Papers and programs: Librarians adopt a scholar's model

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ACRL's Arizona Chapter, which is also the College and University Libraries Division of the Arizona State Library Association (ASLA), recently completed its first call for papers. Librarians responded by submitting proposals that were judged by a review committee, and the best of these were selected for presentation at the annual statewide conference. With funding from the ACRL Chapters Council and ASLA, the papers are about to be published and distributed to the membership.

The idea of using the scholar's model for reporting to colleagues in a discipline the results of research, experimentation, and innovation is not new to librarians. Long practiced by faculty, the academic tradition of making a call for papers, competitively evaluating the proposals, and presenting the results before an audience of interested fellow practitioners has been used by ACRL in five national conferences. Arizona may be the most recent state chapter to offer this opportunity to its members; many others sponsor sessions for contributed papers either at the state association level or at chapter-sponsored conferences. A number of lessons were learned by the sponsors in the process of organizing the contributed papers sessions; an equal number of learning opportunities were available for contributors. Sharing some of these lessons with other ACRL chapters who sponsor contributed paper sessions is one purpose of this paper. Offering some suggestions to users of the traditional scholar's model for presenting papers is another.

Benefits of using the scholar's model

Writing and presenting papers has benefits for both the individual and the profession. For the individual librarian, it is an opportunity to develop an idea or report on progress made in a research project and to obtain feedback and reactions from colleagues with similar interests and expertise. It provides a stage on which to develop or improve both writing and speaking skills. The public presentation process is one which facilitates networking, since it can bring together librarians who are interested in a particular topic. Rewards for participation are significant; presenters receive professional visibility, and papers that are given may be published.

On a larger scale, there are benefits to the profession and to individual institutions as well. Universities and colleges can also gain visibility through the participation of librarians who report on the creativity, scholarship, or innovation taking place at the institution. The opportunity and rewards for the individual may provide motivation for undertaking projects that have on-the-job benefits to the library. The public forum as a way to share

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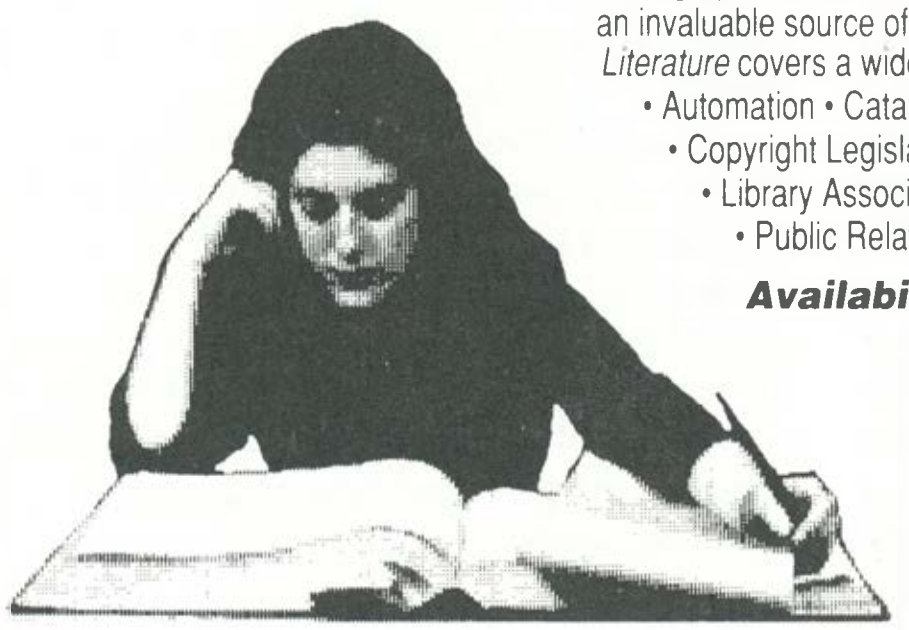

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ideas and innovation, and stimulate discussion with other practitioners, is the greatest value of using the scholar's model.

Local ACRL chapters that provide the opportunity for librarians to participate in paper sessions are not only stimulating individuals to engage in what is for many a new professional experience, but helping to improve the quality of papers that may eventually reach the national level. The competitive selection process allows participants to see how their proposals fare when they are judged by other professionals and compared with work submitted by others. Because the expense of attending a statewide or local conference is usually much less than what is required to travel to a national meeting, most librarians can participate without making a large financial investment. Sessions are also demonstrations of quality that stand as learning models for future participants.

Evaluative criteria for papers

Organizers of paper sessions need to develop and refine the criteria that will be used to evaluate proposals. The criteria must be clearly expressed at the time the call for papers is made to provide guidelines for those who will develop and submit proposals. It will also insure fairness in the evaluation process if expectations about topics, content, and format have been established. Some questions and observations that can facilitate the development of criteria for both evaluators and participants follow.

Are the papers related to the conference theme? Or, do the papers need to be associated with the conference theme? If particular "tracks" or preferred topics have been defined, do the themes of submitted papers fall within these topics?

Will a particular paper appeal to a large audience? While audience appeal is desirable, proposed papers on topics considered "different" should be appraised with care as these may be innovative or provide needed perspective to the aggregate of acceptable papers. A good number of papers will fall naturally into standard categories such as reference, online or instructional services, collection development, faculty liaison, or other defined topics or themes. Evaluators need to seek appropriate balance between audience appeal and the importance of a well-rounded collection of informative papers.

Will it be possible to cover the topic adequately in the time allocated? This may be difficult to assess, but needs to be considered. Individuals who submit proposals may not think about the feasibility or possibility of practical time constraints. They are usually concerned with the critical elements of the topic, not with the actual presentation. As a result, evaluators need to consider proposals within the context of realistic time limitations.

Type or category of paper needs to be deliberated by the evaluators. Contributors need to be aware of possible categories such as research paper, position paper, or summary paper. If "research" papers have been requested, then a "how-we-do-it" paper may be inappropriate for presentation.

In the examination of contributed proposals, evaluators should look for a measure of innovation or creativity. Ideas or concepts that are innovative or different should be cultivated and receive serious consideration. A routine or standard summary of activities or procedures may be acceptable, too, particularly for relevant topics. A balance of application and theory is desirable.

Are ideas and methodology expressed with clarity and are goals and objectives evident? A methodology that is difficult to understand needs to be questioned. If the author is unable to clarify goals and objectives in the proposal, approval of the proposal will be difficult to justify. Evaluators need to focus on potential quality in these papers. Expression of goals and related methodology is a requisite for quality.

The question of balance should be examined. Ideally, proposals on topics related to both public services and technical services will be submitted and accepted for presentation. This will provide needed perspective and enhance universal appeal. Are proposals limited to academic libraries? If so, possible combinations of proposals from college libraries, university libraries, and community colleges may be considered to increase overall representation.

Quality of writing skills needs to be appraised with care and attention. Communication of ideas to peers and colleagues is a primary goal of this collegial program. Ability to write well and to express ideas with clarity is essential.

Evaluation of proposals

The evaluation process must apply the established criteria, and the panel of jurors must add their professional judgment in rating the proposals. It is through this process that the best proposals are selected to be developed into papers and presented at the conference. The proposal writing process is one in which those who are novices in the use of the scholar's model seem to have the most difficulty.

Identifying an appropriate and significant area for study or reporting is the first challenge. One way to successfully meet this challenge is to review possible topics and ideas and ask if they are innovative, experimental, or new. Do they offer creative solutions to problems that others face as well? What can others learn from what you will report? Can the application be used elsewhere? If some-

thing has been studied, what can be done with the evidence or conclusion? If an opinion is offered, what is the objective in doing so?

Producing a document that shows a planned strategy for developing the idea is another problem. Librarians often rely on reporting "how we do it" or "how we fixed it." These reports can be of real value, but only if the projects can serve as models for others in another setting. In order to do so, the report needs a research component that is provided by relevant statistics or evaluation that validates the success of the program. Proposals must include a methodology to provide this evidence. Curiously, some academic librarians, many of whom assist others in the research process on a daily basis, are unfamiliar with structuring research projects in their own discipline.

Proposal writers would do well to take advantage of the informal review process that is available to all through peers and colleagues in our libraries and academic departments. Using other librarians as a preliminary sounding board can provide good feedback. Asking the faculty with whom we work to read a proposal is another opportunity for getting constructive input. Many of them are experienced in using this model and can identify problem areas in proposals and in how the project or idea is presented. Librarians at the local level can provide growth opportunities for each other, and through using another scholar's model—that of collegiality—help develop stronger professional reporters and researchers. Seeking and providing input, advice, and constructive criticism are less obvious but not unimportant parts of the whole process.

The sessions and the papers

Participating in the actual sessions demands a different set of skills; these include organizing, researching, speaking, and writing. Librarians have had more experience with and exposure to these processes, and know how to approach and deliver a finished project. Keeping a presentation within the time constraints in paper sessions is a talent that many faculty members have difficulty developing, and the same holds true for some librarians. Composing a well-written report with appropriate visual support in graphs, charts, and examples is also a task that most librarians handle well. Whether from actual experience in going before students in classrooms, working on research projects or other job requirements that may call for organizing, writing, and speaking skills, librarians demonstrate expertise in carrying out this part of the scholar's model.

Conclusion

Librarians have adopted a model used by faculty for reporting and sharing research, experimentation, and innovation. Some of the skills required to use this model are both highly evident and often exercised by librarians in their work. Other skills that are needed are not as clearly evident, and some library professionals are unprepared to follow the model through lack of experience or training. Librarians can improve the ability to use the model effectively by increased exposure to the practice and the process. State-level sessions can provide the opportunity for both observers and participants to become more familiar with the scholar's model. Additionally, mechanisms and processes need to be developed and employed for providing constructive feedback to contributors on how to produce a successful proposal that will become a successful paper. Helping each other to develop this expertise is a worthy objective for local ACRL chapters that seek to provide professional development opportunities for members.

New ACRL publication on research perspectives

The latest volume in the *ACRL Publications in Librarianship* series, no. 47, has just been published. Edited by Mary Jo Lynch and Arthur P. Young, *Academic Libraries: Research Perspectives*, will give practitioners an expanded understanding of their daily work. More than a review of the literature, each essay in this collection examines recent research and current issues in a major topic in the light of the following questions: What have we learned from research that will help us deal with present and future issues? If past research is not relevant, why not? What research questions should be addressed now and what methodologies appropriate?

The collection includes the following essays:

- "Collection Development and Management," by Charles Osburn
- "Bibliographic Control," by Elaine Svenonius
- "Access Services," by Jo Bell Whitlatch
- "Instructional Services," by Mary George
- "Bibliometrics: Library Use and Citation Studies," by Paul Metz
- "Management Theory and Organizational Structure," by Beverly P. Lynch

• "Insurmountable Opportunities: Advanced Technology and the Academic Library," by Bill Potter

• "Analysis and Library Management," by Malcolm Getz

Mary Jo Lynch is director of the American Library Associations's Office for Research. Arthur P. Young is director of the library at the University of South Carolina.

Academic Libraries: Research Perspectives may be ordered for $27.50 from ALA Publishing, 50 E. Huron St., Chicago, IL 60611. ISBN 0-8389-0532-3.

Poster preparation for ALA Annual Conference

By Suzanne D. Gyeszly

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The first poster session was introduced in Philadelphia in 1982 during the American Library Association Annual Conference. Since the beginning, it became very popular among librarians, both for participants as well as observers. The number of applications, participants, subject topics, and observers have increased during the past years. Among the most popular subject categories are: automation, technology, cataloging systems, public awareness, publishing, services to special groups, collection development, serials, special collections, reference and information services, bibliographic instructions and education, management, personnel, and planning. Last year in Dallas 105 posters were exhibited in thirty major subject categories. The purposes of the poster sessions are to:

1. promote research project(s) of an individual librarian or a team.
2. provide an effective communication of ideas and research.
3. present a broad range of topics in an informal way.
4. provide the opportunity for both beginners and experienced librarians to participate in a national conference in a juried session.
5. place the presenter's institution in a national spotlight.
6. obtain valuable information on innovative programs, in a relatively short time period.

Preparation for a successful poster session

Based on my personal experiences after participating in several poster sessions since 1982, and currently preparing three posters for the Chicago Annual Conference, I strongly believe that the hardest task is to complete the first poster. Therefore, the purpose of my article is to provide a "hands-on" experience for all the librarians who are struggling with their current research and poster or planning to participate in a poster session in the future.

Suggested calendar of events

September to December

Identify the future research or subject topic(s) for a poster. Subject should be relevant to the researcher's interest or institution. If "seed money" is needed to execute the project, the library director, university, institution administration or outside sources may be approached for funding. If funding is not available, but the researcher still wants to proceed with the project, I believe that it is worthwhile to personally finance the work.

January

Obtain an official poster's abstract form and instruction manual from the ALA exhibit booth at the ALA Midwinter Meeting or submit a letter for the necessary information from ALA Headquarters in Chicago. Read all instructions before preparing the abstract. Prepare a well-written, short, but very specific abstract about the research project. The abstract should cover major areas: statement of the problem, objectives, methodology, anticipated research results and conclusions. Before the deadline, submit the poster's abstract to the Chair of the ALA Poster Session Committee using the official abstract form.