



Evidence Summary

Rejuvenation and Networking Motivates Librarians to Attend Conferences

A Review of:

Vega, Robert D. and Ruth S. Connell. "Librarians' Attitudes Toward Conferences: A Study." College & Research Libraries 68.6 (2007): 503-15.

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Objectives – To determine why professional librarians attend or do not attend conferences and to consider their attitudes toward the various conference offerings and whether conference attendance is important to their careers.

Design – An electronic mail list survey designed to collect both quantitative and qualitative data through closed and open-ended questions.

Setting – Mainly academic and public libraries in the U.S.A.

Subjects – A total of 794 librarians participated in the study.

Methods – The quantitative and qualitative data gathered from the survey were analyzed using statistical software. The quantitative items on the questionnaire regarded the following: years working as a librarian, age,

gender, average number of conferences attended each year, amount of financial support provided, and the importance of attending conferences. For qualitative analysis, the instrument included open-ended questions to gather comments about issues related to conferences. Electronic mail list subscriptions were used to reach approximately 17,000 potential respondents of whom 794 completed the survey.

Main Results – The study found the main reason the respondents attended conferences was to achieve professional rejuvenation (56%), and that this finding was associated with age: the older the librarian, the higher he or she would rate the need to stay updated in librarianship. The study also found that men as compared to women ranked rejuvenation as less important. Respondents who visited more conferences tended to rate rejuvenation as more important. Networking was also highly

valued (40%), although was not of significant importance among reference librarians.

Exhibits were considered to be very useful among older respondents, particularly older public librarians and older administrators from all types of libraries, but were regarded as less valuable among younger academic librarians. . Invited speakers were rated highly by academic librarians, but less highly by public librarians. General sessions primarily attracted newer and younger librarians, and poster sessions primarily appealed to academic librarians. Being able to add conference participation to the curriculum vitae was primarily of interest to younger academic librarians. Academic librarians rated roundtables as important.

Conclusion – Respondents primarily attended conferences for professional rejuvenation and networking, though felt these benefits were not necessarily related to conference content. Those who had worked longer as librarians valued exhibits more than those who were new in the field. Based on the results, further investigation is needed to answer the following questions:

- 1) Why do public librarians find poster sessions of low interest?
- 2) Why do men compared to women find professional rejuvenation less important?
- 3) Have more experienced librarians learned to navigate exhibits better?

The findings of this study would be useful to conference organizers.

Commentary

As pointed out in the article, investigators in previous studies have often allowed their own personal experiences to intervene in their evaluations. By performing a survey in the library community, the present authors have offered a broader perspective on this topic. Nevertheless, some comments are needed with regard to certain aspects of the methodology that was used.

The authors state that, in this survey, the total potential audience on electronic discussion lists consisted of 17,000 librarians, but that may be an overstatement due to the likely overlap of names on the targeted lists. In all 794 people took part in the study, mainly academic and public librarians. However, the reader is faced with inconsistent terminology in the article text and the questionnaire. 16% of the respondents identified themselves as being primarily library instructors, a category not included in the questionnaire, so must have selected the category “other” instead. Library instruction is important and well established in the library profession, and hence it should have been included as a separate category on the survey instrument. Without explanation that it is not included in the questionnaire, “instruction” is listed as a category in Table 1 in the article (508). Furthermore, the authors reported that the electronic mail lists they used were selected to reach a large and diverse audience. The results regarding diversity of the respondents could have been strengthened by including a question about “academic degree” in the survey. The authors also mentioned that the electronic mail lists were targeted to capture a variety of positions and settings (505), but a query about “position” was not included in the survey instrument. It would have been interesting if the authors had gathered information on how many respondents were in a managerial position and then correlated the results with the findings in Table 2 about preferred activities when attending conferences (509).

Professional rejuvenation received the highest rating for why respondents attended conferences, but it can be difficult to draw conclusions about that finding due to significant overlap between the conferences/activities chosen and the reasons for attending. Did the respondents acquire the most rejuvenation from general sessions or from any of the other categories? Also, as noted by the authors, “CV padding” has a negative connotation that might have affected the responses.

The authors further maintained that a free-form response is needed for the question concerning the amount of financial support provided for attending conferences. However, they did not present any conclusions or correlations regarding the impact of full or partial funding on conference participation.

This research contributes to general insight into what motivates librarians in different settings to attend conferences. The authors rightly acknowledge that further study is needed, which might be directed toward new research avenues aimed at determining why public librarians consider poster sessions to be of little interest, why men as compared to women rank professional rejuvenation as less important, and whether more experienced

librarians have learned to navigate exhibits better.

Another aspect that should be considered, as stated in part in the conclusion section of the article, is that such research would contribute information that can be useful in the areas of psychology and sociology, as well as in the practical implementation handled by conference organizers. Conference organizers would especially benefit from research results if the survey instrument is changed to include a question about whether respondents would be willing to evaluate future conferences. In addition, although not mentioned in the article, it might be of interest to design an investigation so the results could aid library managers in decision-making processes related to professional staff development.