Introduction

The ARL-OCLC Strategic Issues Forum, held in Keystone, Colorado in September 1999 was memorable for two reasons: the development of the Keystone Principles and the first discussions of the potential of portals in research libraries. Participants at the Strategic Issues Forum agreed that libraries were in danger of abandoning their constituencies to commercial information services in the Web environment. The library Web presence was not (and is still not) an acceptable general entry point to the larger range of Web resources. Participants concluded that it was necessary to increase the research library presence on the Web by advancing the concept of a “library.org.”

Jerry Campbell, Chief Information Officer and Dean of University Libraries, University of Southern California, advanced that idea in his May 2000 white paper prepared for discussion by the ARL membership at their May 2000 meeting. Campbell’s paper asked the ARL membership to consider what role the association should play in portal development for the scholarly community. He suggested that ARL seriously pursue the feasibility of developing a “library.org” Web presence. He argued for a collaborative partnership approach, and asserted that research librarians can create a Scholars Portal better than anyone else. Dr. Campbell was the first to articulate some of the key features and functionality of a scholars portal. He suggested that the portal should include high quality content, be based on standards, search across multiple and disparate databases, offer a variety of supporting tools, offer enhanced supporting services such as digital reference, and have the capability of integrating electronic thesauri. Dr. Campbell asserted that this portal was “the place to start for anyone seeking academically sound information.”

The ARL Scholars Portal Working Group

In early 2000 the ARL Board of Directors established a small working group to think through and recommend a practical vision for a scholars portal and a possible ARL role in developing such a proposal. Jerry
Campbell was appointed chair of the ARL Scholars Portal Working Group. Early in its deliberations, the working group established two cornerstone principles. First, access to disparate electronic resources and services can be improved through integration, both within a single institution and among multiple institutions. Second, efforts to effect such integration should leverage work already being carried out in ARL libraries rather than requiring new work of those libraries.

The Scholars Portal Vision
The scholars portal vision supports at least five key features. First, users will be able to discover resources through the discovery tool. Users will be able to capture content or information about content through the use of harvesting and delivery tools. Third, users will be able to manipulate content by the use of text-processing and citation-management tools. Fourth, users will be able to distribute content via contribution and publication tools. Finally, users will be able to consult with others in the electronic scholarly communities via access to virtual reference services or lists and chat services.

A Super Discovery Tool
Recognizing that the range of features and services will be required to realize the vision articulated by the Scholars Portal Working Group, the working group agreed that the cross-platform searching was the critical first step. The working group identified a number of diverse targets for searching. They include the local online catalog and other library's online catalogs, vetted Web sites, locally licensed full-text and abstracting and indexing databases, public domain or publicly accessible abstracting and indexing services, finding aids for special collections and archives, and digitized material owned locally or by another library, museum, or archive. Recognizing that the scholars portal should offer a range of supporting services and tools, the working group narrowed its focus to the development of specifications (conceptual, functional, and technical) for a super discovery tool with the understanding that the other functions would not be possible without robust discovery tool.

At first the working group assumed that such a tool did not exist, but the working group also recognized that ARL as an organization would not be in a position to develop the tool itself. The working group anticipated contracting with a software developer to build the tool, but wanted to undertake an environmental scan of portal products before it embarked down a long developmental path.

Environmental Scan
During spring 2001, the working group made a decision not to issue a formal request for proposal (RFP) or request for information (RFI) as it was felt that the development, issuance, and review of responses to an RFP or RFI would slow down the ambitious timeline set by the working group. Instead, the working group developed a list of key features it felt was required or highly desirable in the discovery tool of a portal, and included some other features of a portal. That list was used in the working group's environmental scan, and list of features was enhanced during the several months of the environmental scan. (The list has not been updated since it was completed in May 2001.)

During these early discussions, the working group undertook an environment scan and identified over 40 potential portal products. Having identified a core list of key features of the discovery tool, such as the ability to search library catalogs and the free Web, the list of products was narrowed considerably. Many portal products were aimed at organizing internal records and/or searching only Web resources. The working group was also looking for a company that was ready and willing to engage in a project rather than an organization wanting to develop or co-develop a product. Several potential collaborators were dismissed because the working group felt that they were not in a position to work in a collaborative environment with research libraries or were overextended in their current marketplace. Based on the scan, the working group selected Fretwell-Dowling (FD) because the working group believed the FD product suite included in the project—ZPORTAL, Z2Web, OpenLinking2, and Z'MBOL—include many of the key features identified by the working group. Also important in the selection was the readiness and experience of FD to collaborate on advancing the priorities of the project.

Launching the Scholars Portal Project
The Scholars Portal Project seeks to provide tools for an academic community to have a single point of access on the Web to find high-quality information re-
The collaboration with FD aims to demonstrate the viability of the Scholars Portal vision with one vendor’s products. Even as the Scholars Portal Project is launched, other ARL members are working on similar projects with other vendors. The collaboration with FD is not an ARL endorsement of FD or its products.

**Tracking Portal Activities in Research Libraries**

The Scholars Portal Project is one of several initiatives undertaken by the member leaders. In February 2002, ARL surveyed its members on the state of portal implementations. The results were disseminated in May 2002. The Scholars Portal Working Group issued its final report, and the Portal Application Working Group established to track portal activities. This working group is updating the February 2002 survey and undertaking detailed conversations with libraries reporting that they have resource integration tools. The results of that survey are expected in late spring.

**Conclusion**

Like other portal initiatives, the Scholars Portal Project seeks the development of a suite of Web-based tools and supporting services that will connect the higher education community as directly as possible with high quality information. Project participants are confident that these tools and services will permit users to perform integrated searches, access a range of high quality information, and have seamless access to digital reference and interlibrary loan/document delivery services. Project participants also see real potential for strong collaboration among collection managers and others who select Web resources and the exposing of locally digitized collections to the wider research community. Finally, project participants expect to obtain aggregated usage data on the range of information resources targeted and in ways that have not been possible to this point.