



The Benefits of Local Involvement: Professional Development through State and Regional Library Associations

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Abstract

In tight fiscal times, travel expenses add up fast and can make it seem impossible to attend conferences and continue one's professional development after obtaining the MLS. There are many practical benefits to be gained from focusing on involvement in local and regional conferences and organizations. Not only do these organizations offer greater opportunities for leadership and mentoring but also for networking with professionals who face similar issues and concerns with local funding.

Keywords: academic libraries, professional development, networking, regional library associations, state library associations, cost savings, mentoring

Introduction

In the current economic landscape, professional development can seem like an overwhelming task. The expense of travel, association membership dues, conference registration fees, and lodging quickly mount. However, most librarians want to share their knowledge, learn new skills, and hone those they already possess, and many academic librarians must participate in professional service and development to meet the promotion and or tenure requirements of their university. There are multiple cost-effective methods of expanding upon one's education after the MLS, such as remaining current on professional literature, publishing research papers, taking free classes or workshops online, or engaging on social media with other librarians (Harris, 2011, p. 33).

But what if a librarian wants to interact in person with others in the field? The American Library Association's annual conference remains the most attended event for librarians. At the conferences in 2013 and 2014, there were 20,000 and 13,000 attendees, respectively; during that same time period, the midwinter meetings each had 6,500 and 8,000 participants (American Library Association, 2014). Many librarians may view these conferences "as the primary or only opportunities for learning" and meeting others in the profession face-to-face (Blakiston, 2011, p. 729). However, participating in these events is quite costly. A more affordable method of professional development is attending state and regional library conferences. Indeed, there are many advantages to getting involved in local library associations or local and regional chapters of national and international library associations. Not only do these organizations offer opportunities for continual learning, leadership, and mentoring but also for networking with professionals who deal with similar issues and concerns in terms of local funding and availability of technology.

Local, State, and Regional Library Associations

Every state in the U.S. has a chapter of the American Library Association (ALA), and many also have Association of College & Research Libraries (ACRL) chapters and Special Library Association (SLA) chapters. A simple web search will reveal the nearest local library associations or chapters as well as any pertinent information about conferences or skill building workshops available to members. However, there is a middle ground between the state library association and its national parent—regional library associations. These associations provide

a happy medium between the intimacy of a local organization and the vast exposure to new perspectives at the national level. Additionally, regional associations move from state to state within their region and sometimes even combine with the state library conference. Thus, every few years, this gives librarians from each of those states the opportunity to attend a regional conference for about the same price as a state conference.

A few regional library associations:

- Mountain Plains Library Association (MPLA): <http://www.mpla.us>.
- Pacific Northwest Library Association (PNLA): <http://www.pnla.org>.
- New England Library Association (NELA): <http://www.nelib.org>.
- Southeastern Library Association (SELA): <http://www.selaonline.org>.

There are other library groups one can become involved in that are not affiliated with ALA, ACRL, SLA, or any other national library organization, such as the California Conference on Library Instruction or the Border Regional Library Association which encompasses parts of Texas, New Mexico, and Chihuahua, Mexico.

Investigating the library associations in one's area can be well worth a librarian's time and energy. There may be committees or sections that offer particular appeal. Reading through an organization's charter and bylaws will reveal which is the best fit for the librarian's professional goals.

Cost-Saving Measures

Membership Dues

In recent years, quite a few state and regional library associations have moved to a graduated fee schedule. In this system, membership dues are based on a librarian's annual salary; therefore, those who make less, pay less. But what does that actually mean when measured against the fees of a national organization? Currently, annual dues for SLA are \$200 for full membership for those making \$75,000 or more per year, and \$185 per year for those making between \$35,000 and \$74,999 per year. That membership fee includes the dues for one local chapter and one division as well. As demonstrated below, for even the least expensive local chapter of ALA and the national dues together, a member would pay \$200 total or more annually.

For ALA, annual dues are \$135 for regular membership and \$47 for those making less than \$30,000 per year. The mean income for a librarian in the U.S. is \$57,550, so most librarians would pay at the higher dues level (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2013). Taking the national average for salaries and using it to look at levels of state and regional fees, we find that local options are usually 25-50% less expensive.

Compare the ALA national dues to a few chapters:

- American Library Association: \$135.
- Louisiana Library Association: \$94.
- Kansas Library Association: \$85.
- Nevada Library Association: \$70.
- Southeastern Library Association: \$65.

However, states such as California, Michigan, and New York—with a high cost of living overall—have dues which are close to or even higher than those of the national ALA organization.

Many librarians are members of national associations as well as one or more local chapters. Organizations such as ALA allow librarians to choose between national or local membership whereas other organizations such as SLA bundle the two together. When budgets contract, it is often a balancing act to decide where money should go. At that point, it is best to evaluate what one gets out of the organization and how much those membership dues are helping forward one's career objectives.

Conferences

Libraries have had to slash—if not completely do away with—travel funds for professional development. This requires librarians who wish to attend conferences to incur those costs themselves. One of the benefits of local and regional organizations is that the registration fee for conferences is often significantly lower than for their national counterparts. For example, the regular member registration cost for the 2014 ALA Annual Conference was \$250 and for the 2015 ACRL Conference was \$455. In contrast, the regular conference cost for the 2014 Tennessee Library Association, a chapter of ALA, was \$75. The ACRL New England Chapter charged \$65 for registration. The regional Pacific Northwest Library Association conference was \$200. Obviously, costs will vary from year to year and from state to state, but this comparison

shows the contrast between national, regional, and local conference prices. Perhaps the opportunity to present a paper or poster session might make the cost-benefit analysis fall in favor of a national conference, but on price alone, the local events usually win out.

Travel

Another benefit that makes local conferences an economical choice is that travel costs tend to be lower. Depending on the distance to the conference site, there might be the option to drive or carpool rather than fly.

Geographic Assets

Geography can often feel like a limiting factor for professional development (Borko, Elliott, & Uchiyama, 2002, p. 976). Librarians, especially those in rural areas, have a much longer travel time to drive or fly to conferences since large events are usually held in major cities. Add to that the cost of conference registration, lodging, and meals, and continuing education seems further and further from their reach. This is where local associations have some of their biggest benefits for library professionals.

Workshops

The opportunity to expand one's skill set should never be overlooked. Many library associations, regardless of size, offer relevant workshops and training sessions on a regular basis. These can be hosted by a particular section or committee within the organization or by the organization as a whole. Typically, a reduced fee is offered for members of the association. The proximity of local organizations to one's home institution makes these workshops affordable both in terms of time and money.

Scholarships and Grants

Local library associations often provide grant and scholarship opportunities for travel, continuing education, or innovative research projects. Some of these are open only to applications from members of the organization or from residents of that particular state or region. It pays to look into the funds available through local channels because the geographical limit automatically makes the pool of candidates smaller.

Presenting at Local Conferences

Presenting a paper or poster session at a local conference can be an excellent addition to a curriculum vita. As with the scholarships and grants, a local conference also means competing against a smaller pool of applicants. That is not to say that the review of presentation proposals is not rigorous, but being one of five hundred proposals versus one of five thousand increases the chances of acceptance. Additionally, library administrators are more likely to allocate travel funds to those presenting or volunteering at conferences over those who are only attending.

Networking Opportunities

Building a professional network is an important endeavor for any librarian. A “network can also help you get promoted faster, stay employed longer, bounce back from setbacks more easily, and even help you discover hidden career opportunities that non-networking” librarians may never hear about (Thomas, 2010, p. 21). Interacting with other professionals cultivates these essential connections, and involving oneself in library associations usually assists in making such contacts.

Networking within state and regional associations has additional benefits when taking into account issues of local significance, from state funding to availability of technology to cultural considerations. For example, a particular area may have a high population from a particular immigrant group, or a regional college consortium may have adopted new software or moved to a different vendor, or a state may have passed legislation that affects library budgets. Any of these scenarios would create unique challenges in offering library services. Discovering how other librarians have dealt with similar concerns or finding creative ways to combine resources is an excellent use of a professional network.

Conference Networking

The smaller venues for state and regional conferences often make networking a much easier endeavor. Anyone who has attended a national conference has experienced the exhilarating inundation of ideas but also the chaotic dash from one event to the next while trying to fit everything in. Local conferences may have a slower pace or fewer competing sessions, which

creates an ideal atmosphere for networking. Fewer attendees make for deeper and more significant contact with other librarians, and some conferences host events such as dine-arounds that are meant to facilitate developing new connections.

Service Networking

Volunteering on a committee, round table, section, or interest group also helps make professional contacts. Obviously, this can work at any level—national, regional, or state—but there are a few advantages to serving at the local level. First, volunteering automatically puts one in touch with librarians who deal with the same local concerns, but second, if one wishes to remain in the same geographic region but wishes to move up or out of their current institution, it pays to have some goodwill and professional collateral built up with librarians who could be members on future search committees.

Perhaps the simplest and most straightforward reasons for volunteering are that it adds service credit to one's vita and the committees one chooses to serve on lead to connections with librarians who have similar interests within the profession. Shared interests on these local committees mean that one can be part of coordinating workshops on relevant topics, which is an additional opportunity for networking, training to gain new skills, and exchanging ideas.

Opportunities for Mentoring

Mentoring and being mentored is another way to expand a professional network. This can happen in both a formal mentoring program or more informally between colleagues. Many state and regional library associations have formal mentoring programs for those just entering the profession. Indeed, the regional New England Library Association (NELA) offers a mentorship program that is open to anyone, regardless of geographic location or membership in the organization. But one might ask how such a mentoring relationship would work if mentor and protégé did not live in the same city, let alone the same state. The advent of the internet has turned e-mentoring into a viable option for librarians when lack of proximity makes a face-to-face relationship impractical (Bierema & Merriam, 2002, p. 214) and when in-person contact is limited to meetings at conferences.

One could argue that mentoring “is essential to the growth and success of librarianship in all types of library” (Freedman, 2009, p. 171). This process not only helps indoctrinate librarians to standard practices in the field but also means they are more likely to remain in the

field if effectively guided through the immersion process. Mentoring and being mentored by librarians through a state library association can give a needed outside perspective and widen a new librarian's view of the profession. Also, because of their involvement in local library associations, the mentor may have real experience with those the protégé works with directly.

It is an important point that often mentors feel they have gained as much or more than the protégé from the mentoring process (Barkham, 2005, p. 341). The mentor makes a new connection to add to her network and gets the chance to see familiar professional situations from a different perspective—the protégé's. Often there is also the opportunity for the mentor to reflect on and develop her own skills and abilities through answering—and sometimes researching the answer to—her protégé's questions.

Peer mentoring or co-mentoring is another option for librarians, especially when performed informally with someone they met through a local library association. Formal mentoring programs typically have one senior colleague as the mentor and one junior colleague as the protégé. In a co-mentoring scenario, both parties are simultaneously mentor and protégé. During any successful mentoring process, both librarians bring their individual strengths to the relationship as they navigate the immersion process into the profession, build expertise, and, of course, add a contact to their network of colleagues. Finding a librarian with complementary skills at a local conference or through volunteering for a local committee is an excellent way to establish the foundation of a mentoring relationship.

Leadership Opportunities

A smaller library association means that a single person can have a greater impact on the organization as a whole. This is an opportunity not only to serve but also to shape the professional landscape of a state or region. Leadership is another way to expand one's network and it looks good on a vita, but it goes much further than that. It can influence an organization's flexibility and responsiveness to changes in the field, its policies and procedures, and the events it holds. If that were not incentive enough, some organizations provide travel assistance for conferences or other sponsored events to those in specific leadership roles.

There are several ways to become a leader in a library association, each with its own means of getting a librarian's voice and opinions heard.

Running for Office

With multiple officer positions in each association to fill, the opportunities for a librarian to assume leadership roles are numerous. Often these positions include a president, vice president—who might also be the president-elect—secretary, and treasurer. Different library associations may have slight deviations from this, but generally there are three to four officer positions for each association along with a larger board of directors, also elected.

To run for the officer and board of director positions, a librarian is usually expected to be an active member of the association for several years, with progressively more responsible roles within the organization. Depending on the size of the association, they may have some difficulty filling these positions, which means that a librarian who wants to make an impact on the organization—as well as develop professionally—has the chance to advance at a relatively early stage in her career.

Chairing a Committee

Even if one does not wish to take on the heavy responsibility of an elected position, there are many other possibilities for leadership within local library associations. Volunteering to serve as a chair or vice-chair of one of the many committees, divisions, sections, round tables, or interest groups in a library association is an option. These can cover issues such as instruction, reference, technology, conference planning, membership, intellectual freedom, and scholarships and awards, to name a few. The key to leadership is to get involved in an area that is of interest and then actively participate. This will help in making the decision about whether or not a leadership position there would be a good fit or what kinds of initiatives to pursue after taking on a leadership role. Another possibility is to investigate if there are any standing openings for leaders. Occasionally, a committee will become defunct, but that opening becomes an opportunity for a librarian to seek out the chair position and revitalize the group.

The idea of leadership can be intimidating, but it is important to remember that taking on a leadership position does not mean taking all the responsibility onto oneself—a good leader enables others to act and fosters collaboration within the group or organization. The reason that librarians form associations is because teamwork is often needed to meet goals efficiently and effectively (Kouzes & Posner, 2002, p. 241-2). Developing one's leadership skills in the smaller environment of a local association is a great deal easier than diving into the deep end of a national association. Building good leadership abilities benefits the local organization, and it also helps the librarian in almost every other aspect of her career.

Conclusion

Library associations do not exist without librarians stepping up and getting involved, and local library associations' limited geographic scope makes it even more imperative that local librarians take a hand in driving the organization forward. But with fewer members to be involved, it opens up many opportunities to librarians looking for avenues of professional development.

State and regional associations need librarians to serve and lead as much as librarians want to use the services these organizations offer to build their skill sets, their experience, their vitae, their professional networks, and their leadership abilities. It is a synergistic relationship that benefits both sides.

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