
To Join or Not to Join: How Librarians Make Membership Decisions About Their Associations

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ABSTRACT

WHY DO LIBRARIANS JOIN PROFESSIONAL associations? Although a literature review finds little research on the topic, the author's survey concludes that many factors influence decisions.

INTRODUCTION

Librarians are urged to join and to participate in professional associations from the time they enter library school. Indeed, by offering free membership or greatly reduced dues to students, organizations such as the American Library Association (ALA) and the Special Libraries Association (SLA) hope to build relationships with newcomers to the profession that will continue throughout their careers. Do librarians join professional associations? Why? If not, why don't they join?

Little research has been done on librarian behavior in professional organizations. Literature searches revealed only a few articles on librarians' or other professionals' relationships with their organizations. A 1992 survey of academic librarians in California found that 98 percent of the respondents considered the opportunity to network with colleagues as a very important or somewhat important reason to join professional associations; 81 percent felt that professional membership was important for retention, tenure, or promotion; 84 percent used professional memberships to influence librarians' professional goals and to keep up with developments in the field through professional journals; and 74 percent used their association membership to speak or to publish (Anderson et al., 1992).

Although the authors are concerned with what is needed to start a new organization, Cornell and Farkas (1995) define benefits of professional associations to include "networking, technological advancements, sharing of knowledge, financial benefits, and career opportunities" (p. 44). Diamond and Haurin (1994) point out that membership in the American Economics Association which, like library associations, is voluntary, is probably more valuable for job-seekers—either younger economists or those with high mobility.

Baldwin (1995) discusses the functions, history, membership, and individual and professional benefits that SLA offers. For the individual, she notes that leadership training for division and chapter officers, continuing education courses at all levels, and networking opportunities are benefits gained from SLA. On a professional level, she cites SLA's focus on professional issues such as image, copyright, professional standards, education, and the future of the information profession.

The (British) Library Association plays a different role than its American counterparts. Lowe (1980) notes that the Library Association had been "the indispensable custodian of professional librarianship status [but] begins to lose its hold in a free market for professional qualifications and conditions." Reporting in the *British Journal of Academic Librarianship*, Fisher (1994) points out that "the acquisition of Chartered status is a benchmark in the career of the information professional" (p. 167).

Havener and Worrell (1994) studied the extent to which U. S. academic librarians rely on continuing professional development activities. Their study found that 89.9 percent of academic librarians surveyed belong to professional associations. In addition, the librarians in their study had attended meetings within the past year (80.9 percent), served on committees (47 percent), or presented papers (6 percent). Their conclusions showed that librarians at doctorate-granting universities belonged to more professional associations, particularly to ALA, and were more involved in the organization than those at nondoctorate institutions.

HOW LIBRARIANS DECIDE WHICH ASSOCIATION

How do librarians decide which associations to join? For some, the choice is easy; their employers pay dues and conference expenses and, absent any financial pressure, the librarian's decision is based on which association is most relevant to his or her job. Most, however, do not have this economic freedom and must select from an array of professional organizations which include the American Library Association and its divisions; American Society for Information Science; Special Libraries Association; American Association of Law Libraries; Medical Library Association; Music Library Association and other specialized organizations; as well as state, regional, or local professional bodies. This variety of organizations does not include unions, staff associations, or collective

bargaining units, which are covered elsewhere in this issue. Since prospective members pay their own dues, they make choices based on the cost of dues and the return on their investment whether that return consists of informative publications, conference programs which are financially accessible, are relevant to their jobs, and which afford them the opportunity to network with colleagues or which serve as forums for presentations. Unlike attorneys who may be required to be members of their state bar association in order to practice law, librarians are under no legal compulsion to belong to national, state, or other professional groups.

The author of this article has been active in professional organizations both nationally and locally but has dropped out of both the Special Libraries Association and her state association largely for financial reasons. Although her current employer paid her dues in the state library association, the association's conference programs were of little interest or relevance to her job, its policy of charging for an exhibit pass was objectionable, and the association's publication was of poor quality. With the SLA, her reasoning was similar—i.e., the cost of dues and the fact that association publications and conference programs lacked immediate job relevance. In SLA's case, the local chapter's activities were frequently more pertinent or useful and offered greater opportunities for networking than did the national association. Additionally, meetings of the local chapter of SLA are open to members and nonmembers at the same fee.

THE SURVEY

The issues described above are one person's experience and perception. To discover whether her impressions were unique, the author posted a brief survey on three Internet listservs of interest to librarians: CALIX, which is directed at California librarians in all types of libraries; PUBLIB, whose members are primarily public librarians worldwide; and Stumpers-Talk, an offshoot of a listserv for librarians needing answers to difficult reference questions. In addition, a subscriber to PUBLIB reposted the survey on a listserv for Florida librarians. The author received 116 responses of which fifty-five (47.4 percent) were public librarians, eighteen (15.5 percent) were academic librarians, and eleven (9.5 percent) were special librarians. The remainder were widely scattered by type of library. Since the survey appeared on listservs directed at California and Florida librarians, these states are heavily represented among the respondents, exactly half of the 116 respondents were Californians, while 20 respondents (17.2 percent) were from Florida. The remainder were widely scattered by state. There were no replies from outside the United States.

The first survey question asked which associations the respondents belonged to. Answers are shown in Table 1.

Table 1.

Question 1. Which library associations do you belong to? Check all that apply.

<i>Association</i>	<i>Number</i>
American Library Association	80
American Society for Information Science	7
Library Association (UK)	1
Special Libraries Association	9
Specialized Association (Medical Library Association, Art Librarians, etc.)	14
State/Regional Library Association	87
Other	28
None	8

A slightly larger number of respondents belong to their state or regional organizations than to ALA. Many belong to more than one organization. "Other" groups listed include state school library associations, county organizations, and REFORMA.

The questionnaire sought to determine what swayed librarians' attitudes when selecting a professional association. Question 2 asked what factors influenced librarians' decisions (see Table 2).

Table 2.

Question 2. What factors influenced your decision to join a professional association? Check all that apply.

<i>Factor</i>	<i>Number</i>
Cost of dues	58
Employer pays all or part of conference/meeting expenses	28
Employer pays all or part of dues	19
Opportunity to make a contribution to the profession	78
Opportunity to network with colleagues	74
Opportunity to serve on committees or as an officer	45
Quality of meetings and/or conferences	73
Quality of publications	59
Other	24

In a profession whose members are not noted for being overpaid, the cost of dues, while obviously a factor, was not named as frequently as expected. Respondents focused instead on more altruistic reasons. The

opportunity to network with colleagues (94 respondents), the opportunity to make a contribution to the profession (78), and the quality of meetings or conferences (73) drew a higher number of replies than did the cost of dues (59).

Several respondents mentioned the organization's political stance as an important reason to join or not. One public librarian from Illinois commented: "A professional organization should have a very strong advocacy mission. This is probably the *most important* reason for me to belong" [emphasis in the original]. A California public librarian was influenced by "[the ability to] gain clout to attempt to influence public policy and opinion [and to] develop theory in collaboration with colleagues from other systems, states, and types of libraries." A California academic librarian said: "I . . . look to see that the organization *does not* direct attention, effort, and membership funds towards what I consider indiscriminate lobbying against anti-pornography legislation . . . I would encourage ALA, and *especially American Libraries* to take a more middle-of-the-road position on such issues as gays, abortion, freedom of expression, sex, etc." [emphasis in the original]. It is not within the scope of this article to discuss professional ethics. From this respondent's comments, however, it seems that it is difficult for some people to separate their personal beliefs from their ethical positions. The ALA's Committee on Professional Ethics has, for the past several years, presented programs dealing with ethical issues and eliciting comments from the audience.

Other reasons that respondents volunteered for belonging to professional associations included "value to our library," "it's the right thing to do," and the professional obligation of librarians to support library organizations. Statements such as this reinforce the value of professional associations taught in library school.

The third survey question asked those who do *not* belong to professional organizations why they did not join. Their replies are noted in Table 3.

Table 3. Question 3. If you do not belong to a professional association, why? Check all that apply.

<i>Factor</i>	<i>Number</i>
Cost of dues	9
Employer does not give time to attend meetings	6
Employer does not pay dues	7
Quality of publications	2
Quality of conferences/meetings	1
Other	6

With Havener and Worrell's 1994 study in mind, it is not surprising that only a small group of respondents said they did not belong to professional associations. Although the cost of dues is the most frequent reason cited, lack of employer support for professional activities (such as not paying dues or conference or meeting expenses) is another. It is unclear why more librarians not affiliated with professional associations did not respond to the survey. Possible reasons for the low response to this question are that: (1) librarians felt uncomfortable admitting that they do not join professional organizations; (2) subscribers to professional listservs may be more likely to be members of professional associations; (3) nonjoiners simply chose not to answer; (4) the respondents in this self-selected sample may not have been representative; or (5) the author's experiences with associations were not the experiences of most librarians. Further research could focus on this question.

Question 4 asked whether respondents had dropped professional memberships or if their level of participation had decreased. Fifty-one respondents said they had dropped or reduced their participation, while fifty-three had not. Respondents' reasons for decreasing or dropping membership varied, as shown in Table 4.

Table 4.

Question 4. Responses to why survey participants had decreased or dropped membership in associations. If yes, why did you do so? Check all that apply.

<i>Factor</i>	<i>Number</i>
Cost of dues	25
Employer no longer pays dues	1
Employer no longer pays conference/meeting expenses	4
Quality of publication declined	3
Quality of conferences/meetings declined	4
Took too much time	3
Other	16

Most respondents cited the cost of dues as a reason for dropping professional membership or decreasing participation. "Costs are way too high for ALA," remarked a public librarian from Florida. Such respondents have a point. Basic ALA dues may indeed be too high for many librarians. Depending on whether a member chooses one or more divisions or round tables, it is possible for dues to be several hundred dollars. SLA, on the other hand, includes one division and one chapter in its basic dues structure. One important difference between the two organizations is that divisions and, to a lesser extent, round tables in ALA are

moving toward autonomy. Some people have suggested a sliding scale for dues based on salary. However, this practice would result in better-paid librarians subsidizing lower-paid members. A New York public library system librarian remarked:

Although I feel it is important to belong to professional associations because of networking with colleagues, publications received, educational opportunities, . . . dues [are] very high for the salaries that most librarians receive. If dues could be paid on a [periodic payment] schedule instead of all at one time it would be financially easier. Even associations that base dues on a scale relative to salary . . . are still high, making it impossible to belong to more than one.

Other reasons for nonparticipation included lack of local opportunities for involvement, change of job responsibilities or job change from one type of library to another or other motivations for changing memberships or level of involvement. "I dropped out of PLA for a while because I was disgusted with their disorganization," a Virginia public librarian wrote. Another public librarian reported: "I usually join the California Library Association when the conference is going to be nearby. I don't join in other years because I'm not overly interested in the organizational issues. I sometimes join ALA to go to conferences, but have not otherwise been interested in belonging until recently, when I joined PLA to attend the PLA conference."

Political issues drew comments from respondents. An academic librarian in California has "thought about dropping because there is too much emphasis on politics. It's a waste of money." According to a California public librarian: "The priorities of the ALA were no longer mine. I decided to get local (i.e., CLA), which is much more interesting to me." Another perspective was provided by a public librarian from New Mexico who said, "I *get* a lot from ALA conferences, then I can give a lot locally." A public librarian from Illinois remarked: "Most library professional associations don't have an advocacy wing and that has cost libraries and the library profession dearly." As mentioned above, lobbying and political action are important roles for professional associations to follow. It is unclear whether some organizations' reluctance to become involved with working for funding and standards results from an impression that libraries are a positive public service and will be funded anyway or the notion that libraries should not be involved in politics.

On the other hand, as a public librarian from Illinois noted: "Ohio Library Association (now called Ohio Library Council) was very good and effective in the area of lobbying and coordination for political action." For publicly supported libraries, active, vocal, and visible professional associations can promote libraries and librarians to the public and in particular to the legislatures and other governing bodies that hold the purse strings. Lobbying and political activity on behalf of libraries and

librarians is an important function of professional associations at legislative hearings and city council meetings where testimony from citizens in support of libraries is encouraged. This can be a very persuasive appeal to potential members, but a school librarian in Texas commented: "Organization with teacher-members do not adequately support nor represent issues and concerns of the school librarians, much less the library profession as a whole."

At the time of writing, there has been a heated discussion on the PUBLIB listserv concerning the roles of school and public libraries in serving students in grades K-12. It appears that no professional organization on the local or national level is addressing the issue of cooperation between the two types of institutions and better communications between teachers and librarians.

Internal ALA politics angered a public librarian in Florida, who wrote: "When ALA switched its conference from Orlando to NY it seemed like a slap in the face of Florida librarians and librarianship. Orlando is the perfect conference town. What can possibly top Disney, etc.? The area caters to tourists!" The issue of locations for ALA and divisional conferences has been discussed both on listservs and in the professional media. Because the number of meetings during an ALA conference can be as many as 2,500, only a limited number of cities can handle an ALA conference. In the past, ALA pulled meetings from the state of Illinois because it had not ratified the Equal Rights Amendment; from Cincinnati because of a controversy about displaying photographs by Robert Mapplethorpe; and from Colorado as a result of the passage of an anti-gay proposition. The Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) canceled its meeting in Phoenix because Arizona refused to recognize the holiday honoring Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr., and REFORMA relocated its conference from California to Texas because of voter approval of an anti-immigrant proposition.

"I have not been a member of ALA for many years because I felt I wasn't receiving enough benefits for all the money I was spending on membership," a librarian in a Wisconsin public library system noted. "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." While this respondent's experience differs from the author's, for an association truly to represent the profession it must encourage participation by newcomers and by librarians at all levels and from all types of libraries.

A California librarian from a multi-type cooperative system said:

Although I haven't dropped any memberships . . . I think about it. Even though a tremendous amount of work is undertaken each year by the volunteer committees, we seldom seem to resolve problems

such as ALA structure [or certifying] public librarians. I get discouraged . . . when I think of the number of times each of these issues has been studied. Librarians' organizations seem to dwell . . . [on] issues such as Internet policies. However, the fee or free policy is another contentious issue.

Perhaps as a result of the sheer size of ALA, it appears that the organization deals with the same issues repeatedly. "Hot" topics at conferences frequently do not include nitty-gritty issues such as certification of librarians and libraries, the political role that ALA should take in areas within its purview, and whether the association's scope includes social issues.

An academic librarian from California revealed: "If it weren't necessary for my continued promotion, I probably wouldn't belong to any. For my area of specialization, ALA GODORT [Government Documents Round Table] is *the* organization to belong to." Because little research has been done on library associations, it is difficult to discover how many librarians belong only to one type of organization or to several. Round tables, divisions, and other groups within associations which deal with narrower concerns may be more attractive to some librarians than the parent organization or may be more attractive at particular career stages. This aspect of professional activity needs further study.

A California public librarian commented at length: "Most of my front line colleagues do not belong to any professional organization (except a union). . . . Non-joiners see these organizations promoting boosterism rather than real dialogue. . . . It is too expensive to go to a conference or they cannot get the time off. Both . . . time and money are more often afforded to administrators in an unfair manifestation of class prerogative." The impression here is that certain organizations cater more to managers and administrators than to front-line librarians, thus creating a vicious circle: Conference programs and publications are directed at higher-ups; therefore, the rank-and-file librarian is discouraged from attending. This results in a small audience for programs directed at librarians who serve on reference desks, for example.

Time pressures weighed heavily on some respondents, who said that they were:

too busy just keeping the library together day-to-day...I did not join my professional organizations until . . . I had the time to become engaged and some flexibility over my time off to attend conferences. I became sharply aware of the need to counteract trends . . . which I felt were deleterious to my ability to fulfill my calling of direct and equitable service to all kinds of people in a public library. Rather than influencing policy, both local and national, by becoming an administrator, I decided to try to do so through my professional organizations.

Librarians, particularly those in large libraries or systems, frequently find that they have no means of influencing how their library operates. They

may see using their professional associations, in addition to unions or other collective bargaining organizations, as a way of putting pressure on their particular agency to improve communication and to provide input from those who perform the work.

From Florida, a public librarian described many of the values and difficulties professional organizations present:

Our professional organizations have not marketed themselves very aggressively. . . .I'm pleased to be able to *actively* participate in my local organization which provides continuing education and networking opportunities *and* promotes the library community to our local citizens. . . .I feel that my membership and participation are valuable. It seems increasingly difficult to find ways to actively participate in state and national organizations. Travel to conferences is sometimes a limited opportunity (\$\$\$, staffing, organizational policies/rules). In addition, participation on a committee or other activity appears to be based upon who one knows, not volunteerism, and can be very discouraging to would-be participants. . . .I encourage my employees to join professional organizations and hope I set a good example by belonging to several myself. For the "front line" librarian, dues are expensive in many cases and they want to choose wisely where to spend their hard-earned money. Some feel very strongly that there is little return on their investment other than a small chance of attending a conference. While I understand some people are not "joiners" by nature, I wonder what more we should/could do to alleviate the situation? Do other professions have similar problems?

CONCLUSION

Librarians elect to join or not to join professional organizations for several reasons. What one respondent called "sheer professionalism" or the opportunity to contribute to the profession and to network with colleagues is a primary factor in many librarians' choices. For others, the extent of employer support of their activities, either by paying dues or paying the expenses of conferences and meetings, is an important factor in their selection of an association. Quality of meetings or conferences and publications is an example of "bang for the buck" that many librarians receive from professional associations.

Political action, particularly lobbying, is also important to many respondents, some of whom commented specifically on their association's strength in this area. The author would like to see more librarians involved in politics and lobbying such as librarian participation in political campaigns and the formation of librarian-based political action committees. While the "legislative days" that state associations and ALA sponsor are useful, librarians may gain more benefit from being on first-name terms with their representatives or their chief aides.

The high cost of conferences is frequently mentioned in discussions

with colleagues. Perhaps ALA could review conference costs and seek to reduce membership fees. A public librarian from California believes that: "The networking aspect has in many ways, been made less important by electronic networking. . . . In fact, perhaps because most of the publications produced by the various organizations are not top drawer, I would rate listservs as better there, too." It is too early to tell how the electronic revolution will affect library association memberships. Another article by Valauskas in this issue of *Library Trends* offers a vision of how the electronic revolution may affect library associations that does not necessarily result in fewer conferences or meetings. To this author, however, librarians appear to use listservs for the networking that otherwise might be conducted through organization meetings. ALA should review its policies to encourage committees and task forces to conduct their business electronically, thus reducing the number of sessions at the midwinter meeting and annual conference.

What can employers, individuals, and associations do to make professional participation more attractive? Employers could assist staff who want to become active and involved by offering paid leave sufficient to cover the entire conference or meeting. They could provide other financial support, such as paying basic dues to organizations such as ALA (exclusive of division or round table dues) and registration fees for one or more conferences each fiscal year. Like the Florida librarian quoted earlier, they can serve as examples to staff by participating, but most important, employers should not make association participation a perquisite solely for administrative and managerial librarians but should offer support to rank-and-file staff as well.

Librarians themselves must recognize the value that association participation offers them and must acknowledge that they have some responsibility for setting the association's agenda. When their organization falters, for example, by presenting programs of interest solely to one stratum of librarians, those members whose interests are not represented must get involved, raise their voices and, if necessary, vote with their wallets by dropping out or reducing their level of participation.

While the present study shows that the cost of joining/participating in professional associations is an important element for some librarians, those with other motivations for taking part in professional organizations will find the means to do so. For example, low-cost housing at conferences is frequently available either through the host city's convention bureau or by working with a good travel agent.

Organizations must be responsive to their members. Many librarians perceive ALA, for example, as an administrators' organization. Indeed, the ALA Council seems to consist primarily of library directors or assistant directors or library school deans. Few candidates for the council have been front-line librarians. While lack of financial support from

employers doubtless plays a significant role in librarians' activities in national or even local organizations, the perception that committee service or elected office is open only to administrators may deter some librarians from participating. Associations should consider offering some financial support to committee members for attendance at meetings as well as encouraging electronic participation wherever possible.

In the end, opting to join a professional body and deciding which one(s) is a subjective choice for most librarians. Finances, job constraints, and the goals of the organization affect that decision. Both organizations and employers should review policies and provide means for more, not less, participation.

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