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# Advocating for Reference and User Services

## Joseph Thompson

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In this, my final column as RUSA president, I'd like to continue offering what I intend to be information and insights that you can immediately put into practice at your own library. Here I'm using the umbrella theme of library advocacy to first provide an update on RUSA's larger legislative activities, then secondly to share techniques for local library advocacy that have proven effective and that can be modeled by libraries regardless of type. These ideas come from my own experience, those of my Maryland public library colleagues, and from experiences shared by members of the *rusa-l* electronic discussion list.

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## POSITIONING RUSA TO ACTIVELY SUPPORT ADVOCACY

While RUSA has strongly established its role in crafting guidelines and developing programs that give library staff direction on how to design services, our attention has primarily focused on how best to do our work. In the past two years we've begun in earnest to take a broader approach that recognizes the importance of the larger environment that our libraries and library staff are working in, specifically in terms of national decisions about legislation and funding. The American Library Association (ALA) already has a wealth of tools and communication channels available to inform ALA members about pending legislation that has the potential to impact libraries broadly. What about those issues that are most important to our RUSA members and their libraries? This was the question that RUSA board asked in the summer of 2013, a question spurred in part by the discussions that had taken place regarding the US Census Bureau's announcement that it would be discontinuing the production of the *Statistical Abstract of the United States* because of budget reductions. For many of us, "Stat Abs" was a core ready-reference source that we could reliably consult in print and online. The idea that it could simply go away brought forth a sense of disbelief and even anger. If such a key ready-reference resource of government information could go away so easily, what was to keep other sources of government information from going the same way? We also recognized that other divisions, specifically ACRL, PLA, and ALSC, had established standing committees that were continuing to develop advocacy tools and resources for their members. These are some great examples:

- Association for Library Service to Children: Everyday Advocacy ([www.ala.org/everyday-advocacy](http://www.ala.org/everyday-advocacy))

- Association of College and Research Libraries: Advocacy and Issues ([www.ala.org/acrl/issues](http://www.ala.org/acrl/issues))
- Public Library Association: Advocacy Resources ([www.ala.org/pla/advocacy](http://www.ala.org/pla/advocacy))

Under the leadership of former RUSA presidents Mary Popp and Kathleen Kern, our first step was to create our RUSA Task Force on Legislative Issues. The task force was charged with identifying legislative issues of concern to RUSA, identifying ways for sections and committees to respond, and to make recommendations to the RUSA board for further action in order to sustain RUSA's engagement with legislative issues. We were very happy to have Alesia McManus and Doris Ann Sweet serve as co-chairs. Alesia had been recently highly engaged in the call to save the *Statistical Abstract of the United States* through the creation of a Facebook group and petition in 2011 that had attracted the notice of the opinion pages of the *Washington Post* and *New York Times*.

I was one of the members of this RUSA task force as well. Within a few months we had worked with RUSA board to define RUSA's legislative priority areas:

- primary priorities:
  - federal funding for libraries
  - access to information including government information and government funded research
- secondary priorities:
  - first sale doctrine
  - copyright and fair use
  - access to e-books
  - privacy and surveillance

How did we want to address these priorities and take action? We first felt that we should learn from the experience of other divisions and state chapters that had already developed and were acting on legislative advocacy agendas. To this end we organized a discussion at the 2014 ALA Midwinter Meeting in Philadelphia, "Building a Legislative Action Initiative for RUSA!" Our panelists were Mary Baykan (legislative officer for the Maryland Library Association), Jan Sanders (chair, PLA Legislation and Advocacy Committee), and Jonathan Miller (chair, ACRL Government Relations Committee). It was a productive conversation. The consensus coming out of the discussion was that we should continue having our ALA Legislative Assembly representative share information with our membership via *rusa-l* on the basis of the identified priorities and work collaboratively with ALA Washington and other ALA divisions on areas of common interest.

The task force subsequently prepared a report with recommendations on how to move forward. At the 2014 ALA Annual Conference in Las Vegas, the RUSA board formalized the arrangement that our ALA Legislative Assembly representative serve on the RUSA Access to Information Committee. RUSA Access to Information Committee is now positioned to recommend and develop continuing education resources for our members around the topic of legislative advocacy. Since access

and information are only two facets of our identified priorities, I see the role of this committee continuing to evolve and am recommending that its charge be broadened and reframed in the larger context of RUSA Advocacy.

Currently Alesia McManus is serving as our RUSA representative to the ALA Legislative Assembly with Doris Ann Sweet serving as the back-up. In late 2014, I asked Alesia to reach out to the ALA Washington Office to arrange for a visit by RUSA members. This took place on February 12, 2015. We opened the opportunity to all of RUSA by publicizing it on *rusa-l*, and in the end we had four participants, including RUSA Division Counselor Jennifer Boettcher and dedicated RUSA Member Aaron Dobbs, who had made the drive all the way from Shippensburg, Pennsylvania, to join us.

Our main purpose was to learn how the ALA Washington Office can support us as we target RUSA's legislative priorities, as well as how best to mobilize our RUSA membership to be advocates for reference and user services and our own community libraries. We also wanted to learn how to increase RUSA's profile to be in a position to provide support for broader ALA initiatives that benefit our members.

I found our visit to be a very educational experience, beginning with the great value of now being able to put the names of people to faces. In addition to Executive Director Emily Sheketoff, we were able to meet the staff of both the Office for Information Technology Policy (OITP) and the Office of Government Relations (OGR). One of the OITP's recent accomplishments involved advocating for a modernization of the Federal Communications Commission's (FCC) E-rate program, which included adding \$1.5 billion to the annual available funding. OITP Director Alan S. Inouye was able to talk about the role of the office in covering the waterfront of information policy topics, including copyright and licensing, through advocacy, research, workshops, and the writing of articles, some of which can be found at [www.ala.org/offices/oitp](http://www.ala.org/offices/oitp). Alan also described the Policy Revolution! draft agenda. When asked, his advice to us in RUSA was to get beyond the day-to-day and think about how we can help our members recognize what the key policy issues for libraries will be 7-10 years out. On our visit we were also able to speak with OGR Managing Director Adam Eisgrau and the OGR staff. In addition to the wealth of resources on the website ([www.ala.org/offices/ogr](http://www.ala.org/offices/ogr)), Adam encouraged RUSA members to use the OGR's toll-free phone number (1-800-941-8478) and email ([ogr@alawash.org](mailto:ogr@alawash.org)) to ask questions and learn how to influence legislation and policy. *District Dispatch* is the primary communication tool used by the ALA Washington Office and can be signed up for at [www.districtdispatch.org](http://www.districtdispatch.org). One important resource that I don't believe many of our RUSA members are aware of, but I would highly recommend, is the Legislative Action Center and the advocacy tool, "Engage." Engage is a new tool that replaces what many of the ALA chapters had been using for several years and which had been referred to as "Capwiz." Found at <http://cqrcengage.com/ala/home>, the Legislative Action Center allows anyone to view the main talking points around an issue and easily

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## FROM THE PRESIDENT OF RUSA

get the contact information for our elected officials so that we can make the important phone call or send a message at the right time. Is there a local issue relevant to libraries in your state? See the chapters' page at <http://cqcengage.com/ala/chapters>. Emily also asked us to make sure to tell our members about the annual National Library Legislative Day (NLLD), [www.ala.org/advocacy/advleg/nlld](http://www.ala.org/advocacy/advleg/nlld), which is a two-day advocacy event held each May that allows library supporters the opportunity to meet with their members of Congress to champion support for libraries.

We very much appreciate the time that Emily Sheketoff and her staff allowed for our visit. If any RUSA members will be in the Mid-Atlantic and would like to participate in a visit to the ALA Washington Office in the latter half of 2015, please send me a note and we'll be happy to make the arrangements.

While there's no way to touch on every great advocacy tool available, I do want to mention one more. A colleague at my own library system is currently taking the Library Advocacy Unshushed massive open online course (MOOC) and finding it to be an extremely valuable experience as it focuses on the importance of relationships in library advocacy. The course is offered as a partnership between the Canadian Library Association and American Library Association. As of March 2015, the course could be found at <https://www.edx.org/course/library-advocacy-unshushed-university-torontox-la101x>.

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## PERSPECTIVES FROM MARYLAND PUBLIC LIBRARIES

Those of you who know me well are aware that I enjoy—figuratively—wearing many hats. In addition to my professional activity with RUSA, I'm on the board of Maryland's statewide friends group, Citizens for Maryland Libraries (CML) in a liaison role representing yet another association. Those of us on the CML board are able to play an advocacy role in support of libraries of all types. One important event for us is our annual Maryland Library Day in Annapolis at the state capital, normally held in January or February near the start of our state's legislative session, long before the final budget is passed in April. Supporters from across the Maryland library community meet with legislators and their staffs to introduce themselves or reconnect, which helps to sustain these important relationships. These visits and meetings provide an important opportunity to inform elected officials about bills that could affect libraries. We also get the chance to listen. What's bugging each elected official? It's worthwhile to ask. Connect what the library is doing to their priorities. Align your great work with what's important to them. These conversations conducted in a culture of collaboration truly are effective and in many cases allow for the foundation of a strong, trusting relationship.

During most legislative sessions the president or other members of CML are often called on to provide written or verbal testimony in support of bills related to library operations or capital grant funding. This testimony is usually

very effective—as it is coming from individuals who not only support libraries, but who also represent the 3 million Maryland library card holders. That number presents a huge “wow” factor.

At the state level, the advocacy by CML and the Maryland library community for Maryland public libraries has been quite successful over the past several years, preserving most state funding for public libraries at existing levels, even during and following the Great Recession of 2008. Per capita increases in funding that had been prescribed in the state Education Law were put on hold by the legislature and the governor, but most of us quietly recognized that this was the new measure of success for the time. A state grant that makes available \$5 million annually in capital projects funding for Maryland public libraries has also been preserved, which serves as an important match for local money and encourages necessary renovations and new library construction.

In thinking about these successes and the experiences of my Maryland colleagues in their own counties, I began to consider the methods of local advocacy that could directly translate to other types of libraries, specifically academic libraries. I have heard from some of my RUSA colleagues who work in academic libraries that advocacy in a college or university environment can be a great challenge, and in some cases even prohibited due to layers of authority and the structure of reporting and funding at institutions of higher education. This topic even came up at our town hall during the first RUSA board meeting at the 2015 Midwinter meeting in Chicago. Some RUSA members in positions of upper management expressed that they feel a degree of frustration at their own institutions about decisions being made by college/university administrators that directly affect the library experience, but that they are not consulted nor involved. This has even included major decisions such as library renovations.

Despite these challenges, I believe that advocacy is not impossible because any of our libraries can build strong relationships with our users, who in turn can advocate for the library. We can also be strategic about building relationships with others on campus. Recognize that a common mission exists between individuals and between campus organizations. It makes good sense for library staff to position themselves to serve on committees and teams outside of the library. You will be able to help these other departments and groups when they need it. The library staff then become viewed by others around campus as creative leaders and big picture problem solvers who understand how to get things done. Likewise, regularly invite people from other parts of the campus community to sit in and serve on projects led by the library so that they gain a greater appreciation for the library's diverse role. You can then anticipate that your colleagues will be there to help you when the library needs it.

One facet of advocacy that can't be taken for granted is the demonstration of value, which must be at the core of our conversations with decision makers on campus. We have to share numbers that reflect the positive effect that we are

having on the campus and the larger community that we serve. You can choose to use a return-on-investment calculator with a dashboard if you need a good way to depict the value of the services being provided. Make sure to also tell stories about individuals who have had their lives positively changed through a library experience.

I would add that you need to ensure that decision-makers on campus are aware that library services are active learning experience. In this same vein, Valerie Gross, president and CEO of Howard County (MD) Library System, recommends using the active terms “education,” “instruction,” and “research” to describe what the library does, and replace passive terms including “information” and “reference.” She observes that using this kind of language is one great way to break down the incorrect notion held by many decision-makers that the only thing libraries do is loan books. My former library director, Mary Baykan at the Washington County (MD) Free Library, also notes that by positioning ourselves as an educational and economic necessity, decision-makers will recognize that the library is not an optional amenity that can be scrapped when times are tough.

I want to express my gratitude for the ideas shared by my colleagues across Maryland public libraries, including Skip Auld, Mary Baykan, Andrea Berstler, Denise Davis, Valerie Gross, Sharan Marshall, and Dorothy Stoltz. The recommendations I’ve shared in the section above are a synthesis of many conversations and emails with these individuals.

I do have one more resource to highlight, especially for RUSA members who work at academic libraries. If the library director is specifically prohibited from actively advocating for the library, the creation of a Library Friends group can be an excellent option. See *Academic Library Friends: A Toolkit for Getting Started—You Can Do This!* by Charles D. Hanson, director of Kettering Library Services at Kettering University in Flint, Michigan. This free toolkit from United for Libraries is geared toward starting a Friends group at a community college or university and stresses the value of building relationships and making connections at the local level—on campus and in your community. Find this toolkit at [www.ala.org/united/sites/ala.org/united/files/content/friends/orgtools/academic-library-friends.pdf](http://www.ala.org/united/sites/ala.org/united/files/content/friends/orgtools/academic-library-friends.pdf) and other toolkits on how to go about organizing a Friends Group at [www.ala.org/united/friends](http://www.ala.org/united/friends).

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## SUCCESS STORIES FROM RUSA

To close, I’d like to share a couple of stories that members of the rusa-l discussion list told me about in February 2015 when I asked for local advocacy success stories in academic libraries. Specifically I wanted to hear about how academic libraries had positioned themselves to be “at the table” when decisions about the library and its resources were being made so that we could learn from their positive experiences.

Hannah Buckland, director of Library Services at the Leech Lake Tribal College in northern Minnesota, shared with

me her library’s recent opening of an all-new, 8,000-square-foot, \$3 million library. This is a terrific advance, as the library had formerly been housed in a room “at the shadowy end of a hallway.” It’s clear that Hannah and her predecessors clearly recognized that they played an important role in advocating for their users by effectively describing the effect that the new facility would have as an investment and a way to strengthen the entire community. By clearly describing the effect on the community as a whole, the library staff and their supporters were able to raise donations combined with grants to cover the entire cost of the project. In another example, Helene Gold, chair of the Information Literacy and Research Services Department at Tallahassee (FL) Community College Library, told me about their recent experience applying for a College Innovation Grant to replace an old “fortress” reference desk with a new smaller desk that would create space for librarians and students to collaborate without leaving the area. Her grant application was successful, in part because of the way that she effectively described the positive effect on students in creating a nurturing learning environment.

I’m asking all RUSA members to please continue to share these kinds of positive stories on rusa-l so that others may learn from your experiences! I would like to see this conversation be the first step toward the creation of a toolkit developed by RUSA that provides our members with best practices for advocating for resources, information services, and collections at their own libraries. The creation of this toolkit will directly support the goals of our new strategic plan.

Since I mentioned the strategic plan, I do want to note that as of this writing (early March 2015), the process is moving along well and we are on track for having the new plan in place for the 2015 Annual Conference in San Francisco. See the president’s column at *RUSA Update* ([www.rusa.ala.org/rusaupdate](http://www.rusa.ala.org/rusaupdate)) for regular updates on the process.

If you are reading this prior to the Annual Conference, I do also want to make sure that you’re aware of the RUSA President’s Program with danah boyd on Saturday, June 27, from 4 to 5:30 p.m. danah will present “It’s Complicated: Navigating the Dynamic Landscapes of Digital Literacy, Collapsing Contexts, and Big Data.” She will describe the crucial role that librarians play as she weaves together her research on youth culture with her analysis of the “big data” phenomenon. Her book, *It’s Complicated: The Social Lives of Networked Teens*, is also available for free download at [www.danah.org/itscomplicated](http://www.danah.org/itscomplicated). This program is organized by the 2015 RUSA President’s Program Planning Committee and the RUSA Just Ask Task Force. I am extremely grateful for all of the hard work that they have put into organizing this program!

I want to again take this opportunity to thank each and every one of our volunteer members who make the work of RUSA happen, from organizing programs to reviewing materials and selecting awards. Your efforts make a positive difference and have a valuable impact on people’s lives. It has been a pleasure serving you as RUSA president over this past year.