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# Serving to Lead

## Alesia McManus

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In an era of constant change and transition, libraries are continually called upon to do more with less. This fact makes it critical to utilize resources—including human—as fully as possible. One way to accomplish this is by encouraging staff participation in service opportunities, which can foster talent and leadership development in those who engage. In this column, Alesia McManus issues a call to action for all of us to get more involved and thereby lay claim to our leadership potential. McManus, immediate past-president of RUSA, offers a compelling argument that seizing the growth opportunities that are available through service will allow us to make even more of a difference in our workplaces and communities as well as enable us to reap personal benefits for years to come.—*Editor*

**W**ith the fast pace of change in today's libraries, leadership is needed more than ever at all levels of the organization and regardless of whether you have a formal leadership role in your workplace. Giovanna Badia cites a definition of leadership as "being able to influence and lead a diverse group of individuals to attain common goals and objectives."<sup>1</sup> Leadership development is an important benefit for you as an individual and, in turn, your development as a leader can also benefit your workplace. In my experience, one of the best ways to obtain leadership experience outside of a defined job description is service. Service can be at the local (library, organization, community, or campus) level or at the state or national level. Those of us who work in academic libraries often have service as one of the criteria for promotion, permanent status, or tenure.

How can you take advantage of service opportunities? Volunteer! Don't be afraid to step up and put yourself out there. Opportunities to serve within your own organization often are available by responding to a call for volunteers. For example, in my library, my department recently asked for volunteers to serve on a reference services working group to examine the best options for providing user-focused reference service to our campus community. Every academic library I've worked for has had a call for volunteers to participate in both library and campus shared governance. This can be a useful way to engage with colleagues in other library and campus units. It's also a good place to observe local politics in action and to learn about parliamentary procedure. Volunteering in this way can be a means of demonstrating what Pixie Anne Mosley calls "grass roots leadership,"<sup>2</sup> where someone can be an effective leader because of passion for an issue that has personal meaning to them.

I have felt this kind of passion not only for issues in my workplace and institution, but also for issues addressed at the national-library-association level. There are many association volunteer opportunities at organizations like the American Library Association (ALA) and RUSA (among many others) because of the size and scope of these organizations and the variety of professional issues and concerns that they address and support. ALA added leadership development to its list of strategic directions in 2015. If professional development funds are limited, you can volunteer to serve a regional or state organization or association but, at the national level, many committees and groups work virtually so you don't have to travel to conferences. Maggie Farrell also has written a column on leadership development through service, and she points out that because there are so many available opportunities, it's important to be careful to select ones that you think will enhance your individual development as well as advance workplace goals.<sup>3</sup>

In addition to grass roots leadership, a literature review on leadership development in libraries by Gabrielle Ka Wai Wong identified what she called "emergent leadership," where leaders come from every segment of the library or profession and demonstrate the capabilities to "spot problems and seek solutions, to collaborate with peers and to volunteer ideas and time."<sup>4</sup> This is the very essence of the work of association member leaders and volunteers. One of the articles Wong reviewed offers further ideas for becoming a leader "be visible, volunteer, take chances, speak up, and stay knowledgeable of professional issues."<sup>5</sup> These suggestions reinforce that service is an excellent way to exercise leadership.

So how did I follow through on my strong interest in service and leadership at the national association level? Badia mentions a study of millennial academic librarians where 19 percent of the respondents perceived barriers to getting involved in association leadership but 50 percent of the respondents saw barriers to leadership roles in their own libraries.<sup>6</sup> Farrell also notes that workplaces may have limited opportunities for career advancement, so association service may be an alternative means for advancing careers.<sup>7</sup>

These circumstances mirror my own experience as an early career librarian. In my first academic library position, I had only limited leadership opportunities and I wanted to have a professional footprint beyond my library. At that time, the RUSA Machine-Assisted Reference Section (MARS)—now called the Emerging Technologies Section (ETS)—was looking for a web coordinator. I had recently learned HTML, and several of my library colleagues were active in MARS and enjoyed it. So I applied and was offered the volunteer position after interviewing at an ALA conference. I was concerned that I was not a "techie" (what is now often referred to as imposter syndrome), but I didn't want to pass up the opportunity to apply my new skill set to a professional setting where I could help support the work of the section and by extension to the patrons we served. This role gave me the invaluable opportunity to serve on MARS's executive committee and see association leadership in action. I was also

able to bring this experience to bear on the job by serving as a reference services representative on more than one library's web development group.

Another point I would like to make about the above example is that the service we volunteer for may not part of our core job responsibilities. It can be an opportunity to explore a new professional skill or area that you are interested in or that might influence your career directions. Also, undertaking service will likely require the support of your supervisor. Being able to show how your service will enhance your professional skills and how it can be a valuable avenue for professional development should help you make the case for volunteering.

Another salient example of the interrelationship between leadership and career development through service in the workplace and service to the profession is from my role as a team leader at another academic library. To be a successful team leader, we were given the opportunity to develop facilitation as well as leadership skills. As a result, I volunteered to participate on the library's facilitator's team to further develop my skills and to help other groups in the library work more successfully together. A facilitator helps others "assume responsibility and to take the lead" through goal-setting, developing plans and actions, supporting decision-making, and endeavoring to take all members' opinions into account.<sup>8</sup> I have been able to apply this facilitation experience to other job settings and, most recently (more than a decade later), as RUSA president.

This past year, the RUSA board and the broader membership voted to support restructuring at the division level so RUSA could be more nimble and flexible in our capacity to make decisions and implement actions to enhance member recruitment, engagement, and professional support. RUSA leaders at all levels will be involved, and I'm sure that our individual experiences will benefit our home institutions. I think the key to being successful is to pursue service out of your intrinsic motivation to impact your local communities and organizations and the profession at large. Yes, many of our libraries, especially in academia, may require service in the broader sense for your contract to be renewed or to receive promotion or tenure, but association service enables you to grow personally as well as professionally.

As I reflect on my record of service, I am grateful for being able to practice leadership, team building, and communication skills in a welcoming and collegial space supported by a network of colleagues that have mentored, encouraged, and provided me with opportunities along the way. This reflection brings me to one of the most valuable aspects of service which is mentoring—both the possibility of mentoring others as well as being mentored oneself. I would not have had the confidence to agree to run for RUSA president without the encouragement and support of many people throughout my career. Mentors not only encourage, they also provide advice on navigating the complex issues that arise during our careers. Some examples of mentoring I've received include being invited to serve on the editorial advisory board

of an edited book, which in turn helped me feel capable of accepting an invitation to write a book chapter of my own a couple of years later. It's being given the chance to run for elected office in an association after being unsuccessful the first time around. Or mentoring can be helpful advice on whether to accept a job offer. Lastly, mentors are excellent references for job applications, as well as for providing recommendations for service and for promotion or tenure. On mentoring and leadership development, Farrell notes that for professionals with limited or no supervisory responsibilities at work, service may "assist in the development of mentoring and coaching skills," which in turn can enhance skills related to supervisory work.<sup>9</sup>

Whether at the local, state, or national level, service can enrich your professional development and make it possible for you to have a positive effect on your local community, workplace, and colleagues. Service enhances your professional skills and leadership abilities by building your strengths and enabling you to develop new capabilities. It can connect your passion to issues that have personal meaning to you within the profession. And, most importantly, it

will allow you to gain collaborators, mentors, and professional friendships that last your entire career.

### References

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