
The Flow State

An Interview with RUSA's Section Chairs

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RUSA is an oddity. Usually institutions fall into one of two categories: Either the sum of its parts is greater than the whole, or the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. Think about Congress, the UN, or a car manufacturing line. In each case, either the total institution is more important than its parts, or the parts are what make the institution shakily hold together. RUSA is in a perfect state of balance—its parts are its whole and its whole is its parts. We, as the current "it" word likes to portray, are at that happy point when everything works and innovation, creativity, and effort are in perfect sync: We are in a state of flow.

Flow is a funny thing. It is fragile; a tiny tilt right or left and it is lost. It is elusive; go looking for it and you will never find it. But once attained, it is self-generating. The kind of effort and outcome that is achieved through flow keeps feeding back into the flow state. The flow-state generators, in RUSA's case, are the sections.

RUSA has six sections, and each provides a place for energy and creativity to regenerate the division. In celebration of the lifeblood of RUSA, I talked to its section chairs about their sections and the future of the profession.

The six sections of RUSA seem to address very different elements of librarianship, so my first question was, *what made you join RUSA and your section?*

Michael Levine-Clark, chair of the Collection Development and Evaluation Section (CODES), stressed that at first RUSA fit his job and then over time he found RUSA kept him connected as he grew professionally. "At the time that I joined CODES, I was a reference librarian with collection development responsibilities. I was very interested in collection development issues and looked for places within ALA where I could fit those interests. As a reference librarian, I very much valued the connection between public service and collection development. I am now head of collection development, with no reference responsibilities whatsoever, but I still value the way that reference/public service can inform and be informed by collection development." Each chair agreed. Judy Solberg, chair of the Reference Services Section (RSS), finds that the mix of reference and public service just worked for her: "I joined RUSA because of its focus on reference and user services. My library career has been focused on public services. I started my career as a reference librarian. RUSA offered programs and discussion groups that were relevant for my day-to-day work life."

From the answers of each chair, it is clear that all of us, no matter our specialty, appreciate and value that RUSA approaches librarianship from a user-oriented service point of

view. It is that philosophy of service, and our holistic approach to the profession, that is the glue that melds six different sections of RUSA together.

Following up on that, I asked the chairs, *what is the best thing about your section?*

I got back a resounding “our members!” David Lincove, chair of the History section (HS), says the best thing about his section is the “opportunities to meet colleagues from across the country and engage in discussions about common interests. The HS offers programs that draw many people because of the widespread interest in history and genealogy research, teaching, reference, new resources, and collection development.” Rosemary Meszaros, chair of the Machine-Assisted Reference Section (MARS), agrees “librarians from every type of library, from all parts of the country, and all with a keen interest in sharing their expertise and learning from others is the strength of MARS.” Stephanie Atkins, chair of the Sharing and Transforming Access to Resources Section (STARS), finds the same thing, “I am always so impressed with the wealth of knowledge and expertise of STARS members—and most importantly, their willingness to share information.”

There are many high-profile activities in each section, such as the Reading List in CODES and RSS's Reference and Research Forum, but there are many hidden gems as well. My next question was about that very issue: *What does your section offer that you think people might not know about?*

A common reply centered on the section discussion groups. Solberg points out, “They are a great way to engage with colleagues and get involved with the section.” Almost all the sections have discussion groups of one kind or another, and they bring new ideas and information from the front lines of librarianship to the forefront of RUSA. A good example is the Business Reference and Services Section's (BRASS) Publishers Forum. According to Rita Moss, BRASS chair, “it is a time for librarian members to talk about problems and issues with resources. This is pretty much a no-holds-barred discussion. We get to know about resources, the cost, and the problems. It is always very stimulating.” On the same theme of focusing on the new and hot issues, Meszaros talked about section preconferences, stressing that they are always “on a pressing topic of interest to all librarians every year.”

The focus of the sections on hot issues and the future of the profession led directly to the next question: *What are the big trends or hot issues surrounding your section's subject area(s)?*

While all tilted toward the expertise of each section's focus, replies were really about the same thing: the role of technology in defining the future of our work and the role of the section in helping figure out the changes in this landscape. CODES is looking at the change in reference publishing and electronic resources from a collection development point of view, and their Cooperative Collection Development Committee (which is a joint committee with STARS) is poised on the front lines of this issue. The History section, as Lincove points out, is facing the same issue with the “digitization of all

types of resources for research in history and genealogy.” His section is looking at the “increasing number of high-quality online resources from vendors,” as well as the “increasing number of free resources of high quality available on the Internet” and the resulting “de-emphasis on browsing print materials and the decreasing size of reference collections as more materials appear online.” Meszaros says that MARS is considering the same landscape. “Reference is ever-changing. Innovative technologies as well as the very newest trends in reference service are on the forefront, issues such as privacy, gaming, Second Life, Facebook, MySpace, etc.” Solberg says RSS is seeing the same thing and wondering about the “changing nature of reference work and the best ways to assist our users. There are questions about the role of the reference desk and how to best use new technologies to assist people.” Over at STARS, “The big trends in ILL and resource-sharing revolve around technological changes too,” says Atkins. “Document delivery through RapidILL and similar systems are allowing us to get materials faster to users. STARS is also part of the Rethinking Resource Sharing initiative, whose mission is to get materials to users with the fewest barriers to access.” Moss sums up the situation for BRASS and all of RUSA this way: The future is all about the “cost of resources, outreach, and integrating new technologies.”

I think this is where flow comes from. All the sections are focused on the same issues and are bringing their own particular expertise and specialized knowledge to the question. As a follow-up, I asked, *What is your section doing to address these hot issues?*

Not surprisingly, the answer was, “A lot!” There were many examples—I'll focus on three: CODES/STARS's Cooperative Collection Development Committee, MARS's Hot Topics, and RSS's Management of Reference Committee. The Cooperative Collection Development Committee has been working to identify best practices in the area and, says Levine-Clark, “should become the place to go for information about cooperative collection building.” Meszaros shared that “the dynamics of reference work are being addressed by the MARS Hot Topics Discussion Group as well as by the Virtual Reference Discussion Group. Each presents a forum addressing the hot issues everyone is talking about.” At this past ALA Midwinter Meeting in Denver, RSS's Management of Reference Committee hosted an open and informal discussion session on the topic, informally calling it “Embracing the Reference Desk: Who's really in love—patrons or staff?”

Maybe it is this multiperspective approach to the creation of the profession and the ideals of the services we offer that provides RUSA with its flow-state energy. Maybe it is just that we all love what we do and are committed to doing it better each day, so flow is built into the process. Or perhaps it is because RUSA itself is built on the collaborative process of its six sections and is therefore constantly open to new ideas, new members, and new initiatives, and flow just wants to come along with us for the ride. In any case, whatever it is, it's a lot of fun and we invite you all to join us.