

Communicating Mission: An Analysis of Academic Library Web Sites

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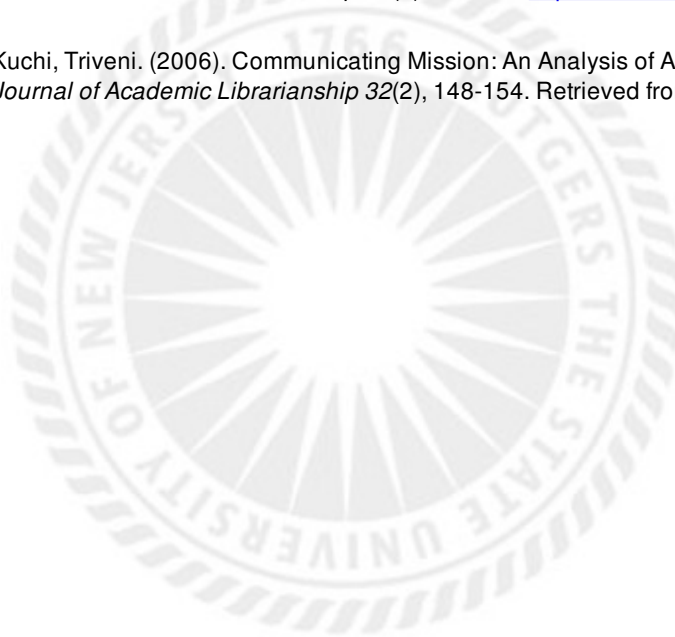
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Author Details:

Triveni Kuchi
Social Sciences/Instructional Services Librarian
Rutgers University Libraries
Kilmer Library
75 Avenue E
Piscataway, New Jersey –08901
USA

T: 732-445-5733, #2

F: 732-445-3472

Email: kuchi@rci.rutgers.edu

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Abstract

As libraries experience changes in their environment, communicating to stakeholders about the changes as well as the library's mission, strategies and responses to the changes is critical. Such communication serves well to inform how the change management integrates with the mission of the library so that stakeholders have a shared understanding of the changes taking place, as well as to build and develop their support and confidence in the organization. This study discusses findings of an exploratory analysis in which one hundred and eleven Association of Research Libraries (ARL) Web sites were surveyed to gain insights into academic library's current practices of communicating the library mission.

Introduction

Rapid and unprecedented changes, driven by accelerated growth in Information and Communication Technologies (ICTs) as well as intense competition from increasingly popular and conveniently available information sources from the World Wide Web, have dramatically altered the information landscape and the functioning of libraries.¹ Increasingly users have been accessing popular search engines such as Google and Google Scholar to find information directly from the Internet rather than the library. Such a competitive trend has created an urgency for libraries to seek new and creative strategies to attract users and satisfy their information needs. As a response to these environmental changes, libraries have been adopting new technologies, adjusting and accommodating existing resources as well as seeking new ones.² Implementing these initiatives require substantial support as well as resources from the stakeholders of the library. Communicating the library mission to stakeholders places new or modified programs in a better perspective. It makes the introduction and management of programs easier and effective. Such communication practices allow for a shared understanding of the library's changing environment among stakeholders. "Changes make more sense in context, and without that context misunderstanding is almost inevitable."³ Clarifying and communicating the mission assures the library's constituencies about why it is doing what it does;

and it gives rationale, meaning and structure to the library's decisions and actions.

Libraries need to communicate mission to their stakeholders in such a way that the stakeholders begin to recognize the library mission more easily and become familiar with it. Traditionally, they have used a number of communication channels such as annual reports, information brochures, newsletters, or direct communication from leadership and so on to convey the library's mission.⁴

During the last decade, libraries have been increasingly using Web sites as a communication channel for a variety of purposes. In addition to displaying information about library services, hours and locations on the Web site, more information resources and services are being offered online, such as full-text journals databases, virtual reference services, and so on. Libraries are facilitating the sharing of resources and products to a much wider audience on the Web. The Web site is no longer regarded as a competitive edge for organizations, but a de facto standard for communication of information.⁵ The library Web site clearly has the potential to become a viable channel for disseminating the mission of the library.

In view of the forceful rationale for communicating mission as well as the popularity of presenting information and services online and the feasibility of reaching out to stakeholders via the Web site, it is reasonable to expect the

library mission statement to be available on the library Web site. This study explores the current practices of academic libraries for communicating mission statements via their Web sites. It examines the presence of mission statement on Web sites across libraries in order to gain a better understanding of the worth libraries have assigned to the communication of mission to their stakeholders.

Discussion of Mission Statements in the Library Literature

There is ample coverage in library literature on the value and use of mission statements as well as recognition of the importance of communicating mission to stakeholders. Having a mission statement is regarded as a must for libraries (Bangert 1997; Brophy 1991 and 2000; Dubberly 1983; Hardesty, Hastreiter, and Henderson 1988; Hartzell 2002; Hastreiter and Henderson 1999; Hernon and Altman 1998; Matthews 2004; Turock and Pedolsky 1992; and Wallace, 2004).⁶ Hardesty, Hastreiter and Henderson point out that during times of change and threat to the traditional support or funding from the parent institutions, mission statements play an important role.⁷ Mission statement serves as a framework for evaluation of library services and user satisfaction which, in turn, help libraries manage changes in their environment more efficiently.⁸ According to Hardesty, Hastreiter and Henderson, "it [mission statement] can provide a conceptual framework for the distinctive purposes of the college library and express to internal and external constituencies what the library aspires to achieve in

response to the support and expectations of the college. Librarians, classroom faculty, and academic administration, alike, need a sense of direction, a frame of reference for activities, and a means by which to evaluate change and progress for the college library." ⁹ Hartzell stresses the danger of ignoring the mission statement, especially since it is used by library evaluators to gauge performance and continue funding for library programs.¹⁰ An increasing use of mission statement by libraries is evident from the 1999 study by Hastreiter and Henderson who found that there was almost a 30% increase in the creation and development of mission statements by college libraries since 1985.¹¹

In addition, several writers point out the need and significance of communicating library mission to stakeholders. Dubberly states that conveying mission to all the constituencies will ensure accountability and effectiveness of the library as well as increase stakeholder confidence in the library.¹² Hastreiter and Henderson recommend that the leadership within libraries needs to communicate the significance of mission and its use for the library to be able to accomplish higher efficiency and performance.¹³ Bangert analyzes 58 library mission statements of college and university libraries and concludes that "a critical role for academic librarians is to more effectively define, synthesize, and communicate library purpose and vision in the context of institutional mission and culture."¹⁴ Brophy, in his study of the content of mission statements of U.K. academic libraries, states that "the mission statement is a representative of the interests of

the 'coalition' that is, all those that have a legitimate interest in the organization...there is a very strong argument that much of the value of the mission statement lies in the process by which it is articulated." ¹⁵

Methodology

This exploratory study provides a snapshot analysis of communication of mission statements on library Web sites covering 111 Association of Research Libraries (ARL) from data collected during February-March 2004. The analysis was conducted to gain insights into the attitudes of libraries towards communicating mission to their stakeholders. Library Web sites were examined for the presence or absence as well as location of mission statements. In addition, data was also collected to analyze how mission was communicated to library stakeholders via the Web site. In order to be consistent with the missions and type of stakeholders of academic libraries, non-university library Web sites (8% of ARL member libraries) such as public, state, institutional or corporate library Web sites were not included in the study. In addition, non-English library Web sites and branch or department library Web sites were excluded for the purposes of this study. The library's main or central Web site was used as the field of observation. Observations of location as well as paths to the mission on library Web sites provided the perspective of access to mission as the libraries intended them to be seen.

Each library web site's main page was scanned for the presence of link or content of mission statement. The perspective for scanning the library Web sites was that of a user or visitor looking for mission statements from the library Web sites. The main page was browsed by checking all the menus for a link to the mission statement. If a link on the main page of the Web site connected to the text of the mission statement, it was regarded to be a direct link. When no direct link on the main page was found, the Web site menus and pages were browsed and searched for mission. The links that eventually located the mission statement after a few clicks from the menu listing or other options on the main page were regarded to be indirect links. If, however, such browsing effort did not yield access to the mission statement, the Web site was searched using the search engine. The search was conducted using the word *mission* or any term analogous to *mission* such as *purpose, vision, goals, values, and strategic or long-range plans*. The links pointing to the mission from the search results were also regarded as indirect links.

The study further analyzed the indirect links that connected to mission statements from common components of the library Web site. The web site components that indirectly linked to the mission were analyzed in terms of: *About Us, Administration, Services* and *Collections* categories. If a link did not fit into these categories, it was placed in the *Miscellaneous* category. In addition,

Web pages or sections of the library Web site that were specifically designated for stakeholder groups were checked for the presence of mission. Academic library stakeholders typically include students; faculty and staff members; university administration; donors or friends of library; state, regional and national library partners, associations and collaborators. For the purposes of this study library stakeholders were grouped as *Users, Employees, Donors/Friends, and Partners/ Collaborators*, which broadly represented the key or strategic constituents of the library.¹⁶

Findings and Discussion

An overall count of presence of mission statements on library Web sites indicates that 78% of ARL libraries studied have a mission statement on their Web sites. This proportion reflects the general recognition by libraries that the mission is an important piece of information that deserves to be made available on the library Web site. The main page of the library's Web site is the general entry point to the Web site.¹⁷ Web designers include only those items that help portray first impressions in the best possible manner on this page.¹⁸ The location of the mission statement on the library main page symbolizes the priority or value libraries assign for communicating purpose of their organization. Considering that space on the main page is limited and has highly competing demands, it was

generally not expected that libraries would place the full content of mission statement on the main page. However, libraries have ample opportunities of drawing attention to the mission by presenting it, for instance, as a clickable fragment or some sort of a creative message that links to the mission detail elsewhere on the library Web site. But, in fact, none of the ARL libraries included any content of the mission statement on their main page.

Communication of Mission using direct or indirect links on library Web sites

Analyzing pathways to the mission statement on library Web sites in the form of direct and indirect links allows us to figure out the manner in which libraries chose to communicate their mission. The positioning and directness of access from the main page signifies the value assigned to the mission. A direct link to mission is one which points the user or visitor directly from the main page to the content of the mission statement. Such a link increases the visibility of mission statement to Web site users. Figure 1 refers to the presence of direct versus indirect links to mission statements on ARL library Web sites. It indicates that only 1% of ARL libraries directly linked to mission statements from the main page of the library Web site. One can understand that by placing the content of the mission on the front page, libraries would have to use up premium space in the main doorway to the library's Web site. However, almost none of the libraries included the mission of the library even as a link on the main page. The library

mission just did not find a place for itself on the main page beside the information and service related links such as Hours, Library Catalog, Databases and so on.

[Figure 1 about here...]

In the absence of an apparent link to the mission on the main page of the library Web site, an indirect path to the mission statement was explored. An indirect path is a sequence of links leading to the mission after following a series of navigational choices starting from the main page. If browsing the Web site did not yield a link to mission, the library Web site search engine was used. About 94% of ARL libraries had a suitable search facility on their library Web site. Mission statements were found using the search engine on a little above three-quarters of these library Web sites. This indicates that even if a high proportion of search engines were present among the library Web sites, some of them did not retrieve the mission statement. There can be many reasons why certain pieces of information are left out of the search results. Regardless, libraries would be better off placing the mission in multiple locations and among more visible and generally expected locations on the Web site so that such information is amenable for use.

The data on indirect links show that almost all of the ARL libraries that had mission statements, placed them among common library Web site components such as *About Us*, *Administration*, *Services and Collections* (figure. 2). The data also indicates that the *About Us* section was one of the primary Web components from which the mission statement originated. *About the Library*, *Library Information*, *Information*, and *Library News* were regarded as sections equivalent to *About us* for the purposes of this study. Conventionally, Web design layouts have regarded the *About Us* category or section of the Web site to be the location where the organization places information about itself. The information items found in the *About Us* section of library Web sites generally included brief description about the library or library system, descriptions of branch library highlights, annual reports, strategic or long range plans, library facts and statistics, new services or project information and so on. Nearly three-quarters of the libraries with indirect links to mission connected to the mission statement through the *About Us* section. Clearly, a large majority of libraries seem to regard mission to be an element of information to be placed on pages that informed about their organization.

[Figure 2 about here]

Another Web site component from which mission statement originated was the *Administration* category. Typically, the administration or management of libraries

is primarily responsible for creating mission, vision and goals of the library, although a number of librarians as well as staff from different departments of the library participate in the process. Given that responsibilities of formulating strategies are associated with administration or management of libraries, it is reasonable to expect to find the mission statement from pages relating to these departments. The category for *Administration* in this study included pages that that were listed as *Management, Dean's Office, Library administration, or University Librarian's Office*. Typically, these pages presented items such as library annual reports, letter or message from University librarian/Dean, library statistics and so on. Data shows that, although *Administration* category was the next largest Web component from which mission statement was linked, it represented only 7% of all indirect links. The small proportion of mission indicates that libraries did not think mission statement belonged to the administration pages.

The *Services* section was the next Web site component noted to have links to the mission statement. This section is regarded as an important component on library Web sites, in that it presents useful information and links about access to library resources. Since this information is largely oriented towards the needs of users and visitors of the library, the library has the opportunity of communicating to its constituencies the connections between services offered and the overall organizational purpose. However, links to the mission presence from this Web

component was also only 2%. The library Web sites limited the *Services* section items mainly to policy information such as general procedures for access and use of library materials, ettiquette, reference policies and other user services.

During the analysis *Collections* emerged as another Web component with links to the mission statement. Libraries regard *Collections* to be a major asset as it forms a fundamental basis on which they carry out operations. A library's effectiveness is based on adequacy, quality, utility and uniqueness of resources offered to its users and visitors. The *Collections* pages of the library Web site provide libraries with a helpful facility to display the volume and variety of their resources. It is also an appropriate place for informing users and visitors about the rationale behind the library's collection. Given that *Collections*, as a function and asset, indispensably ties up with the broader aims of the library, makes this Web section a useful avenue to place the mission statement. As expected, data from Web site observations indicate that the *Collections* pages typically carried information about library's books, journals and other materials. However, only 1% of the libraries linked to mission statement from these pages. Evidently mission was not considered to be suitable content for the *Collections* pages on library Web sites.

The *Miscellaneous* category included about 16% of the libraries that showed presence of mission statements, but relating the mission link to any of the

common Web site components was not feasible. The mission statements for these libraries were visible on a list of search results from the Web site's search, but were mostly disconnected from the main Web site of the library. In many cases, the mission appeared as part of the text of documents such as working documents, long-range plans, annual reports, guides and other documents (sometimes included within appendices). While searching from the main library Web site's search engine, on a few occasions, links to the mission statements were not connected to any of the Web pages or sections on the main library Web site. In these cases, the mission of the library were found to be present within the library's intranet. Some of the library intranets were noted to have restricted access. Although the search results pointed to the presence of mission on the intranet site, the mission statement was inaccessible from the main library Web site.¹⁹ The mission statements of libraries in the *Miscellaneous* category largely appeared to be hidden somewhere as part of other documents or within intranets meant for the library's internal communication. Libraries in this category did not see the need to communicate the mission of the library as separate link or text within the logical structure of their main library Web site.

Communication of mission to Stakeholders on Library Web sites

The success or failure of libraries depends to a large extent on stakeholders who influence and are influenced by the library's goals and programs. Keeping

mission as a frame of reference increases possibilities of consensus and better understanding between libraries and their stakeholders on decisions taken for conducting library operations. This approach allows libraries to improve their chances of reducing conflict arising from competing choices of programs as well as gaining stakeholder support for building resources, developing and implementing programs.

Data was gathered with respect to four representative stakeholder groups - *Users, Employees, Donors/Friends, Partners/Collaborators* to learn how mission was conveyed to them via the library Web sites. Web pages or sections dedicated specifically to these stakeholder groups were examined for the purposes of analysis. Figure 3 summarizes the presence of stakeholder Web pages on library Web sites and the availability of mission statement from these stakeholder pages.

[Figure 3 about here]

One of the important stakeholders of libraries is the *Users* group. This group comprises students, university faculty and staff, and visitors. Libraries fundamentally depend on *Users* for their survival, growth and success. They offer new products and services as well as prioritize existing programs based on the needs and interests of the *Users*. This *User*-orientation is well reflected in the data on library Web sites. About three-quarters of the ARL libraries were noted

to have designated their Web pages specifically for *Users*. These Web pages included information relevant for *Users* such as borrowing policies, library research tutorials, and so on. Although many libraries had a Web page dedicated to the *Users* group on their Web site, a little less than 5% of them displayed contents or provided a link to the mission from these *User*-specific pages. It is interesting to note that even though libraries seem to regard communicating to the *Users* important enough, they did not deem it necessary to include mission on the *Users* pages.

Employees is another critical stakeholder group on whom libraries rely for fulfilling the objectives of the organization. The mission is meant to guide, inspire and motivate employees of the organization to conduct their operations smoothly and successfully. One would expect to find a lot of libraries communicating to their employees via their Web site in this regard. In fact, however, only 27% of ARL libraries had Web pages for employees or staff. Of these libraries, close to a third of the libraries linked to the library's mission statement. Even though the libraries had fewer *Employees* pages as compared to *Users* and *Donors/Friends* pages, it is worthwhile to note that proportionately a greater number of libraries communicated mission via the *Employees* pages than any of the stakeholder group pages. Evidently, more libraries seem to think that mission needs to be communicated to the employees within the organization than to the external stakeholders.

Libraries often depend on gifts, donations and other endowments to supplement the funding of their activities. It is essential that libraries maintain a channel of communication with *Donors/Friends* group on matters of existing and prospective projects, services and resources. Figure 3 shows that a little less than three-quarters of ARL library Web sites created Web pages for *Donors/Friends* of the libraries, indicating that libraries attached almost as much importance to this stakeholder group as the *Users* group for communicating via the Web. The Web pages for *Donors/Friends* on the library Web site is an ideal channel for communicating mission and other information to keep the *Donors/Friends* engaged and attracted to the library's purpose and work. Including the mission of the library within these pages is appropriate as it clarifies what prospective *Donors/Friends* can expect from the library, should they invest their resources or efforts in it. One would assume these pages to be a suitable avenue for libraries to present their mission. However, this study found that despite the large number of *Donors/Friends* pages among library Web sites, only 11% of the libraries offered links or content of mission from the *Donors/Friends* pages.

Partners/Collaborators is another critical stakeholder group, which teams with libraries for funding, sharing or providing mutually advantageous resources that support activities and services to users. This group includes schools and departments in the university, other libraries on campus or in the state, region or

the nation as a whole, associations of libraries, vendors and aggregators of databases, and so on. Collaborative projects are fundamental for the library to sustain, develop and expand its activities. Such projects or activities, in turn, rely on how well the libraries communicate their mission, strategic direction and progress among existing and prospective partners and collaborators. Regardless of this rationale, facts indicate that less than 5% of the libraries under study had a Web page specifically designated for *Partners/Collaborators* (figure 3). Furthermore, communication of mission by academic libraries to this vital stakeholder group via their web site was virtually absent.

Conclusion

During times of turbulence in a library's environment due to constant changes in information technology and increasing competition, communication of purpose of the organization to stakeholders becomes an essential process for managing change efficiently. Several studies about libraries have shown the significance of having and communicating mission for the organization, but those examining extent and quality of such communication are practically non-existent.

Addressing the communication perspective, this study attempted to explore the practices of libraries communicating mission on their Web sites.

The study showed that many libraries were placing the mission statement on their Web site. However, the location of the mission as well as the pattern in which mission was communicated to the library stakeholders appeared to be far from effective. Almost none of the ARL libraries under study placed their mission among the more visible parts of the Web site. The lack of direct mission link on main pages is compensated to some extent by the presence of a large number of indirect links to mission on library Web sites, especially from the *About Us* Web component or section. The study also showed that academic libraries have not targeted communication of mission well to stakeholders via the Web pages. Despite a high percentage of Web pages for *Users* and *Donors/Friends* categories, mission was barely communicated from these pages. This fact seems to imply that contextual significance was not relevant in placing the mission on these stakeholder pages of the Web site.

Libraries have immense scope for improvement in the manner of communication of mission on their Web sites. Recognizing the Web site as a powerful communication channel, libraries should, at a minimum, accommodate space for linking to the mission from the main page. Given the non-linearity of Web site design, it is prudent to facilitate multiple access paths to mission from Web sections such as library information pages and specific target pages for stakeholders. It is preferable to place the mission statement as a persistent link in menus that are constantly visible or are "always on top" of any page being

browsed. User evaluation of such links can provide libraries with further feedback of the effectiveness or success of communication. Libraries should take advantage of the Web site by using creative and unique ways to communicate library's purposefulness and vision during times of constant change and competition. Planning communication of mission and targeting stakeholders with a message that they understand can help libraries handle changes in their environment effectively. As Quirke states, "In a... turbulent environment, people need a greater understanding of the context, why things are the way they are now. The context shifts, different parts of the organization put a different backdrop behind words and actions, interpretations vary and the chance of confusion multiplies."²⁰ Communicating library mission, especially to stakeholders to ensure their continued participation, trust and confidence with the library's programs and activities is critical for libraries.

The objective of this study was to gather the depth and patterns of communication of mission on a potent channel as the Web site to gain insights about the attitudes of academic libraries towards the use of mission. The study is limited by its snapshot analysis of observations that are likely to be time-bound as library Web sites continue to evolve. Regardless, this approach of assessing the place utility of the library's mission within the library Web site is a valid first step. Employing a longitudinal analysis of data at different points of time can overcome the static limitation of this study. The implications of this study also

seem to broadly apply to libraries such as public, special and others; therefore, it would be worthwhile to study communication of mission by non-academic libraries. Conducting surveys or interviews with libraries can be a valuable approach to understand the library's culture of communicating mission. This will help us learn about the physical presence as well as responsibilities relating to the use of mission statement within the library. Further, mission statement is one instance of strategy type of information. Other avenues for research include finding ways how libraries can benefit from communication of other such strategic type of information. Findings from such research will foster understanding of library's culture of communicating strategy among its stakeholders.

Notes and References

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7. Hardesty, Hastreiter and Henderson, "Development of College..." p. 25.

8. Hernon and Altman, "Your Mission should you choose to accept..." pp. 28-29.

9. Hardesty, Hastreiter and Henderson, "Development of College..." p.25.

10. Hartzell, "Promises You Can't Keep," p.31.

11. Hastreiter and Henderson, *Mission Statements for...* p. 3.

12. Dubberly, "Why you must know..." p.89.

13. Hastreiter and Henderson, *Mission Statements for...* p. 3.

14. Bangert, "Thinking Boldly!..." pp. 14-15.

15. Brophy, "The Mission of the Academic..." p.138 and p.140.

16. For a thorough stakeholder analysis, see Bryson (1995) and Freeman (1984). John M. Bryson, *Strategic Planning for Public and Nonprofit Organizations: A Guide To Strengthening And Sustaining Organizational Achievement*, 3rd edition. (San Francisco, California: Jossey-Bass Publishers, 1995); Edward R. Freeman, *Strategic Management: A stakeholder approach* (Boston, Mass.: University of Minnesota. Pitman, 1984).
17. The main page of a library Web site is considered to be the first page or home page of the Web site.
18. For instance see: Louis Rosenfield and Peter Morville, *Information Architecture for the World Wide Web* (O’Rielly, Sebastopol, California, 1998); Jan H. Spridakis, “Guidelines for Authoring Comprehensible Web pages and Evaluating their Success,” *Technical Communication* 47 (August 2000): 359-383; Patrick Lynch and Sarah Horton, *Web Style Guide Basic Design Principles for Creating Web Sites* (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1999).
19. For the purposes of analysis, the study granted the benefit of doubt to such libraries as having the presence of mission on their library Web sites.
20. Quirke, *Communicating Corporate...* p.92.

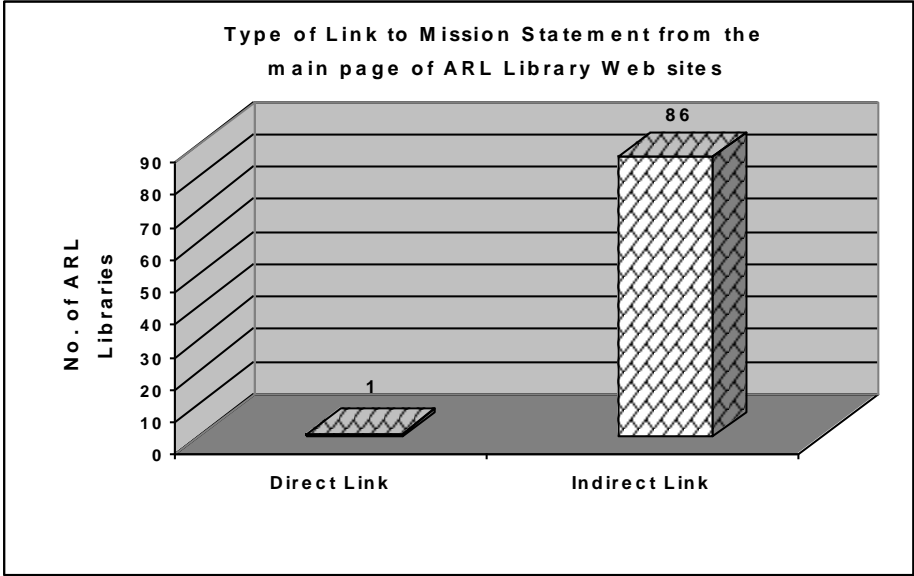


Figure 1: Direct and Indirect link to Mission on ARL Library Web sites

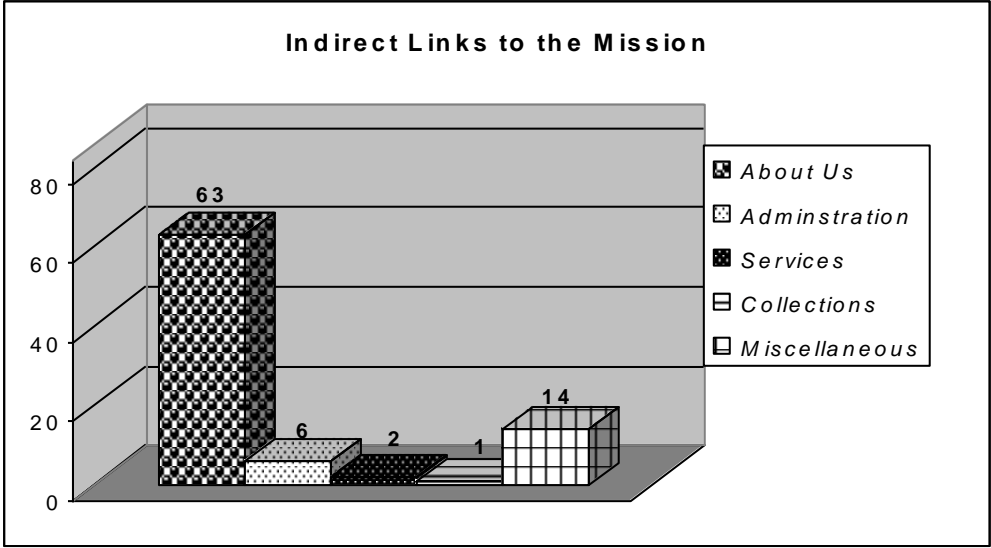


Figure 2. Indirect Links to the mission from Web components or sections on ARL Library Web sites

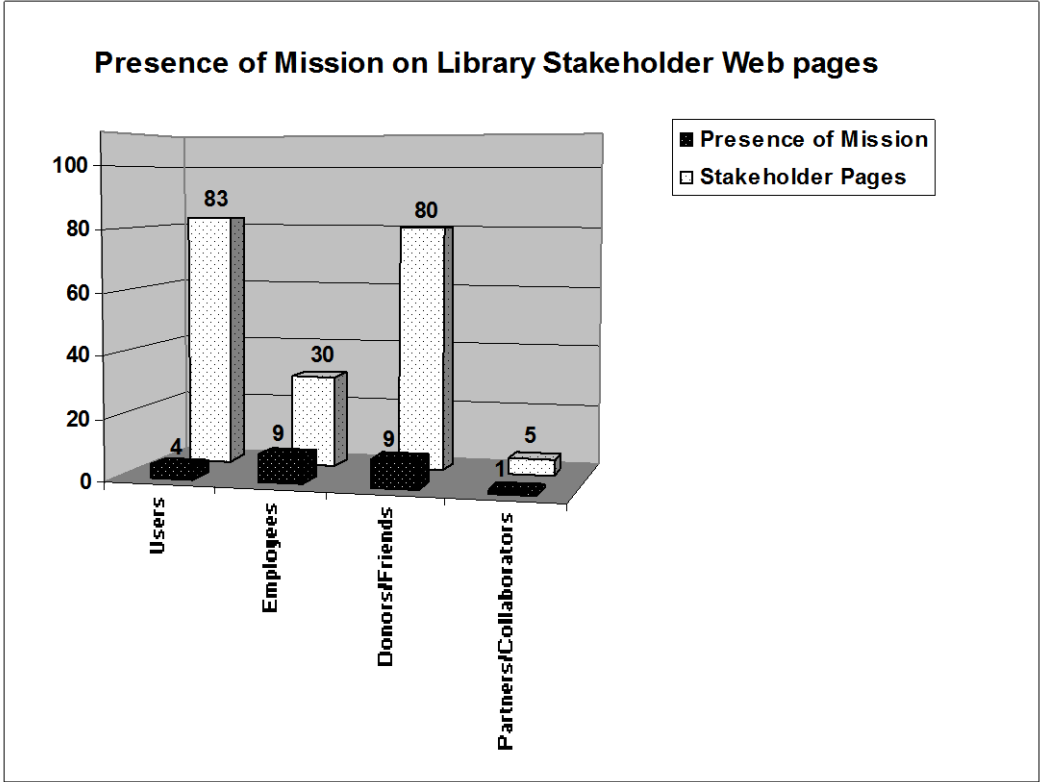


Figure 3: Links to Mission from Stakeholder Web pages or sections on ARL Library Web sites.