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Membership Drive Success: ALA/Alabama's Support Staff Pilot Initiative

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The roles of all library workers have changed dramatically in the last few years. Library employees are performing increasingly more complex work, with many support staff accepting higher level responsibilities previously assigned to librarians. Throughout the years, support staff were committed to the profession, but now, more than ever, they view their job as a career. With current national efforts for staff recognition and the recommendations resulting from the 3rd Congress On Professional Education (COPE): Focus on Library Support Staff, the American Library Association (ALA) decided the time was right to implement new support staff membership initiatives. COPE Recommendation 1.2.1,1.2.2, requests ALA undertake an economic study of the feasibility of a dues structure that would allow substantial support staff participation and then market membership options, including joint membership opportunities, widely to support staff (Congress III, 2005).

Many professional associations are grappling with membership challenges. Recently, the American Medical Association (AMA) adopted a strategy they termed the “member-centered” approach (Romano, 2004). One feature of this approach designed to boost membership is teaming with state and specialty societies. The American Medical Association believes that “future cooperation and collaboration with state associations is vital to any membership turnaround” (Romano, 2004, p. 11). This partnership makes good business sense.

The American Library Association considers a cooperative venture with state associations as an

important avenue to increase membership as well. Taking to heart the COPE recommendations and incorporating the idea of partnerships with state associations, ALA created a new membership option targeting library support staff at the state level. Alabama is the first state in which ALA will launch this cooperative endeavor. This article describes the joint staff membership initiative between a state association, the Alabama Library Association (ALLA), and the American Library Association – a unique pilot program already beginning to spread nationwide.

ALA Membership Initiatives: A Brief Background

In 1994, at the American Library Association's annual conference in Miami Beach, the Planning and Budget Assembly discussed raising general fund revenues. Options for changing funding included increased dues, business revenue, and membership (Symons, 1994). Raising revenues from dues can be accomplished by increasing members, juggling dues categories, and/or increasing individual members' dues. During this period student membership was the fastest growing category. However, because their membership rate is lower, these additional members were not generating significantly more money. ALA concluded that increasing membership and changing membership categories would not bring sufficient dollars to meet their needs (Symons, 1994). ALA decided instead only an increase in individual members' dues would generate income quickly. The topic of special initiatives was not introduced. However,

increasing membership continued to be an important item for discussion and a few years later in a 1998 survey, the ALA Chapters identified membership development as the number one priority (American Library Association Chapter Relations Subcommittee on Membership, n.d.). In response to this survey the ALA Chapter Relations Committee sponsored a workshop at the 1999 annual conference in New Orleans entitled "Membership Four Rs Preconference" (Georgia Library Association Executive Board, 1999). The committee also summarized "best practices" incorporating ideas and materials from different states regarding membership recruitment, retention, recognition and rewards (the four Rs). They concluded "planning for membership growth is an essential step and worth the time and effort of members and staff," because membership is the "heart and soul" of an association's financial health (American Library Association Chapter Relations Subcommittee on Membership, n.d.).

Since increasing membership in the association was targeted as the primary goal, several groups designed proposals for new membership initiatives. The following initiatives were introduced and approved by the Executive Board at the annual ALA Convention in Chicago 2000:

- a special Student Membership Initiative where ALA Chapters may participate in a three year program which entitles the student to dual membership in both ALA and their State Association for \$25.00 per year;
- ALA and the California Library Association endorsed the implementation of a joint student and new librarian membership for 2000-02; and
- the ALA Membership Committee was charged to develop a proposal for a dual membership campaign between ALA's ethnic caucus affiliates and new members of ALA (American Library Association Executive Board, 2000).

The first to pilot this partnership would be the National Association to Promote Library

Services to the Spanish Speaking (REFORMA). At that point, there were no plans for initiatives aimed specifically at support staff. However, in 2001 the Membership Committee developed a plan to increase support staff involvement in ALA. They introduced the idea, and ALA began a special membership offer for library support staff (American Library Association Executive Board, 2000). This special membership offer includes two options, either Public Services (including ALA, Reference and User Services Association (RUSA), and Library Support Staff Interests Round Table (LSSIRT)) or Technical Services (ALA, Association for Library Collections & Technical Services (ALCTS), and LSSIRT) - all for the reduced price of \$59 (American Library Association, n.d.). This staff membership recruitment plan was to be offered for a 3-year period (2001-2004). Recently, the ALA Executive Board voted to extend this special offer for an additional three-year period (2004-2007) (American Library Association, 2003-2004). Another significant step was the establishment of a library support staff member dues category approved in the 2004 election. Support staff can join ALA for \$35 (Congress III, 2005).

Regarding the success rate of these programs, Marcia Boosinger, ALA Membership Committee Chair, reports "the test membership programs of ALA have proven to be very successful in increasing membership and have been responsible for the largest growth in ALA, providing double digit growth while ALA growth rates over the last four years have been between 2% and 3%." She points out that as a result of the joint support staff membership initiative, the membership in LSSIRT has climbed from 270 members in 2001 to 480 in 2005, and the student membership effort has resulted in a 50% growth since its inception (American Library Association, 2004-2005).

ALA/Alabama Pilot Program

In the Fall of 2004, John Chrastka, American Library Association Manager for Membership Promotion, contacted Jack Fitzpatrick, Moderator for the Alabama Library Association Paraprofessional Round Table (ALLA-PART).

ALA proposed the development of a joint national and state membership initiative for support staff. Chrastka wanted to discuss the possibility of Alabama becoming the pilot program for such an idea. Fitzpatrick and Kerry Ransel, Secretary of ALLA-PART, met with Chrastka at the Southeastern Library Association (SELA) conference in November 2004 to discuss details. Chrastka outlined the proposal for a dual membership offer where first time Alabama library support staff could join both the national and state organizations at a discounted rate. The membership would include the American Library Association (ALA) and the Library Support Staff Interests Round Table (LSSIRT) as well as the Alabama Library Association (ALLA) and its Paraprofessional Round Table (PART) for a reduced rate of \$54.00 per year for a three year period. We agreed that this sounded like a terrific deal with mutual benefits for everyone. Marcia Boosinger, Chapter Liaison and ALA Membership Chair, was instrumental in guiding this proposal through the ALA Membership Committee, which gave its approval at Midwinter 2005 (Boston). The next step was to present the proposal to the Executive Board of the Alabama Library Association and obtain their approval. At the January 26, 2005 ALLA Executive Board meeting, Boosinger presented the joint membership initiative details and made a motion to approve. The vote was unanimously in favor.

Spreading the Word - Marketing

During a conference call January 31, 2005, Chrastka, Fitzpatrick and Ransel brainstormed marketing strategies. A division of labor and timeline were created. ALA would be responsible for creating marketing copy for newsletters, press releases and electronic postings as well as a brochure and FAQ. Since the applications and money would be sent directly to the ALA offices, the specifics of tracking the new members and mechanics of the money transfer to the state association needed outlining. Fitzpatrick would be responsible for contacting the ALLA webmaster to post all information on the web page, procuring a list of all state library directors, contacting the ALLA convention chair to inform her that Chrastka would be attending the state

convention in April 2005, mining old membership databases for past members, and sending out promotional emails to the electronic mailing lists. The target date for implementation was March 1, 2005.

In early February an email was sent to all Alabama Library Directors asking them to nominate up to 5 potentially excellent candidates for this initiative. ALA planned on contacting them and sending information packets. However, this avenue did not generate the interest we had hoped. We may revisit this approach. Promotional email advertisements were sent to the Alabama Academic College and Research Libraries (AACRL), Network for Alabama Academic Libraries (NAAL), ALLA.COMmunicator (ALLA newsletter), and APLSauce (Alabama Public Library Service newsletter). Emails were sent to existing ALA members located in Alabama asking them to share this news with colleagues and staff. Also, American Libraries featured a news article in the March 2005 issue promoting this pilot project ("Alabama joint membership offered," 2005). It is difficult, however, to assess the success of recruitment efforts from these venues.

A much more effective and measurable approach proved to be face-to-face presentations. Coincidentally, during this timeframe, Fitzpatrick had been invited to speak at a training session in late February hosted by Birmingham Public Library (a large metropolitan library system with over 900,000 volumes held in one main and 20 branch libraries). About 80 staff would be in attendance for his presentation, creating a great opportunity to publicize the new membership initiative. He spoke about the state association and PART and outlined benefits of support staff membership at the local and national level. Fitzpatrick's presentations are particularly entertaining and effective. He captures the attention of the audience by incorporating music and ends this particular presentation with a song called "Super Staff" with everyone joining in singing. We also awarded three attendees free memberships. After ending on a musical note, everyone was in the mood to win! Three names were drawn and the majority of others in

attendance took information packets and applications. Traveling around the state conducting repeat performances of this presentation has been most successful in recruiting staff for the new joint membership initiative.

The Alabama Library Convention in April 2005 presented another excellent marketing opportunity and captured a wide audience. Promotional brochures and membership applications were included in the convention registration packets. The Paraprofessional Round Table's Program "Training the Paraprofessional of the Future: New Approaches to Support Staff Training and Development" had wonderful attendance and Chrastka ended the program touting the benefits of library membership and promoting the initiative to the captive listeners.¹ Highlighted benefits were: ALA's lobbying for library funding, which helps all library workers, subscriptions to professional journals, access to experience and expertise through networking opportunities, participation in committees, distance and regional continuing educational opportunities, and discounts on services provided by ALA.

Membership as a Staff Development Initiative

A primary benefit Chrastka emphasizes is professional development (Chrastka, J. 2004). Support staff members have significant opportunities for professional development through membership in library associations. Membership has traditionally been a way to make essential connections benefiting one's work and personal life. However, many support staff do not consider association membership as a regular part of their career development. With encouragement from progressive directors and department heads, support staff can begin to view association membership as a vital, natural component of their professional journey.

Membership is an often overlooked staff development area. Studies have consistently shown that feelings of 'connection' motivate staff

¹Many of the benefits he pointed out are listed in the toolkit entitled "Sharing Connections" (American Library Association Communications and Marketing Department, n.d.).

to perform better at work, have lower absentee rates and stronger personal identification with the success of projects (Baum, 1990). Directors and administrators should look for ways to encourage support staff to make connections with others in their field by joining a library association. Membership can also be used as a staff appreciation technique. One option could be gifting a yearly membership in ALA or your state association for an employment anniversary or offering membership as a prize during National Library Workers Day or a staff appreciation day. Perhaps the board or friends group could provide membership as a non-salary benefit for key employees. Any efforts to encourage support staff in their career development will return dividends to your library through a well motivated, better informed, and more connected staff.

Results Thus Far

Since the ALA/ALLA support staff joint membership program became 'live' March 1, 2005, seventeen new members have taken advantage of this excellent initiative. We have high hopes that increasing numbers of support staff will follow suit. Timing seems to be crucial. During a presentation at Auburn University Libraries when an employee from Document Delivery won the free membership, the entire department made the decision to join along with their fellow co-worker. Also a small local public library director paid for her staff to join as well. All attended the face-to-face presentation and decided to become members that very day. This appears to be an effective way to motivate support staff and boost membership. As Arlene Farber Sirkin expressed in her "Membership Four Rs Preconference" mentioned earlier, "the key to this process is personal contact!" (Georgia Library Association Executive Board, 1999).

Future Publicity

After the ALA annual convention, efforts will be focused on expanding our marketing campaign. A mass mailing of brochures and applications will be sent to all Alabama library directors and follow-up telephone calls will be made. Fitzpatrick and Ransel are scheduled to make a

presentation in north Alabama and will attempt to schedule one in south Alabama. Repeat emails and newsletter publicity will be sent, targeting both academic and public libraries.

We are committed to making this initial pilot program a success and are hopeful for expansion nationwide. Recently Kansas, Massachusetts, and New York joined Alabama in this new membership endeavor.

Conclusion

Paraprofessionals have sophisticated knowledge and skills, performing higher level responsibilities, previously performed by

librarians. There is a need for staff to be on the cutting edge of library trends. Becoming a member in the American Library Association and the state association through this joint membership initiative finally gives library staff an affordable avenue to be included in planning the future of libraries.

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