
Activity in Professional Associations: The Positive Difference in a Librarian's Career

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ABSTRACT

PARTICIPATING ACTIVELY IN PROFESSIONAL associations can make a positive difference in a librarian's job and career. Associations are relevant sources of current information. Effective communication and leadership skills are learned or enhanced. Librarians can become familiar with the processes of research and publication. A sense of professional community is nurtured. This article discusses the impact of active participation in professional associations on the librarian's job and career development.

INTRODUCTION

When a graduate student completes the formal coursework and requirements for the master's degree in library and information studies, he or she is simply not aware of the value of professional associations. The student has listened to comments about professional associations, but the comments are more theoretical than meaningful. Context and perspective are missing.

When the librarian assumes the responsibilities of his or her first professional position, the realities of professional associations are still somewhat mysterious. What is a professional association? Is it necessary to become involved? If so, in what associations and at what levels since there are local, state, regional, national, and international associations? These are some of the questions entry-level librarians ask. The author of this article started in an academic library in which participation was optional. Soon, he realized that the degree and necessity of participation

varied from one library to another. Like other entry-level librarians, he was confused.

Participating in the activities of professional associations can contribute positively to a librarian's professional development. Active participation is likely to facilitate professional success in one's job and career. This article discusses the impact of participation. As the literature of professional associations is not extensive, several focus groups were also conducted by this author to provide additional information and perspective.

PROFESSIONAL ASSOCIATIONS AS RELEVANT SOURCES OF INFORMATION

Information professionals need relevant information to be effective in their positions. In her article on the role of professional associations, Virgo (1991) states that associations are a "body of people who collectively have a tremendous wealth of experiences to draw upon in a common field" (p. 189). This collection of experiences underscores the value of professional associations for the librarian.

The librarian's expertise and experiences are initially influenced by the professional associations that participate in the accreditation of graduate schools. The curricula and core competencies of the various schools of library and information studies are influenced and monitored by professional associations, most obviously the American Library Association (ALA). Academic courses studied by graduate students are shaped by a professional association. Before librarians assume their first professional position, they have been influenced significantly by associations such as ALA (Curry, 1992).

Practical up-to-date information is readily available and openly shared at conferences conducted or sponsored by professional associations. Formal programs, for example, provide numerous opportunities to obtain information. Participants or speakers with special expertise are recruited to discuss issues and provide various perspectives. A speaker or panel of experts will not only provide information but also stimulate the creation of ideas. Good speakers challenge the audience, providing opportunities for positive discussions in which information is shared and ideas are generated.

In addition to formal programs at conferences, discussion groups and other less formal options, such as interest groups, are ideal forums for information sharing. At the American Library Association conferences, for example, the discussion group has become an essential vehicle for the stimulation of ideas on current topics. Examples of discussion groups include the Middle Management Discussion Group and the Interlibrary Loan Discussion Group. Interest group examples include the Geographic Information Systems Interest Group and the Internet Resources Interest Group. These are special opportunities to learn and to keep up

to date on issues, patterns, and trends in librarianship. Members of the focus groups emphasized the importance of the informality in discussion and interest groups, indicating that informal conditions facilitate learning and idea stimulation (Frank, 1997).

Active participation on committees in professional associations is a particularly effective option for obtaining relevant information. Librarians occasionally de-emphasize or deride the value of committees in libraries and in professional associations. It is popular to do so, especially in the relatively large associations such as ALA or the Special Libraries Association (SLA). Most professionals realize, nonetheless, that committees are important, and that effectively run committees are fundamental to the success of the associations. Committees and task forces have specific charges or responsibilities. Those who participate become familiar with the committee's responsibilities as well as the rationale for the existence of the committee. They also become involved in the collection and synthesis of data or information, in various planning processes, and in the implementation of recommendations. These are valuable experiences. Becoming familiar and experienced with collegial processes in professional associations contributes to success "at home" in libraries. Working effectively in groups to examine issues critically and to attain a positive consensus in decisions is a collegial skill that is valued in libraries. Members of the focus groups reiterated the utility of these skills (Frank, 1997).

Vendors or exhibitors that populate the various professional conferences constitute another source of information. Indeed, it is occasionally difficult to navigate in the sea of exhibitors that are available and organized at ALA or SLA conferences. Exhibitors may include representatives from private companies, colleges and universities, organizational units of the association, and governmental organizations. For example, at the ALA Annual Conference, one is likely to interact with publishers as well as other information producers from the private and public sectors, representatives of the various divisions such as the Association of College and Research Libraries or the Public Library Association, and representatives from local, state, and national governments. While the information available from these exhibitors tends to be biased toward specific points of view or, in some instances, toward specific companies, the information is relevant to the librarian who is able to listen actively and consider the various points of view from a critical perspective. It is important to look at the overall picture as the patterns and trends are as relevant as the specifics.

A librarian's network of contacts can be cultivated and refined at the conferences sponsored by professional associations. Informal discussions with colleagues at conferences are particularly important. Opportunities to collaborate or network with colleagues over coffee, for example, con-

tribute significantly to one's ability to be effective. The information obtained via these informal contacts is very current and usually practical or to the point. Problem solving is facilitated by the information obtained from colleagues from other institutions. The focus group participants asserted that the information obtained from these contacts is especially applicable and helpful (Frank, 1997).

Another benefit of participating actively in professional associations is that it exposes one to a variety of perspectives and viewpoints. As a result of organizational values as well as the realities and consequences of accepted routines, librarians tend to do the same things in the same ways. The resulting routines and associated inertia must be continually challenged in order to move ahead. Formal programs and informal discussions at conferences provide opportunities to be challenged. Librarians at other institutions look at issues and problems differently. If one is actively involved, he or she learns, becomes familiar with new or different options, and is challenged to consider other approaches, solutions, or perspectives. Creativity and innovation are stimulated. As the librarian's routines and values are challenged, he or she becomes more effective.

Professional associations are producers and disseminators of relevant information. "A primary mark of a profession is the development of a scholarly body of knowledge which continues to grow and be furthered" (Virgo, 1991, p. 195). Associations disseminate information via books, refereed journals, presentations at conferences, and by other formal and informal means. Librarians who are members of professional associations have opportunities to contribute to this "body of knowledge." As information professionals participate and contribute, they learn and become more familiar with the processes of scholarly communication.

CONTRIBUTORS TO EFFECTIVE LEADERSHIP

Professional associations contribute significantly to the development of effective leadership. Librarians who are active in professional associations have realistic opportunities to improve or enhance their leadership skills. Leadership is a relatively complex concept. One scholar argues that "leadership is largely an intuitive concept for which there can never be a single, agreed-upon definition" (Conger, 1992, p. 18). In their research on leadership, Bennis and Nanus (1985) recorded 350 different definitions of leadership (p. 4). For this article, leaders are "individuals who establish direction for a working group of individuals, who gain commitment from these group members to this direction, and who then motivate these members to achieve the direction's outcomes" (Conger, 1992, p. 18).

Leadership, administration, management, and supervision are interdependent concepts and practices. All are concerned with behaviors and interaction patterns, role relationships, influence, motivation, and goals

or desired outcomes. Additionally, all are concerned with the ability or capacity to provide focus and direction for individuals and groups. Opportunities to develop these skills are numerous via active participation in professional associations. Service on committees, for example, exposes the librarian to various planning and implementation processes. As the librarian is working with information professionals from other states or regions, he or she is also exposed to differences in methodologies. Assuming responsibility for a committee is a particularly valuable experience as committee chairs work with a group of colleagues to define and refine goals, develop strategies to attain these goals, and follow up as needed. Roles and responsibilities are delineated. Specific tasks are delegated. The chair of the committee articulates the rationale for the committee's activities, relating the work of the committee to other committees or organizational units in the association. He or she becomes more familiar with the dynamics of conducting meetings, including the ability to attain a positive consensus on important decisions.

The members of the focus groups stated emphatically that participating as a chair of a committee in a professional association facilitates the development of leadership skills. Several stated that the skills learned and developed as chairs of association committees enabled them to work more effectively with groups to attain desired outcomes. They also became more interested in management. Another librarian noted that she was motivated positively by Patricia Breivik's "Every Librarian a Leader" theme during Breivik's term as President of the Association of College and Research Libraries (Frank, 1997).

In addition to committees in professional associations, it is possible to become the elected chair or president of the association's sections or divisions. The responsibilities associated with such positions are significant, and the opportunities to learn and to enhance one's administrative skills are plentiful.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR RESEARCH AND PUBLICATION

Participating in professional associations provides opportunities to become familiar with the processes of research and publication. These important processes contribute to the librarian's professional development. Creativity and innovation are expressed as ideas, concepts are considered and integrated, and new information is generated.

Several options for research and publication are available via participation in professional associations. Poster sessions are popular examples. ALA's conferences provide opportunities to prepare and present poster sessions. These are not formal presentations or publications but necessitate preparation and the ability to communicate ideas or concepts to others. Additionally, editors of journals occasionally examine the various poster sessions at national conferences looking for ideas or presentations

that might be eventually transformed into published articles. One of the librarians in the focus groups stated that the editor of *RQ* asked her to write an article on the topic of her poster session (Frank, 1997).

Calls for papers are ideal opportunities to become involved in scholarly processes. Sponsored by professional associations at local, state, regional, national, and international levels, calls for papers are opportunities to do research and to discuss the results with a forum of colleagues. As with poster sessions, these scholarly papers and presentations are potential candidates for articles in refereed journals. Also, presenting a paper to a group of peers, listening to their comments and suggestions, and responding to their questions constitute several of the key elements of critical dialogue. These skills are essential to success in libraries. Information professionals are instructors, mediators and facilitators, and advocates for ideas as well as strategic positions or directions. They must communicate effectively with groups. Scholarly presentations at professional conferences provide realistic options to develop these skills.

On occasion, committees in professional associations produce documents that are eventually published. The author of this article participated on such a committee in ALA's Reference and User Services Division. The committee's activities focused on the importance of collection development policies. As we collected data on policies, we realized that the information was particularly relevant to the work of librarians who have managerial responsibilities related to the development of collections. As a result, we sought options to disseminate the information. The chair of the committee contacted several editors, including the editor of *RQ*, who provided support and practical recommendations. In six months, the members of the committee completed an article that was published in *RQ*. It was a valuable experience for all committee members. We participated in a collegial process within the context of a professional association and produced an article that was published in an important journal. Such activities and results are not uncommon in professional associations (American Library Association, 1993).

Professional associations are concerned with the creation, organization, and dissemination of information. They are also concerned with the activities related to research and publication. One dictionary defines a profession as a "calling requiring specialized knowledge and often long and intensive preparation including instruction in skills and methods as well as in the scientific, historical, or scholarly principles underlying such skills and methods" (*Webster's Third New International Dictionary*, 1968, p. 1811). The skills and methods referred to are essential to the success of librarians.

By supporting and providing opportunities for research and publication, professional associations of librarians or information professionals

become, in a sense, more professional. In reality, it is also advantageous for professional associations to provide such support:

- associations gain value for both themselves as organizations and especially for their members;
- associations and their members gain visibility by publicizing research efforts;
- by collaborating on activities that one institution cannot do as readily (for example, gathering profession-wide statistics), associations gain in effectiveness;
- associations can add to their image of having more clout than any one individual institution;
- associations can draw on the tremendous range of talents of their members; and
- associations can increase their impact on the educational process (Virgo, 1991, pp. 192-93).

The librarian who participates actively in professional associations and who is interested in contributing to the scholarly processes will discover that there are opportunities to do so. The professional associations are motivated to provide these opportunities.

FACILITATORS OF EFFECTIVE COMMUNICATION

Activity in professional associations promotes the skills needed for effective communication. One communicates with individuals as well as groups. Also, one is exposed to a variety of methods and styles of communication. In particular, the librarian is exposed to different perspectives and questions. As the librarian becomes more informed and looks at issues from different perspectives, he or she is more likely to be listened to "at home."

Professional associations also provide opportunities by which librarians can be mentored by experienced colleagues. Formal mentoring programs exist in national associations and occasionally in regional organizations. Issues of communication are frequently discussed by the mentor and the one being mentored. Communicating with one's supervisor or with other colleagues is a particularly relevant topic of discussion. Articulation of ideas and the techniques of assertive communication are also relevant. Listening to the comments and suggestions of an experienced colleague from another institution makes a positive difference. Several members of the focus groups had worked with mentors via professional associations. Two of the librarians had participated in mentoring programs organized by ALA's New Members Round Table (Frank, 1997).

A SENSE OF PROFESSIONAL COMMUNITY

By participating actively in professional associations, one learns what it means to be a professional. One contributes to the overall profession by participating and, as a result, feels "professionally empowered." This is especially important for the individual librarian and for the profession of librarianship. "The significance of having members equipped to cope with new challenges has far-reaching effects on any profession and shows the direction towards which the profession is moving" (Osman, 1987, p. 33).

The sense of professional community is nurtured via participation in professional associations. Conferring with professionals from other institutions not only provides additional perspective on issues but also enhances one's status as a professional. The values and ethics of professionalism rise to the surface and are very evident in the activities of professional associations. Issues of professional values and ethics were viewed as very important by all members of the focus groups (Frank, 1997).

Professional associations usually have codes of ethics. ALA's Code of Ethics is representative and underscores the sense of professional community. The principles of the code essentially encompass the work of professional librarians:

- We provide the highest level of service to all library users through appropriate and usefully organized resources; equitable service policies; equitable access; and accurate, unbiased, and courteous responses to all requests.
- We uphold the principles of intellectual freedom and resist all efforts to censor library resources.
- We protect each library's user's right to privacy and confidentiality with respect to information sought or received and resources consulted, borrowed, acquired, or transmitted.
- We recognize and respect intellectual property rights.
- We treat co-workers and other colleagues with respect, fairness, and good faith, and advocate conditions of employment that safeguard the rights and welfare of all employees of our institutions.
- We distinguish between our personal convictions and professional duties and do not allow our personal beliefs to interfere with fair representation of the aims of our institutions or the provision of access to their information resources.
- We strive for excellence in the profession by maintaining and enhancing our own knowledge and skills, by encouraging the professional development of co-workers, and by fostering the aspirations of potential members of the profession. (American Library Association, 1995, p. 673)

The above statements go to the core of the profession. These statements are not unlike the principles in the codes of ethics for the legal or medical professions. The issues covered in the code are particularly relevant to the work of librarians. Information resources are organized to be accessible to all users; equitable services are critically important. In-

Intellectual freedom is a concept that must be protected. Information transactions are private and confidential. Intellectual property needs to be recognized and protected. Colleagues must be respected; fairness in the workplace is essential. Private interests are not advanced at the expense of others. Important differences exist between one's personal convictions and professional responsibilities. Professional excellence is an ongoing and encompassing goal and must be supported.

Becoming aware of the sense of professional community provides perspective and insight on the culture of the profession of librarianship. A culture is a "pattern of basic assumptions—invented, discovered, or developed by a given group as it learns to cope with its problems of external adaptation and internal integration—that has worked well enough to be considered valid and, therefore, to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think, and feel in relation to those problems" (Schein, 1988, pp. 8-9). Librarians deal or work with the issues of external adaptation and internal integration on a day-to-day basis. On another level, the pattern of basic assumptions is transferred from one individual or group to other individuals or groups and essentially underscores the sense of professionalism. Codes of ethics, accepted and unaccepted patterns of behavior, organizational values, and a concern for the development and promotion of colleagues and principles are examples of assumptions that are culturally transferred.

Active participation in professional associations facilitates one's awareness of, and integration into, the culture of professional librarianship. One gains a broader vision of one's role and responsibilities as a professional. This vision is continually enhanced and expanded as the librarian works with colleagues from other institutions to attain common goals. Moreover, the librarian's ability to attain goals "at home" is facilitated. Members of the focus groups were very concerned with ethics and values as critical elements of professionalism. Several indicated that values were being openly discussed in their libraries and that such discussions were uncommon five years ago. Two participants stated that assumptions related to culture, values, and ethics were being deliberated as a result of reorganizations in their libraries. All stated that activity in professional associations contributes significantly to one's sense of professional community.

THE CHALLENGES

Participating actively in professional associations is not necessarily a simplistic process. For example, financial support is often needed to participate at the local, regional, or national levels. Salaries of librarians are not excessive and, as a result, the institution needs to provide some financial assistance. Levels of support vary among libraries. It is a controversial issue at some libraries. Who will participate? What levels of financial

assistance are available for the participating librarians? These are practical and philosophical questions. Some academic librarians must participate in order to qualify for a continuing appointment. In some libraries, it is difficult to participate on a regular basis as a result of staff shortages. In these instances, association options are selected judiciously, and opportunities are occasionally rotated so that all interested librarians can participate to some degree.

Becoming active on committees and other organizational units of professional associations is occasionally challenging. It takes time and effort to become familiar with the association's organizational structure as well as its relative priorities. The size and complexity of associations, especially national associations such as ALA or SLA, can easily frustrate interested librarians. Associations of the scope and magnitude of ALA are frequently confusing and complicated for the "new" librarian as well as for the experienced one. A librarian feels overwhelmed by the numbers of programs, committees, discussion groups, etc. Such feelings are not conducive to active participation. Getting on a committee or becoming involved in some formal capacity can be facilitated by colleagues or mentors who are already participating in the activities of the association.

Becoming chairs of committees or getting elected to offices is another challenge. A track record or some evidence of success is usually necessary, especially for elected offices. In ALA or SLA, for example, becoming chairs of sections or presidents of divisions usually necessitates a positive track record in the section, division, or association. This is especially accented in an association of ALA's size and complexity.

Opportunities for publications and scholarly presentations are numerous, but success is not automatic. Applications for poster sessions are refereed. Calls for papers are also refereed. A significant number of the applications for poster sessions are accepted for presentation in associations such as ALA as these have become a standard vehicle for the demonstration of new or innovative initiatives.

Being able to identify with or to simply understand the realities of a sense of professional community is also a challenge. The sense of professional community is more abstract than concrete. What is a professional? It is not necessarily obvious to new librarians and to some librarians who are experienced in the profession. One, it is hoped, becomes familiar and comfortable with the concept of professionalism, including its responsibilities.

The focus group participants were concerned with issues of financial assistance and other challenges related to getting started. Several librarians stated that financial support for professional conferences was directly related to the degree of active participation. In other words, if one was active on a committee or another group, one received more financial assistance. They asserted that it was more difficult for new librarians with

lower salaries to get started under these conditions. Issues of fairness underscored their pointed comments. All participants emphasized the importance of fair guidelines (Frank, 1997).

Members of the focus groups were also concerned with the size and complexity of national professional associations such as ALA or SLA. All indicated that it is difficult to get started and to become actively involved. The academic librarians discussed the degree of duplication in the committees and sections of ALA's Association of College and Research Libraries as well as the Reference and User Services Division. Such duplication can be confusing to the new or experienced librarian. The public, school, and special librarians were less concerned with duplication but indicated that it is very difficult to "figure out" associations such as ALA or SLA (Frank, 1997).

IMPACT ON THE LIBRARIAN'S CAREER

The author of this article was not able to find a specific study that correlates activity in professional associations and success in one's career as a librarian. It is likely that a positive correlation exists.

Librarians who participate actively in professional associations are likely to be more informed and, in particular, up to date on current issues and trends. Opportunities to be exposed to other ideas and perspectives are numerous as one participates and becomes effectively networked. In February 1997, a program on "new learning communities" was sponsored by ALA's University Libraries Section. As the concept of learning communities in academic libraries is relatively new, the room was filled with interested librarians who were excited as they focused on the description of the University of Washington's UWired program (American Library Association, 1997). It is likely that the enthusiastic attendees returned to their respective libraries with practical recommendations. They were more informed and the informed librarian will be more effective and more likely to succeed in his or her career.

The librarian who is interested in moving into management will have opportunities to learn and/or refine various managerial skills. Working with the committees and other groups, sections, or divisions of a professional association provides opportunities to lead, to provide focus and direction, and to attain important goals. These are relevant skills and are generally perceived as very desirable in libraries. Moreover, these skills are likely to open doors for the librarian, either in positions at his or her library or in managerial positions at other libraries.

The librarian who is able to write and to communicate effectively will be more "marketable." Professional associations provide excellent opportunities to improve these skills. Becoming familiar with the processes of research and publication via options such as poster sessions, calls for papers, and articles in refereed journals enhances one's ability

to communicate effectively with colleagues. In addition, presenting a paper to a group of colleagues from other institutions enables one to refine his or her oratory skills. Publications and scholarly presentations also look good on vitae. They are indications of the librarian's ability to organize and articulate ideas and information. Such indications are valued and facilitate one's career development.

Becoming aware of the intrinsic value of a sense of professionalism also facilitates a librarian's career development. It is more intrinsic than extrinsic, so it is less obvious. Issues of values and ethics, for example, are usually less evident in one's day-to-day activities. Nonetheless, the sense of professional community that is facilitated via experiences in professional associations is very important and contributes to professional effectiveness.

Participating actively in professional associations also enhances the librarian's career options. A record of activity in associations indicates that the librarian is interested in the profession. Moreover, a record of activity is a clear indication that the individual is willing to learn and to grow. Being exposed to different ideas and perspectives contributes significantly to one's expertise and ability to examine issues critically. Such librarians are likely to be promoted. Also, they are likely to be successful in efforts to move into positions of responsibility at other libraries.

Members of the focus groups noted the relevance of participation to one's career. The importance of being exposed to innovations at other libraries was emphasized. Nearly all of the participants stated that they returned from conferences with ideas for new activities or initiatives. They were more informed. Additionally, creativity and innovation had been stimulated. The librarians also underscored the value of participation to career development and advancement. Opportunities to work in groups of librarians from other libraries were especially valued by the focus group members. Collaborating with librarians to refine strategies and attain goals facilitated the development of skills that were emphasized in their respective libraries. All of the members stated that the librarians who participate actively are more "marketable," more likely to be promoted, and more likely to succeed in their careers (Frank, 1997).

CONCLUSION

The role and responsibilities of professional associations are varied and numerous. If the associations are going to continue to provide realistic opportunities to learn and to participate actively, they must be responsive to their members. In particular, they must be as flexible as possible and open to the concept of change. Issues of flexibility and change are occasionally problematic for the large professional associations. Organizational behaviors and practices are likely to be self-perpetuated. To be relevant in the future, the associations must focus on change and re-

newal: "The professional association that wishes to be effective in changing its industry must be open to a process of continuous change within itself. Such an association will have the credibility to carry the message of change to the rest of its industry" (Segal, 1993, p. 242).

Professional associations are critically important. Participating actively can make a positive difference. The librarian's ability to perform effectively can be enhanced. Moreover, the librarian's career progression can be influenced positively. One of the librarians in the focus groups concluded that "the challenges and opportunities in professional associations provide valuable perspective, help me to think critically, and stimulate my creative abilities." Another librarian concluded that "the activities in professional associations help me to know what others are thinking and doing, to see what might be possible, and to move ahead in positive directions" (Frank, 1997).

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