

Chapter 99

Library Associations, Conferences, and Professional Development

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ABSTRACT

What role do conferences play in the professional development offerings of associations? This chapter examines the role of library associations generally in librarian professional development, then focuses on the conference as the key outlet of professional development for the library association. Benefits of conference attendance as discussed in the scholarly literature of librarianship are presented. Current leaders of library associations are surveyed to determine the relevance and sustainability of conferences for library associations, and future trends are addressed along with recommendations for associations offering conferences.

INTRODUCTION

During the process of researching and writing my chapter for this book covering why library workers attend conferences, and in reading over the other contributed chapters as I assembled the book, some important and unaddressed questions surfaced for me. What role do library associations play in professional development generally, and with conferences in particular? Are conferences the premier professional development opportunity

for associations, or were other outlets driving associations' offerings? Do conferences fulfill other needs and goals of associations besides professional development?

My role as a past president of a regional library association and my experience as a library branch manager have led me to examine the relationship between associations and professional development. The conference in particular piqued my interest. Conferences can be expensive to put on. Finding and booking the location, arranging and purchasing the catering, coordinating the volunteer and paid work, the time involved in

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-4666-5780-9.ch099

these aspects—all these components add up and can be quite costly. Since library associations are non-profit organizations, there is a real concern to not ‘make money’ on conferences (meaning to turn a large profit), yet many library associations rely upon conferences to fund the association’s activities, which can include future conferences.

At the same time, one of the reasons for a professional library association’s existence is to provide professional development opportunities to its members. Conferences are a prime example of a professional development opportunity, but with the growth of the internet, online opportunities to provide education and training are increasing. It is becoming relatively easy to reach library workers at their place of employment via the web, and offer an interactive and educational experience with no travel costs or hassles, and little time away from regular tasks. It is also easy to attract a diverse group of presenters who no longer have to travel or take much time away from work as well, and the need to find a large venue to host a gathering of library workers is no longer present. This differs from the traditional model outlined above, with all the time and financial costs associated. Is there a chance that the costs of the traditional library conference could price the library association out of the business of providing them unless there is some change in how conferences are done?

For the purposes of this chapter, professional development is defined as continuing education and training for those in a profession. A conference is defined as a gathering of professionals for purposes of continuing education and networking for a sustained period of time, usually a few days. This gathering is generally done face-to-face but can be done virtually.

BACKGROUND

The role of the library association in the library profession has been examined with some regularity. *Library Trends* devoted a special issue to the

subject in 1997. The introduction to that issue offers a good overview of what is meant by library association: a volunteer organization, drawing from a pool of experienced professionals, with collective funds to address issues of importance and interest, and an interest in standards for members of the profession, including professional development (Thomas, 1997, p. 230). The special issue goes on to address how library associations lead to the “establishment of a unified culture for the profession, the institutionalization of professional codes of conduct, establishment of educational and performance standards, and the diffusion and incorporation of change and innovation within the profession” (Hovecamp, 1997, p. 234). Some associations have been more overt about the establishment of culture in librarianship. For example, the American Library Association takes an active role in accrediting library schools in the United States and Canada. Other actions can be a bit more subtle—awards recognizing professionals, selection of keynote and other conference speakers, committee charges, and so on can all speak to what is valued and supported in the profession by a particular association.

Goals of library associations almost universally include the continuing education of members, which is demonstrated in the offering of conferences, among other learning opportunities. In a survey of state library associations, respondents indicated heavy reliance on the conference as a mode of professional development (Kenney & McMillan, 1992, pp. 378-379). These conferences and other opportunities allow members to get involved in the association and contribute to the learning process (Frank, 1997). Members contribute by participating in learning activities as learners but also by teaching, presenting, organizing, and recommending these activities.

Another key benefit of associations for librarians is the provision of mentoring opportunities (Davidson & Middleton, 2006). The association serves to gather a pool of professionals together from all levels of experience. It is easy for an

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