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Why You Should Consider Going to Non-Library Conferences

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Title: Why You Should Consider Going to Non-Library Conferences

*The goal of this piece is not to shame librarians for attending ALA or ACRL, but to encourage librarians to also consider attending non-library conferences.

Author biography: Michael DeNotto has an MLIS from the University of Illinois, as well as a MA in English and Communication from Valparaiso University. He has worked as a librarian at Denison University, St. Mary's University of Minnesota, and is currently the Humanities Librarian at Hope College in Holland, MI. He has a wide range of interests that include graffiti/street art, popular culture, science fiction, travel, craft beer, wine, theories relating to posthumanism, and soccer.

Featured image:

<https://www.pexels.com/photo/action-adult-asphalt-blur-343469/>

Alt text for image: People using crosswalk to walk across a street in a bustling city. There is a close-up, but slightly blurred focus on their feet, crossing over a line.

I have been an academic librarian for almost 7 years. This summer, I attended my first ALA National Conference. I plan on attending my first ACRL Conference in 2021. Nearly half the conferences I have participated in during my career have been non-library focused. I believe that alternating between library and non-library conferences has made me a better librarian and library advocate. And, as such, this is a path that I encourage other librarians to consider.

Surveying the Professional Development Landscape

Of course, it is an unfortunate reality that many librarians are not able to go to conferences regularly due to [limited funds or opportunities](#). Or, some librarians must make a difficult decision and choose just one. Others have the pick of the litter; however, if that's not your current situation, consider a rotation based strategy of alternating annually between attending a librarian and a non-librarian conference. That strategy will ensure you prevent disconnection from librarianship while keeping in touch with other disciplines.

Why Attend a Conference at all?

People often attend conferences to keep abreast of their field, to network, and to feel [rejuvenated](#). We take comfort in being within fellow librarians and in the fact that other libraries are facing similar challenges. Yet, librarians often warn of echo chambers with regard to information literacy; what about our own conference echo chambers? Librarians know that libraries, librarianship, and concepts like information literacy are important. Of course, there are differing views and ideas presented, but I've seen many presentations at library conferences that are essentially “preaching to the choir.” And, while attending library conferences is [undoubtedly beneficial](#), hearing too often from one perspective can also create a need for a new viewpoint. This is why, whenever I attend library conferences, I keep an eye out for any presentations that include non-librarians as speakers.

Benefits of Attending Non-Library Conferences

It is important to consider attending and presenting at non-librarian conferences as it can facilitate engagement and collaboration with new and wider audiences, help librarians take a break from the library echo chamber, offer increased scholarly production opportunities, and widely communicate the value of librarians, libraries, and their work to new stakeholders and institutions. Additionally, I have found that the more often I witness presentations across disciplines, the more comfortable I feel with my ability to deliver them.

Showing Value

I have presented at the [Popular Culture Association/American Culture Association's \(PACA\) National Conference](#) three times. PACA is a massive conference that is based around different subject areas from Appalachian Studies to Punk Culture (and even [libraries](#)). My first presentation at PACA was part of the Radio area. I detailed a digitization project I had done using archival material from Denison University's Radio Station. After finishing, I was networking with audience members when one of them profusely thanked me for “helping to save radio history.” Highlighting the efforts of librarians to new audiences emphasizes their importance to those who may not be aware of what librarians do.

Dynamism of Librarians

Librarians should make an effort to present and communicate their work in nontraditional library settings as a way of increasing their outreach and potential impact. My second presentation was on the HBO show *True Detective* and the *Courir de Mardi Gras*. As the sole librarian presenting, it allowed me to advocate for libraries and librarians, while also showcasing that librarians participate in scholarly work outside librarianship, which is not something widely known across academia. Producing scholarship in multiple disciplines helps librarians be seen as valuable to the broader

academic landscape. And, doing this at non-librarian conferences will potentially change the way librarians are viewed by institutional stakeholders, paving the way for increased collaboration and status on campuses.

Practical Benefits

Another benefit to attending PACA is that one learns just how much scholarly research about nontraditional scholarly topics exists. This is useful for future research opportunities and collection development purposes, but it also provides an effective tool for instruction sessions. I have used sample search terms like “Gilmore Girls” or “Lady Gaga,” to show that research isn’t always scary and can be relatable to a variety of interests. Finally, on occasion, I have startled awake a daydreaming student during an instruction session when I mention “Lady Gaga.” Referencing an atypical topic usually helps hold the students’ attention. It should also be noted that attending any non-librarian conference is likely to elucidate different resources/publications, as well as faculty research strategies/methods/tools, that a librarian might not be familiar with.

Making Your Case to Attend

At this point, one may be thinking, “How do I get my administration to allow me to go to these non-library conferences?” For my second presentation at PACA, I encountered pushback and had to negotiate and advocate for myself. I drafted a plan detailing which sessions I would attend, how they would make me more valuable to the library, what costs there might be, and identified some ways in which my attendance could directly and positively affect the library. I was eventually able to secure the time off and a small amount of funding. Negotiating is something a lot of librarians struggle with, and this practice helped me prepare for [future salary negotiations](#) and [conference attendance](#).

Another non-librarian conference that I have attended is the [Association of Writers and Writing Programs \(AWP\) Conference](#). I recently chose to attend AWP instead of ACRL. At my current institution, before being allowed to attend a conference, one must put in a request. The only requirements for the requests are identifying the conference, how much money you’ll need, and how long you’ll be away. However, in this instance, I knew that it might be in my best interest to draft a strong case for my attending AWP. So, I went through previous years’ presentation catalogues and highlighted presentations that were applicable for a librarian in my position. Additionally, I discussed how my attendance at this conference would prove beneficial to the library and college as a whole by identifying library and campus-wide goals, partnerships, and strategic initiatives that aligned with the conference.

A Deeper Dive

For a deeper dive as to the benefits of attending non-librarian conferences, check out Tysick’s piece [“Attending Conferences Outside Librarianship.”](#) And, for some

guidance as to choosing non-library conferences, read through Tomaszewski and MacDonald's piece, "[Identifying Subject-Specific Conferences as Professional Development Opportunities for the Academic Librarian.](#)"

Looking Back, Looking Forward

Working outside of our comfortable silos, engaging in collaboration, eschewing disciplinary boundaries, and being a part of conversations that are happening in other areas, are all vital to the growth of librarianship and librarians. And, attending non-librarian conferences, in balance with attending librarian conferences, will facilitate this growth. Librarians should strive to be visible and heard in as many spaces as possible. ACRL recognizes this with its [External Liaisons Committee](#) and its [VAL Travel Scholarships](#), but I think there should be a complementary ground-level approach via individual librarians expanding their conference and disciplinary horizons. If nothing else, start up a conversation with fellow attendees of a conference, it can be a truly refreshing experience to hear what other disciplines think of librarians. Or, if you get lucky and go to an AWP conference, you might just hear somebody, like Pulitzer Prize winning poet Tyehimba Jess, loudly proclaim, "I love librarians! They have infinite amounts of patience." Doesn't get more rejuvenating for a librarian than that.

Have you attended non-library conferences that have benefited your position?