



ARTICLE

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Con-vergence: Bringing Libraries and Popular-Culture Conventions Together

ABSTRACT

Popular-culture conventions (cons) can be powerful opportunities for library outreach, but they are underutilized or ignored by many libraries as a way to reach new audiences. This article summarizes the results of a survey of libraries concerning their own con attendance/non-attendance as well as perceived benefits and actual barriers to attending. We also discuss our own experiences attending cons, including lessons learned and benefits gained by our own institution.

KEYWORDS

library outreach, popular culture, comic conventions, programming, libraries, communities

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Libraries have a strong tradition of being involved in community activities and finding ways to bring collections and services to their users. As libraries expand their holdings of popular-culture material beyond genre fiction to include graphic novels, video games, movies, board games, role-playing game manuals, and other items, popular-culture conventions become a new venue for outreach, education, and professional development. We define popular-culture conventions (cons) as organized events in which fans of a particular film, television series, comic book, actor, or an entire genre of entertainment (such as science fiction, anime, and manga) gather to participate and hold programs and other events, and to meet experts, scholars, famous personalities, and each other.¹

Our institution, Cushing Memorial Library & Archives at Texas A&M University, is one of the genre’s major collecting repositories, with over 50,000 items in its Science Fiction & Fantasy Research Collection (SFFRC). Consisting of books, manuscripts, archival collections of authors and other creators, comic books and graphic novels, maps, pulp magazines, and fanworks such as fanzines, fanvids, and filksong (folk songs relating to science fiction or fantasy), the SFFRC is a popular collection that we routinely promote at cons. We have attended cons—small and large, local and across the country—as representatives of our library. Attending cons has proven to be an excellent outreach activity; we are repeatedly struck by the enthusiasm shown for libraries in general and for our specific collections by con attendees. We identify both as librarians and as fans, and in our professional work these identities

1 Our definition of cons expands on the definition from Wikipedia’s Fan convention entry. “Fan convention,” Wikipedia, https://en.wikipedia.org/w/index.php?title=Fan_convention&oldid=930400322.

speak to and inform each other. Our fannish enthusiasm and interests are, happily, consistent with our collection development policies. They motivate much of our outreach, and that outreach has, in turn, fostered connections with fellow fans of all genders, sexual orientations, cultural backgrounds, ages, and interests. Those connections have led to more interest in visiting the library, in using our materials, and in donating new materials that enhance the collection—a complete outreach circle!

We suggest, based on our personal observations and on the data collected during our survey, that libraries with popular-culture materials have a presence at cons. There are many benefits to participating in a con: cons serve as outreach venues, professional development and networking opportunities, and sites for both collection- and donor-relations development. We recognize there are barriers, such as cost or perceived irrelevancy, that prevent librarians from attending cons as representatives of their institutions; we hope to provide both evidence and ideas that help reduce or eliminate those barriers. Additionally, we will provide examples of ways other libraries are participating in cons and share our own con success stories. We gathered this information by surveying libraries and documenting our own personal observations.

Personal experience, coupled with a general professional curiosity, formed the motive and basis for this study. We did not intend this study to answer a particular problem that was calling out for an immediate solution; rather, we see our investigations here as the exploratory foundation for further research into a question that interests us and has the potential to increase outreach options for institutions looking to extend their public presence. This study and its practical applications are rooted in our own experiences working with cons and the people who attend them, associations we have found personally rewarding and reputationally profitable. We believe such associations will be equally beneficial for other institutions; this initial study is an attempt to chart the institutional ecosystem encompassing cons and libraries as it now exists, and to lay the groundwork for solid data that library staff and administrators can use when looking to establish their presence at cons.

Literature Review

The literature on library outreach has grown increasingly robust in the last few decades, much of it concerned with traditional outreach activities such as exhibits, book discussions, provision of library cards to people outside the defined patron communities, a stronger online presence, the establishment of cooperative consortia, and in-library events. Our research question for this piece is framed in terms of investigating spaces where librarians perform outreach outside their traditional environments—outside their “comfort zones”; therefore, we do not explore the wider issue of general library and archives outreach.

It’s important to note here the work of Shannon L. Farrell and Kristen Mastel (2016) who grouped library outreach activities into general categories that can be used by institutions to help shape their outreach strategies in the context of their missions or programmatic motivations. The categories are Collection-Based Outreach, Instruction & User Services-Based Outreach, “Whole Person” Outreach, Just-for-Fun Outreach, Partnerships and Community-Focused Outreach, and Multi-Pronged Themed Events and Programming. It is a reasonably comprehensive categorization of the outreach environment, which is why we cite it here. However, we also note that all of these outreach categories

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are library-centered, that is, they are designed to be conducted primarily within the walls of the institution itself. We find this same institutional centering in the majority of the literature related to outreach. While we certainly are not decrying these kinds of activities—far from it!—librarians’ engagement with different communities may require stepping outside their comfort zones and meeting these communities where they gather.

There is a paucity of research in the literature on the effectiveness of librarians functioning as roving ambassadors to expand their patron populations.² The occasional piece outside of the professional literature discusses this need to varying degrees. For example, Butch Lazorchak of the Library of Congress highlights the importance of librarians’ presence at the massive South By Southwest (SXSW) festival in Austin, Texas noting, “it’s one thing to attend panels and participate on the edges; it’s quite another to drive conversations and be active participants. LAMs [Libraries, Archives, and Museums] can occasionally isolate themselves in their own communities, but SXSW forces LAMs out of that comfort zone and puts them in contact with like-minded people who might not have the exact same perspective as LAMs but have shared interests and are looking to solve some of the same problems.” (Lazorchak 2013) However, this sort of guidance is rare.

There is little in the library literature relating to the connections between librarians and popular-culture conventions beyond anecdotal and usually brief descriptions. Both *Library Journal* and *Publishers Weekly* have presented brief reports of librarians’ presence at major cons such as San Diego Comic-Con (SDCC) and New York Comic-Con (NYCC). There is certainly value in having this information, if only to affirm that libraries and cons are a natural partnership (demonstrated by, for example, NYCC’s introduction of special badges for librarians in 2017). These brief pieces also provide examples—though with little enough detail—of con panel topics relating to libraries, which can be helpful to librarians seeking guidance for their own con activities. In the end, however, they are not substantive. An exception is a 2015 *American Libraries* article that discusses how libraries can facilitate pop culture events that are cheaper and easier for fans to attend than the traditional giant cons. The piece quotes librarian Sarah Hall: “I think rural communities are the best place for libraries to host conventions. . . . There isn’t anywhere else nearby [with whom] patrons can get their nerdy on. This gives them a safe environment to meet others with similar interests without having to travel for hours or pay exorbitant rates to attend.” (Rogers-Whitehead 2015) Several successful examples of library-run cons are given, as well as a list of typical con activities a library might choose to engage in as part of its event. Ian Chant’s 2016 *Library Journal* article makes a similar case, pointing out the kinds of advantages these events offer, including energizing and reaching new user groups, reducing the “stuffy librarian” stereotype, and increasing awareness of the richness of library collections. Heidi MacDonald (2014) stresses these advantages as well, paying particular attention to library cons’ ability to serve as marketing platforms by comics retailers and publishers, increasing the levels of direct outreach between these creators and library patrons.

However, few articles have been written which provide any kind of thorough, practical grounding in the subject of library outreach through convention attendance and participation. Interestingly, events related to anime and comics have produced the largest number of case studies, reflecting perhaps the wide

2 In conducting this literature review, we used a combination of searching under *Library Literature* in JSTOR and numerous Google searches using combinations and variations of relevant search terms such as outreach, publicity, comfort zones, marketing, and so on. We received thousands of returns, the vast majority of which proved to be irrelevant or insignificant to our study.

popularity of these genres. Nina Exner (2012) in *North Carolina Libraries* details the involvement of North Carolina Research Triangle-area libraries with the annual anime event Animazement, including Wake County Public Libraries' embedded presence at the con through hosting a manga reading room. Exner points out that North Carolina libraries seized on Animazement, as well as other anime and science fiction cons, as fertile and effective ground for increased library outreach. She also observes that libraries need not rely on large-scale events like SDCC; there are advantages to participating in smaller venues. Institutions limited by distance or relative isolation can coordinate with fans who are hampered by the same barriers. "Outside of the largest cities, people often feel that it is difficult to find events and gatherings of common interest. These smaller conventions represent efforts to remedy this lack and show the diversity of interests among the fan community. They also represent a great opportunity for programming, outreach, and [a] better understanding of teen and adult fans." (Exner 2012, 30) Exner's piece is unique in the available literature for its focus on library participation in outside cons (rather than in cons organized by libraries), a subject that deserves greater investigation.

An article from *Young Adult Library Services* by Brehm-Heeger, Conway, and Vale (2007) also describes the fruitful connections possible between a library (in this case, a branch of the Public Library of Cincinnati and Hamilton County [PLCH] in Ohio) and the anime fan community, specifically its young fans. PLCH has been running anime clubs at this branch with activities that include cosplay events, teen-only gaming nights, and sending enthusiastic librarians (with the support of teen patrons) to anime cons in order to expand their understanding of the anime subculture. Paula J. Knipp et al. (2015) published a valuable study detailing a 2014 public-academic collaboration between Florida's Palm Harbor Library and the St. Petersburg College Tarpon Springs Campus library in which they created a large-scale, multi-day anime and comic con (ACEcon). The article makes clear the advantages of pop culture-related programming to different kinds of libraries, particularly when multiple institutions collaborate: greater attendance at collaborating facilities, increased public visibility, and tighter links with the local community.

We did find a limited number of targeted studies in our search of the literature. Schneider and Cannon (2020) published an article that used quantitative data gathered through surveying attendees at the 2019 Tampa Bay Comic Convention. Unlike our own survey (described below), which was designed to elicit the attitudes of librarians towards actual and potential attendance at cons, Schneider and Cannon's study looked at con attendees' attitudes towards libraries and comic books. Both studies were designed to elicit new avenues for library outreach, although the Schneider and Cannon study deals specifically with comic book collections at libraries. Schneider and Cannon use data-driven evidence to suggest local comic cons have "real potential to reach patrons and encourage patrons to make more use of their local libraries."

In a broader study, librarian-bloggers Sophie Brookover and Elizabeth Burns produced *Pop Goes the Library* (2008), which explores how libraries can interact with and make use of popular culture in collection development, outreach, and programming. Brookover and Burns use as the backbone of their study a 2007 survey of more than 700 librarians that sought their opinions on how pop culture is defined, how libraries track pop culture interests among patrons and use that in building collections, how they market their pop culture collections, how they keep abreast of new developments, how they incorporate new IT trends, and how they choose the types of pop culture-related programming to engage in. The book is a useful guide for establishing

pop culture linkages between libraries and audiences, but it gives little attention to the type of targeted outreach we were looking for. Brookover and Burns point out the need for librarians to expand their horizons and their understanding of their collections and the patron groups they serve; they are also conscious of the constraints that may prevent a library from doing so, such budget, time, or institutional mission. Nevertheless, as they note, it is important that libraries not discount the drawing power of pop culture.

Our Research

We conducted this study to gain a better understanding of attendance and non-attendance of libraries at cons, as well as the perceived barriers and benefits. More specifically, our study sought to answer these four questions: 1. Do libraries participate in cons? 2. If libraries do participate, how do they participate? 3. What value do libraries find in participation? 4. If libraries do not participate, what are the reasons for non-participation?

Methods

We created a survey consisting of multiple choice and open-ended questions using the Qualtrics survey platform. The survey included twelve questions in total; however, respondents who indicated they do not attend cons as representatives of their library were asked to respond to only five questions, and respondents who have attended cons as representatives of their library were presented with nine questions. The survey was anonymous: we did not collect respondents' names or the names of the libraries they work for; we did collect the type of library the respondents work for and the respondents' organizational roles. The study was submitted to the University's Human Research Protection Program for IRB approval and determined to be exempt. (See Appendix for survey.)

We distributed the survey through listservs, social media, and direct email to selected libraries. We selected which listservs to target using the American Library Association's Electronic Discussion Lists database and filtering for groups that focus on graphic novels and popular culture, science fiction and fantasy, children's services, and marketing and outreach. The lists we selected for our survey were Graphic Novels and Comics in Libraries, ACRL Library Marketing and Outreach Interest Group, and Library and Information Technology Association's main list (LITA-L) as well as LITA's Imagineering Interest Group list. Additionally, the survey was distributed on several professional discussion lists for archivists: Mid-Atlantic Regional Archives Conference, Society of Southwest Archivists, and the Midwest Archives Conference.

Social media was also used to share the survey: we posted links to the survey on the library and archive-focused Facebook groups Library Think Tank - #ALATT, Archivists Think Tank, and SciFi Collection Libraries Consortium. The twenty-five largest public libraries in America were directly emailed the survey, most using email addresses identified for outreach or youth librarians. If a named individual's address was not listed on the library's website, the email was sent to the generic library address requesting it to be forwarded to the appropriate employee.

Results

The survey was open for responses during the months of August–September 2019; 112 responses were received. The responses were reviewed for validity, which left 106 usable responses (Table 1). The survey responses were then analyzed, with open-ended responses coded into categories for analysis.

Library Type	Attend	Do not Attend	Total Responses
Academic	9	49	58
Corporate	0	3	3
Government	0	1	1
Museum	1	1	2
Public	15	16	31
School	0	1	1
Special	1	8	9
Unspecified	0	1	1
Total	26	80	106

Table 1. Participation at popular-culture conventions by library type

Respondents reflected the range of library types, with responses received from employees at academic, public, special, corporate, museum, government, and school libraries. The majority of respondents, 75%, indicated that they do not attend cons as a representative of their library, while 25% reported attending cons.

Participants who reported attending cons as representatives of their library represented public libraries, academic libraries, museums, and special libraries. Employees of public libraries were the largest attending group, with fifteen individuals reporting that their library sends representatives. Academic libraries followed with nine individuals reporting attendance, and both museums and special libraries had one report of attendance each (Table 1).

Respondents who reported attending cons as a representative of their library were asked additional questions focusing on their participation at the con. These questions included the number of employees from their library that have attended cons (Figure 1), how far they have traveled in order to attend cons (Figure 2), and what activities they've taken part in at cons (Figure 3). These questions did not require responses from survey participants, and several respondents chose not to supply answers.

Public libraries, which send the largest number of people to conventions, were the only library type that reported sending a range of more than one to three employees to a single con event; several libraries in this group, in fact, reported sending seven or more employees. However, both academic and public libraries have participated in cons at the local, state, and national levels, and the one respondent representing special libraries indicated they have attended only a national-level con. Public libraries reported the largest number of local cons; this is not surprising, as reflected in our literature review. Staff from public libraries not only attended, but were also often involved in hosting local cons.

Of particular interest to us are the ways libraries participated at cons and why they attended. Academic, public, and special libraries reported participating

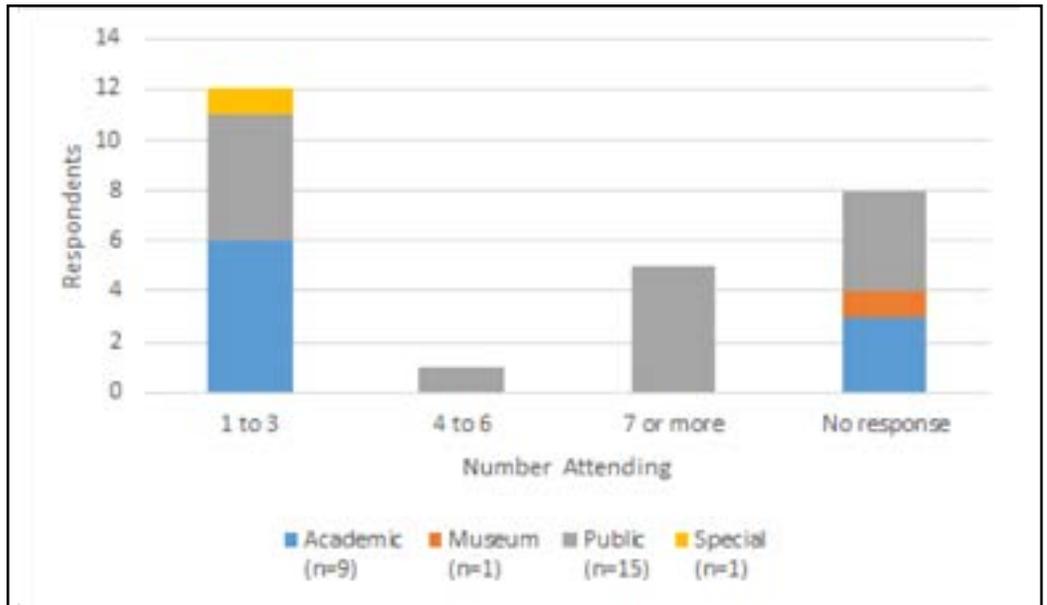


Figure 1. Number of staff in attendance by library type

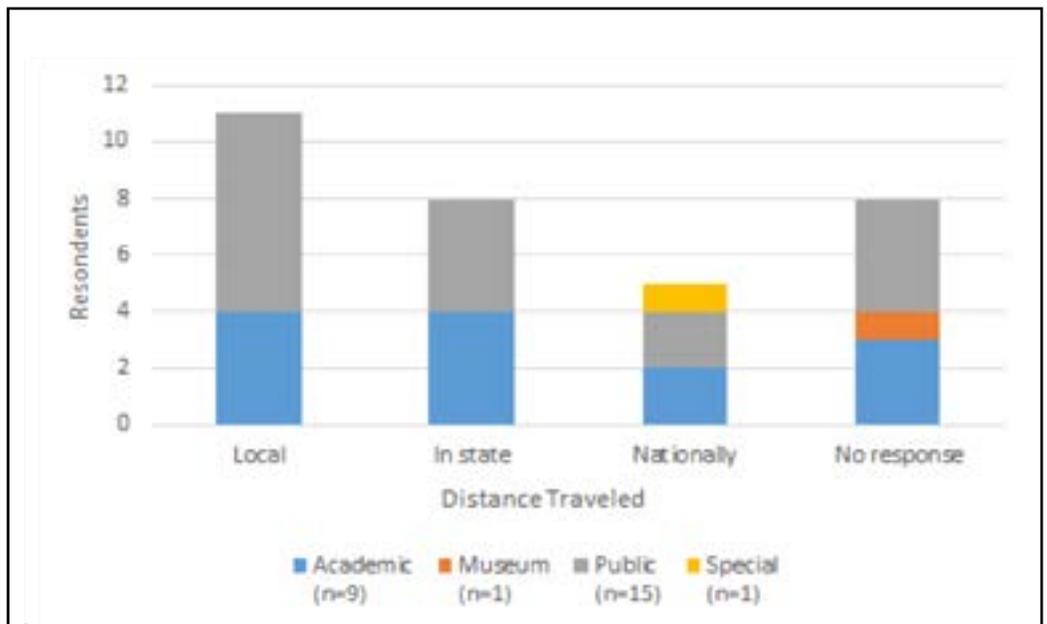


Figure 2. Distance traveled by library type

in a variety of ways, most commonly staffing a booth in the vendor/artist hall of the con and engaging as panelists at convention sessions. Respondents who chose the Other option were able to expand on the response in a free text field—one library respondent wrote that their employees “walk through and give out information about our library and invite participants and vendors to our own [con].” Respondents were also asked, in an open-text field, to describe the perceived benefits to their library of attending cons. Responses varied, but can be categorized into four themes: outreach, collection development, professional development, and networking (Figure 4). The most common responses centered on cons as outreach opportunities, with respondents stating that cons let them publicize library programming in a different venue and “reach non-traditional library customers.” The words and phrases market services, exposure, community engagement, and raise awareness were reported across all library types, highlighting cons as a venue for library outreach.

Several respondents highlighted the collection development benefits of attending cons, identifying them as events where they can “learn more about upcoming products the library may want to add to its collection” and as a placeto meet potential donors. Networking and professional development were also popular responses. One respondent noted, for example, that by attending cons they learn “from other libraries and campuses on their projects in relation to comic books and popular culture, and gain ideas from them,” and that they

Cons are akin to academic conferences these days. You attend panels to learn how researchers engage with pop culture and gain ideas about how to incorporate resources from your library into the curriculum or community. Cons are also one of the best places to do collection development and to network with potential donors. For universities with local cons, they can also be “town and gown” events where you build goodwill between the community and University.

Of all the library types represented in the responses, academic libraries represent the majority of those who answered “no” to the question of whether they had ever attended a con as part of their job. This is understandable considering academic libraries make up the majority of respondents overall

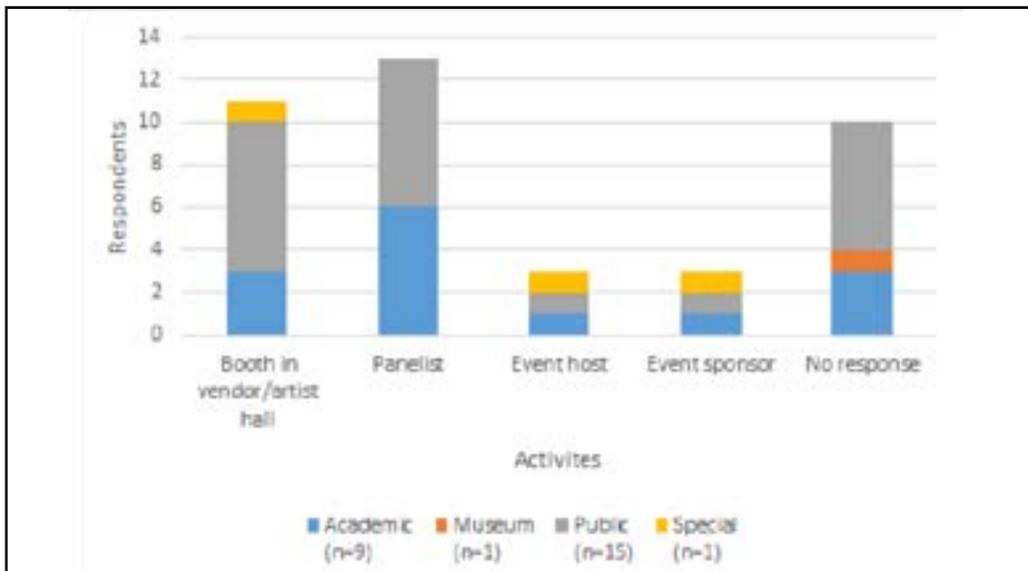


Figure 3. Con activities by library type

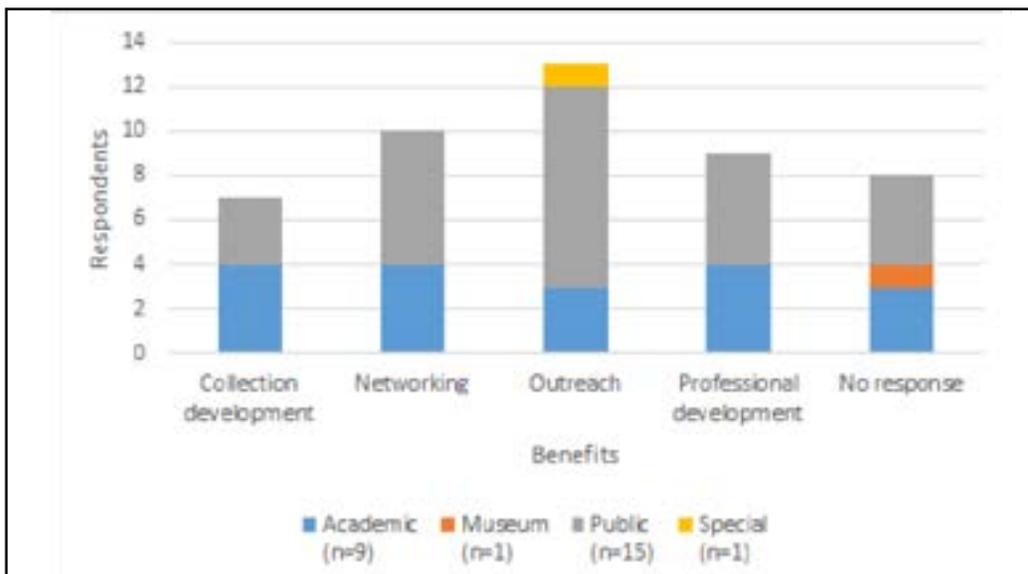


Figure 4. Perceived benefits of con participation by library types

(see Table 1). The preponderance of academic libraries that do not participate in cons is perhaps not surprising, given that these institutions tend to have specific missions geared towards serving a targeted user community. These kinds of institutional mandates often leave little room for more general interactions

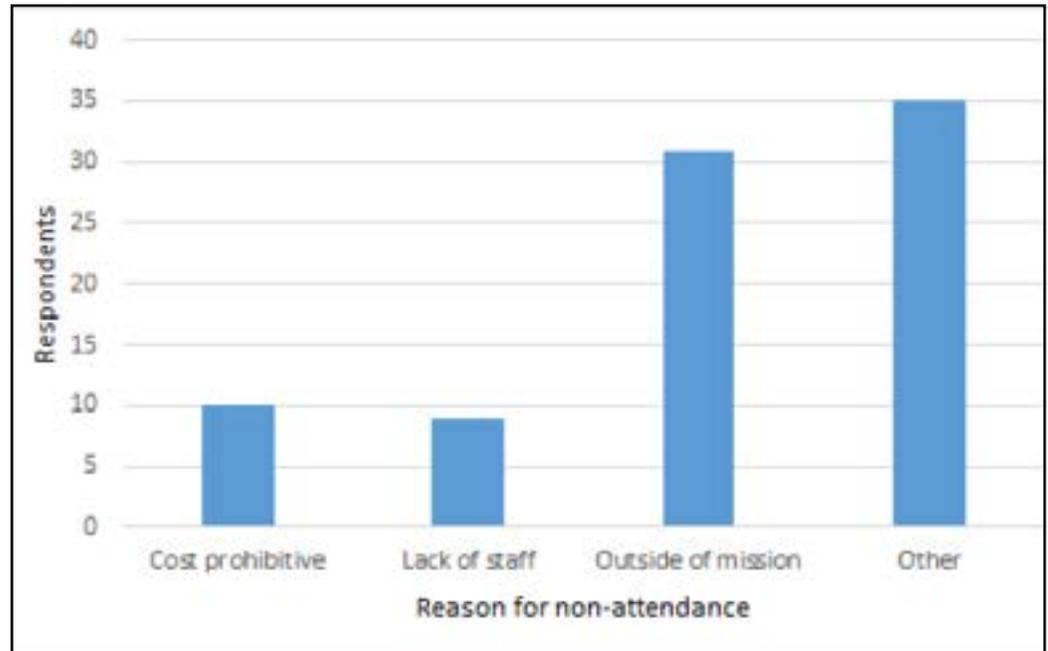


Figure 5. Reason for con non-attendance

with the public or with groups outside the campus community.³ This barrier is perhaps reflected in responses to the question “Why have you not attended a con as a representative of your library?” (Figure 5).

Respondents were permitted to choose more than one answer from the given list, or to provide a different reason Other open-text field. Note that of the choices given, Outside of mission—whether alone or in concert with another choice—is the reason most often given. Furthermore, in almost every case where Outside of mission was selected as a reason, it was a staff member from an academic institution that did so. In addition, several of the Other answers that were elaborated upon in open text could be considered variations on the issue of mission scope: “The Director would not have thought it useful,” and “None [of the cons] that I know of [are] relevant to our collecting scope,” for example.

A number of responses given in this Other field conveyed a simple lack of knowledge that con attendance was even a possibility or a useful event. Some of these answers included “Not aware,” “I don’t think we’ve ever thought about this!” “Hasn’t come up as a possibility,” “Never thought about it!” “Never came up,” “Never crossed their mind,” and “Management does not understand why this could be a good thing.” This suggests that cons might do well to make their presence known to local or regional institutions, and individual library staff members might need to take the lead in offering con attendance as a possibility to their administrators.

³ Of course, we ourselves represent an academic library, and yet we pursue participation in cons. However, we acknowledge our library is something of an exception to the rule, given the nature of the collections we curate (science fiction and fantasy, imaginary maps, etc.), which fit well into the interests that drive cons. We are also fortunate to have an administration that understands the institutional value in our presence at cons. Not every academic library will have these advantages.

Although a lack of staff and prohibitive costs were also offered as reasons for non-attendance at cons, the percentage of these responses (and variations on them as given in the Other open-text field) fall far behind that of mission scope. Therefore, we find that the primacy of mission should pair with the evident enthusiasm that respondents had for the possibility of librarians attending cons; that is, libraries whose staff show an active interest in con attendance may need to change their formal missions accordingly. At the very least, assuming that institutional missions include as part of their mandate interaction with the public or their specific patron communities, that mandate could be imaginatively expanded to include cons.

There were thirty-four respondents who indicated they would consider attending a con as a representative of their library. Another twenty offered a qualified yes in that they signaled willingness given certain conditions. These types of qualified responses included comments like the following: "Only if it was appropriate and could be a learning experience," "Only if a student group on campus actively looked for representation in the library and a related con was in the area and not cost prohibitive," "Yes, if our materials complemented the programming," and "Yes, but most of the archival positions only last for a year. . . so management usually doesn't want to spend \$ on that." A clear minority answered "No." Allowing for self-selection, the data show that libraries overall see advantages in con attendance and would welcome an opportunity to become a part of con programming. Some institutions clearly require additional justification to do so, whether that be buy-in from the administration, or a new consideration or interpretation of the institutional mission. Overall, however, it is clear that the desire and the interest are already there; what remains is the will and commitment of resources.

Discussion

The objective in developing this survey was to collect baseline data on attendance at cons by libraries. Based on our own experience, we expected the number of librarians participating in cons to be small. However, participation was reported by 25% of respondents, which was higher than we anticipated. We note that this result could be due in part to sampling bias as the survey was voluntary and distributed to targeted interest groups alongside broad library profession groups.

Academic libraries were the largest group to respond to the survey (58% of the total respondents), yet they reported only the second highest level of attendance at cons. Public libraries—representing 35% of respondents—reported the highest level of con attendance. It is not altogether surprising that these two library types reported the highest level of attendance: each typically collects material broadly across genres, and each serves a wide audience with varied interests. Additionally, the public libraries' focus on community partnership and programming lends to participation in community engagement events.

One theme that emerged across library types concerns non-attendance at cons due to such events lying outside of the library's mission. Additionally, several respondents indicated not attending due to a lack of relevancy to their collections. An in-depth analysis on library mission and collections as the impetus for participation at cons is beyond the scope of this study, however we acknowledge that mission and collection are at the center of library decision-making; they play a guiding role in deciding what services are offered and which events to participate in. We suggest that libraries interested in attending cons look to their mission and collections as a reason for attendance. Con attendance has bigger institutional implications than one might imagine. It is

unlikely that “attending public events such as conventions” is an explicit part of most institutional missions; thus the opportunity to attend a con can also be an opportunity for institutions to think more expansively and imaginatively about their mission.

A second theme we found in the data concerns the benefits of attending cons. Again, looking at the two library types reporting the largest attendance at cons—academic libraries and public libraries—we see 60% of responding public libraries indicated outreach as a primary benefit of attendance while only 33% of academic libraries reported the same. Perhaps this is because public libraries engage a wider range of patron groups—in theory, every member of the public—whereas academic libraries traditionally limit their outreach to their campus and research communities. The concept of proactive outreach to new and emerging communities may come more naturally to public libraries.

Further, academic libraries reported professional and collection development opportunities as benefits of attending cons at a higher rate than did other library types. We surmise this may be due to the disproportionately greater degree of access academic libraries have to resources that support attendance at events outside the home institution and to their larger collection budgets.

When reviewing the survey responses, we recall the wisdom Brookover and Burns (2008) share in calling for librarians who do not work with pop culture materials—or who simply do not like pop culture—to reconsider their view on pop culture materials and its value in libraries. The majority of our respondents have never been to a con as representatives of their institutions, most of them because such events lie outside their mission. However, many of them expressed the desire or willingness to go if the opportunity presented itself. As Brookover and Burns found in their survey responses, our respondents cited the constraints of budget, time, and institutional mission as barriers to establishing a con presence. Even with the presence of these constraints, we are gratified that so many of our respondents are excited by the prospect of connecting their libraries with pop culture communities.

The results from the survey are the first data points in understanding library participation at cons, and they open new lines of inquiry. For example, do libraries that attend cons see an increase in the use of popular-culture materials or foot traffic in general at their institutions after con attendance? For libraries that do not attend cons and expressed interest in doing so, what resources or tools could help support attendance? Additional surveying that focuses on answering these questions, and that gathers more robust data about respondents and their libraries, would provide a more detailed data set for understanding the benefit of participation to libraries and how these types of events fit within a library’s mission. Additionally, con organizers are another audience for future surveys: how many report libraries participating at their events, and do organizers see a benefit in having libraries present?

Texas A&M University is a Carnegie Research 1 University that has the resources to support travel and has a major library collection focused on popular culture. Together, the resources and collection emphasis have put annual attendance at multiple cons within easy reach for us. Other libraries with similar resources or collections are likely to find support for con attendance from their administration. For those libraries who are interested in attending cons—and our survey results suggest a high percentage of librarians are, indeed, interested—we offer five pieces of advice gained from our experience:

1. *Never feel reluctant to simply ask.*

Rarely are we approached by cons to attend—though it has happened. If your library builds up its con presence, it is more likely to happen to you. In

almost every case, from small con to large, we made the first move and asked the con organizers whether there might be a place for Cushing Library in its programming or in the Dealers Room (the con equivalent of a vendor hall). Moreover, in one case—at San Diego Comic-Con—we did not even ask; we just took our bundles of library swag and roamed the con. To date, no one has ever turned us down; in fact, our requests have always been met with enthusiasm and excitement. Yours will likely be as well, provided that you ask early on. Cons have reasonably strict deadlines for programming and other activities, so you will want to get started as early as you can. It is a tired old saying, but no less true: the worst thing they can do is say no.

2. *You deserve to be there.*

Libraries are an important part of the community: our collections, services, and programming have a definite impact. Cons are an opportunity to share our expertise; attendees have demonstrated an interest in how we build collections, what we've learned from hosting gaming and manga events, and how they can discover more at the library. We have served as panelists, sitting beside creators, offering insights on how our profession collects and preserves pop culture materials. At a con, you will find yourself surrounded by authors, artists, cosplayers, and enthusiastic fan creators, and you may feel that you do not belong. We know that impostor syndrome is real; we've all felt it, whether at professional conferences or at cons. However, each time we go into a con, we remind one another that we have our own experiences and expertise to impart, as much as any other guest or attendee. We have a place there, too.

3. *Cons like librarians.*

One of the most exciting aspects of cons is the welcoming nature of organizers and attendees. Schneider and Cannon (2020) demonstrate that con attendees are already primed to use libraries and appreciate librarians, and this is borne out in our own experiences at cons. When you go to a con identifying as a librarian, you are already a long way towards amassing goodwill. At every con we have attended, we've been met with enthusiasm, oftentimes feeling like a VIP. We joke that librarians are rock stars in the world of pop culture, and in many ways it is true. Did you know that as a library employee you qualify for free admission to San Diego Comic-Con? You still have to pay for your travel and lodging, but the entry fee is waived, and you are given access to the professional's lounge where you can network, grab a free cup of coffee, and kick back to relax. Many larger cons host a special library track, featuring panelists and presenters speaking directly to the unique and valuable asset libraries are to fandom.

4. *There are many doorways.*

Cons provide a variety of ways for you to participate and present your library to an audience. We have sat on panels in our capacity as librarians/archivists and represented our institution that way. We have made more formal, conference-like presentations on various aspects of our collections. We have staffed tables in the Dealers Room where we have talked with visitors about our collections, given out swag and library exhibit catalogs, and provided a place to meet conversationally with potential patrons. In our experience, a presence in the Dealers Room is always a good idea because at a con, everyone visits the Dealers Room at some point. Moreover, it gets you that much closer to the merchandise for sale.

5. *There is a con for every library.*

The diversity of cons matches the diversity of our library collections and services. Your presence at any con will be welcome but picking the right con can truly highlight your library. There are cons that cover all aspects of fandom; if your library has a particularly large manga and anime collection, for example, attending an anime-focused con would be a good use of your resources. For Cushing Memorial Library & Archives it's important, when we can, to have a presence at Con of Thrones, an event focused on Game of Thrones and the source novels by George R.R. Martin (whose archive we maintain). For others, a con dedicated to Star Trek, Harry Potter, or fanzines may be more appropriate.

Location, location, location—you do not have to travel across the country to attend a con; we guarantee there is a con near you. Smallness can be a virtue, too. We have established a presence at a number of smaller Texas cons—including ArmadilloCon (Austin), ConDFW (Dallas-Ft. Worth), and GeekFest (now Epically Geeky Expo) (Killeen)—at relatively low cost and effort. In return for that investment, we were able to make our presence felt in more-intimate settings and to have a greater impact through direct and sustained interaction with more people. These advantages are points to take to your higher administration if you want to have your library represented at a con.

Conclusion

If libraries are to remain relevant institutions that serve society and the public good in all their aspects, they need to seek out new and more varied audiences. They need audiences that reflect the diverse nature of a robust humanity. The problem for libraries is often less about specific outreach activities and more about locating these new audiences in the first place. Our own experiences—seeing the joy in con attendees' eyes when they realize who we are and what we can offer, or the excitement when they learn about all our collections—demonstrate that cons are ideal places for reaching out to potential patrons and advocating publicly for the rich resources of our institution.

Cons are always remarkable, frequently heartwarming, and intensely human events. Unlike, say, academic conferences, which are geared towards a very specific type of attendees—that is, scholars and researchers—cons are places where scholars sit side by side with celebrities, artists, dealers, authors, editors, and, most of all, communities of fans, readers, and viewers. Cons serve multiple audiences; part of their delightful nature lies in the sheer diversity of people who attend. We believe that any institution (academic, public, or otherwise) that is concerned in any way with popular culture or expanding its range of patron audiences, can find value in con attendance. Library staff who attend cons have the opportunity to interact with a wide variety of people, any one of whom has the potential to become an enthusiastic library patron. Even an academic library, whose primary audience is the campus community, can benefit from establishing a presence in unconventional locales, like cons, in which members of their campus are likely to be participating. Their presence gives the library a new openness and dimensionality—it steps outside its traditional walls to engage directly with new audiences on their own ground.

The outreach opportunities presented by cons range from one-on-one interactions to large group activities. Librarians going to cons might participate in a panel in their professional capacity. They might sit at an informational table or booth. They might even act as a roving ambassador for their institution, as we did at the 2019 San Diego Comic-Con, carrying Cushing Library swag back and forth across the massive San Diego Convention Center and using it as a way to introduce ourselves and our library to con attendees, dealers, and special guests alike. The exchange of a few short days of our time for

face-to-face engagement with hundreds of fans, artists, authors, and media personalities about our library and its services was a trade well worth making. These opportunities for intimate and friendly interactions with new audiences make cons invaluable loci for effective outreach. Cons offer myriad, exciting ways to connect engaged and enthusiastic consumers and producers of popular culture to our services and collection.

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Appendix

Libraries and Popular Culture Conventions Survey

A fan convention (also known as a con) is an event in which fans of a particular film, television series, comic book, actor, or an entire genre of entertainment, such as science fiction or anime and manga, gather to participate and hold programs and other events, and to meet experts, famous personalities, and each other.

Q1 Please indicate the type of library you are affiliated with.

- Academic
- Public
- School
- Special
- Corporate
- Other _____

Q2 What is your position at the library?

Q3 Have you attended a con as a representative of your library?

- Yes
- No

Skip To: Q6 If Have you attended a con as a representative of your library? = Yes

Skip To: Q4 If Have you attended a con as a representative of your library? = No

Q4 Why have you not attended a con as a representative of your library?

- Outside of mission
- Lack of staff
- Cost prohibitive
- Other _____

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Q5 Would you consider attending a con as a representative of your library? Why or why not?

Skip To: End of Survey If Would you consider attending a con as a representative of your library? Why or why not? Is Displayed

Q6 What cons have you attended as a representative of your library?

Q7 How many staff went to the con as a representative of your library?

1-3

4-6

7+

Q8 What activities do you participate in at cons?

Booth in vendor/artist hall

Panelist

Event host

Event sponsor

Other _____

Q9 How far do you travel to attend cons?

Local

In state

Nationally

Internationally

Q10 What was the benefit to your library/institution of attending the con(s)?

Q11 Are there cons your library sends representatives to regularly?
