The conference experience: Past, present, and future

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I've just come back from attending both the Special Libraries Association (SLA) Annual conference in San Antonio and the American Libraries Association (ALA) Annual conference in San Francisco. I'm sure I've gone to every SLA conference for the last 10 years and for the last 3 years of those years as a member or candidate of the SLA Board of Directors. This means I have spent some considerable time and worry thinking about the annual conference experience and the value that it offers participants, the future of professional conferences in general, and the future of the SLA annual conference in particular. My attendance at the ALA annual conference is much less frequent, having gone to only three conferences in the past 10 years. This infrequency probably stems from my absolute lack of interest in, understanding of, or desire for any involvement in ALA governance issues. My interest in attending ALA is much more casual, mainly to pick up general information about the profession from the meetings or from the large exhibit hall. For exhibits, ALA is truly awesome, probably the largest exhibit hall in the library field today.

At the SLA Mid-Winter meeting in St. Louis in January 2000, the Board of Directors met in a special long-range planning session to discuss issues and problems facing the Association. From the planning session five issues emerged which the Board felt needed addressing and for which they established five Task Forces: conferences, membership, partnerships, branding, and simplification. In many ways the Board saw these issues as interwoven and affecting one another. The Board established the Task Forces to help ensure that the Association could respond quickly and efficiently to the one constant that we did see and could count on — change. The Board mandated the Task Forces to get input from members who could spend the time and effort necessary to study the issues. Susan DiMattia, then president of the Association, appointed the members of those Task Forces, but the leaders of the Chapters and Divisions and members were strongly urged and encouraged to participate. Many did step forward to participate in the Task Forces. In some cases, such as the Branding Task Force, some specific members having experience with branding were sought out. The Partnership Task Force was the first to complete its assignment, as it had the clearest and perhaps easiest mandate of all the Task Forces. The Partnership Task Force was asked to identify other organizations and conferences with which SLA could partner for the benefit of its members.

At this year's annual conference meeting the Board received the final reports of three of the five Task Forces and an interim report from the only remaining Task Force still in existence after the annual conference. The three Task Forces, which issued their final reports at the June annual conference, were Membership, Conference Planning, and Simplification. The Branding Task Force gave a status report on its ongoing efforts. Each Task Force came up with some new and innovative possibilities and recommendations that should help make the Association as a whole more responsive to the membership, help attract potential members from areas traditionally not linked to SLA, make it easier and more affordable for international members to join, participate, and benefit from the Association, and improve the conference experience for all attendees by devoting more time to education and networking and less to SLA governance issues. The Conference Planning Task Force was charged with making the conference experience as complete and up-to-date as possible and, again, to ensure that time spent at the conference dealt with substantive and useful issues to members, rather than SLA governance issues.

For all of the suggestions of the Conference Planning Task Force in particular, I recommend to your attention the following SLA Web site, where you can find the Task Force recommendations in full: http://www.sla.org/content/SLA/Structure/board/index/june01doclist/doca0148.cfm. A word of caution if you read it: Not all the recommendations of the Task Forces can or will be implemented by the Board for a variety of reasons. For example, one recommendation from the Task Force on Conference Planning, while excellent, is just not
possible to implement at this time. The Task Force recommended that electronic meetings handle SLA governance issues and balloting before the annual conference is held. As much as many members of the Board and Leadership may like the idea of conducting the Association's business that way and not wasting precious conference time on those issues, the Association is incorporated in the State of New York. The laws of the State of New York currently do not allow any Association or Corporation to conduct its official business electronically. So until either the laws of the State of New York change or the Association reincorporates in a state which does allow electronic voting, we cannot implement this recommendation. The Board did ask this and all the Task Forces to try to not be bound by current rules and restrictions on the books and to think as much as possible—forgive the cliché—"out of the box." There is certainly a move within state legislatures to allow businesses and associations to conduct their business electronically, so hopefully sooner, rather than later, SLA too will be able to conduct business meetings and votes electronically.

The Conference Planning Task Force made other recommendations to change many of the current traditional ways SLA holds its conference. One highly controversial proposal suggested that the conference be held every other year rather than annually. To many members, seeing their colleagues and friends only every other year loomed as a horrifying prospect, illustrating what truly draws professionals to conferences. In my opinion. The Board did discuss these and all the recommendations of the Task Forces at its strategic planning session, held just before the Board of Directors met. These sessions allow for a greater discussion of the implications of recommendations and provide, in some cases, some useful background on why the recommendations were made.

I will take my experiences as an example—maybe not a typical example—but I think indicative of why people attend conferences during their careers. I first attended ALA and SLA annual conferences when I was graduating with my MLS degree. I attended both because one was close to my Graduate School and the other lay on my way back home after having completed my course work. My sole purpose in attending was the same as probably every young graduate’s— the chance to interview for and possibly land my first professional position.

My next SLA conference occurred some 10 years later, as the rotation policy for librarians attending conferences at the large research institution where I worked finally reached me. I had also worked for the SLA president that year and she had appointed me to a committee. Part of my duties on that committee involved working with a Division to plan a program for the conference. I wanted to make sure that program went well and, equally as important by then, to finally meet the wonderful person I had worked with via the phone, who helped me plan my first meeting, and with whom I had lots of fun planning the program. Since I enjoyed working on the program with my new friend, I agreed to run for chair-elect in order to continue planning programs with her. Whatever office she held, I gladly followed.

From my experience I hope readers will learn to take an active interest in the professional association which best meets their interests and needs.
easy for all of us to be involved only in our day-to-day activities and not volunteer time and efforts to our professional association. If you do become involved, you will end up saying the same thing that everyone I know who serves as an active volunteer for SLA says: "I got far more out of it than I was ever able to give."

Personal contacts, all that people get from each other in personal interactions, probably explain the resistance to having the SLA annual conference every 2 years instead of 1, even in this day and age with all the many new, smaller topic conferences to attend. SLA and ALA conferences and activities facilitate people with common interests and needs getting together. While I personally have found it easier to make those connections at SLA, once you know where and how to look, you can also find them ALA as well.

At SLA this year, I had the privilege of attending the Geography and Maps Division 60th Anniversary as well as the Information Technology Division 50th Anniversary celebrations. In each event it was obvious that whether big or small, the groups were about the connections of colleagues. Subject interests may have brought them together, but it is what they learn from each other that keeps them involved in the group, as the conference programs. In the Geography and Maps celebration, the most senior member shared her pictures and memories of the field trips to map libraries and map facilities which the Division has sponsored for the last 40 years.

The Membership Task Force report can be found at http://www.sla.org/content/SLA/Structure/board-index/june01doclist/doca0139.cfm. Their charge was as follows:

1. Prepare a membership definition.
2. Create a Virtual Member category for a trial audience.
3. Redesign the Student category to attempt to offer SLA virtual membership to all qualified students at no charge.
4. Design a flexible plan to allow all members to choose member services.

The Board really wanted this Task Force to look for ways to attract students, newer professionals, and international members to SLA. The Task Force looked at the membership categories unexamined for some time, specifically the student category. They rejected the idea of a free service, ultimately, because they felt that people only value things they’ve paid for, and that if the student category were free, though it might induce many to join, they would probably not value the membership and become committed members when no longer students. The plan for flexible services was also found too impractical for the Association.

In the early 1990s SLA made a decision to truly commit to becoming an international association. SLA decided then to sponsor the second International Special Libraries conference, which became the Global 2000 conference held in October 2000 in Brighton, England. Many of the people who made the Global 2000 conference so memorable, the “Global Fellowship attendees,” could only come because of the sponsorship they were given. The Board realized many potential international SLA members needed significant sponsorship to ever become active SLA members, because of the expense involved in attendance. The Board also realized the different needs for services. This is one of the reasons the Task Force was asked to examine the issue and concept of a virtual membership. A virtual member might not pay for, receive, or need the “Who’s Who in SLA,” but instead rely on the information in the members-only section of the SLA Web site.

The Simplification Task Force, as it turned out, had perhaps the most difficult challenge of all, since one of the hardest things you can try to do is make a large organization try to function in an easier fashion. You can see the report at the following SLA Web site: http://www.sla.org/content/SLA/Structure/board-index/june01doclist/doca0149a.cfm. Perhaps the best recommendations coming out of the Task Forces efforts were to appoint people to positions which actually have to be done and not to waste a good volunteer by giving them a temporary or unnecessary job. Not every position in the Association needs doing every year. Working on bylaws and strategic planning are two shining examples. Five- or 10-year strategic plans certainly don’t need review every year. The Task Force recommended that bylaws for the Association and its units should be shorter and only cover operational essentials.

The Branding Task Force recommended at the Winter 2001 meeting in Savannah, Georgia, that the Association hire a public relations firm with expertise in branding to look at the possibility of changing the Association’s name. The firm hired will have many discussions with members about the pros and cons of the current name and what potential alternatives might better represent what the membership is and does today. Many trained in the field of librarianship no longer really work in a traditional library and a look at how the name might become more inclusive and more accurately reflect its members is the purpose of this firm’s work.

I would be remiss in not noting the biggest change happening at SLA in at least 20 years. David R. Bender, the SLA Executive Director since 1979, retires September 4, 2001. Roberta Shaffer, formerly the Dean of the Library School at the University of Texas at Austin, will become SLA’s new Executive Director. Roberta Shaffer has the opportunity to take the best of the Task Forces recommendations to better position SLA for the future. For those of us who had the pleasure of interviewing and selecting Roberta, we all felt strongly she was the person to lead the changes necessary to make SLA as responsive, flexible, and strong as it needs to be to better serve members in the future.

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