organizations like CRL and you, our member libraries, transform essential infrastructure into durable social fabric effective engines of progress.

Let me give you an example of what that can look like.

Liberia and Cultural Reconstruction

I had the opportunity to work in Liberia on two occasions. The first time was during the ceasefire in the early 2000s. I was part of a team working to recover cultural materials threatened by conflict. So it does not go unsaid, I am reflecting on a tragedy far beyond questions of salvaging records and cultural materials, but loss of those materials is a genuine tragedy.

It is hard to put the scope of the preservation challenges into words. Things were saved, though. That fact deserves attention. One document was recovered, then another. The incomprehensible scale of damage was two documents smaller, and then two hundred. Preservation proceeds in this way quite often in my experience. Start with one preservation department-worth of capacity and a thousand problems. Then solve one problem, then one more, and soon enough there is one preservation department of capacity and nine hundred problems. Sometimes it matters less which problem is solved only that you solve what you can so that the ratio improves.

The majority of preservation is just that kind of persistent work, but in my experience, something astonishing always emerges from the process. In Liberia, we found several safes that had been looted from the Center for National Documents, Records, and Archives (CNDRA). People thought these safes contained cash or something that could be converted into currency. They did not. What they held was far more valuable: the Liberian Constitution and Declaration of Independence.

My second trip was to help bring those documents back into public view. We put them on display as part of International Right to Know Day, alongside records management training for civil servants and capacity-building for the archive staff.

We started with salvaged records piled on the floor or dropped at random into whatever containers had been at hand. And over two weeks we processed and rehoused collections; drafted policies and training materials; held workshops and left CNDRA with fewer problems than when we started.

There was a room filled with empty shelves and cast-off fixtures that was chosen to be the gallery. We had shipped some exhibitions cases and wall panels with the text of the exhibit

in advance. In one week, we cleared the room, painted the walls, located a generator, hung the panels, set up the cases and installed the documents, and opened an exhibition featuring the founding documents of the Liberian government.

And this is what it meant: Liberian schoolchildren seeing their country's story presented for them alongside the material, documentary evidence of that story, and recognizing that there was an organization that had kept that memory for them.

Liberia still faces challenges, but people have records to prove they own their homes and marriage records to prove their rights of inheritance. Liberia has fractious elections and Grammy-winning artists. It has civil discord and very passionate football matches. And while there are no superheroes in this story and no easy endings, libraries and archives are an important part of it. Society cannot be built or rebuilt without us.

Part II: Purposes, Mission, and Values I

Let me emphasize that my training is in library science, not political science. I am not here to give a big lesson in civics. I am here to say that civil society and the rule of law depend on records and cultural identity. I am here to remind you that records and culture are the business of libraries in the most literal way, and that collective efforts like CRL are a crucial tool for doing our business well.

The Center for Research Libraries is now 76 years old. And its founding purposes still resonate. We were created to extend and complement the collecting power of research libraries—and that is still what we do. The methods have changed, the scale has changed, the world around us has certainly changed—but that core function holds steady.

Founding Purpose

The Center for Research Libraries is a 501(c)(3) not for profit corporation whose tax-exempt purposes are:

to establish and maintain an education, literary, scientific, charitable and research interlibrary center;

to provide and promote cooperative, auxiliary libraries services for one or more educational, charitable, and scientific institutions;

to establish, conduct, and maintain a place or places for the deposit, storage care, delivery and exchange of [library materials] and services with respect thereto, and

[to] circulate and distribute any and all [publications and records] dealing with the [library materials] deposited in said library and available in participating libraries.

This year, we recommitted to those founding principles. Your Governance Task Force and Board adopted a formal **Mission Statement**—the first in CRL’s history—and a set of **Organizational Values** to guide our work.

Mission

The Center for Research Libraries contributes to the preservation and sharing of knowledge by collecting and stewarding the record of human expression in partnership with its members.

To me, this is CRL in its most fundamental form: a working library, built by and for other working libraries. It is our distinct value proposition.

I do not know of another organization with this same combination of breadth, independence, and openness—open to any library that shares our goals, independent from commercial or governmental control, owned and governed by you, our members.

Values I

Stewardship: *We affirm our responsibility in the collective effort to preserve and share the documentary record and cultural heritage, upholding cooperation in this work as essential to the universal human right to participate in cultural life and share knowledge.*

Access: *We strive to improve access to information across the knowledge ecosystem.*

Sustainability: *We are dedicated to cultivating practices and partnerships that ensure the sustainable stewardship of collections, services, and community resources.*

These values articulate how we do that core of our work. They provide a reference point as we make choices, weigh trade-offs, and commit to action. And they reflect what I have heard from you: that CRL must remain grounded in the realities of research libraries.

Because we are a library just like our members, we have a built-in assurance that our investments and initiatives will be practical and relevant. Our identity as a collections and access institution is the fundamental reason CRL can claim credibility.

This is the core identity we are going to build our future on. Over the last two days, we have heard an incredible range of ideas for how CRL can support and amplify our collective work. I have heard dozens more in my conversations with members and staff.

Over the coming year, we will build a strategic plan that gives structure to these ideas, shows clearly where we are investing, and gives you the ability to see their value. And as we do that, we will return—over and over again—to this mission and these values as our touchstone.

But we also have to be honest about the environment we are working in.

In normal times, our foundational value proposition would be enough. This mission statement and these three values would be enough. But these are not normal times. Values are under threat, and normal order is fracturing. And it is the second half of our Values statement that speaks most directly to that.

Part III: Values II & Vision

Earlier, I said I recognized the “caretaker’s dilemma” in CRL—and that reassured me, because it is a problem with solutions. But I also see CRL, and the library sector more broadly, facing a larger dilemma—one that strikes at the core of our societies.

Over the years, I have had the privilege – and I don’t use the word lightly here – the privilege of working on cultural heritage protection with people across the spectrum, from senior ranks of the military and intelligence services to diplomats and policy-makers, law enforcement officers, and experts from our own sector.

It is an axiom in the field of cultural property protection that if you can preserve and protect cultural heritage, you stabilize communities. You signal safety and order. You make it possible to build something lasting.

And the inverse is true. If you want to destabilize a society, if you want to create discord, one of the first things you do is destroy its records and cultural materials.

So, as our societies confront questions of equity, inclusion, and identity—as we reexamine our monuments and our narratives—I have watched with pride, fear, and a measure of hope.

Pride that we are grappling with difficult legacies, and that “we” is not an abstraction: this profession is grappling with our legacies.

Fear, because I know what happens when people feel like their culture is being stripped away. Fear because whether an identity is built on ideas and icons that stand for something true or false, something moral or immoral, people need an identity. When people feel unmoored, they become fertile ground for division and extremism.

And a measure of hope because I believe this moment is a chance to accept our responsibilities and turn them into opportunities.

This repair and rebuilding ahead is a job for education, for study, for dialogue. And the tools of that repair—texts, images, narratives—are our domain.

Libraries and archives are the institutions tasked with preserving the full record—for everyone. We are in a position to bring dialog about who we wish to be into the same place as the record of who we were, who we are now. Libraries are institutions, things that last from generation to generation, uniquely suited to bringing identity and honesty together.

I said earlier that my training is in library science, not political science. I am President of the Center for Research Libraries, nothing else, an organization that exists to care for the record. CRL does not face the challenges of a society working through its identity in the way you, our members, do. We don't have a campus with faculty and students. CRL is not under the direct threats that some of our members face as institutions and as individuals.

I also said it is crucial for CRL to see the world our members see, to be on your side and to live up to our values in a time when values really matter. That's why I think that it's crucial that CRL's value statement extends further than just how to be a good preservation organization, and that we really think about where we are positioning ourselves in the community and what our job is in relationship to you.

Values II

Global: We emphasize the importance of international collaboration, fostering partnerships and work that transcend borders and barriers to advance shared goals in service to our mission.

Community: We are committed to fostering community and facilitating opportunities for learning and growth across disciplines, geographies, languages, and professions.

Integrity: We uphold principles of transparency, consistency, and honesty in all our work, fostering an environment grounded in ethical collaboration.

These values are already being tested. They have been at stake as we sunset the AMPs and transition to the GCCs. They have been at stake as we work with members on financial exigencies, adjust NERL fees, and support colleagues dealing with political factors on their campuses and in their jurisdictions.

Each of those decisions forced us to ask if we are aligned with our values, acting with integrity and foresight. I am grateful for the tests, because real challenges are ahead, and tests like this are how we make living out our values a habit, something ingrained in our organizational culture.

Over these last hundred days—and thinking about the next hundred, and the thousand after that—I have been hearing our mission, vision, and values not just as a framework, but as a call to action.

Vision

We envision a world in which the research library community harnesses collective action and the power of the CRL network to cooperatively build, steward, and share an equitable, accessible, and sustainable scholarly record to advance the creation of knowledge.

I have been thinking about that phrase: “a world in which...” Not as a hope, but as a charge. A responsibility.

The hardest lesson I have learned in my career is this: there are people, and there is weather, and you cannot control either one. They will do things. There are crises you can neither predict nor prevent.

The most comforting lesson? You can always rebuild. And when we rebuild with care, we have the opportunity to build back better.

Off-script: I was struck by some of Heather Joseph's remarks about the role of organizations like SPARC as catalysts in the community. Something I've learned doing preservation work—whether it's mucking out archives or grinding away at large scale change—is that preservation is a career choice that calls for some gallows humor. It's all problems, all the time. It is also a profession where the most successful people I know have learned to take a victory lap. The conservation division party is the best party. I think those two things hang together and that's something worth saying during a moment when there are anxieties and problems aplenty. We are going to confront problems, solve some and not others, and we need to make a point of coming together to celebrate what we achieved. Being part of CRL has to mean being part of a great club, the kind you want to have in your neighborhood, the kind that does the good work and has fun doing that work together.

Part IV: Our Collective Power

Collectively, we have extraordinary resources to build with.

I look across our membership and our network, and I see the people who already are the future of this profession.

You run university presses and publish scholarly journals. You are setting the direction for infrastructure, discovery, data management, and access.

Earlier, I divided CRL's budget by 0.0052—so I know that together, we represent over **\$1.3 billion** in purchasing power. We have real leverage.

And we have long recognized something essential: we are our own customers. Our universities and presses produce many of the works we buy. We build much of the infrastructure we use. That is a base of influence we can coordinate, align, and wield.

And I know you are doing it already. There are projects across our membership that are models for the future. There are processes that are models for good professional practice.

Northwestern has an AI system that creates a natural language interface to its special collections. And they are not alone: you are already launching the future of our work.⁴

⁴ Northwestern University's *Shaping the Conversation: Enriching Collection Access and Use with Generative AI*: <https://collections-and-ai.library.northwestern.edu/>

The University of Alberta is advancing an open infrastructure framework. And they are not alone: you are already transforming the tools of our profession.⁵

The Claremont Colleges turned primary sources into research data with their CLIRWater project. The University of Maryland's LINA initiative is helping libraries understand and meet the information needs of immigrant communities—building trust, not just access.⁶

You are shaping what is possible in scholarship and showing how the library is a distinctive force in the scholarly enterprise, something that stands alongside every other department of the university and a valuable partner at the table with other civil society organizations.

You are doing that through work with your communities that only you can do.

When I look around this room, I see the people who have the ideas and the resources we need in order to build a better future.

I also know that right now, when we talk about resources, the words that come to mind are “less” and “restricted.” You face budget cuts, political headwinds, and mounting constraints. But those pressures do not just constrain us, they also authorize us. Crisis is permission. Scarcity and pressure will force change—but they also give us permission to change.

I hope you feel some of that agency. I hope you claim some of that authority.

And as you do, as you see yourself as an empowered actor, I hope you will look again at CRL and ask what you want from this joint venture. Think of CRL as a corporation in which you hold equity and ask what you want this organization to accomplish for you.

That is the real power of this community.

That is what makes this organization worth building.

Part V: Our Future Together

I hope you've caught some of my confidence and enthusiasm.

I hope you're seeing CRL not just as a service you subscribe to, but as a joint venture—your means of doing the work that ought to be shared across the profession, so that you can focus on what matters most to your communities.

⁵ University of Alberta Open Metadata Sharing Framework: <https://library.ualberta.ca/about/policies/open-metadata-sharing-framework>

⁶ The Claremont Colleges' Western Water Archives and CLIRWater project: <https://westernwaterarchives.org/> and the University of Maryland's Libraries, Integration and New Americans Project (LINA) initiative <https://lina.ischool.umd.edu/>

But I also want to leave you with something more concrete.

I do not have a splashy initiative to launch today, but it is not for lack of ideas and opportunities. Our discussions over the last two days made it clear that we have a rich supply of both.

Talking with you, working with my team, we have already identified so many ways to put CRL's capabilities to work:

- To bring advocacy and collective action deeper into our licensing program—to negotiate the future, not just favorable terms this year, but to signal the market pressure we can bring to shape the next.
- To develop a cooperative network to address cataloging backlogs, aligning expertise with needs across the membership. (In fact, we are running a computer simulation of the cataloging network this summer; a concrete step toward making more of our collective resources discoverable and accessible.)
- To build on our existing tools and long-standing experience—like the PAPR database and the Print Archive Network—to develop the business intelligence needed to move beyond regional, time-bound projects and toward a sustainable, coordinated network across the continent.⁷
- To invest in open infrastructure—like our open-source TIND ILS—so every dollar you put into CRL delivers a second-order benefit: strengthening systems the whole profession relies on.
- To put our collection development principles into action—across every format, genre, and geography, to advance global access to information.
- To be a safe harbor—so the questions of “will it be here?” and “can it be saved?” are off the table, and you can focus on putting collections into action.
- To create opportunities for members to connect, through work that has real impact—and that offers real, meaningful professional growth.

To do all of this, we are building a strategic plan for the year ahead—grounded in your perspectives, shaped by your needs, informed by our values, and designed to alleviate burdens through shared solutions to real problems.

Off script: Throughout the meeting we talked about how to make sure that there are real solutions to those problems, and we always had that conversation in terms of the value proposition of CRL and of all our collective

⁷ For more information about CRL's work in shared print: <https://www.crl.edu/shared-print>

action. I'm grateful to a few of our panelists who framed this in terms of asking "if we didn't have this, what would it cost us to buy it, what would it cost us to build this on our own or all over again?" For most of our members, we invest between 15-30 times their dues into collection acquisitions and digitization projects. That gets even more valuable if your staff participate in the committees that take a role in shaping our investments in the collections. The usage stats for CRL loans to your institution in any given week may be one (1), but that loan may be something that would cost your library thousands of dollars to buy, or that would otherwise have been a dead end to someone's research. CRL is less than the cost of full-time staff member and gets you access to an incredible well of resources and knowledge, at CRL and across our membership, people who organize shared print and negotiate for the resources you need on the terms you want.

(N.B. average dues are \$35,000 and our highest rate, currently \$78,000, slips in under the ALA median non-supervisory university librarian salary of \$63,000 plus a 25-35% benefit rate, or \$78,750–85,000.)

Conclusion

Let me leave you with two thoughts.

First: Libraries are how we make a gift of the past to the present.

That cycle of care strengthens communities and enriches lives.

What we do matters. Continuity of knowledge and culture is not a luxury for settled times—it is the foundation of society.

And second: We get to be responsible for it.

We are the people, in this place and time, who decide how it will be done.

There is no reason the future should not look back at the research library community of the late 2020s and say: *"That was extraordinary. They rewrote the script. They changed the way it's done."*

I know many of you. I know your intelligence, your creativity, your capability.

And I know that so often, the only thing holding you back is that something urgent crowded out something important, or something necessary stole time from something revolutionary.

CRL is here to be on your side.

CRL extends the value of your resources: next year, we will invest over 1.2 million dollars in collections and access projects: 30 times the average member's dues.

Our licensing team coordinates the talent and market power of our member network to obtain some of the best pricing and rate caps in the sector.

CRL is here to clear obstacles, to share the work, to connect the advocates, and to sustain the resources we need to fulfill our mission and our purpose.

This organization has a great future. Every member who joins in this incredible project gives us more fuel to fly. ***I am glad you are part of it.***