The Value of Professional Associations

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ABSTRACT
PROFESSIONAL ASSOCIATIONS IN THE LIBRARY/INFORMATION science field are viewed
from the perspective of the value they bring to the field. Two areas in
particular, research and professional development, are reviewed in this
context based on the efforts of ALA, ALISE, ASIS, and SLA.

INTRODUCTION
     The index to the 32nd edition of the *Encyclopedia of Associations* (Jasz-
czak, 1997) lists some 524 organizations with the keywords of either "in-
formation" or "library" or their derivatives. Even if one removes those
groups with their entries included in the companion volume *International
Organizations* on the presumption they are based outside North America,
that still leaves some 324 organizations. And that does not include cog-
nate groups without "information" or "library" in their names that would
be found elsewhere in the index. Still, with 324 library and information
related organizations, one is left to ask what value these groups provide
their members for so many organizations to exist?
     Other authors in this issue discuss why professional associations are
formed, so that ground will not be covered here. As to the value pro-
vided by these groups, there are two possible answers. The first answer
works on the foundation that, if these 324 groups were not providing
some value to someone, they would be out of business. All associations
serve some purpose and provide some kind of value when they are first
organized. However, if that purpose and value cannot be sustained over

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time, the association loses its support and goes out of business. So, in short, the first answer is yes, all these groups have value because they are still functioning. In other words, the Association of Architectural Librarians (AAL), with a membership of 100, has value just as the American Library Association (ALA), with a membership of 56,800, has value because they are both viable organizations with dues-paying members. With this answer, the case can also be made that larger organizations provide more value because they have greater resources.

The second way of addressing the value question of associations, especially from an individual's perspective, is the idea that the value one gets from an organization is based on the time and effort that person puts into it. This view is supported by Grace Anne DeCandido (1996) who presented suggestions to people new to the profession. As part of her first recommendation of how to connect with professional colleagues, DeCandido suggests joining professional associations.

Membership organizations thrive on the input of their members, so the value one might get from belonging to either the AAL or ALA depends on what the member puts into the organization. With this answer, the case can be made that smaller organizations provide more value because each member has a better opportunity to participate actively in the organization.

While an association's longevity and the level of activity among its members can be used as measures of value, other ways of determining value do exist. Definitions of professions usually contain two attributes in particular. One of these is the idea that a profession is built around a substantial body of theory and knowledge, which must be continuously tested, revised, and expanded. Thus one value an association can bring to its profession is to encourage and support research that feeds the theoretical/knowledge base of the profession. The second attribute of a profession deals with its members constantly pursuing the new or revalidated knowledge that is a result of research efforts in the field or from cognate fields. A second value that an association can bring to its profession is to encourage and support the professional development of its members. [Note: professional development will be used as a general term that encompasses a wide range of educational opportunities—from annual conferences, to local or regional workshops, to self-paced instructional materials for individualized learning.] So if a professional association can demonstrate active involvement in research efforts and professional development, one can make a case for the value that association gives to that profession in general and to its members in particular.

RESEARCH

Research, like beauty, is in the eye of the beholder. This is especially true for a profession that is very application oriented, such as the library

and information science field. What one person might do in the way of applied research would not be considered research at all by a person working in a more theoretical environment. On the other hand, what the latter person might produce in the way of basic research would not be understood by the applied researcher interested in solving a specific problem. So, one of the first things needed is a definition of what is meant by research. One way to define, or actually differentiate, research is to look at the objectives of the research being conducted. During the latter 1980s, the U. S. Department of Education's Office of Educational Research and Improvement sponsored a series of reports on research issues for the library field (U. S. Department of Education, 1989). The third volume contains descriptions of four possible research objectives as follows:

> Some research is basic and theoretical, aimed at determining funda-
> mental truths. Some research is applied and pragmatic, aimed at
> solving immediately identifiable operational needs. Some is soci-
> etal, aimed at determining needs and roles. And some is policy ori-
> ented, aimed at establishing the basis for decisions about allocations
> of resources and priorities in meeting needs. (U. S. Department of
> Education, 1989, p. 11)

The library and information science field certainly has need for all these "types" of research. The question becomes what can our professional associations do to support any or all of this research? One part of the Department of Education report examined what associations might do to support library and information science research and came up with six possible models (U. S. Department of Education, 1989, pp. 19-31).

The first model proposed centered on joint research projects, where a project team representing a variety of associations would work on the proposal and manage the project, although the primary promoter of the project would be someone not directly connected to any of the associations involved. Some of the potential problems with this model dealt with the assumptions made about projects, funding, and leadership/administration and the commitment from the associations.

The second model proposed was for similar units of associations to interact and identify mutual areas of interest. For example, the American Society for Information Science (ASIS) Management Special Interest Group, the Special Libraries Association (SLA) Library Management Division, and the Library Administration and Management Association of the American Library Association would identify areas of mutual concern and would put together a research project team to address one or more of those concerns. While the level of commitment here could be reasonably high from those directly concerned, there would still be potential problems with full support and cooperation from the association as a whole.

The U. S. Department of Education's (1989) third model calls for connections to be made at the level of association president. This proposed model calls for a meeting of association presidents and an agreement to work on a project(s) to result from that session. This would be a more formal relationship than the second model above; however, that formality results in potential problems due to the time it would take to hold the original meeting and have each president involved get back to his/her board of directors (or similar body) to validate the agreements reached. By the time this procedure would be completed for all the groups involved, some of those presidents would no longer be in that office and the promised support might be withdrawn.

The fourth model proposed the creation of a coordinating body comprised of association representatives. This group would develop research agendas, promote those agendas, and act as a clearinghouse for information on research projects. This model requires a certain commitment from each association that would extend over a certain period of time. As conditions change for each association, that commitment could waiver.

The fifth model picks up the basic idea behind the fourth model by proposing a more broad-base group with representatives from associations, government, industry, and the academic sector. Versions of this model exist for other fields, such as a joint effort by the National Academy of Sciences, the National Academy of Engineering, and the Institute of Medicine. With government, industry, and educators involved, the specific role of the associations diminishes somewhat. Furthermore, the appointments made to these bodies are usually based on the subject expertise of the appointee rather than his or her ability to represent a specific group.

The final model proposed in *Rethinking the Library* calls for a research foundation to be established by one or more associations. This would be similar to the foundation sponsored by the American Bar Association or the foundation sponsored by the American Nurses Association, although these are single associations supporting their own foundation. There is not a good model that exists for multiple associations supporting a single foundation.

The potential obstacles to interassociation cooperation in the area of research were more real than imagined, as no substantive joint research effort has developed since the models were proposed in 1988. This leaves each of the associations to do as much in the research arena as they care to pursue on their own. It is not possible to detail the research-related activities of all 324 library-related associations found in the *Encyclopedia of Associations*. However, a look at the efforts of a few associations will provide some perspective on the topic. Four groups will be examined: the American Library Association, the Special Libraries Association, the American Society for Information Science, and the Asso-

ciation for Library & Information Science Education (ALISE), since they
have some level of commitment to research and together represent a
broad range of the library and information science field. This is not to
say that other associations, those which are smaller and/or more nar-
rowly defined by subject or geographically, are not also involved in re-
search.

ALA is involved with research through a number of activities. While
ALA's mission statement does not expressly mention research, its more
extensive policy manual (American Library Association, 1996) does note
the role of research:

> The American Library Association recognizes the need to continu-
> ously build and strengthen the knowledge base upon which library
> services and the library profession depend. Basic and applied re-
> search in the field of library and information studies, as well as re-
> search results in related disciplines will, in large measure, shape li-
> brary and information services and the nature of the library profes-
> sion in the future. (p. 47)

To help ALA fulfill this role, an Office for Research and Statistics exists as
part of the overall association structure. There is also a standing Re-
search and Statistics Committee within ALA. While this oversight at the
association level is good, much of the work of ALA is carried out by its
subordinate affiliates, primarily divisions and round tables, which pursue
activities related to a specific clientele or environment, including research-
related activities. The key venues for supporting research at this level of
the association are: (1) research-related committees; (2) competitive
awards to either help fund research projects or recognize a competing
research effort, sometimes focused on dissertation-level research; and
(3) publication of a journal as a dissemination outlet for research-based
articles. Table 1 lists the major ALA units which support research through
one or more of the methods described above.

In addition to these units of ALA, the Library Research Round Table
works to enhance research efforts and provide an outlet for dissemina-
tion of research results, usually through programs at ALA's annual con-
ference.

ASIS clearly presents itself as a research-oriented organization. The
society's mission statement indicates that one of its primary roles is "en-
couraging research, development, and applications that advance the field
of information science" (ASIS, 1996, p. 6). ASIS fulfills this part of its
mission in a number of ways. The *Journal of the American Society for Infor-
mation Science* is a primary publishing outlet for information science re-
search. Another ASIS publication, the *Annual Review of Information Sci-
ence and Technology*, provides essays that review current research on a vari-
ety of topics, making it an excellent place for a researcher to begin his/
her search of the literature. ASIS does not have a specific research com-

Table 1.

Unit	Committee	Journal	
American Association of School Librarians	Y	Y	Y
American Library Trustee Association	N	Y	N
Association for Library Collections and Technical Services	Y	Y	*
Association of Library Services to Children	Y	Y	*
Association of College & Research Libraries	Y	Y	Y
Association of Special & Coop. Library Agencies	Y	Y	N
Library Administration & Management Association	N	Y	*
Library & Information Technology Association	Y	Y	*
Public Library Association	Y	Y	N
Reference & User Services Association	N	Y	*
Young Adult Library Services Association	Y	Y	N

*sponsors or co-sponsors an award, usually for a publication that can be research-based, although the research component is not specifically required

mittee like the ALA units. However, all of ASIS's special interest groups take a research focus for their area(s) of interest. Finally, ASIS has a number of awards that directly support research. These include the ASIS Research Award, Best *JASIS* Paper Award, Best Information Science Book Award, and the ISI Information Science Doctoral Dissertation Scholarship.

One would expect an organization of educators who primarily teach at the graduate level to be concerned about research, and ALISE meets that expectation. There is a standing Research Committee as well as a special interest group for research (Directory of the Association). ALISE's primary publication is research oriented, and the association sponsors four research-based awards. These include the Research Grant Award, the Research Paper Competition, the Methodology Paper Competition, and the Doctoral Student Dissertation Competition.

SLA also demonstrates a strong commitment to research. While there is no mention of research in SLA's mission statement, its strategic plan, which was based on member input, identified research as one of the three major priorities for the association (Special Libraries Association, 1996, p. 17). SLA reinforces this with a director of research on staff and a standing research committee. A research agenda for SLA was identified a few years ago, and this is supported by an annual competitive award of

up to $20,000 to fund research projects that address areas identified on the research agenda. In 1995, SLA also sponsored a research forum with participants from a number of professional associations. The forum examined issues relating to library and information science research and revalidated SLA's agenda with particular attention to studies assessing or measuring the value of information and/or information professionals.

From the activities of these four groups, it would appear that library and information science associations are providing value in the form of research for the profession. This may not seem obvious to many people due to the fact that there is no unifying body to coordinate the efforts of the various groups involved. The six models presented earlier were all attempts to bring about some of this cooperation; however, none of the models has been adopted. This results in a situation that appears less active than is the case. If questions exist in this area, they are more along the lines of "Are the associations doing enough to support research?" and "How beneficial is the research that is being done?"

PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

If associations' records with research lead to the questions posed above, there should be little room for such concerns over their input into the professional development arena. Library and information science organizations have a long history of providing educational opportunities for their members. Most associations hold at least one conference annually. In addition to the individual sessions that comprise the conference, many groups have one- or two-day professional development workshops immediately before and/or after the conference. The larger associations, like ALA, ASIS, and SLA, have conferences twice a year. In addition to these opportunities for professional development, associations are now sponsoring regional meetings as well as video conferences to attract members who cannot attend the larger conferences. Those organizations with local chapters provide ongoing opportunities closer to home, sponsoring meetings and workshops throughout the year.

In fact, if anything can be said about associations' involvement with professional development, it may be that there is too much of it—i.e., that too many groups are competing too often for the same audience with very similar programs. And the associations are not only competing among themselves for the professional development market, but universities, vendors, and other commercial providers also offer professional development just in the library and information science arena. If one includes professional development focused on subject or discipline, the potential number of professional development providers increases dramatically.

Yet the number of professional development offerings from library/information science associations remains high. Since there are registra-

tion fees associated with most, if not all, of these programs for both asso-
ciation members and non-members, the assumption is that these various
professional development activities are attracting enough registrants to
at least break even if not earn a profit for the sponsoring association. So
the market for professional development stays strong. The occasional
program or workshop is canceled from time to time, but overall the op-
portunities continue to exist, and information professionals in major
metropolitan areas often find themselves selecting from a number of pro-
grams offered on the same day, all sponsored by different groups. For
some groups, their annual conference and other professional develop-
ment offerings constitute a major source of revenue. As long as this is the
case, associations will continue to place emphasis on professional devel-
opment.

    With the importance of professional development in mind (as both
a revenue producer and as a response to member needs), one would
think associations would keep their professional development activities
fairly prominent. To verify this, the Web sites for ALA, ASIS, and SLA
were checked to see how easy or difficult it was to get professional devel-
opment-related information. All three sites were checked on 27 March
1997.

    The home page for ALA (<http://www.ala.org>) allowed one to click
on the 1997 Annual Conference and from there click on Pre-Conference
Institutes for a description of those offerings. There was also a button on
the home page for Events, which brought up a list of options that in-
cluded Annual Conferences, Division Conferences, Chapter Conferences,
Public Programs, Institutes, Workshops, and Other Events. The only other
heading on ALA's home page that appeared applicable was for Educa-
tion, but this linked to information about the accredited M.L.S. programs
and had little relevance for professional development. The ASIS home
page (<http://www.asis.org>) had one link to Continuing Education and
another to Conferences. Taking the Continuing Education route, one
finds a number of relevant items. These include a description of ASIS's
continuing education philosophy and a catalog of continuing education
offerings, as well as links to annual and regional conference pages pro-
viding further relevant information.

    Finally, SLA had two relevant links on its home page (<http://
www.sla.org>). The first was under Conferences & Meetings, which gets
annual conference information including the continuing education of-
ferings held in conjunction with the conference. The second link was to
Educational/Career Opportunities which in turn linked to Professional
Development pages providing the contact information for SLA's profes-
sional development staff and an extensive list of activities. (As an aside,
SLA was the only one of the three organizations checked that had any-
thing readily accessible dealing with research. Choosing "research" gets

one to the SLA Research Agenda, a description of their research grant, and descriptions of recently funded projects.)

CONCLUSION

This brings up the original question of whether associations provide any value to their members and/or to the profession at large. If associations' activities in the areas of research and professional development can be used as indications of value, then it appears that associations in the library and information science field are making contributions to their members, especially if the activities noted above are representative of what the other library/information science associations are doing. What may be missing in both these areas is some kind of clearinghouse where information regarding research and/or professional development opportunities from multiple associations would be available. The individual associations may do a good job of keeping their members informed about what that association is doing; however, opportunities provided by other associations may be just as valuable. Clearinghouse-type efforts have been tried at the regional and local level, though keeping the information accurate and up-to-date is a very expensive and time-consuming process, one reason why little exists at the national or international level. A contribution to the profession along these lines would be welcome. So, are professional associations valuable? Ultimately, this question can only be answered by the associations' members as to whether they receive any value for the resources each one commits to these professional groups. However, it does appear that professional associations are enriching the library and information science field through their efforts in both research and professional development. Another way to look at the value of something is to speculate on what things would be like if the item in question were no longer available. So imagine, if you will, what our world would be like if there were no professional associations in the field of library and information science.

The "up side" would be that most of us would have a bit more discretionary income, since we would not be paying dues to one or more organizations or having to come up with all or part of conference expenses. The fact that there would be no more conferences means that more of us would be able to take vacations when and where we wish (within the parameters of things going on at the workplace), not scheduling things chronologically or geographically around an annual or mid-year conference. For many of us this also means *not* experiencing Miami, Atlanta, or New Orleans in summer and Chicago, Cleveland, or Philadelphia in winter. Those meetings/workshops that would be held would be sponsored by library schools or other education-oriented providers, consortia or informal groups of libraries, or vendors and most likely held on a local or regional basis, making them somewhat easier to attend.

The amount of professional junk mail would decrease or at least it would be harder to identify us individually since there would be no more membership mailing lists to sell. There would be no more association by-laws for us to understand and occasionally revise, no more ballots to send back, and no more presidents' messages all saying essentially the same thing. These are all things we would do without for lack of our professional associations.

However, while we are on vacation spending our new found wealth, consider what the "down side" of this scenario might be. First, there would be no "umbrella" type organizations to speak on behalf of the profession. This might not affect larger institutions like the New York Public Library or the University of California, Berkeley, libraries. However, the smaller libraries would very much feel that they had no voice in professional issues ranging from open access to information to setting postage and telecommunications rates. Without association meetings, even once or twice a year, librarians would begin to feel isolated. Having no other professional contact or contact only with the same group can be demoralizing. It is granted that some of the electronic methods of communication can be helpful to counter this but consider two things. First, one of the fastest growing units within the Special Libraries Association is the Solo Librarians Division—those individuals working as the only information professional in a library and information center. Second, one of the highlights now of any ALA conference is when the wombats (those people who are prime users of the Stumpers listserv) get together to put names with faces after communicating electronically for so long. Learning what your colleagues are doing, how they are dealing with the same problems you face, or simply knowing they are there is very reassuring. Keeping up with new resources and new technology will become more of a challenge. Some of this kind of material that crosses our desks will no longer do so as association mailing lists disappear. To compare the products/ services of a number of different vendors would require contacting vendors directly and dealing with them in that manner rather than roaming the aisles of the conference exhibit hall and accomplishing one's objective in an hour or two.

Without professional associations, the support for research and professional development discussed above would disappear. The type or amount of research being conducted may not suffer. However, dissemination of the results would be affected by the loss of programs, workshops, and publications. Our associations also help provide a continuum from library science to information science, bringing all interested parties together to facilitate communication, cooperation, and understanding. Without our associations, this effort would be severely handicapped. Furthermore, without our associations, our primary professional reading

would become *Library Journal, Library Trends,* and the Haworth Press publications.

But perhaps the biggest impact of this nonassociation scenario would be felt by library directors. Without professional associations of which they become officers, without professional association conferences at which they attend and/or deliver papers and go to meetings, and without professional association publications of which they become editors, reviewers, and/or authors, library directors would have to devote more of their time to the day-to-day running of their libraries. If they exist for no better reason than to keep library directors busy, our professional associations play an important role.

It would seem the negatives outweigh whatever advantages there might be in having no professional associations. The preliminary conclusion remains intact—professional associations in library and information science do provide value to their members.

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