

# The Role of Associations in Professions

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More than one hundred associations of libraries and librarians are included in the most recent edition of the *Encyclopedia of Associations*.<sup>1</sup> Ralph Ellsworth suggested eighteen years ago when he reviewed library associations in the United States "... In our time participation in a national association provides for many a substitute for the kind of participation previous generations were willing to give to the church."<sup>2</sup>

What is the role of the association in other professions? How do we as librarians conform to other association models? The role of associations is influenced by the characteristics and nature of the profession which we serve. What is a profession? The *Encyclopedia of the Social Sciences* defines a profession as an occupation requiring extensive and continuous preparation.<sup>3</sup> Searching back in my memory to library school classes I took 17 years ago in Australia, I remember the characteristics then cited to describe a profession as being:

1. It had a body of knowledge that described the field and some consensus about that body of knowledge.
2. It required extensive study or preparation.
3. There developed a commitment to training new entrants and extending the knowledge.
4. It developed a body of literature and the publication of scholarly journals to disseminate the information.
5. Groups were formed to advance the goals of the group—in other words, the development of associations.

What is an association, and why does it exist, Ellsworth notwithstanding? Obviously there must be advantages derived from a group that are not available so readily to us as individuals, or we would not choose to form or belong to the group.

What are these advantages, and how are we able to achieve them more readily as a group? Association activities can be classed into four general categories:

1. An association provides a unified front on issues of importance to the profession generally.
2. It provides programs for the individual that aid his/her better job and career performance.
3. It provides a forum for the exchange of ideas.
4. It provides benefits that may be available to any group at large, that are not specifically aimed at the professional or subject affiliation of the group.

To what extent do activities that library associations engage in, conform to this overall association "model"? To provide a manageable framework most of the examples given are those that affect academic libraries. The first category—providing a united front on issues of importance to the profession generally—is a function that is most often associated with a professional group.

When a group of people speaks to an issue, more weight is usually carried than when just one person speaks. And depending on the issue, different groups can speak in the most meaningful way. Examples of this are:

- Representing librarians' views during the copyright law deliberations; the hearings on the White House Conference; and most recently, the hearings on the National Periodical Center.
- Developing standards for libraries and specific library services. In the Association of College and Research Libraries, we have standards for two-year and four-year college libraries, and for university libraries.
- Supporting legislation affecting libraries.
- Investigating complaints of unfair practices against librarians, e.g. the ALA Staff Committee on Meditation, Arbitration and Inquiry, and the ACRL Committee on Academic Status.

Each of these endeavors is made possible because as a group we have much greater strength and resources than we do as individuals.

That leads to another set of activities we can accomplish as a group that we could not as individuals. Collectively, our resources are much greater as a group, and we can engage in projects that we could not afford as individual libraries or librarians. Examples of these are:

- Developing national sets of competencies for entry level librarians (this requires a lot of money, and the experiences of many libraries).
- Bring together people from various accreditation agencies in an invitational conference to focus on standards for libraries.
- Producing expensive films, news clips, or brochures, National Library Week posters, or the national publicity clips for libraries, or ensuring that Gene Shalit talks about libraries on the *Today Show* periodically.
- The pilot satellite program that was held last year on the new copyright law

- National salary surveys
- Statistics from non-ARL university libraries; this is a pilot study being carried out by ACRL. It may be extended to other kinds of libraries in future years.

Another type of association activity is to provide programs for the individual that aid his/her better job and career performance. This can be closely tied to providing a forum for the exchange of ideas, so let us consider them together.

We sometimes fall into the trap of thinking that providing programs for the individual for improved job or career performance refers to continuing education. It does, but that is only one of many aspects of providing programs.

- Formal continuing education programs are provided by the American Library Association and the Association of College and Research Libraries either as pre-conferences before the annual meeting each year or separately. In New York, for example, there will be a two day workshop on planning and implementing staff development programs in academic libraries, and another on ERIC services. At Dallas there was one on developing bibliographic instruction programs in academic institutions, and another on "Planning Continuing Education Programs for Academic Libraries". In San Antonio this year ACRL sponsored a three day conference on rare books and manuscripts.
- The official meetings of the association (ACRL), its 22 Chapters, 13 Sections, and 5 Discussion Groups, provide formal and informal exposure to new or important ideas and concepts. A library staff may be very competent, but without the exchange of ideas, it can become very insular.

ACRL last year sponsored for the first time a national conference in Boston, to focus on problems and issues in academic libraries specifically. There were nine invited papers, seventy refereed contributed papers, exhibits, social events, a job placement center, and Kurt Vonnegut as the banquet speaker! The next national conference will be September 29-October 2, 1981, in Minneapolis.

- ACRL provides consultative services to individual academic libraries and librarians to assist them in solving on-the-job problems.
- Publications extend knowledge, provide an exchange of ideas, and provide information. In ACRL these journals are published:

*College and Research Libraries* (a bi-monthly scholarly journal),  
*College & Research Libraries News* (a monthly magazine), and  
*CHOICE* (the monthly book reviewing journal for academic libraries).

Membership in a group also provides the opportunity for participation in programs that would otherwise not be available to the individual. These programs may not be related to librarianship specifically but may be important to the librarian. These programs might include, for example, major medical coverage, disability protection income, or other types of insurance coverage unavailable except to very large groups.

The comment is sometimes made that there are too many associations. There is the North Carolina Library Association, the College and University Libraries Section of it, and the South East Library Association. There are probably Chapters of the Special Libraries Association, and of the American Society for Information Science; there is ALA and ACRL, CLENE . . . One could spend all one's time, money, and energies just trying to keep up with all the associations.

I can sympathize with those who have this feeling. I remember my chagrin on account of the teasing I got from my colleagues once when sitting at a head table. The speaker asked people to raise their hand if they belonged to any of the associations he was going to name; I had only to raise my hand once because I belonged to all fifteen names he reeled off.

Yet there is a good purpose served by the multiplicity of such associations. I remember when I was in library school, this time in the United States, in discussions about networks we talked of the overlap and duplication of the U.S. indexing and abstracting apparatus, and the simplicity of the single Russian system. A single approach sounds logical and reasonable, but then I would think of the times when the controlled vocabulary in *Index Medicus* was just what I needed to quickly search for material on neoplasms. I did not have to look up all those synonyms, such as cancers, tumors, . . . and the times when I was looking for information on new subjects where the terminology had not yet been established, the KWIC indexes in *Biological Abstracts* were what I needed . . .

And the times when I was trying to find material that cut across disciplines, and *Science Citation Index* was the best tool.

I could not on . . . but the point is, that a multiplicity or a variety enables us to choose what works best for us, given a specific kind of need. Depending on the need, different groups will best fit that need. And none of us is likely to have only one need for ever and ever.

When we are dealing with issues, different groups can speak in the most meaningful way to different issues. On some issues, a local group can carry the most weight; on the other issues affecting the State, perhaps the State Library Association is the best voice. On an issue of statewide concern to academic librarians, perhaps the ACRL Chapter and the College and University Libraries Section will be best listened to. Generally speaking, higher education listens

more carefully to the combined voices of academic librarians nationally through the Association of College and Research Libraries, than it does to the American Library Association because ALA contains many librarians who are not academic librarians. But on other issues of more widespread interest, such as copyright, National Library Week, or OCLC, ALA speaks out with more weight, with 35,000 members, than does ACRL with 9,000 members.

Even within librarianship we need different groups to speak most effectively, depending on the nature of the issue, and the breadth of the audience the issue affects. And as librarians, we experience a variety of needs that can best be handled by a variety of associations.

### CONCLUSION

Associations play an important role in professions. For the profession as an entity, associations provide a collective voice which can advance the goals and the knowledge of the profession. For the individual, the association provides a professional identity, the support of colleagues, and an opportunity to grow through participation in the work of the association. Associations are as strong as the individuals who belong to, and are active in them.

### REFERENCES

1. *Encyclopedia of Associations* 13th ed. Detroit, Gale Research Co., 1979.
2. Ralph E. Ellsworth "Critique of Library Associations in America," *Library Quarterly* 31: 383-84, (October 1961).
3. Talcott Parsons, "Professions" in the *Encyclopedia of Social Sciences* 12: 536-47. (Crowell, Colliers, and MacMillan, Inc., 1968).



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