

Boost Your Career

How to Get Involved Professionally

ROBIN SOFGE

One of the things I love about librarianship, and youth librarianship in particular, is how much of a sharing profession it is. That's not limited to just sharing program plans and ideas; it also includes sharing our experiences, our professional networks, and our advice to support one another in continuing to develop as professionals. So if you have a question about how something works in an organization, ask someone to share their experience with you," said Amy Koester, the learning experiences manager at the Skokie Public Library in Skokie, Illinois. "And always be willing to share your experience with others, too."

Koester and four other library professionals shared their insights on how giving back to the profession energized them and, in some cases, helped them chart a new direction. They also offered advice on finding the right way to get involved, whether starting at the local or state level or going for participation in a national library association. These professionals also provided suggestions for getting your library to support your involvement.

Lisa R. Varga, executive director of the Virginia Library Association (VLA), was a youth services librarian when her

library director was president of VLA and needed help with a committee. "I had no idea what I was getting into," Varga said. "I was a volunteer before I was executive director."

She worked at the Central Rappahannock Regional Library in Virginia for nine years, first as a youth services librarian and then as a human resources and staff training coordinator. Varga is currently a member of the International Council of Library Association Executives (ICLAE) of ALA and was recently selected to be part of the first class of the ALA Policy Corps, which aspires to develop a key group of experts with deep and continuous knowledge of national public policies in areas crucial to ALA's strategic goals.

"I found being involved in committees with their networking and exposure to a variety of committed professionals from various sizes of libraries from different regions helped me learn new techniques, approaches, and viewpoints. I brought these back to my library and community and helped create better, more meaningful service that I could not have imagined without that network of learning peers. Hallway conversations were as important as conference sessions in terms of my professional development!" said Marge Loch-Wouters,



Robin Sofge is the Youth Services Supervisor at Montclair Community Library (VA) in Prince William Public Library System. She was a 2018 ALA Annual Conference panelist for *Fresh Takes on Youth Services*, served as Chair of the YALSA 2018 Summer Learning Taskforce, and was also on the ALSC Special Collections and Bechtel Fellowship Committee.

whose service includes past ALA councilor, current president of the Wisconsin Library Association, lecturer at University of Wisconsin-Madison iSchool, and youth consultant for Loch-Works Consulting in Minnesota.

Robin Fogle Kurz, Ph.D., a self-employed writer and consultant who served more than fifteen years in public libraries and library science education, has served on the Editorial Advisory Committee for *Children and Libraries* and also on YALSA's Organization & Bylaws Committee. She said her volunteer experience in professional library organizations has been rewarding. She has a suggestion for getting involved. "The advice I always offer is jump in—attend a 101 session at a conference if possible, introduce yourself to officers, board members, and other group members whenever you have a chance, and volunteer for the strategic/processes committees before trying to get onto a book committee."

Dennis J. LeLoup, a retired school librarian whose committee work has included the ALSC Special Collections and Bechtel Fellowship Committee, 2014 Caldecott Committee, and past-president of the Indiana Library Federation, said a professor encouraged him to get involved professionally. He first got involved with a professional organization that is now known as the Association of Indiana School Library Educators (AISLE). "I was asked to be involved in membership and I said yes," LeLoup said. "I didn't know librarians outside of my local area until I got involved on the state level." Another colleague encouraged him to get involved nationally.

Although LeLoup retired this year, he plans to continue being active in the profession. "I'm only retired from my day job. I'll never retire professionally from ALA, ALSC, or AASL (American Association of School Librarians). I want to be involved and help others affect what is going on with children," said LeLoup.

Participation can range from virtual to in-person. For example, Koester, who has served on many committees including the ALSC virtual Grants Administration Committee, the in-person Public Awareness Committee, the 2014 Newbery Award Committee, and currently serves on the ALSC board of directors, said she first got involved with ALA and ALSC while in graduate school.

"I had a professor who talked about the value of the organizations and also made sure to impress upon us the fact that student membership rates are a great deal. For that first year or two, I was largely a passive member; I would read *American Libraries* and *Children and Libraries*, the AL Direct newsletters, and that was about it," Koester said.

She said she was soaking in a lot of information. As Koester approached the end of graduate school and started to look for jobs, she knew she was interested in public librarianship but didn't yet know if she was more suited for adult or children's librarianship. Koester attended her first ALA Annual Conference right after graduation and attended different

conference sessions about public library services that ultimately helped her decide youth librarianship was for her. Koester also took advantage of the ALA jobs resources, both online and at the conference, including resume and cover letter help.

"While I didn't really know anyone involved in these organizations at the time, I definitely saw that folks who'd been in them for a few years, and who had careers in librarianship, found them to be an invigorating and network-expanding part of their careers. Witnessing that definitely planted the seeds of continued professional involvement for me," Koester said.

The first national library association Kurz became involved with was the National Association to Promote Library and Information Services to Latinos and the Spanish Speaking (REFORMA). "Through my involvement with REFORMA and presenting at several REFORMA National Conferences, I learned the power of national organizations, made lifelong friendships, and gained the confidence I needed to become involved in other national library groups," Kurz said. "I think the value of all these groups lies in helping members learn how national library organizations function, making connections across the country, and being able to give back to the field."

Kurz said serving on the 2013 Pura Belpré Award committee was life changing because she worked with a talented committee and was able to give something special in terms of her time and expertise to both ALSC and REFORMA. Kurz said serving in professional organizations made her a more knowledgeable faculty member. "I was able to advocate for the importance of library groups in all my courses using my personal experiences. I also encouraged my youth services students to become involved at the local, state, and/or national level," Kurz said.

Loch-Wouters said she first became active professionally in her state library association that had and still has a dynamic youth services section. "I was appointed to a committee and loved working with and meeting so many new peers and colleagues. It gave me the confidence and budding leadership skills to take the leap and run for their board and eventually for chair of the section. All along the way I was mentored by veteran as well as librarian peers in my cohort. And I discovered that by being active, I could move youth librarianship forward! This proved just as true when I stepped up to more participation in ALSC!"

Koester said she learned through her involvement with the organizations she participated in, whether taking advantage of free or low-cost trainings, trying on leadership skills, or building her professional network through interactions with other members.

"The most meaningful experiences I've had with any of the groups I've been involved in have been those that allow me to

develop mentor/mentee relationships. I feel like I have benefitted greatly from the formal and informal mentors whose advice and support have guided my career, and I find very little as gratifying as paying that forward,” Koester said. “To that end, I really take seriously any opportunities in which I’m asked to provide mentorship to fellow professionals. That may be through a formal program like the ALSC Mentorship Program, or it may be through more informal channels like when a colleague asks if I’m willing to chat with a newer professional about something on which I might have perspective. Supporting the work of other library workers, including but not limited to new professionals, is some of the most meaningful work that I do, and I feel strongly that it not only contributes to our profession as a whole, but also has downstream impacts on the impacts that we’re able to provide the communities we serve.”

Suggestions vary on how to best get involved. “There’s no single right way to be involved in any of these organizations—depending on where you are in your career, how much time you feel you have for professional involvement right now, and what skills and ideas you may be looking to develop, the ‘right way’ for you could be something more passive like reading the ALSC Blog every day. The ‘right way’ for you could also be submitting your volunteer form to serve on a committee, or submitting a proposal to write an ALSC Blog post or teach an online course,” Koester said.

She said the best way to get involved could also be to prioritize attending in-person association events to take advantage of both in-person learning and networking. “In my experience, if you just wait for the opportunities to be dropped in your lap, chances are you won’t find the experience as gratifying or as worthwhile. Rather, think about what it is you’re hoping to get out of your membership right now—and this can change over time—and then do a bit of sleuthing to see how you can put those wheels in motion,” Koester said. “I only got really involved in ALSC once I made the conscious decision to chat up members at an ALSC Institute; it was that moment when I decided, okay, I want to be more involved, and I’m going to talk to folks who might be able to guide me in making that happen. There’s a reason these are member-driven organizations: members make all the things happen. So be proactive about forming relationships and seeking what you want from the opportunities you see.”

Varga said most associations have websites with contacts listed. “Find the leadership and reach out with your strengths.” A strength could include proofreading, for example. “We’re all in a rush to publish things.” Another benefit of volunteering

is that it can provide an opportunity to do work in a different area of librarianship, for example a youth services librarian can volunteer in a different area. “You don’t have to stay in a straight line,” Varga said.

Loch-Wouters added, “Our state associations need our time, talent, and leadership just as much as our national associations. You can do both!” She recommends being active on youth committees and boards, but also branching out in other areas of associations like public libraries, equity and diversity groups, intellectual freedom, small libraries, and more.

There are different strategies to get your library to support your involvement. “I would state to the administration how this has helped me,” LeLoup said. “Look what it’s done for me and it helped the school district too.” Kurz agrees. “I was always able to get support by highlighting how an individual’s involvement in larger library organizations reflects positively on the entire library (or library school) staff and by offering to make available all of the resources from the sessions that I attended at the conferences. Always start by explaining how your involvement benefits the larger institution, rather than focusing on how it might benefit you alone.”

Loch-Wouters said for the first thirty years of her career, she worked at small libraries that could only support her attendance at state conference by paying for the registration and with work time and would only support national conferences with work time.

“Because I felt that all library voices should be heard, not just those from large urban libraries, I started a conference savings account and put money aside to send myself to conference. I ate soup mixes and ramen noodles, shared hotel rooms with many peers, and in general lived small while at conference,” Loch-Wouters said. She said it made it affordable. She described the opportunity to participate at a state and national level as “tremendous” and said it changed her professional life and career.

Loch-Wouters added, “At my last full-time librarian job, I made national and state conference support (registration, travel, meals and lodging) part of my negotiation for the job. I made the case that the library receives far more (instant access to new trends and issues, positive changes to service because of the learning opportunities, and a voice at the association table representing our library and its philosophy) from that investment than they spend. It was a successful negotiation!” 🐾

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