

In November 2007, ALA president-elect Jim Rettig posed two questions on the NMRT listserv. NMRT members' responses, sans the authors' names, appear below.

First Question:

What have your best, most rewarding experiences in ALA been? What made them the best? How can ALA offer opportunities for such experiences to all of its members?

I work at the Library of Congress as support staff. I decided to go to ALA for the first time this year as it was in DC. One observation is that ALA seems to treat support staff as equals. One idea might be to recognize support staff attending with a similar kind of badge like the "first time" badge.

One of the most rewarding things for me is being a member of NMRT. I've been able to get leadership experience and meet other new librarians in a variety of different positions. Since I am a new librarian with a flexible career path, I also enjoy the many sections and roundtables that ALA offers to the varied interests and positions in our field.

To reiterate what others have said, my best, most rewarding experiences in ALA have been networking at conferences and involvement in committees (both in person and electronically). In particular, friendships and mentors that came about through ALA & NMRT have had the greatest impact.

My most rewarding experience in ALA has come from the trust my fellow NMRT-ers placed in me when I ran for office (I'm currently Networking Director). I really only knew a few people when I ran. Now I know a lot more people.

I love the people who are involved in NMRT and I follow their careers as they advance, or change direction. I most value the personal relationships that I have made through NMRT, and look forward to seeing my colleagues/friends at the conferences. I wanted my contribution to NMRT to be tangible, so I served on the Booth Committee.

Attending conferences is another rewarding experience for me...the energy and communication is not easily described. To see that many people who have similar goals and problems is very empowering and gives me a true sense of belonging to a great profession.

I'm wondering if regional conferences might help provide a conference feel for those who can't attend the large annual conferences. I know that means I probably won't get to see my friends from Florida or Seattle at such a regional event. Perhaps regional events could alternate with the Annual Conference every other year.

That is a tough one because best to me implies number 1 and I've had several that are equally rewarding in different ways. NMRT's resume review service has been very rewarding because they helped me get a job. If not for them, then I may not have gotten an interview at UCSB. They were kind enough to read the job posting, my letter of interest and CV and gave me great recommendations. They also caught a few typos!

Other just as equally rewarding experiences have been working on committees. This can be spread out by allowing people to volunteer for committees without committing to attendance at

ALA and ALA Midwinter. I have found attendance to be greatly enjoyable but also a bit overwhelming, especially the annual in June. I like smaller conferences and I have also found financial support to be minimal. I have been creative using services like CouchSurfing to find cheap if not free places to stay to help with the finances

The most rewarding experiences I have had in ALA have all been about personal connections - meeting new people, networking, meeting online friends for the first time, seeing old friends. I have been very lucky in my first year of active involvement, but I know that other new librarians are not so lucky.

NMRT, of course, is ideal for new librarians - welcoming to all and providing real opportunities to get involved. I have also had good luck getting into committees and really contributing to my divisions. On the other hand, I have a colleague who did not feel welcomed or respected when he attended (at Midwinter) an event held by the Instruction Section. He had personally contributed to some of the projects being discussed, but his opinions were not listened to. He felt that he was not welcomed or respected, and was left feeling like an outsider. He has remained in ALA, but his withdrawal from active participation is a real loss to all of us. That situation was one of the reasons that I decided to run for ALA Council - to help make sure that all parts of the organization are welcoming, not just to new/young librarians, but also to their ideas.

The best way for other members to have the positive kind of experience I had is probably through attending the conferences in person. This is at odds with the fact that I'd like to see ALA move to more virtual interactions. Perhaps there is a way to create a virtual space that is as dynamic as the NMRT meet & greet? In the end, however, it seems that which parts of ALA you try to get involved in can have a big impact on the quality of your experience. How can we make all divisions, sections, committees, and round tables as welcoming as NMRT? Throughout ALA we should be thrilled whenever someone new joins us, and ready to take advantage of their enthusiasm, ideas, and perspectives.

My most rewarding ALA experiences? This will sound corny, 1. ALA level committee work (I've been involved in ALA Membership Committee (pushed for streamlined processes and worked on the reactor panel for the membership dues structure study) and the OITP Advisory Committee (learned about how ALA Washington Office serves as a voice for librarians and librarianship - very occasionally seemingly against some members' wills, but always with a solid feel for what librarians and libraries are about and what they need to continue to function- and influenced positions taken on a bevy of "Information Technologies in Libraries" issues) 2. (a close second, btw) is the personal networking at conferences, in committee work, in the biblioblogosphere, and everywhere I've been involved.

3. Pestering "the people in the know" for info on upcoming events and discussions and occasionally heckling (quietly) the processes used to get Council stuff done.

4. Running for Council as a reformer. I've met so many passionate, engaged, interested, and interesting people who see things that need reformed (not just changed, but improved) and with suggestions for how to do things more efficiently.

I know I sound like a broken record, repeating everyone else's sentiments...but the best part of ALA has been my involvement in NMRT committee work and the chance to travel to conferences and meet colleagues from all over the nation. Conference attendance has also been a very good way to develop professionally and brainstorm to get new ideas. Another rewarding experience was participating in the Student to Staff program as a library school student. I was fortunate enough to have my travel expenses (mostly) paid and to get experience at the national level so early in my career! All I had to do was work for about 20 hours at the conference.

One way to provide similar experiences is to offer grants or scholarships for travel expenses to attend conferences and/or registration costs for online classes, webinars, etc. Working with corporate partners to do such things may be one way to continue to make this possible (one example: the 3M/NMRT grant). As mentioned above, the Student to Staff program is another example. Any way ALA could continue to do such things or provide support to the division/round table level to do such things would be helpful to a lot of people!

Most rewarding experience--like everyone else the contacts I've made through online relationships, conferences, and the emerging leaders program. The personal communication is what made them the best -- and the best parts of ALA are on the smaller level. More intro programs would be great--I was an emerging leader last year, and the people I met and contacts I made through it definitely helped make me "more at home". Reaching out to newbies and giving them some guidance seem to be what works best--NMRT definitely does this, but probably misses a lot of people. Giving them personal contact instead of something generic is needed--ALA is a big organization to navigate and can be overly daunting to someone who isn't vocal.

My best, most rewarding experiences in ALA have definitely been at the round table and committee level. NMRT has provided me with the opportunity to get involved and contribute to the organization and the profession. NMRT has encouraged and allowed me to take risks. Most importantly NMRT has allowed me to meet, get to know, and network with a diverse group of librarians. In my mind NMRT provides the blueprint and tools for the 21st century librarian. I've found that all the ways I've been involved in NMRT have transferred to my everyday librarian life of working with my library users, colleagues, local committee work, and sometimes everyday life. Committees beyond NMRT have primarily been programming committees, where my "librarian" skills have been expanded to bring in national speakers who both inform and entertain.

I've also been rewarded by some of ALA's programming. I always managed to learn about a new approach, project, or trend in libraries across the country. That sharing of information is one of the things that makes librarians great.

Continued access to committees and task forces are essential for ALA. This includes providing more opportunities for access to ALA committees. By access I mean both opportunity to serve as well as increasing access through the use of what are now standard technologies as well as cutting edge technology. In addition, ALA needs to develop ways for all members to have greater access to programs and materials. I am extremely appreciative of what Conference Services is able to pull together in terms of a calendar particularly for the Annual conference, but I often find myself making tough decisions when deciding what program to attend. Sometimes you can get to both, but other times you're forced to make a painful decision and lose out on learning about a new initiative or participating in a good discussion. There should be a way for me to use my online conference planner to put together a schedule and get on a list or be provided with a password for information that might be posted after the conference for those sessions so I can hear an audiorecording or watch streaming video or access the PowerPoint of the missed session. This would be particularly useful for those sessions you just happen to find.

I agree with what C**** said about making conference content available electronically. I would love to see an "electronic only" conference registration, which would allow users access to podcasts, streaming audio/video, and electronic versions of handouts. I understand that this would require buy-in from presenters and would probably need to be eased in, but I think this is a way that ALA could be innovative.

The ALA Communities were a good idea for electronic discussion and collaboration, but the software was difficult to use.

I've had a lot of rewarding experiences in ALA. NMRT certainly ranks at the top--I've met some wonderful people and had the opportunity to connect with leaders at all phases of their careers. I've gained a lot of skills and insights from my time on the NMRT board that I would not have gained otherwise. I also feel that NMRT has given me the opportunity to really do something for our profession and to make a difference in my own small way. My intern experience on the ALA Awards Committee was also valuable, because I started to gain a broader perspective on how ALA functions, and I've really enjoyed being a member of the ALA Membership Committee for the last year. The ALA staff have been all-around fantastic, and everyone I've worked with at ALA has been extremely helpful.

I've served on a few division committees, and I've enjoyed those as well. I've learned that the opportunities are there, but you have to put yourself out there and apply for them.

One thing I can share about leaders in our profession: They are generally very open, accepting, friendly people with a true desire to serve. There's no reason to be intimidated by them or to feel like they don't care about what you have to say. Leaders become leaders because they are willing to listen to EVERYONE. If you see Lorie Roy (or Jim, or any ALA division president, or another library leader who you respect/admire/want to talk to), you should never be afraid to say hello.

Second Question:

If ALA didn't exist today and we wanted to create a library association that would work on behalf of all types of libraries, all library users, and all library workers, what would it look like and how would it operate?

If ALA didn't exist and we had to create it today, the Association would be: online, asynchronous, dynamic, engaged, and flexible; the Association would operate in a distributed, mutually participatory, largely virtual fashion. There, that's enough buzzwords for now...

How would the Association, re-created today, have been formed?

I suspect things would have started with many small groups of people who were *passionate* about some cause or other (and there are many, many causes about which people in ALA are passionate) posting stuff online somewhere. Sooner or later, these groups would have discovered each other and formed alliances to achieve certain goals. Perhaps the re-created today ALA would have started as a sort of clearinghouse or collection of links to all library related activities discovered online.

The technologies used would likely have been "off the shelf" and likely open sourced to most extent (as opposed to vendor-supplied stand-alone products which are difficult to customize) easily customized applications.

The key to the whole re-creation is the Association would exist to publicize what efforts are being made by many small groups of people and funnel information seekers to things that interest the seekers.

In many ways, ALA does do this now (though the website is built upon a horrendous piece of kludge and looks like a circa 1997 website) though sporadically and not marketed well. Slowly, the current ALA is getting its marketing and dissemination efforts under control and becoming responsive to newer members' concerns.

With all due respect to the battle-scarred veterans who've gotten ALA (and librarianship) this far, the time are a changin' and what used to work isn't working so well any more. Potential new users are not-coming in droves, information is no longer scarce, librarianship needs to respond and start to look like what new users want without losing the long-time library patrons in the process.

I'd like to see the current ALA really encourage small passionate sub-groups to really dig in to their issues and promote, praise, recognize, and encourage them as well as encourage broader participation from the less visibly engaged membership.

Open-source, transparent, and the ALA web site would incorporate a professional, ALA-sponsored social-networking interface to maximize member participation and cultivate regular interaction, particularly for those new to the profession. This might allow for greater collaboration between newer professionals and those who have brought the field where it is today. (While there are plenty of librarians on facebook, myspace, and ning, adding this type of social networking functionality via the ALA site would have definite value for increasing involvement in the organization, IMHO).

If ALA didn't exist today...interesting question. Like many, I have a lot of critical thoughts on the ALA of today. There would be a lot less bureaucracy. More of a continuance of leadership. A very different structure based upon various networks. Definitely more based upon technology. I for one thinks ALA needs a dramatic overhaul and dream of what would happen if it could start over.

I like what others have been saying about what ALA might look like if it was created today. I think there are a couple ways that it might develop - perhaps as a loose confederation of smaller groups uniting, or as a few people hatching the idea together in a virtual space and then growing organically. Regardless, the new library association would be centered on informal electronic interaction (such as the meebo rooms and wikis that we've seen alternative library associations using). Governance would be less formal and more distributed. Publications would all be e-only and open access.

If we created a national organization today and suggested that all members attend two conferences per year, I don't know if that would fly. If we didn't have the 2-meetings per year precedent - or tenure/promotion emphasis on conference attendance - I don't think that would be our first choice. Perhaps we would want one face-to-face national meeting per year, possibly alternating with regional meetings. The electronic options that are available to us today make virtual work so much easier that two national conferences would just seem excessive. Even if the new association was automatically the same size as ALA, physical conference attendance would be drastically reduced while virtual participation would dramatically increase. Work of the association would be tied less to the conference schedule, occurring asynchronously year-round. Like the existing ALA, it would be made up of all kinds of workers from all kinds of libraries, and there would be a great deal of opportunity for personal involvement. Actually, it sounds pretty fun!

ALA seems to appear to be too big to easily "get personal" with.
Has a lot of interested members and potential members.
Needs to somehow feel smaller, cozier, friendlier.
Needs to be more proactive, welcoming, and more forthcoming with helpful information.

Everyone has said they love the personal contacts made at conferences.

Perhaps remodeling the Annual Conference into something like a "Joint Conference." (I don't mean like "hey, no smoking!" joint, either) Maybe cast Annual as a bunch of conferences under one roof.

Each Division's (and Round Table's!) programs could be as physically co-located (with as few time overlaps) as possible;

Stuff that usually "happens" in meetings could be required/allowed/encouraged to be handled asynchronously online before the conference;

Conference "meetings" could actually be more like discussions and networking.

With a (crazy to organize and implement) setup like this it's possible less scheduling conflicts would occur in very involved members' calendars (I'm usually 5 to 12 deep with things I'd "like" to see for every hour of every day at conferences -- but usually there is 1 or 2 meetings I'm required to attend to accomplish things that could easily have been done online before the conference)

Okay, designing my own library organization from scratch...

I want a communication and coordination tool for individuals with shared interests. I'm sure this echoes earlier comments, but the most useful thing I've gotten out of my professional organizations, ALA or otherwise, is communication with a pool of individuals whose shared experiences all members can draw on. For general information in a field, it's hard to beat a pool of professionals as a resource; similarly for sharing frustration and insights there's nothing better than a pool of peers. That said, I'm out here in the middle of nowhere, so I want these connections to be electronic – I can afford to fly out to big national conferences _maybe_ twice a year, and as an academic librarian, one of those probably has to be a conference specifically oriented to my subject areas. I'm sure others can't afford even one annual one – if you're the public librarian at a small library serving a town of 1000 on the island of Kauai, shouldn't you really have the same access to ALA in this day and age as a well paid corporate librarian on the eastern seaboard? If people want face-to-face groups, great, but those located remotely shouldn't be penalized for it these days. (Hmm – with no facts one way or the other, I suddenly wonder if Alaska and Hawaii are woefully under-represented on ALA committees?).

Since I'm singlehandedly creating ALA from scratch, and have a faceless pool of computer experts to draw on, we're going to build an electronic democratic community. Build an enormous multidimensional database into which we place our membership. Facet individuals by their interests, and build an interface which allows them to connect to others with similar interests; electronic communities spring into being wherever people have shared interests. Those communities are given their own identities, and both evaluated anonymously by their constituents on a number of factors and linked to other communities which people have rated as being similar. Becoming part of a community allows you to find more specific, less specific, and somewhat related communities by following those ties, or by following the ties of those users who allow their information to be publicly available. Divisions and chapters can come into existence, merge into each other, split from each other, or eventually die based on their users' wants.

Hmm. Librarians and library interest groups accessed a la Aquabrowser? I've apparently hyperlinked the world's librarians to each other here, hopefully allowing easier access to those with common interests/needs/limits/dreams than the current top down system of so many divisions, chapters, etc, each limited by a) your inability to find out what's in them, b) their requirements for involvement, and c) territorial splits. By the by, we'd also need to open this system to non-ALA members, though functionally the money-making decisions would probably have to require ALA membership!

As librarians, I think that one of our most valuable resources is each other. It seems like we're a unique field in that, in general, we're cooperative, not competitive – if we can leverage each other's knowledge to build better libraries, than we bring all libraries up. It's the opposite of a zero sum game – by bettering my own library it could be argued that I better libraries everywhere; certainly no other library is harmed! If I could surf my fellows, skim who and what they use and connect to that myself for the improvement of myself, my work, and my organization– there's really something to that! What better fundamental purpose could a library organization have than to enable and enhance those kind of connections?

Inevitably the people governing an organization are those who already know how to use the organization – just as we librarians are always trying to look at libraries with “new eyes” and make our libraries open and easy for the people coming in for the first time, its great that you as incoming president seem to be taking the time to try to step back and see ALA through the eyes of a “new user.” Like many a freshman student seeing a university library for a first time, I'm looking at ALA and seeing something that is enormous and filled with a lot of intimidating stuff that I really have no clue as to the value of, and very few clues on where to start trying to figure out how to make it most useful to me. So far, this NMRT list seems to be the closest thing to inviting and helpful signage that I've found!