

10-1-2008

On the ALA Membership Pyramid

Emily Ford

Portland State University, forder@pdx.edu

Let us know how access to this document benefits you.

Follow this and additional works at: https://pdxscholar.library.pdx.edu/ulib_fac

 Part of the [Library and Information Science Commons](#)

Citation Details

Ford, E. (2008). On the ALA membership pyramid. In *The Library With The Lead Pipe*, 1-3

This Article is brought to you for free and open access. It has been accepted for inclusion in Library Faculty Publications and Presentations by an authorized administrator of PDXScholar. For more information, please contact pdxscholar@pdx.edu.

- In the Library with the Lead Pipe - <http://www.inthelibrarywiththeleadpipe.org> -

On the ALA Membership Pyramid

Emily Ford

October 15, 2008 @ 6:30 am



[1]

All Gizah Pyramids. Image from liber's photo stream.

["...i \[sic\] only renew \[my ALA membership\] out of a sense of professional obligation, and also because of the fear that 'll \[sic\] put it on my resume and get busted as not being a member."](#) -c-dog [2]

Membership in the American Library Association means professionals are bound together by the tenets of librarianship. Technically, this means we commit to these tenets in the form of dues payable to ALA. Being a recent library school graduate I am new to ALA membership as well as organizational involvement. However, I find that the previous statement points to perils inherent within ALA that could, if not addressed, lead to the organization's downfall.

This is not a problem that has gone unnoticed by many within the organization. This year, I was part of the ALA [Emerging Leaders program](#) [3]—a program intended to create more active ALA members and participants. In this program six Emerging Leaders projects centered around membership recruitment and retention issues within ALA and its various divisions. Other membership and participation initiatives include current ALA president Jim Rettig's [member participation](#) [4] initiative, not to mention the [New Members Round Table \(NMRT\)](#). [5] Drawing on my Emerging Leaders experience, I would like to further examine ALA membership structures and provide suggestions that will help to topple this perceived "professional obligation" of ALA membership. We need to create an inspired and invested community of librarians and professionals who will feel proud to be an ALA member and to serve their organization.

In order to understand my suggestions, it's important I provide some background on the current ALA climate and membership. There seem to be three general categories of ALA members, in the form of a pyramid. The base level, level 1, consists of those who pay dues and who have minimal investment in ALA as a professional organization; the middle and smaller group of individuals, level 2, consists of those who pay dues, attend conferences and are nominally to marginally involved in the organization; and the tip of the pyramid, level 3, consists of those who pay dues, belong to divisions and serve on committees. As I understand it, the shape includes the largest amount of members in level 1 and the fewest amount of members in level 3.

The basic problem with current membership and participation initiatives is that they do not target the

largest population of ALA members, level 1. Members in level 1 are those who are most apt to say they are "professionally obligated" to pay their dues. Instead of bringing the movement to members, initiatives like the Emerging Leaders program, Jim Rettig's "Craigslis of opportunities for members to get involved in ALA" and the NMRT are initiatives that pro-active, motivated individuals will seek out. If we were able to mobilize level 1 ALA members by bringing community and participation to them, we could create a larger sense of community investment as a whole and dispel those attitudes of membership as "professional obligation." Over time, this model of community investment would lead to a flattening of the ALA membership pyramid—changing the shape of ALA membership into one that is a globe of overlapping and active communities. In order to create this membership model, ALA, its members and leadership should investigate how to involve level 1 members in association activities and thereby create an organization comprised of a richer and more diverse professional community.

The financial membership model of ALA creates a certain attitude among members. Their investment in the organization is only as important as the amount of their check. Instead, ALA might consider adopting another membership model that incorporates service to the organization as a stipulation of membership. This is the model of both the [National Honor Society](#) ^[6] and [Beta Club](#) ^[7]. Requiring members to serve their professional community can only create a stronger community that better represents its largest constituent base. Examples of this service might be acting as a guest editor for a portion of *American Libraries* or other journals published by ALA divisions, writing op-eds for journals, or otherwise serving ALA in capacities, as they are able. Changing the parameters of ALA membership is something toward which we need to strive. While this service model may not be feasible to adopt for a good many years, there are other issues that we can address more directly.

Cost is a major deterrent for the increased involvement of many level 1 and level 2 members. Paying membership dues to ALA and its numerous divisions can be quite expensive. This deters individuals from serving on committees (one must be a member of a division to serve on a committee of that division) and contributing to ALA's general body of work (one must also pay conference registration and travel to serve on committees). New librarians struggle with student loan debt and as a result do not have room in their budgets for personal memberships. They may also work for libraries affected by slashed budgets and national policy decisions and funding practices. In response to these conditions many libraries are no longer able to support their employees' professional membership costs. This means that individuals must use their personal funds to pay for membership in ALA and its divisions. Coupled with travel costs to conferences, it is simply financially unfeasible for library professionals to participate on a higher level than they do (even before recent economic collapse).

A simple way to make conference attendance and professional development easier for those who cannot afford to travel is to create webcasts of conferences and workshops. We are in the age of virtual conferences and seminars, and they have proven successful. It should plain and simple be the standard that ALA conference programs be made accessible virtually. If pricing is an issue, ALA might consider creating a price structure for "virtual" attendance to ALA conferences. Members and their employers would be better able to afford this model of conference attendance and involvement. If ALA were truly committed to including level 1 members, then it would create and implement ways for individuals to engage virtually by using a combination of videocasting, chat programs, message boards, and other participatory and collaborative applications. Because of their ability to participate in professional programs and conference activities, virtual participants will feel as if they have more stake in ALA than they did before. Consequently, we will see these members begin to actively seek other avenues of participation with ALA.

The level 1 ALA constituent is not the only constituent that ALA should reach and better utilize to create an organization that reflects a community beyond "professional obligation." There are level 2 participants who attend conferences. The next logical step would be for these members to engage in service opportunities such as sitting on a committee or hosting and presenting at professional programs. One way for ALA to show its commitment to these level 2 members would be to mandate a seat on every ALA committee for a new member or conference attendee. Soliciting member service via ALA governance and policy will show that the organization as a whole is committed to the needs of new members, member recruitment and member retention.

However, once a member begins to serve ALA as a committee member cost can still be an object. For level 2 members to become more engaged and sit on committees this object must be addressed. Most ALA committees require members to attend two conferences each year. Instead of mandating in-person attendance for committee members at both Midwinter and Annual Conferences, shouldn't we be encouraging the use of those collaborative tools and technologies (chat, wikis, web sharing applications, online conferences, etc.) that we as professionals tout? If ALA were to move to a model of mandatory in-person committee participation at one conference a year, costs would be cut in half for committee members, thereby enabling more new professionals to better afford conference attendance and committee participation.

Conferences themselves need to adopt new models to attract greater participation. In addition to the mix of meetings, presentations and workshops that comprise ALA Midwinter and Annual meetings, hands-on professional service opportunities would enhance conference goers' experiences. Instead of

passively sitting in a conference session, librarians and conference attendees could engage in service learning workshops or service challenges. A group of professionals would be tasked to create a body of work to serve the organization or create a professional development tool in one day. The service could be the creation of a new resource guide, a new web portal, or a new best practice statement. Whatever the participants created, it would be a piece of professional work as well as enable professionals to network with others in their areas of interest. Producing a body of work will be more professionally satisfying to some conference goers, and will give a diversity of participation and service opportunities that will appeal to a larger audience.

New members will not be recruited nor will members remain active within ALA unless the organization as a whole engages in dialog about how to remain a viable, interesting, and diverse professional community. We need to advocate for and attempt to implement membership model and policy changes within ALA. These changes will encourage greater member investments in their organization and help to reshape the ALA pyramid into a globally shaped membership that is dedicated to ALA's success. This will make our association a more diverse and stimulating organization of which we can all be proud.

We need to think creatively and to create programs and workshops that embrace virtual participation. We need to break the mold of traditional ALA membership. The next time you attend a conference or a committee meeting, bring up these issues and ask questions. Propose and implement pilot service projects at a conference and publish your successes and challenges. Help to create new models of participation and share them with your professional community. The more experimenting we do at a grassroots level the more we are able to best find the models of participation, service, and governance for a sustainable and successful ALA. By continuing to adopt these changes in ALA, the membership pyramid will eventually flatten and the globally shaped ALA membership can form.

Thank you to Kim Leeder, Jami Haskell, and Lori Shmulewitz for reading several versions of this post. And thank you to my Emerging Leaders group members, Kim Leeder and Nicole Cavallaro; and my Emerging Leaders project mentors, Joseph Yue and Mary Pagliero Popp for forcing me to think about these issues.

You might also be interested in:

- [Revisiting the ALA Membership Pyramid](#) ^[8]
- [All Dressed Up with Nowhere to Go: A Survey of ALA Emerging Leaders](#) ^[9]
- [Why We Should Adopt ALAConnect: A brief review and rumination on ALA's new online community](#) ^[10]
- [Conference this! Lead Pipers compare conference experiences](#) ^[11]
- [Pro-Con-ference](#) ^[12]

44 Comments To "On the ALA Membership Pyramid"

44 Comments ([Open](#) | [Close](#))

#1 Comment By [Erin](#) On October 15, 2008 @ 12:47 pm

Hello Amy, and thank you for such an organized and valuable post on this topic. I find myself in a situation somewhat similar: a recent graduate struggling with loans as well as career drive. I have been accepted as an Emerging Leader and look forward to learning more about the inner-workings (for better or for worse) of ALA. I would not be able to participate in this opportunity if I had not been selected for financial sponsorship by the Pennsylvania Library Association. I think that local sponsorship is one of the more "grassroots" ways of encouraging affordable participation, although it also has its pros and cons.

In particular, I think you hit on two major points in your post:

1. "...shouldn't we be encouraging the use of those collaborative tools and technologies (chat, wikis, web sharing applications, online conferences, etc.) that we as professionals tout?"

Exactly! Since I began library school, the benefits of these new, web-based technologies have been pounded into my brain. They are some of the things that will allow libraries to remain a relevant and valuable resource in our society. However, ALA has not particularly embraced them wholeheartedly, as we can see by the lack of virtual participation avenues. How can we not practice what we preach?

2. "Instead of passively sitting in a conference session, librarians and conference attendees could engage in service learning workshops or service challenges."

This would definitely be seen by many attendees as a benefit to attend a conference. More people might be willing to travel if they knew that they would be working on a tangible, sustainable project. A lot of focus is put on networking at conferences, and rightly so. However, meeting new people can

only go so far, and may turn as many people off of attending as on. The opportunity to assist in a proactive way would be a clear improvement.

Again, thank you. I think we all need to be willing to participate in these sorts of discussions.
-Erin

#2 Comment By [Erin](#) On October 15, 2008 @ 12:49 pm

Whoops – I meant Emily, not Amy. My apologies (no idea where I got Amy from!).
-Erin

#3 Comment By [camila alire](#) On October 15, 2008 @ 3:25 pm

HI Emily and Others –

Thanks for your posting concerning membership in ALA. I would agree that the pyramid structure assessment is pretty accurate. Having said that I want to concentrate my response on ALA's efforts to try to get more virtual involvement of the folks in levels 1 and 2.

ALA Council commissioned a task force on e-participation. They have worked hard to address this issue. But, unfortunately, things move slowly within ALA governance. The task force's official report will be out soon. I don't think there will be anything in it that we weren't expecting. That is, giving us ways that we can at least maintain and involve our current membership thru more non-traditional, virtual ways as well as recruiting new members.

Nonetheless, we recognize that 1)we need to get more folks involved, especially the folks new to the profession; 2) we need to do it in ways that resonate with them (e.g. use of latest technology) 3)we need to be mindful of people's economic situation that prohibits them from attending major conferences and address that; and the list could go on....

I want you all to know that the ALA Executive Board has all of these concerns on our minds, also. But hear this — we hear you! We have heard your concerns from many other folks. We know that we have to stay relevant to folks coming in as new members and members for less than 5 or so years. We know we have to think/act out of the box.

Don't give up on ALA. We are working on it — but we are such a "process" organization that it is taking more time then we would like to admit.

We are beginning to work on my presidential initiative which will concentrate on member-driven advocacy (personal and professional) with the primary intent of reaching out to members in levels 1 and 2 and involving them at their local level. This will take a lot of collaboration with ALA state chapters (your state library associations). Stay tuned...

Meanwhile, feel free to send me ideas beyond what was posted in the messages above. Thanks for listening....

Camila Alire
ALA President-elect
[13]

#4 Comment By [camila alire](#) On October 15, 2008 @ 3:46 pm

[I AM REPOSTING FOR A BETTER READING FORMAT]

HI Emily and Others –

Thanks for your posting concerning membership in ALA. I would agree that the pyramid structure assessment is pretty accurate. Having said that I want to concentrate my response on ALA's efforts to try to get more virtual involvement of the folks in levels 1 and 2.

ALA Council commissioned a task force on e-participation. They have worked hard to address this issue. But, unfortunately, things move slowly within ALA governance. The task force's official report will be out soon. I don't think there will be anything in it that we weren't expecting. That is, giving us ways that we can at least maintain and involve our current membership thru more non-traditional, virtual ways as well as recruiting new members.

Nonetheless, we recognize that 1)we need to get more folks involved, especially the folks new to the profession; 2) we need to do it in ways that resonate with them (e.g. use of latest technology) 3)we need to be mindful of people's economic situation that prohibits them from attending major conferences and address that; and the list could go on....

I want you all to know that the ALA Executive Board has all of these concerns on our minds, also. But hear this — we hear you! We have heard your concerns from many other folks. We know that we have to stay relevant to folks coming in as new members and members for less than 5 or so years. We know we have to think/act out of the box.

Don't give up on ALA. We are working on it — but we are such a "process" organization that it is taking more time then we would like to admit.

We are beginning to work on my presidential initiative which will concentrate on member-driven

advocacy (personal and professional) with the primary intent of reaching out to members in levels 1 and 2 and involving them at their local level. This will take a lot of collaboration with ALA state chapters (your state library associations). Stay tuned...

Meanwhile, feel free to send me ideas beyond what was posted in the messages above. Thanks for listening....

Camila Alire
ALA President-elect
[13]

#5 Comment By [Ryan Johnson](#) On October 15, 2008 @ 4:30 pm

Emily

Your comments have touched a nerve that has often caused me to climb up on a soap box and shout. I will attempt to avoid such polemics. Over the past ten or so years that I have belonged to ALA I have often felt that the organization operated for the benefit of the organization rather than that of the members. Mandatory attendance at a business meeting (MidWinter) may have been essential to the proper functioning of the organization in the past, but with modern communication technology it strikes me primarily as a source of organizational revenue rather than serving any functional purpose.

My other primary pet peeve is mandatory membership in ALA is participate in/belong to ACRL, RUSA, PLA etc. I have belonged to the American Historical Association, the Society of Historians of American Foreign Relations, and the American Association for History and Computing off and on over the past two decades and at no time was my participation in one dependent on the other. ALA's membership structure increases organizational membership and revenue at the top while hampering the more specialized and, in my opinion, more professionally significant and interesting organizations from adding and developing younger members.

I understand that ALA leadership talks a good game, I unfortunately, am not a true believer. I am also not alone in my unbelief and I suspect that the number of heretics is growing. These are issues that must be addressed but I am afraid that they will continue to fall on deaf ears in the name of organizational inertia.

#6 Comment By [Megan Hodge](#) On October 15, 2008 @ 4:48 pm

You wrote: "If pricing is an issue, ALA might consider creating a price structure for "virtual" attendance to ALA conferences."

I agree; as a library school student currently working in a paraprofessional position in a small academic library, I: 1) don't receive funding from my library to attend since I am not in a professional position and 2) don't have the funds myself to attend conferences on the other side of the country. Arguably the demographic most in need of the networking offered at conferences is students—yet we are perhaps the ones least able to afford going! While presentations and poster sessions would transfer well to the virtual format, I don't know about networking virtually on as large a scale as Midwinter/Annual. I will be interested to see how that plays out.

You also state that, ideally, "Over time, this model of community investment would lead to a flattening of the ALA membership pyramid—changing the shape of ALA membership into one that is a globe of overlapping and active communities."

I am curious as to how, logistically, getting level 1 ALA members as involved as level 3 members would work, considering there are tens of thousands of librarians/library staff in ALA (and even more who aren't members) and only so many committees to be appointed to and library journals to edit/write for.

You've raised a number of excellent points here and I look forward to attending my first virtual ALA conference!

#7 Comment By [Laura Z](#) On October 15, 2008 @ 6:59 pm

I like your ideas here, particularly the following, some of which others have already mentioned:

1. Webcasts! Yes, let's use technology to lower costs and increase access.
2. Lower costs! Yes, even before the current economic downturn, but especially now.
3. Projects! Professional things we can sink our teeth into (and share on our cv's). For this, I might actually tote my body to a physical conference.

So, if the structure changes to something flatter does it go from being an ALA pyramid to an ALA

pancake?

#8 Comment By [Derik Badman](#) On October 15, 2008 @ 7:39 pm

I agree with a number of the comments in here, particular what Ryan had to say about mandatory memberships and organizational revenue.

A few other things:

1) I guess I'm in Level 3 of your schema. I went to both conferences this year and I'm on two committees right now, but honestly, my alienation from ALA has never been greater. My conference experience was one of fun socializing and a general sense of malaise at the wasted committee time and unengaging programs (maybe I picked the wrong ones).

2) The one committee I'm on, while having no official "virtual" members, did have unofficial ones. At both Midwinter and Annual different members Skyped-in to our meeting via one of the committee head's laptops. It worked decently, considering it was slightly ad hoc, though in the end, I'm not sure we did anything in person that a virtual group chat couldn't have accomplished.

3) How useful would service projects be beyond making people feel like they are participating? Project ideas would have to be carefully, thoughtfully, and creatively generated. To me, it seemed like a great number of the Emerging Leaders project this year (projects created by the various divisions and sections in ALA) were often redundant (of each other and already existing projects either in ALA or in the wider community) or useless, as if projects were created just to fill a quota to have enough for all the EL group members to do.

4) Often I get the feeling a lot of ALA work is some kind of enclosed self-perpetuating machine, generating energy and reams of paper/websites solely for the purpose of generating more energy and reams of paper/websites.

5) If I take a moment to think, "what has ALA done for me in the time I've been paying dues," I can't come up with a clear example other than the conferences serving as a social gathering to make new friends. Maybe ALA needs a promotional program to answer that question (that is, have members answer that question).

#9 Comment By [Emily Ford](#) On October 15, 2008 @ 9:31 pm

There are so many things to respond to here! Thanks to all who gave my post time, thought, and response.

I want to first respond to Megan's comment about membership structure and flattening the pyramid. My idea for a globally shaped ALA is, indeed, ideal. In fact, I don't think a complete flattening of a membership pyramid is possible. (Maybe an hour glass or column is a better shape to invoke?) In an organization as large as ALA there will always be hierarchical power/membership structures wherein those at the top-level 3 in this paradigm- will dictate the organization's governance and evolution. However, if one considers what it means to create a movement, or to mobilize a constituency, the power is in the greatest number. Hence, my concentration on the level 1 folks.

Another reason I think we need to be concentrating on level 1 membership and participation initiatives is because this level, the disheartened, will challenge the ALA far more than those who have already be active within the organization and have learned to navigate it. I think ALA needs this challenge to move forward and start to break down some of the bureaucracy that helped created these attitudes in the first place.

Now. On to Ryan.

it strikes me primarily as a source of organizational revenue rather than serving any functional purpose.

I agree. ALA needs to come up with ways to remain financially viable. This is why I suggested a model of service to the organization as part of a membership package. Yes, service might only be to sustain the organization, but it would be a better model than hiking up membership and conference registration costs. ALA has become too big for its own good.

And thank to you Camila for taking the time to respond with a thoughtful comment!

Don't give up on ALA. We are working on it — but we are such a "process" organization that it is taking more time then we would like to admit.

How can we examine and eradicate this "process" that seems to inhibit ALA growth on a large scale? It seems to me that most of my disenchantment with ALA stem from the bureaucracy and hierarchical power structures inherent within the organization. As a leader what do you think people like myself,

who are involved and are on committees, can do to change these problems?

And finally, Derik. You have said many things that I thought and couldn't get down, so thanks.

3) How useful would service projects be beyond making people feel like they are participating? Project ideas would have to be carefully, thoughtfully, and creatively generated. To me, it seemed like a great number of the Emerging Leaders project this year (projects created by the various divisions and sections in ALA) were often redundant (of each other and already existing projects either in ALA or in the wider community) or useless, as if projects were created just to fill a quota to have enough for all the EL group members to do.

Yes! A service model might take many different paths. One that I was considering was at conferences having a service challenge that directly affected the local community hosting the conference. For example, in Anaheim could we have not done something to serve the libraries and community of Southern California? Just because we're librarians doesn't mean we can't band together and help build a habitat house, or something of that nature.

A service challenge might also be for a group to create curriculum, handouts, and other teaching tools for instruction librarians to use when they return home. This kind of service challenge would help to create something more hands on to participate in at conferences while still using a librarian's skills, knowledge and abilities.

1) I guess I'm in Level 3 of your schema. I went to both conferences this year and I'm on two committees right now, but honestly, my alienation from ALA has never been greater. My conference experience was one of fun socializing and a general sense of malaise at the wasted committee time and unengaging programs (maybe I picked the wrong ones).

I think I'm in Level 3, too, and this scares me. After Anaheim and having some very negative experiences (in our day long EL workshop as well as trying to show up to a committee meeting to which I had been newly appointed and being the only one who showed) I feel incredibly alienated from the organization. Something will have to change right quick for me to continue my involvement with ALA.

#10 Comment By [Aaron the Librarian](#) On October 16, 2008 @ 9:46 am

Hooboy, there's a lot of stuff to support and respond to in this post and its replies... I'm going to go bare-brained and on the fly to start in this reply, but this may take a series of posts on ^[14] to fully support/respond/expand on all this.

1. Yay! Another long, thoughtful post about how methods of ALA participation need to change *and soon*

2. Your three-tiered model of ALA members may need a fourth (and possibly a fifth) tier: Tier four — potential member-participants who are daunted/turned off by the monolithic appearance of "Big ALA" (the mothership as I think KGS (among others) has called it); and possibly Tier five — people who have been completely turned off from ALA (former members as well as people who would never consider joining, for whatever reason from resistance to "the establishment" to a complete dislike for bureaucracy.

3. Effective "Electronic Participation" (as it is quaintly termed at the moment) is coming (no really, not kidding this time) it's in final alpha or finally beta as I type this (I just requested having my user account activated as beta account in ALA Connect) See the ^[15] for more details.

Yep, this is getting long — I now have "write series of blog posts about this post" on my "to do today" list — so I'll go organize & then write in support of many of Emily's points here and offer my observations of "what's going on in ALA" about several of them...

But first, must go do my "day job" *sigh* :)

-Aaron the Librarian
ALA Gadabout & Councilor at Large
and Councilor at Large Candidate again in 2009!

#11 Comment By [Dan C](#) On October 16, 2008 @ 4:20 pm

First off, it's not just new librarians who are struggling with student loans. We don't exactly hop into jobs that immediately wipe us out of debt in this profession.

I tend to be more SLA focused than ALA, as I find more that speaks to my actual day-to-day job. SLA does a good job with online learning initiatives, and, from what I can tell, many folks go to the

conference mainly to network & schmooze as well as talk to the vendors. For many people, the presentations/committees are time consuming (often triple booked) and usually not worth it.

If ALA worked on making the conference experience more of a worthwhile community networking event (and less expensive as we're then not paying for all the speakers and A/V equipment) I think more people might enjoy it.

#12 Comment By [Naive Newbie](#) On October 16, 2008 @ 10:01 pm

NOTICE: Disenter in your midst!

Now, as a current grad student in the MLIS program, I'm able to relate to the discourse regarding high prices limiting involvement in ALA and it's numerous divisions and committees. I tried desperately to be able to justify and fund a trip to YALSA's first conference in Tennessee, to no avail. Needless to say, I'll be staying at home that weekend.

However, I am unable to completely agree or commit to several of your evaluations.

1. Even if I am unable to attend the conferences, I still gain some significant benefits, including the e-mail newsletter American Libraries Direct, and the mailed monthly periodical. Maybe that's just because I'm still in school, and have other idealistic and naive classmates to share them with. I recognize that this could probably be seen as an argument towards the increasing feasibility of virtual membership, but I consider it justification for my membership dues.

2. Second, I am however attending my state library association's conference. While it hasn't occurred yet, this is one of the highlights of my year, being able to network with professionals, meet librarians from all over the state, and gather ideas that I might be able to implement in the library where I am employed, either now or after I graduate. In a profession where we are constantly consumed with the idea that we don't get to network enough, I doubt that becoming names on a screen will allow for that same opportunity.

3. I find it also a hinderance to encouraging involvement by limiting meetings to online interaction. Yes, we are supposed to be at the forefront of technological advances. That's not the case in every instance, and I feel it would be a penalty to not only those who do not have the training (I just learned what Skype was a few months ago, and have still yet to use it), but also those loyal members who have been with the organization and the profession for years.

4. Some of us just don't have time to be involved in committee work or service projects at this time. Some us are working full time and going to school full time. Others of us have family obligations. There are only so many hours in the day. Why should we be forced to participate in an organization that, whether we admit it or not, we might have joined for the benefits and recognition and the possibilities of opportunities that we know will be there when we're ready and able to take advantage of them? I'd rather wait just another year or two when I feel confident in my contributions then just serving a committee to be able to fulfill a required obligation.

5. Plus, when else would we have an excuse to do library book cart drill team events? I see the videos on youtube.com, and I want to see them in person, and maybe one day participate. When else would we get free stuff from vendors? And when else would we have an excuse to talk shop with other libraries? And, if we did away with physical meetings, how would your idea of service centered meetings be implemented?

In essence, DON'T TAKE THAT AWAY FROM ME!

These are my ever evolving thoughts.

#13 Comment By [Lisa Kurt](#) On October 17, 2008 @ 1:06 am

I just wanted to say that I do agree with a lot of the points made regarding ALA and why I am a member- mostly for the basic membership. I think one point that could be drawn out slightly more is the fact that ALA is so big and trying to be so many things to so many different people. I found in the past two ALA annual conferences I went to that there were not enough relevant sessions for me. Also many of the sessions I was interested in conflicted timewise.

Consider this, there are other organizations that are more specific to the area of librarianship that I work in. And in order for me to serve and get involved on committees with those organizations I need only to pay one membership fee and attend one conference - that's it. Most coordinating and organizing happens virtually via email and conference call. The upshot on top of that is I attend a conference that's more targeted toward me and my work. I'm a relatively new librarian. That said, I need to learn as much as possible, find out best practices and practical information from other librarians in my specific field of librarianship. It's really important to me that most of the sessions I attend - I will walk away with something to take away and bring back to my institution and/or in my job.

The bottom line is, I don't know that ALA could do anything to make me change my mind- there are a lot of other conferences that are way more relevant to the work I do and yes I only get so much support from my institution so I have to choose wisely- I think we all do. I tend to choose organizations that not only I can contribute to but that by being part of that organization- it also benefits me in a very direct and focused manner. Now I know that not everyone feels that way and some do feel like serving on an ALA committee such as NMRT is directly relevant to their work- unfortunately that kind of committee just doesn't for me. Again, I know that there may be other ALA committees that might be more relevant but then I'm back having to pay more for the added divisions and in order to serve on a committee- I'm stuck going to two conferences a year.

#14 Comment By [Lynda Reynolds](#) On October 17, 2008 @ 9:43 am

Emily,

It's great to hear your thoughts on ALA and to see how well you are doing in your profession! Congrats on being an Emerging Leader for ALA. We are fortunate to have you in the profession!

I attend only PLA conferences for 2 reasons: 1) I only have to attend every other year-easier to convince the powers that be for funding; and 2) it is so much more relevant to my job as a public library director. In the past when I have attended ALA (Dallas and New Orleans) I was overwhelmed and lost and not sure I got much of out it. The most recent PLA conference in Minneapolis had programs available virtually. While I attended the actual conference, several other librarians from Stillwater paid to attend virtually and really enjoyed it. That is definitely the way to go for ALA as well.

#15 Comment By [Derik Badman](#) On October 19, 2008 @ 4:32 pm

Newbie, a few quick replies to one of your comments:

"In a profession where we are constantly consumed with the idea that we don't get to network enough, I doubt that becoming names on a screen will allow for that same opportunity."

That's a severe reduction of virtual interaction. I've got more to say on this in an upcoming post, but I think the nature of online/virtual interaction has changed drastically over the years. We are considerably more than names on a screen to each other when we interact through apps like Facebook, Twitter, Second Life, or even a good old fashioned message board.

p.s. Dissent is good. That spurs conversation.

#16 Comment By [effinlibrarian](#) On October 19, 2008 @ 7:55 pm

I'm cheap, and I don't have any plans to pay for anything including memberships, especially one that increases in cost the longer I belong.

You talk about tiers: what about the "no money," but "show support" tier? I'm an extremely (yes, extremely) important blogger and I would put a banner on my page that links to the ALA site just as I link to Amazon.com, Taco Bell and the NRA. Do they have that? I don't see any way to support ALA for free with something as simple as a banner to display on my blog.

So create a tier for people who have no interest in joining anything, and I'd join that.

(also, the "create a body of work" idea is really good)

#17 Pingback By [Aaron the Librarian » Brainstorming about ALA & Lead Pipes](#) On October 19, 2008 @ 9:59 pm

[...] at In the Library with the Lead Pipe Emily Ford posted a nice long detailed post on ALA & Membership. She described a 3 tier model to describe members' participation in pyramid form which is a [...]

#18 Pingback By [Aaron the Librarian » Membership: what's in it for me?](#) On October 19, 2008 @ 10:58 pm

[...] Membership was one of the themes Emily mentioned over in her post on In the Library with a Lead Pipe [...]

#19 Pingback By [Aaron the Librarian » Membership: how to pitch it?](#) On October 19, 2008 @ 11:09 pm

[...] Thinking back to Emily's 3 tiered pyramid [...]

#20 Comment By [Aaron the Librarian](#) On October 19, 2008 @ 11:43 pm

Just to expand on the process sub-thread:

And thank to you Camila for taking the time to respond with a thoughtful comment!

Don't give up on ALA. We are working on it — but we are such a "process" organization that it is taking more time then we would like to admit.

How can we examine and eradicate this "process" that seems to inhibit ALA growth on a large scale? It seems to me that most of my disenchantment with ALA stem from the bureaucracy and hierarchical power structures inherent within the organization. As a leader what do you think people like myself, who are involved and are on committees, can do to change these problems?

Yes, the hierarchy does get in the way (a lot, imho, though others disagree and/or argue it's a necessary evil); the fundamental organizational motive power of the association is "evolution" which by its very nature is more additive of "stuff." People who are involved, who are on committees, who have ideas for transformation, who can identify pieces-parts of the "process" which are superfluous or which no longer work can do the best service by highlighting those excesses and discussing how what needs to be done could be done more efficiently via a different process or via different channels or through new media.

In the last year or so, I feel ALA has turned the corner and is headed toward better processes and acceptance that the online medium will neither break policy nor destroy the association.

This has been painfully slow to my "revolution, not evolution" tendencies. The process is grinding on, but I have hopes that several action items will finally be acted upon and the skids will be greased enough that

1. meaningful and needed change to association practices will be officially officialized and
2. all the working around old interpretations will no longer be necessary and
3. all the stuff which people have been told cannot happen a certain way will be encouraged to happen in the most efficient way the participants see fit and
4. the unicorns will come back.

Well, alright, #4 is a bit optimistic :)

PS I've started on my long support and reply posts: ^[16]
[17]
[18]

#21 Comment By [Aaron the Librarian](#) On October 19, 2008 @ 11:49 pm

@effinglibrarian Thanks for pointing out another valuable tier for ALA (heck, for any worthwhile non-profit) to include in their efforts.

makes note to self & emails comment link to Membership peeps

#22 Comment By [Jenny Parsons](#) On October 20, 2008 @ 10:17 am

Emily, what a good post! I've felt a similar sort of strain as a new ALA member. I'm even on a round table discussion, and I still don't feel like I participate as much as I'd like to!

Another thought for making memberships more financially feasible— why not let new members "work off" their membership fees at places like conventions or via doing administrative tasks? I don't think this is feasible for everyone who needs it, but to organize a kind of "work study" program for new ALA will encourage involvement, and through that, foster a sense of community.

#23 Comment By [Ellie](#) On October 20, 2008 @ 2:02 pm

Jenny – I really like that "work off" idea! Offering discounted membership to first time committee members for the term of their appointment might be another incentive...

#24 Pingback By [Aaron the Librarian](#) » [Cogitating about Conference Costs](#) On October 20, 2008 @ 4:43 pm

[...] okay, I'm still working on several responses to the post on In the Library with a Lead Pipe and I took a math detour while spinning my wheels on my regular day job [...]

#25 Comment By [Poor Librarian](#) On October 20, 2008 @ 5:23 pm

In general, I find that my membership in ALA has no value. The only reason I belong is to have the opportunity to join ACRL and RUSA. As a result, I feel taken advantage of by the "parent" organization that offers little in the way of support or opportunities. ALA is a bulky, ineffective, inefficient

organization that often focuses on the wrong issues in terms of libraries and librarianship. There have been many times in the past few years when I've been ashamed to be even loosely associated with the organization. The leadership is generally useless and I'm tired of hearing excuses about why things aren't getting done. Isn't it time they really start listening to the membership and start focusing on real issues? Fortunately ACRL and the other associations under the leaky ALA umbrella do a better job. But it is wrong (no matter how you structure it) for ALA to continue taking our limited money to do things that matter little to working librarians.

#26 Comment By [Carolyn Wood](#) On October 20, 2008 @ 9:48 pm

Many comments in this thread address the symptoms rather than the root cause of this problem, in my opinion.

Advocate for higher salaries. Move forward on the issue.

Active steps on this issue will increase organizational support.

#27 Comment By [Rory Litwin](#) On October 21, 2008 @ 11:04 am

I think the problem with this line of thinking is that it assumes many more librarians would like to be actively involved than presently are. I think the lack of involvement among members is mostly because of personal preference.

By way of analogy... I support Barak Obama, but I didn't want to put any time into campaigning for him. So I wrote a check to his campaign. It wasn't exactly out of a sense of obligation that I did that, but because it was an easy way to lend support to a cause that I believe in. Also, I have the sense that they've got all the people they need and can handle who are volunteering time.

To me ALA is a similar thing. I think most members pay dues not exactly out of a sense of obligation but because it's the easiest way to lend support to something that they believe in. I don't think ALA has too much difficulty finding the volunteers it needs to serve on committees. If a person wants to be involved at that level, I think the door is pretty much open, especially now with electronic participation options increasing. I think most members, though, don't want to contribute time and would rather just contribute by paying their membership dues, voting, and being counted among the big number of members that gives weight to what ALA says and does.

#28 Comment By [Jenny Parsons](#) On October 21, 2008 @ 11:55 am

@Ellie- Thanks. Cost is what drives most people away, I know; for something that gets nearly \$200 of my hard-earned cash, the only benefits I get from the ALA are the periodicals they send to me; I use them for my own research. (I think I might be the only one who actually reads them.)

But in terms of networking and hiring, the ALA is essentially useless. Conferences and events are either insanely expensive in and of themselves, or they take place halfway across the country- and since I work two part-time jobs to make ends meet, flying to these things is out of the question. That's why I'm so hippped on options like blogs and wikis and Second Life- they offer a way to interact and gain information even though my employing organization won't support my attending.

#29 Comment By [Derik Badman](#) On October 21, 2008 @ 2:17 pm

Carolyn, I'm not sure how salaries are the root of the problem. If I made more money, I might be relatively less annoyed at the price of dues, but it wouldn't really make me feel better about ALA.

#30 Comment By [Ellie](#) On October 21, 2008 @ 3:41 pm

Rory - I think that's an excellent analogy. I don't agree with it 100%, but I think there's definitely a place for that type of "member" in thinking about the structure. I want to disagree about the door being open since a common complaint that I've heard discussed is how hard it is to get on a committee. The returning refrain is "just volunteer," but you may be right that ALA already has more volunteers than it can handle. Hence Emily's suggestions for creating more opportunities for involvement.

#31 Comment By [Carolyn Wood](#) On October 21, 2008 @ 10:35 pm

Derik: If most librarians made at least the ALA suggested minimum, perhaps more librarians would be like Rory in writing a check to their favorite causes...be it a political candidate or ALA. A \$200 ALA membership is significant amount of after-tax salary for many librarians. When ALA has a larger base of members (active or not), there is a greater probability of members using and purchasing ALA services and/or goods, whether virtual or hardcopy in addition to growing the organization. More members translate into lower cost of services.

[19]

The above link includes informative graphs and the following summary: "ALA continues to be strong financially, which allows it to be strong programmatically. There are always revenue and expense challenges though. The dues increase is adding revenue as expected, but membership retention and growth remain a challenge. Net margins for meetings and conferences have shown no growth over the last ten years. Conference expenses are increasing faster than revenues. Publishing has invested in new technologies and is still searching for the right business models to make them pay off."

If the salary structure remains low, why would anyone enter the field? Why would a low paid librarian take any kind of 'risk' to improve the library or library world? Working for the 'greater good' is admirable; societal norms draw a correlation between perceived value of work and salary. The ALA Allied Professional Association endorses a minimum salary for professional librarians of not less than \$40,000 per year. Does this figure accurately reflect librarian salaries coast to coast?

In addition, a higher salary structure would increase the perceived value of librarians and (hopefully) increase public support. I believe it's a cycle...professions that have low salaries have low perceived value, so what is the motivation to pay more? And, as long as raises are doled out as a percentage of base pay, the low paid professions again get hit, i.e. 5% of \$25,000 is certainly different than 5% of \$75,000.

=====

Rory's comment -"I think most members, though, don't want to contribute time and would rather just contribute by paying their membership dues, voting, and being counted among the big number of members that gives weight to what ALA says and does."

Why don't they want to contribute time? Is the decision dependent on the perceived value they hold for not only what ALA represents but also what it does. Do member expectations and participation levels affect organizational impact on local and national levels?

#32 Comment By [Derik Badman](#) On October 22, 2008 @ 4:29 pm

Carolyn: My point is that having a better salary wouldn't necessarily improve one's desire to give ALA money.

Salaries may be at the root of the issues you mention (perceived value of libraries, recruiting) but that doesn't translate into liking ALA more.

#33 Comment By [Carolyn Wood](#) On October 22, 2008 @ 10:40 pm

I suspect most librarians, who make below the ALA recommended minimum, would support an organization if they believed it was instrumental in getting more dollars into their pockets. Every librarian might not necessarily send ALA money, though the probability would increase as member librarians tie value to organizational support.

More members increase revenue and in turn present opportunities for new reductions in costs of services i.e. conferences, publications, webinars and more.

I truly enjoyed volunteering time to assist with the new ALA website. I found ALA HR staff to be very helpful in providing support documentation for my group's EL project. I enjoyed sharing usability details with Rob Carlson and other ALA IT folks.

I am passionate about recruitment efforts and to that end I ask...what will make you "like ALA more?"

If ALA falls out of favor, what means of national networking will supplant it?

#34 Comment By [Derik Badman](#) On October 24, 2008 @ 9:21 am

I honestly have no idea what would make me like ALA more. Perhaps I am not properly indoctrinated into the idea of professional organizations or maybe contemporary methods of online interaction, networking, and sharing have eliminated a lot of the traditional roles of a ginormous professional organization. I'm just not seeing the benefits, beyond padding the resume. I wonder if there's ever been a study on what members see as the benefits of the organization.

I should say, that I do see the policy/govt advocacy function of ALA as important. Though I've researched it closely to see if it's had much effect.

If ALA falls out of favor it would be replaced by something new. Perhaps something more agile. I have no idea, it's not something I've given a lot of thought to.

#35 Comment By [Carolyn Wood](#) On October 24, 2008 @ 2:49 pm

properly indoctrinated – ouch

I have been involved in community efforts that made a difference. Things change.

I will give your study idea some thought.

#36 Comment By [Derik Badman](#) On October 24, 2008 @ 8:39 pm

That indoctrinated comment wasn't meant as an insult or anything. Just me amusing myself as I write.

I do believe community efforts can make a difference. I do see I've a typo in my comment. It should say "I've NOT researched it closely". That is, I know ALA does advocacy, I've just not paid attention to the outcomes.

I think it'd be an interesting study to find out what people like. It could potentially work as a marketing effort (so and so loves ALA because...).

#37 Comment By [Emily Ford](#) On October 25, 2008 @ 11:03 am

I've been following these discussions and wanted to chime in again...

Aaron: I really do like your expansion of the pyramid—this is a great complement to the framework of understanding I see. And I can't wait for the unicorns.

Rory: I think you've poked at another level that can be added to the model.

Jenny: This model does exist, but only in the Student to Work program and not for those of us who have finished school.

Carolyn: I am agreeing with Derik for most of this conversation. I have found myself using the term "indoctrinated" for ALA for quite a while and I use it earnestly. What's more, a friend of mine and fellow Emerging Leader has referred to ALA as an "elitist monolith" and I quite fully agree. Yet I find myself participating in this structure—to a large degree of consternation. ALA may not be for me in the future, and I think this is what the organization is battling, a whole slew of librarians who don't really want to participate in that "elitist monolith" or to become "properly indoctrinated."

#38 Comment By [Carolyn Wood](#) On October 25, 2008 @ 12:22 pm

Every individual brings a unique perspective to an organizational system. I agree with much has been said and actually was amusing myself to some extent in this thread. Presently I'm focused on NJLA but continue to pay my obligatory ALA dues. I am open to joining a productive committee/round table if you have a recommendation.

While I was visiting Seattle, as an EL, I was indoctrinated into promoting the value of having fun in libraryland. I credit the fish mongers of Pike Place Market who continue to serve as my mentors for literacy advocacy.

BTW—I plan to visit Woodbury Public Library at 1:00 pm this afternoon for the opening of the Smithsonian's exhibit, Key Ingredients. [Woodbury](#)

[Public Library Key Ingredients Exhibit](#) The exhibit should be fun, stop by if you need to get out more. Derik: Nice photostream!

#39 Pingback By [The Brewin' Librarian » Great Leaders Listen, Do You?](#) On October 25, 2008 @ 9:51 pm

[...] in the ALA at large—for reasons Emily at "In the Library with the Lead Pipe" laid out much more eloquently than I could—I am very happy to be involved on a local level. I love this state, I am immensely impressed by [...]

#40 Pingback By [Pro-Con-ference | In the Library with the Lead Pipe](#) On October 29, 2008 @ 9:02 am

[...] With the economy tanking and travel prices increasing (I don't want to think about how much it's costing to get me across the country to ACRL in March), large national conferences become ever more problematic for a larger number of librarians. There has always been a (perhaps large) group of librarians who have neither the personal nor institutional funding to attend conferences, a group which has been mostly shut out of ALA (see Emily's post). [...]

#41 Comment By [Doug Dawson](#) On November 4, 2008 @ 1:58 pm

Emily,

I think that your post is an excellent reminder of the value of getting younger members involved in discussing the future of organizations such as the ALA and PLA. You raise several intriguing ideas for discussion. We in the Public Library Association (PLA) have seen strong support for increased online

participation. Last spring the PLA membership voted overwhelmingly in favor of shifting many of the traditional PLA committees to online communities of practice (CoPs). A PLA Emerging Leader group spent time this past summer creating a plan to manage that shift, and out of their recommendations we created ^[20]. Launched last month PLAspace is still taking shape but the number of CoPs and registered users has grown rapidly, and it is all being driven by dedicated PLA members. At this time anyone – member or not – is able to create an account and participate, and I'd like to encourage you and every young librarian to do so to make your voice heard.

Doug Dawson | Manager of Web Services, PLA

#42 Comment By [Andrea Mercado](#) On November 5, 2008 @ 12:57 pm

Just to piggyback on Doug Dawson's comments, PLA also presented its first-ever Virtual Conference in conjunction with the most recent PLA conference, and it was a huge success for a first-time effort. I testified before ALA Council to the fact that there was great demand from those attendees — by way of comments in the live discussions as well as evaluation comments — for more and similar events to be presented by ALA as a whole. I definitely feel like PLA is really making great strides in trying to implement the types of interactions and technologies that can enable members to make the most out of their professional experiences through PLA, and that it's really hard, slow work making this type of progress within a large organization like ALA.

Andrea Mercado, Co-Manager, PLABlog.org

#43 Comment By [Emily Ford](#) On November 7, 2008 @ 10:41 am

I'm so glad to hear of such efforts and successes for PLA. I recently had a conversation with some volunteers of mine who are public librarians who expressed the difficulty of being involved in ALA because of institutional support. The efforts that PLA is making for virtual attendance and by creating online communities of practice will certainly help professionals participate on national levels, especially those whose employers don't support conference attendance except for once every few years.

#44 Pingback By [ALA Marginalia » Blog Archive » Increasing Usage of ALA Connect](#) On June 8, 2009 @ 8:48 am

[...] ItLwtLP site also has an interesting post from October 15, 2008, titled On the ALA Membership Pyramid. It has 43 comments on it, which contain some truly interesting ideas for ALA. If you're one [...]

Article printed from In the Library with the Lead Pipe: <http://www.inthelibrarywiththeleadpipe.org>

URL to article: <http://www.inthelibrarywiththeleadpipe.org/2008/on-the-ala-membership-pyramid/>

URLs in this post:

[1] Image: <http://flickr.com/photos/liberato/171610084/>

[2] "...i [sic] only renew [my ALA membership] out of a sense of professional obligation, and also because of the fear that i'll [sic] put it on my resume and get busted as not being a member." –c-dog: <http://jenna.openflows.com/ala/election/2008#comment-1>

[3] Emerging Leaders program: http://wikis.ala.org/emergingleaders/index.php/2008_Emerging_Leaders_Program_Information

[4] member participation: http://jimrettig.org/content/initiatives/member_participation.htm

[5] New Members Round Table (NMRT): <http://www.ala.org/ala/mgrps/rts/nmrt/index.cfm>

[6] National Honor Society: http://www.nhs.us/s_nhs/index.asp

[7] Beta Club: <http://www.betaclub.org/>

[8] Revisiting the ALA Membership Pyramid: <http://www.inthelibrarywiththeleadpipe.org/2011/revisiting-the-ala-membership-pyramid/>

[9] All Dressed Up with Nowhere to Go: A Survey of ALA Emerging Leaders:

<http://www.inthelibrarywiththeleadpipe.org/2009/all-dressed-up/>

[10] Why We Should Adopt ALAConnect: A brief review and rumination on ALA's new online community: <http://www.inthelibrarywiththeleadpipe.org/2009/why-we-should-adopt-alaconnect-a-brief-review-and-rumination-on-alas-new-online-community/>

[11] Conference this! Lead Pipers compare conference experiences:

<http://www.inthelibrarywiththeleadpipe.org/2010/conference-this-lead-pipers-compare-conference-experiences/>

[12] Pro-Con-ference: <http://www.inthelibrarywiththeleadpipe.org/2008/pro-con-ference/>

[13] : <http://www.camilaalire.com>

[14] : <http://aaron.thelibrarian.org/blog/>

[15] : <http://itts.ala.org/update>

[16] : <http://aaron.thelibrarian.org/blog/2008/10/19/brainstorming-about-ala-lead-pipes/>

[17] : <http://aaron.thelibrarian.org/blog/2008/10/19/membership-whats-in-it-for-me/>

[18] : <http://aaron.thelibrarian.org/blog/2008/10/19/membership-how-to-pitch-it/>

[19] :

<http://atyourlibrary.org/ala/aboutala/governance/annualreport/annualreport/financials/financials.cfm>

[20] : <http://www.PLAspace.org>

Click [here](#) to print.

This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial 3.0 United States License](#).