
The Spirit of Giving and Receiving

Librarianship and the Volunteer Tradition

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Recently I was talking with someone about the success of the ALA conferences. How do we attract so many attendees? What makes the ALA conference stand out among the other national and regional library conferences? There are a lot of reasons that I can find, but mostly they can be explained by the conference being member-driven. The volunteers plan almost all of the programs and they base the content on what they want to experience and what they see as the topics of interest to their peers. Programs are not based on calls for presentations with the winning applicants selected by one or two committees. It is a huge group of volunteers who together assemble a diverse schedule of presentations, author events, receptions, and discussion forums. Staff within ALA and the divisions provide necessary and substantial support, but the content is assembled by the members for the members.

The same is true for the success of RUSA, not just in our programs at conferences, but with all of our endeavors. The work of RUSA is determined by the volunteers and then implemented by those volunteers. RUSA Office provides some ongoing support, but at less than three FTE for our 4000 members, RUSA works because you do. I am aware that the process of volunteering for a committee appointment can be mysterious and daunting. ALA, even RUSA, can seem so large, and it is unclear what happens after you submit a volunteer form or what happens to get you onto your second committee appointment. The latter part of this column will hopefully answer your questions and provide some guidance. And if not, you know where to find me.

VOLUNTEERING, THE GIFT THAT RECEIVES

Librarians have a strong history of volunteering, from home-front efforts in WWII to support during and after Hurricanes Katrina and Sandy¹. Of course, not all volunteering is in the wake of natural disasters or major wars, even though exceptional circumstances can bring out best and make for press-worthy efforts. Volunteering is more often about the smaller efforts, the quotidian, the activities that feel closer to work than participation in an heroic effort. It is this desire and willingness to impact lives in ongoing, incremental, and less often noticed ways that makes volunteering truly exceptional.

There are a variety of reasons that people volunteer and that can be seen from the range of organizations to which people offer their time and expertise. Since I am writing this for *Reference and User Services Quarterly*, I will focus on why people volunteer for professional associations. In every association there are member, and volunteers. Volunteers are nearly

always members, but not all members are active volunteers and people may be volunteers at different times throughout their membership. One of the reasons for an association to exist, and a motivation for volunteers, is to provide resources for those who for a variety of reasons are not active volunteers but need what we have to offer.

A study from the Center for Association Leadership² examined why people join professional associations with particular attention to the interests of members and active volunteers. In their study, about thirty percent of members had actively volunteered in the last year. The motivations for joining their professional associations was different and this seems to me to be related to why people volunteer within their associations. Volunteer members rated more highly than non-volunteers the personal value of access to networking with other professionals and opportunities to gain leadership experience, whereas non-volunteers value more highly access to educational materials, career information, and up-to-date information about the field. In some of these cases the differences in the rankings were not large (all members ranked up-to-date information as a first or second most important reason to join) but for other values the difference is more marked. When asked about challenges, everyone felt that lack of value placed on their profession by the public was the biggest challenge. Non-members cited keeping up with new information and technological changes as the other biggest challenges for the profession. Volunteers also saw keeping up with new information (but not technology) as a top challenge but ranked lack of awareness of the profession as a bigger challenge. While these results are not specific to librarianship, they are revealing of what people feel they receive from volunteering: a connection with other professionals, experience in leadership, a feeling of contributing to the awareness of profession (with the public and law-makers). Volunteers enjoy the opportunity to give by sharing information, providing education, and mentoring. They receive mentorship, leadership experience, and also learning about the profession. Volunteering is about growing yourself and helping others to grow.

Volunteering seems like a natural fit for RUSA members as in our work as librarians we hope to change lives, improve lives, or make people at least a little better off than they started by answering a question or connecting them with a good book. Volunteering within RUSA (or any professional organization) similarly improves the lives of your colleagues by offering programming and education and providing guidelines and information that help others do their work more effectively. You also indirectly affect patrons by helping others to grow and improve their library services. To help you envision that impact more, here is a short overview of the ways that RUSA volunteers contribute to the profession.

WHAT DO RUSA COMMITTEES DO?

RUSA has over 100 committees at the Division level and within the six Sections. What do all of those committees and volunteers do? Broadly, the activities fall within the following areas:

- Recognize excellence through awards to individuals and organizations at the RUSA and section levels.
- Recommend books through a wide variety of book and media awards.
- Write and update guidelines on reference work for practitioners.
- Develop and present programming at Annual Conference and discussion forums at Midwinter meetings.
- Plan fun networking activities such as the Book and Media Awards and the RUSA Social.
- Provide education through webinars and online courses on topics ranging from business reference to readers' advisory.
- Organize the work of the division and sections in various boards, working groups, and committees.
- Provide liaison and representation to other groups within RUSA and ALA by representing the sections and division on ALA committees and taskforces.

HOW DO APPOINTMENTS GET MADE?

There are seven people within RUSA who make the appointments each year, the "appointing officers." They are the RUSA Vice-President and the Vice-Chairs of RUSA's sections (BRASS, CODES, History, MARS Emerging Technologies, RSS, and STARS). They make the appointments for approximately twenty committees each as well as about ten representatives to RUSA-level or ALA-level committees. This is roughly one-thousand positions with about half of them being appointed each year. It is a lot to manage and there is a database that helps us to keep track of some of it. Here is how it works.

You fill out a volunteer form (see below for tips).

Appointments are made in the spring between Midwinter and Annual conferences. Most appointments start after Annual conference with some Awards and Nominating committees having different cycles.

The appointing officers may send an email to ask you to be on the committee, particularly if you are being appointed as chair. But, with seventy appointments each, that is a lot of emails to keep track of. So, more typically, we make the appointment in the database which will generate an email to you notifying you of the appointment and providing a link to accept or decline the appointment.

Accepting, or declining, the appointment is an important step. The appointment is not complete unless you agree to it. If you want the appointment (we hope so!) then you must let us know by following the link to accept the appointment. Likewise, it is important to decline so that we know to appoint someone else and that it is not just a matter of you forgetting to accept the appointment. If you have questions about the committee, please email the person listed on the letter as the appointing officer.

That's the technical stuff. There is a lot of decision-making that goes on. Things we consider are: Is this a good mix of members for a diverse committee? Different library types,

FROM THE PRESIDENT OF RUSA

geographic location, years involved with RUSA, job titles, and size of library can all be factors in making a committee well-rounded and broadly representative. How long has this person been on this committee? Am I allowed to reappoint or do I need to find a new committee for her? Does this committee accept virtual members? Do I know that this person would be really good for a different committee or perhaps as a chair or a representative or liaison to another group? Does this person already serve on other committees? There is an ALA maximum of three committee appointments at a time, but sometimes it is difficult to know what other appointments someone has, especially with multiple people in RUSA making appointments. There are really a lot of considerations because we want to make a good match between volunteer and committee appointment. The volunteer form is therefore essential. Read on.

TIPS FOR VOLUNTEERING

Fill out the Volunteer Form

Be complete. If you don't put something in all fields, it does not give confidence that you will take your committee work seriously.

Prior Committees

An entire résumé is not needed. But you can save yourself time by copying text from your résumé. There is not a convenient list that we have of everyone's prior appointments, which is why we ask for this information. You don't need to be exhaustive, but representative, or just list your most recent committee appointments. Don't restrict yourself to ALA, if you have been on state committees that might be good for us to know.

Why do You Want to Volunteer with RUSA

We use this for two reasons: to get an idea of what committees interest you the most and to get an idea of motivation and enthusiasm. It is not always clear from the committees that you choose which ones might be of the most interest. Or, if you have chosen committees where we have a lot of volunteers, it will help know what other committees you might like instead. Sometimes people volunteer for RUSA-level committees, but their statements make it clear that, say, they are really interested in business-librarianship committees in which case we know to make sure that the BRASS Vice-Chair knows that this person is interested in volunteering for BRASS, even if no BRASS committees were selected.

Pick More than One Committee

Some committees just attract a lot of volunteers (for example, the book and media awards committees). This makes those committees more competitive. There are also committees where having prior committee experience is really a plus

(such as the nominating committees). Or we might be trying to balance a committee's membership between newer members and experienced members, or public and academic members, or large and small libraries, or a geographic distribution. I don't mean to be discouraging and you might end up on the committee you most want to be on, so select it. However, it is good to have some other committees listed in addition to what might be your top choice. Being on another committee might increase your chances the next time you fill out the form of being placed on the committee of your dreams. And hopefully the committee you are placed on will be one that you grow to love. I was not placed on the committee that I most wanted the first time I volunteered. But, I liked the committee I was placed on and I stayed on to chair it. A couple of years into volunteering, I was a known quantity and when a task-force for the first virtual reference guidelines was being formed, I was selected.

Look for Off-Cycle and Micro-Volunteer Opportunities

Typically appointments are made in the spring and start after Annual. However, there are exceptions. Taskforces and working groups can be formed at any time. Sometimes subcommittees form and then they are seeking additional members for the committee. A recent example is the Legislative Agenda Working Group that was formed in August. We are also starting to experiment with "micro-volunteering." We know that not everyone can commit to a committee for a full two years but might have interest and time for an activity that last only a month or two. When these late-breaking opportunities occur, announcements are made on RUSA-L or the Section email lists and through venues such as the RUSA website, social media, and *RUSA Update*. So, keep your eyes open for these.

VOLUNTEERING WITH RUSA, YOUR QUESTIONS ANSWERED

Do I Need to Attend Conference to Be On a Committee?

Probably not, but possibly. There is a Y/N column for this and the person making appointments will know what to match you with based on your response. Some committees feel that their work requires face-to-face time, but it is less common than it used to be. Many committees only meet face-to-face at Annual conference and a few do not meet face-to-face at all but conduct all of their work online and through conference calls. Most committees will accept "virtual members" who will not be expected to attend face-to-face meetings. That being said, not attending conference means that you have to work to stay tied into the work of the committee, and that is the responsibility of the committee chair and the virtual member. If your committee is holding a discussion forum at conference you might miss out on something fun if you aren't there, but you can work on lining up speakers or

publicity. Regardless of being a virtual or in-person member, the expectations for participation are the same, other than the attendance at conference.

What's the Best Committee for Me?

You can volunteer at either the Division level or the Section level, or both. If you are new to RUSA, you might find the committees in the Sections to be the most interesting. Not to say that RUSA-level committees are boring, but they do tend to have more to do with operations than with direct content like program-planning and writing guidelines. Check out a committee's website to see the charge and composition. You can also look at the links to public posts in ALA Connect to see what the committee has been up to in recent years.

What If I am not Appointed?

There could have been an issue with one of the above areas. Think back on your form. Try again with different committees or additional information. You might also contact the vice-chair or vice-president to see if they are done with appointments or if there are committees where they still need people. Sometimes we might have more volunteers than we have space for, since we want to keep committee size manageable, but we also do work hard to place everyone on an appropriate committee.

I hope that this information demystifies the volunteer form and the appointment process. I am also working this year with committees on their websites to make it clearer when committees have special requirements for membership, such as prior committee service or required attendance at conference.

If I am Already on a Committee, Will I be Reappointed?

Maybe, it depends on several things. If you have served on the committee for four years, you are unlikely to be reappointed. Term limits are four years, though there are occasional exceptions. Committee chairs can express if they want to have the current members reappointed or not. If you were on a committee and but didn't participate, you might not be reappointed. We also look to rotate members off committees when we need them on other committee and to keep all of the committees infused with new ideas. If your committee appointment has ended and you did not receive another appointment, this could have been through no fault of your own, but a product of us not having a current volunteer form and not knowing what other committee to offer to you. Another possibility is that you were appointed but did not accept the appointment online. I would say that this is a good time

to follow-up with the section vice-chair or RUSA president (depending on where the committee was in the organization) to find out what is going on and express that you would like an appointment.

A PLEA TO LONGTIME RUSA VOLUNTEERS

Please fill out the volunteer form! After four years you cannot be reappointed to the same committee, and if we don't know what you want to be on, it makes it difficult to place you on a committee. Also, although we want to recognize everyone's name, sometimes we don't. It is a huge information control and memory challenge to track everyone whose committee terms are up to make sure they are placed on another committee. As I made appointments I feared that I was slighting people who had been active for decades and figured that they'd get automatically appointed to a committee. Really, we want to appoint you, but especially if you've been active for year we would like to try and reward you with the appointment that you most desire. On the other hand, sometimes people really are done volunteering and we also do not want to assume that everyone wants another appointment. So, please, fill out that volunteer form. You do not need to list *all* of your RUSA/ALA committee experience, but something to jog a memory or to represent your deep and wide contributions.

CONCLUSION

Volunteering is rewarding—it feels good to give your time to something worthwhile—which is why over 26 percent of the United States adult population volunteered in 2011.³ You get to meet and work with great people from a wide range of libraries and locations, you develop new skills, and you support the profession. RUSA is at the forefront of developing the theory and practice of reference librarianship and the growing range of user services, and without volunteers that work would not be possible. So come join us in that work.

References

1. See Brett Spencer, "Preparing For An Air Attack: Libraries And American Air Raid Defense During World War II," *Libraries & The Cultural Record* 43, no. 2 (2008): 125–47; "Queens Library: Strength After The Storm," *Unabashed Librarian* 165 (2012): 9–10; Beth Dempsey, "Responding To Disaster," *Library Journal* (2005): 6–8.
2. Clare Inzeo, "Making the Decision to Join and Volunteer," *Journal of Association Leadership* (Spring 2009).
3. US Bureau of Labor Statistics, Volunteering in the United States 2012, accessed September 5, 2013, www.bls.gov/news.release/volun.nr0.htm.