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Mary Wise
Central Washington University, wisem@cwu.edu

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Participation in Local Library Associations: The Benefits to Participants

Mary Wise

Mary Wise is a Catalog Librarian at Central Washington University in Ellensburg, Washington. She can be reached at: wisem@cwu.edu

Introduction

Library associations have a long history of sponsoring or supporting in some manner conferences, ongoing professional development, and various aspects of library services. For them to do so, however, requires that some members must participate in the planning and implementation of those activities, not just attendance by interested library personnel. In this article I will review the history of sponsorship of conferences and then look at the benefits of participation in local organizations.

Conferences sponsored by library associations in the United States began in the 19th century. The first "national" library conference was held in New York City in 1853 (Holley, 1976). The next conference, however, was not held until 1876, in Philadelphia during the Centennial Exposition. 103 librarians attended that conference (Mission & history, ALA website, n.d.), and the American Library Association was born. Inspired by the national association, several states followed shortly thereafter to establish library associations. In 1889, New Hampshire organized a library association. By 1891, Iowa, New York, Massachusetts, New Jersey, Connecticut, Minnesota, Wisconsin, and Michigan had all formed library associations (Kenney & McMillan, 1992). Twenty-eight states had created library associations by 1905.

While much has been written on the benefits of joining a national professional association, specifically in this case the American Library Association (ALA) (Curry, 1992), (Holley, 1976), (Wiegand & Steffins, 1988), there is little in the literature to demonstrate the benefits of belonging to and participating in local (i.e. state and regional) library associations. The associations with which I am most familiar are in the Pacific Northwest (specifically a state association, the Washington Library Association (WLA) and the Pacific Northwest Library Association (PNLA), the regional association that includes Alaska, Alberta, British Columbia, Idaho, Montana, and Washington).

The articles written about the benefits of belonging to and participating in professional associations don't describe the benefits of belonging to a local association compared to a national association. As a long time member and participant in WLA, I have experienced numerous benefits that have been gained from concentrating my professional service at the local level.

According to the ALA website, there are library associations for all fifty states, four regional associations in the United States, and associations for Guam and the Virgin Islands

(<http://www.ala.org/groups/affiliates/chapters/state/stateregional>). While many state and regional library associations have mission statements, or statements that resemble mission statements, only approximately half of them appear on the associations' homepages.

ALA's mission statement appears on its website, although not on its homepage. According to its website (<http://www.ala.org/aboutala/missionhistory>), ALA's mission is "...to provide leadership for the development, promotion, and improvement of library and information services and the profession of librarianship in order to enhance learning and ensure access to information for all ..." Its strategic plan specifically calls for improvements in " ... Advocacy for Libraries and the Profession, Diversity, Education and Lifelong Learning, Equitable Access to Information and Library Services, Intellectual Freedom, Literacy, Organizational Excellence and Transforming Libraries ..." The mission statement clearly expresses the assertion that it is the association's responsibility to provide many and varied opportunities for professional service activities to all library employees, particularly to librarians in faculty positions. ALA does this on a grand scale.

There are also opportunities at the local level, specifically in the state and regional library associations. After reviewing the web sites of the fifty states' associations and four regional associations, I've categorized their specified areas of priority into these six general areas: Leadership, Support of Library Services, Professional Development, Library Advocacy, Intellectual Freedom, and Membership Acquisition. I will add a seventh category: conferences, because conferences incorporate many of these facets and provide outlets for them. These areas are closely aligned to the topics mentioned in ALA's mission; they also provide opportunities for librarians to pursue professional service activities in a wide array of categories.

Since state and regional associations' missions are so similar to ALA's, a librarian might wonder what the benefits are of belonging to these state and regional associations rather than the national organization. There are a number of them, especially those members who participate in the organization's committees, programs, and conferences. In the next part of this article, I will discuss what these benefits are, why joining and organization is important, and how doing so differs from (and can complement) membership in the national organization. I'll look at the broad categories of activities and discuss some of the benefits or opportunities for participation in each.

Conferences

National organizations can provide many benefits, but they and their conferences are large and cumbersome. While there are networking opportunities that can benefit librarians, they can also be overwhelming. For example, an ALA conference typically requires over 350 meeting rooms to accommodate the more than 2,500 scheduled events, 250-300 of which are programs (<http://www.ala.org/offices/conference/confservices/cccfag>). According to the ALA Conferences Q & A website, there are typically around 12,000 attendees at the annual conferences. There are so many exhibitors at ALA that "it is occasionally difficult to navigate in the sea of exhibitors ..." (Frank, 1997, p. 3). This can be overwhelming for attendees, who may have difficulty finding the vendors or exhibitors with whom they could actually do business. Attendees may also have difficulty locating and meeting with colleagues from other libraries, with whom they are able to discuss issues of importance in libraries, upcoming issues, or potential collaboration. These meetings and discussions are vital to professional networking

The significant difference in conference size between the national and the local (state and regional) associations is that the local conferences afford greater opportunities for attendees to meet people they are likely to encounter again in the course of their careers. This makes networking a valuable benefit of attendance at these smaller conferences. I have been involved in the Washington Library Association for nearly twenty years, and I have built long term and productive working relationships with many of the people I encounter each year at conferences and at other association meetings. As Brown (2010) points out, at small conferences, attendees can interact with peers from similar institutions and can get constructive feedback. He adds that other advantages of small conferences are opportunities for leadership and for contributions to the profession. They are usually easier (and less expensive) to get to than national conferences and easier to navigate once you are on site. Attendees can visit the exhibitors and be able to take the time to talk with many of them, getting information that can lead to purchasing their products or services that are pertinent to the attendees' libraries.

Support of Library Services

Association members rely on their associations to keep them abreast of the latest and best practices in the field. Sometimes training available from local and state associations is the only feasible way for library employees to keep up with advances in the field, especially if they work in a library or system with limited funds. Registration for state and regional conferences is frequently less expensive than that of national conferences. This is especially important if staffing is sparse at the attendees' libraries, or if several employees wish to attend the conference. Training obtained at conferences and standalone workshops is vital to the continuing education of library employees, and assists in providing better service to library patrons. This is another example of how the regional organization realizes its mission and helps the local library do so as well.

Leadership training

ALA provides leadership training. (Glendenning & Gordon, 1997). So do some state and regional associations. For instance, PNLA presents a Leadership Institute (PNLA Leads) every two years (<http://pnla.org/institute/index.htm>) that is a week-long seminar to teach participants leadership skills. Participants learn skills they can take back to their libraries and share with their colleagues. As Mech (1996) points out, not all leaders need to be administrators. People who are "leading from below" take advantage of opportunities for leadership on projects and by mentoring and helping colleagues with their work. Even those employees not seeking formal advancement can be leaders and can benefit considerably from leadership training and education. They can make a positive difference in their libraries and help others to accomplish projects, come up with ideas, as well as lead by example. These local leadership training workshops benefit employees and institutions alike. Additionally, they can be easier to apply for, easier to travel to, and more economical than training at the national level. As is the case with local conferences, these smaller and local workshops afford participants the opportunity to meet people they are likely to encounter again in the course of their careers. Attendees interact with peers from similar institutions and can develop professional relationships that will last for many years.

Professional Development (including Leadership Experience)

Participation on committees or holding association offices are ways of obtaining direct leadership experience, as well as of applying the training participants have gained, either by means already mentioned or at a sessions held at the members' libraries or campuses.

Many librarians and library paraprofessionals, however, think that serving on committees or holding offices in ALA is nearly impossible, since most of those positions are held by library administrators (Kamm, 1997). Wiegand & Steffens (1988) point out the trend for the highest ALA office: "Over the years the vast majority of ALA presidents have been directors of whatever library unit employed them ..." (p. 18). Overall, the perception and the practice demonstrates that there are better opportunities in regional and state associations for people who otherwise would not be able to, or want to, compete for national offices in ALA. A Wisconsin librarian is quoted by Kamm (1997) as saying, "Getting a committee appointment was nearly impossible because I'm not employed at an academic library and didn't have my employer's financial or professional support. I can make more of a contribution at the state and local level," (p. 7). Many front line librarians and indeed paraprofessional library employees have held offices and committee positions at all levels in state and regional associations. These committed library employees have taken advantage of state and regional committee appointments to make many positive contributions to the profession and gain valuable leadership experience.

A related aspect of professional development is mentoring. New members of the library profession can benefit from being mentored. Professional associations can help with the development of these new members by providing mentoring programs. Mentors can help with practical tips for working in the profession, networking, and career advancement information (Zabel, 2008). Another benefit of mentoring is retention (Davidson & Middleton (2006). If new librarians are mentored successfully, they are more likely to remain in the profession. The "mentees" are not the only ones who benefit from mentorship. Mentors can also gain advantages from these relationships, since they often acquire insight as well as new knowledge from those they mentor. This phenomenon is known as "reverse mentoring". Zabel (2008) also states that "... interviews with leaders in library organizations confirm that professional associations play an important role in facilitating mentoring" (p. 359). Mentoring is a vital enterprise, along with professional development, in assuring succession planning within the association. Current committee members and association officers help prepare new and interested members for the tasks they may perform as active incoming association participants. Association service can lead to many professional skills that can be used throughout the mentees' careers.

As already mentioned, workshops and conferences offered by state and regional library associations augment the job skills of librarians (Kenney & McMillan, 1992). These workshops are greatly appreciated by those who take advantage of the workshops. Participants are able to gain training and knowledge that might otherwise be difficult, more expensive, or simply out of reach. Another facet is that those who conduct the workshops are often library employees as well. Their participation in creating and holding the workshop provides them a valuable outlet for demonstrating and developing their knowledge and teaching skills.

Library Advocacy

There are several ways local library associations engage in advocacy. One way is through the members themselves. People who work in libraries tend to be advocates for libraries, and when organized in an association's structure, they can be very effective. Many associations send representatives to library days at legislatures, both in their states or regions and nationally. During those days, library employees are often able to meet and speak with legislators in person. Another way state or regional associations can be involved in advocacy is through the use of lobbyists. Several associations pay lobbyists to advocate for library issues with their state legislatures. For example, the lobbyist for the Washington

Library Association spends much of his time examining upcoming legislation and dividing issues into those that can be left alone, those that need to be supported, and those that could be bad for libraries and need to be worked on to help them be defeated or modified. He can look ahead and see which issues are going to be important to libraries, for better or worse (Soneda, 2008). While ALA has lobbyists, they don't have the local state and regional connections and time for local issues that the local lobbyists have. State and regional association members also have opportunities to become directly involved in library advocacy. Even if the association has a professional lobbyist, association members can work with the lobbyist on issues that are important to libraries during the already mentioned legislative days, or at other times. Members can organize grassroots activities. In these multiple ways, they are able to forge important and lasting relationships with state and local legislators (Taylor & Wise, 2003). Another outlet for advocacy is the state or regional association's journal. These local journals can inform the membership about legislative issues pertinent to their specific areas (Scherlen, 2008).

Intellectual Freedom

Intellectual freedom is a broad category, including such topics as free speech, censorship, USA Patriot Act, Children's Internet Protection Act (CIPA), and Open Access, among others. Most library associations are strong supporters of intellectual freedom. The extent of their support may vary depending on their resources, both monetary and volunteer. Although there is little to be found in library literature regarding intellectual freedom and local library associations, the associations' websites themselves are good starting points to discover what intellectual freedom resources they do provide. For example, the Washington Library Association has an Intellectual Freedom Interest Group (IFIG). Among their many services, they list a page of resources and local library policies (<http://ifig.wla.org/resources/>). The Oregon Library Association's Intellectual Freedom Committee webpage is located at http://www.olaweb.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=159. The Idaho Library Association also has an Intellectual Freedom Committee (<http://www.idaholibraries.org/node/97>). These are just a few examples of state associations that promote intellectual freedom and provide services to support it, in many cases by means of continuing education for library personnel. Many other state and regional associations have similar intellectual freedom committees, round tables, and interest groups.

Membership Acquisition

In order for library associations to be effective and continue to grow and change, they need to acquire and retain members. A strong membership is the backbone of any association. During tough economic times, it is all too easy to drop local association memberships. However, these are the times in which associations and their support are absolutely essential to library employees. Associations offer their members benefits that constitute value for the cost of membership, such as mentoring (Zabel, 2008), discounts at conferences, continuing education, occasions for networking, earliest access to journals and other association publications, and leadership opportunities.

Journals

Journals of state and regional library associations relate to more than one category because they serve most of the already mentioned purposes. These journals inform members about best practices, legislative or other advocacy issues, and provide a means for librarians to share information about other aspects of libraries in their areas. According to Scherlen

(2008), these local journals also give publishing opportunities for library authors who might have difficulty submitting articles to national journals. Especially in academic libraries, it is often required that librarians publish and contribute to the scholarly literature of the profession. These state and regional journals are a valuable means for them to do so. In addition, these journals provide the benefits of all journals, that of the dissemination and preservation of scholarship.

There is one more benefit from belonging to a state or regional library association that is less tangible. That is the joy and satisfaction of being able to help make a difference for people in the library field, and by extension people who live in the states and regions served by the associations and libraries. I believe that during my nineteen years of participation in WLA, I have helped make a difference in the professional lives of many library personnel and, in a corresponding fashion, my participation has certainly made a difference in mine.

So while national associations such as the American Library Association can provide valuable services to members, sometimes it is just as important, or sometimes more important, to belong to and participate in state or regional library associations.

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