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Jump Start Your Professional Participation by Serving on a Conference Planning Committee: Tips for ILL Professionals

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Keywords:

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Introduction

Based upon my experience serving on the planning committee for the 5th (2006) and 6th (2007) annual Northwest Interlibrary Loan & Resource Sharing (NWILL) Conference, this essay provides guidance to ILL staff and librarians seeking to contribute professionally outside of their own organizations. Specifically, I encourage

ILL professionals at all levels to consider volunteering for the planning committee of an ILL-specific conference, or perhaps establishing their own regional event, as one way to begin serving the profession on a wider scale.

Planners of conferences and events, such as NWILL, not wholly sponsored or organized by a single organization, are often eager for new volunteers to join their team. There is always plenty of work to do and new volunteers bring fresh ideas to the table to help ensure that an annual conference is interesting and stimulating each year. Furthermore, the NWILL conference welcomes both staff and librarians to participate on its planning committee, often preferring a balanced mix of staff and librarians because of the unique perspectives and insights of each. Additionally, staff from a myriad of library types are welcome, as the NWILL conference hosts different sessions geared toward a variety of library settings.

Academic librarians, in particular, often need to serve on committees outside of their own organization to enhance a promotion or tenure package. While participating on committees within ALA, its committees or chapters, or another library association is one route for this, serving on a conference planning committee presents another option. The latter often do not require formal application, are open for all to volunteer without any membership dues, and typically do not require competition with others for limited available positions. For those initially reluctant to volunteer for a group such as RUSA STARS (<http://www.ala.org/ala/rusa/rusaourassoc/rusasections/stars/rusastars.htm>), starting with a regional, rather than nationwide, committee may be more manageable,

intimate, and hands-on. This is also a good option for a librarian new to the profession, a librarian new to ILL, or any librarian or staff wishing to learn more about ILL services before considering joining a broader ALA committee.

Even for staff who might not face the often daunting tenure or promotion process, volunteering for a conference planning committee would certainly demonstrate one's dedication to the job, and his or her interest in seeking effective, efficient, and innovative ways to manage the ILL operation, which should no doubt positively impact any appraisals to which the volunteer is subject.

Benefits

Serving on a conference planning committee produces numerous benefits to the individual, in addition to the obvious benefits to the conference and the profession. As is generally true of attendance at events outside one's organization, time away from the daily routine of an ILL unit helps to energize and restore enthusiasm for one's tasks upon return to the workplace.

Additionally, serving as the Sponsor/Exhibitor Coordinator for the Northwest Interlibrary Loan & Resource Sharing Conference for the past two years enabled me to:

- Network with professionals working in similar settings nationwide
- Meet library-related vendors and learn more about their products and services

- Utilize and enhance my project management skills
- Develop new skills in communicating with external agencies and multiple vendors, and soliciting sponsorships and other donations
- Learn more about trends and innovations in the field of Resource Sharing
- Gain a better understanding of the variety of systems, software, equipment, workflows, and staffing structures used across ILL operations
- Feel engaged in the current state of ILL services at least on a regional, if not national, level and empowered in influencing the future of these services
- Have the opportunity to shape the speakers and topics of the conference, which in turn helps to influence the direction of ILL services on a scale far greater than just within my institution
- Enjoy a sense of satisfaction when the event finally arrives and I saw the attendees learning, networking, and enjoying themselves and knowing that I played a role in facilitating those opportunities

Additionally, a role coordinating vendors for a conference will test your organizational, time management, multi-tasking, interpersonal, and communication skills. Among those skills, you'll also develop creativity, attention to detail, and event planning skills, along with the abilities to think and plan ahead, meet deadlines, and adapt and respond quickly. One's powers of persuasion will also be utilized and enhanced, both in soliciting financial support from vendors, as well as persuading potential speakers to accept the conference's invitation to participate. As is true of most experiences, flexibility and a sense of humor definitely come in handy for such a task.

Furthermore, with the advent of blogs, wikis, virtual meeting software, and other Web 2.0 and social networking applications, someone with these skills (or the interest in developing them) could put them to use to support the planning of a conference. That was the case with the 2007 NWILL when we experimented with a “Place” (similar to a wiki) at NETCIPIA, utilized Sporg for the event registration page, and took advantage of Microsoft Office’s Live Meeting tool to enable conference calls between conference committee members separated across numerous states. Not only did the committee member who developed these for us expand her skills, but getting to use them afforded each of the rest of those on the committee the opportunity to experiment and interact with them as well.

While ILL units are often minimally staffed, depending on workload volume and size of the institution, and their staff typically kept consistently busy, ILL staff (as opposed to librarians who might have broader roles within the library and greater opportunity to attend and contribute to other committees and conferences) sometimes feel isolated from the larger library community, and have difficulty truly understanding how valuable their work is to the library’s patrons and the goals of the overall organization. Attending an ILL-specific conference, as well as serving on a planning committee for such an event, allows staff to meet others who struggle with similar (and sometimes unique) issues, as well as to find common ground and innovative ways to address the problems they face on a daily or regular basis. In addition to networking with others working in ILL, committee members meet new friends on the committee, as the team works toward

the common goal of pulling together a meaningful and successful event. Committee members also hear how policies, practices, and technologies are applied or implemented across a spectrum of ILL environments, both through attendance at the conference sessions, but also through the informal, exploratory discussions among the committee as they prepare for the event.

Most events only require a one-year or one-time commitment. Nonetheless, if you stay on for more than one year, whether in the same specific role or not, the second time around will be much less stressful, since you (and others who have served on the committee multiple times) will have learned from the first. Furthermore, in subsequent years, you may have the opportunity to mentor newer committee members as they join your ranks.

Examples of ILL Events

Below are a few examples of ILL-specific conferences for which one might volunteer as a member of the planning committee. While I outline a selection of events in regions across the United States, readers may be familiar with many others as well. Keep in mind that, while useful, it is not essential to have attended an event prior to volunteering for its planning committee. Furthermore, although it is ideal to volunteer for an event held in your area of the country, this too is not imperative given the availability of conference calling and online meeting software.

The two-day Northwest Resource Sharing & Interlibrary Loan (NWILL) Conference has been held each September in Portland, Oregon, although new venues, locations, and schedules are being explored for future events. While its name suggests a Northwest focus, attendees from institutions nationwide are encouraged to participate, including both librarians and paraprofessionals. Details about the 2007 conference, as well as information about the five previous conferences are available at <http://nwill.org/>.

Its site summarizes the event as follows: “Designed for staff in libraries of all types and sizes, this conference aims to help you streamline processing, utilize new tools and solve problems. We will meet again to discuss how individuals and groups can improve missions, goals, codes and standards through technology, policies, practices and people.” It also lists the following opportunities for attendees.

- Discuss the future of resource sharing and ILL
- Obtain practical information for a variety of resource sharing operations
- Discuss issues and solutions with colleagues from the Northwest and beyond
- See demonstrations of resource sharing tools, including free resources

Examples of coordinating roles for NWILL include:

- Sponsor/Exhibitor Coordinator
- Local Arrangements Coordinator
- Treasurer/Secretary

- General Chair & Co-Chair (optional)
- Webmaster/Web Site Coordinator
- Scholarship Coordinator
- Program Coordinator

Furthermore, all conference planning committee members participate in determining the theme, topics, and speakers for the event, and are generally assigned to coordinate and host or moderate at least one individual presentation or breakout session.

Additional roles that might exist with other conference committees include those specific to registration, publicity, printing of conference materials, and more.

Another well-established and highly respected ILL-specific conference is the annual Colorado ILL Conference, now in its 39th year for 2008. The May 2008 event, entitled “All Aboard the Wagon Train: Innovations in Resource Sharing,” will be held in Denver, while future conferences rotate around the state. As of this writing, a rudimentary web site for the 2008 event is developing at <http://coloradovirtuallibrary.org/coloillconf/>.

NWILL attendees are asked in the survey following the conference if they are interested in serving on the next year’s planning committee. Others who are interested may simply contact the past or future committee chair directly. For both the Northwest and Colorado conferences, the chair of the current or upcoming conference, as well as existing committee members, are generally listed on the event’s web site, along with their institutional affiliations and email addresses. The 2008 committee chair for NWILL

is Chelle Batchelor (michelle.batchelor@unlv.edu), while Cynthia Fields (cfields@do.usbr.gov) and Franca C. Rosen (frosen@jefferson.lib.co.us) are filling the role for the next Colorado event.

Another event for which one might consider volunteering is the one-day TexShare Interlibrary Loan Workshop, held roughly every 15 months. The 7th such workshop was held in September 2006 in Austin and was preceded by an ILLiad training session, while the 8th one is now under development. Information from the 7th ILL workshop is available at <http://www.texshare.edu/ill-courier/7thworkshop/index.html>. Regarding the agenda for the 2006 workshop, the site states, "With topics such as The Future of Interlibrary Loan (with nationally known speakers), Copyright (with special emphasis on ILL circumstances), and a panel of your peers discussing ILL Best Practices, this workshop will offer something for libraries of all types and sizes." As of this writing, a web site for the 8th workshop is in progress.

Prior to the 2006 workshop, the events were only open to TexShare members, but recent workshops have been open to non-members as well. According to Sue Bennett (sbennett@tsl.state.tx.us), coordinator for the 2007 and 2008 workshops, "The Texas State programs have working groups that help shape the various programs with the approval of our Board. The ILL/Courier working group plans the workshops, but is always willing to take on any volunteers." She also explains that while the workshops have thus far been sponsored solely by the Texas State Library, they are hoping to

supplement event costs for 2008 with exhibitors and/or sponsors, offering another opportunity for volunteers to serve in this role.

A third event focused on ILL was the New York State Resource Sharing Summit, which was held in June 2007 in Saratoga Springs, NY. The event, which was open to anyone, was attended by both ILL practitioners and library administrators. Details from the summit are available at http://nylink.org/events/rs_summit07.cfm, where the event was described as follows: “This summit will explore successful resource sharing models and programs currently in place throughout the state and beyond. Summit participants will learn about best practices, what the future of resource sharing might look like and discuss how libraries in New York can work together to further enhance resource sharing. Through discussion and participation, attendees will develop a broad understanding of the current state of resource sharing in New York and explore new ways of collaborating for the future.”

According to Jonathan Penn, Resource Sharing Librarian at SUNY-Albany, while the 2007 summit was the first of its kind, the group is considering hosting a follow-up summit in the fall of 2008. Members of the 2007 planning committee, all librarians at Nylink member libraries, are listed on the web site. However, because the organization specifically sought representation from various library consortia and groups in New York State, Nylink staff suggested possible committee members for the 2007 event and then asked particular individuals about their willingness to serve in this capacity. Penn further explained, “We do not have a planning committee for the 2008 Resource

Sharing Summit. One of the outcomes of the 2007 Summit was the formation of two working groups. One working group is looking at issues related to delivery of ILL materials. The other working group is looking at tools used for discovery. It is expected that these working groups will provide input and help to shape the agenda for the 2008 Resource Sharing Summit.” Nonetheless, interested parties associated with Nylink may wish to inquire about participating in planning a future summit.

The 1st Annual Midwest Interlibrary Loan Conference was held at Loras College in Dubuque, Iowa on April 13, 2007 (details at <http://dalinc.org/midwestill/program.html>). The 2nd annual conference, also subtitled “Exchanging Knowledge Between Libraries” will be held in the same location on April 11, 2008. The web site for the 2008 event at <http://dalinc.org/midwestill/> lists its Special Committees for the 2008 conference in its ‘About Us’ section. A ‘Contact Us’ link is also provided there to send an email to a conference planning committee member, while DiAnn Kilburg (DiAnn.Kilburg@loras.edu) and Joyce Meldrem (joyce.meldrem@loras.edu), both of Loras College, serve as a primary contacts for the event.

The Midwest ILL Conference is sponsored by DALINC (Dubuque Area Library Information Consortium) “to offer interlibrary loan personnel the opportunity to learn about current issues, copyright, software, and work flow. The conference will also provide an opportunity for networking among all types of libraries.” According to Joyce Meldrem, “the event is open to any ILL professionals – our intent with the conference is

to give an opportunity for ILL professionals to share their knowledge with a wider audience than they would often reach.”

Plans for the future of the conference include offering it every other year following the 2008 event. The planning committee for the 2008 conference was formed by the Dubuque Area Library Information Consortium, a group of 15 area libraries committed to providing communication and learning opportunities. Because of the large pool of library personnel within the DALINC libraries, the committee does not currently accept external volunteers. Nonetheless, anyone associated with a DALINC library is welcome to volunteer. According to Meldrem, the process works as follows: “We send an e-mail to all of the directors and ask them for volunteers and they individually speak with their library staff. Once that is done, the volunteers’ names are sent to the coordinators of the event (this year, and myself) and we call a meeting to get the ball rolling. At that meeting, people volunteer for the subcommittees that they would like to work with.”

With the theme of “Refresh Your Perspective,” the Florida Resource Sharing 2007 Conference is another option for would-be volunteers (details at <http://www.fiu.edu/~hastyd/florida2007.html>). The three-day event for 2007, which is open to anyone, will occur from December 12-14 in Orlando, FL, and will begin with an ILLiad Continuing Education Pre-Conference Event. Topics to be covered include interlibrary loan and resource sharing, circulation, work flow, staff training, networking, copyright, and continuing education.

The 2007 Florida event will be the second of its kind, with the first one, in 2006, entitled the "Florida ILLiad Workshop and Conference." While the 2007 planning team has yet to gauge whether there is sufficient demand to offer the conference every year, it is their hope to continue to offer it. Planners for the 2006 conference were limited to two individuals, with additional support staff from the University of Central Florida (UCF). The planning committee for the 2007 event consisted of five volunteers who came forward through the joint Circulation-ILL Committee meeting of the State University Libraries of Florida. The process for seeking and accepting volunteers for the planning committee currently lacks formal guidelines, but these will likely be developed in the future should a 2008 event be established. Those potentially interested in volunteering for the Florida Resource Sharing post-2007, can email either Douglas Hasty (hastyd@fiu.edu) of Florida International University or Kristine Shrauger (kshrauge@MAIL.UCF.EDU) of the University of Central Florida.

Considerations

As with any such activity outside the scope of one's regular duties, those interested in volunteering for an event planning committee should consult with his/her supervisor and/or library administration before agreeing to serve in this capacity. Depending upon the role or roles you assume within the committee, the time commitment might be either extensive or minimal. If you have a preference for or limitation to how much time you commit to the project, you may be able to state that up front to the rest of the committee. Even if you have a limited role, you will benefit from

being part of the group and the others will appreciate your efforts. One should keep in mind, however, that, particularly if the planning team is relatively small, one's role often expands incrementally, but sometimes substantially, throughout the process, and tasks often take longer than one initially expects. Furthermore, planning a large-scale event can be quite stressful and, at times, frustrating.

Another consideration is that, again depending upon your role(s), you may not be able to fully attend each of the conference sessions during the actual event, and therefore, might not get the most out of the experience from an attendee perspective. For example, as the Sponsor/Exhibitor Coordinator for NWILL, I missed the beginning of the keynote speaker, was unable to attend a few conference sessions, and took my lunches and breaks sporadically because I was either helping the exhibitors set up or tear down, or checking in with them (genuinely seeing if they needed anything, but also schmoozing a bit to help ensure continued support in future years) throughout the event.

Finally, while one can often avoid attending on-site meetings prior to the event if you don't live near the host state or city, serving on the planning committee will require some funding to attend. Typically, volunteers do not pay registration fees, and some meals and/or snacks maybe included, but travel and lodging expenses will not generally be covered by the conference for planning committee members. As a result, one would need funding from his or her institution if the volunteer did not have allocated professional or personal funds to use for this purpose.

Conclusion

Despite these cautions, I highly recommend that ILL professionals consider volunteering to help plan such events as those mentioned here or seeking out similar opportunities. Doing so will put your own skills and ideas to work to influence the future of your chosen area of library services, and you're sure to find it a challenging, stimulating, and rewarding experience.