National versus Local:
A Comparative Analysis of the
American Library Association and the
Oregon Library Association

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Abstract:

Professional associations can be of great use to library and information science professionals to stay current with professional knowledge and develop their careers. This paper explores and compares two library science related professional associations, the American Library Association and the Oregon Library Association. It examines the relevance of size and scope to the mission of each association and considers the usefulness of associations to young library professionals.

This paper compares and contrasts two library science related professional associations, the American Library Association (ALA) and the Oregon Library Association (OLA). There are similarities between the two associations in the issues they promote and services they provide to their members. The main contrasts are the “size and scope” of the associations, which is due to the ALA being a national organization and the OLA covering state and local issues (Beasley, telephone interview with, February 9th, 2007).

The difference in the size of the associations’ membership and budgets are enormous. The ALA membership consists of more than 66,075 people (American Library Association, 2007). The general fund revenues for 2005 were $26,599,000 (ALA, 2007). In contrast, the OLA membership is just over 1,000 people (Oregon Library Association, 2007), and its total income for the 2004/2005 fiscal year was $119,402 (OLA, 2007). The ALA has many salaried professionals working for them, while the OLA is run by volunteers and has only one paid employee, a Webmaster (telephone interview with Bonebrake, February 9th, 2007).
The scope of the associations differs because one is a national organization and one is state oriented. That difference aside, many aspects of the individual organizations parallel each other. They both have divisions to deal with issues such as intellectual freedom, technology issues, legislation which concern libraries, and raising money for library programs. Both have round table interest groups that members can participate in. Both have annual conferences for the exchange of ideas and professional networking. Both provide experience, training, and support services for members who are students or seeking employment (ALA, OLA, 2007).

With all of these parallels, it appears if the OLA was a chapter of the ALA. Indeed it implies as much on the ALA website where the OLA is listed as an affiliated chapter of the ALA (ALA, 2007). This information took both the President of the OLA, Aletha Bonebrake, and the President-Elect of the OLA, Sarah Beasley, by surprise in phone interviews conducted on February 9\textsuperscript{th}, 2007. President Aletha Bonebrake said the OLA was affiliated with the ALA, but receives no mandated direction from the ALA. She considers the OLA more of an independent organization that shares some of the same goals as the ALA (telephone interview with Bonebrake, February 9\textsuperscript{th}, 2007). President-Elect Sarah Beasley was also surprised that they were considered by the ALA as a chapter, but inferred that since one of the board members was an ALA representative that works with the ALA Washington Office, that could be enough for the ALA to consider them a chapter (telephone interview with Beasley, February 9\textsuperscript{th}, 2007). The fact that these two leaders of the OLA took the time to be interviewed by a graduate student, illustrates a benefit that can come from working in a smaller association.

The different arenas of influence the associations have differ due to the national versus local scope of the two associations. The ALA has a National Library Legislative Day, which is organized by the ALA Washington Office (ALA, 2007). Over 500 librarians went to Washington
D.C. to meet their elected representatives and speak about the needs of libraries (ALA, 2007). “Fund America’s Libraries” was the name of the campaign for 2005 (ALA, 2007). Sarah Beasley, President Elect of the OLA, said she went to the 2006 National Legislative Day and enjoyed engaging in discussion of such topics as Internet Network Neutrality, an issue that Senator Ron Wyden (D-Ore.) is concerned with (telephone interview with Beasley, February 9th, 2007).

The OLA also participates in Legislation Day, but on the state level. The goal is to get one librarian to speak to each state level representative about issues on which the OLA has a position. They provide discussion papers with which librarians can prepare themselves on the issues. This year the position topics include a bill to protect privacy of e-mail addresses, the importance of school libraries, and the Library Appropriation Bill SB 5523 (OLA, 2007).

Both associations raise money for important library campaigns. The ALA recently received a $2.6 million grant from the Bill & Melinda Gates foundation. The ALA will conduct a study examining the use of the internet in libraries and the impact that funding has on that use (Advanced Technology Libraries, 2006).

The OLA has raised money in innovative ways as well. In 1998, the OLA decided to consider corporate sponsorship of its statewide summer reading program. They set out with a small goal of raising $15,000 for material costs. They hired a public relations firm with the scarce resources they had. The public relations firm advised them that they would be more successful in trying to raise a larger amount of money, for a more effective, high-profile project. The first year raised enough money and was successful enough, that more companies wanted to be a part of the project in subsequent years. Within five years, statewide participation grew from about 39,500 to 98,855 children and young adults (American Libraries, 2002).
A major reason to join a professional association is to participate in activities that will enhance one’s knowledge of the field and increase one’s potential finding satisfying employment by gaining experience to place on a resume. A good place to start is to join a round table interest group, affiliated association or committee. The ALA has eleven affiliated associations such as the Library and Information Technology Association (LITA) and the Public Library Association (PLA). The ALA also has seventeen round table interest groups such as the International Relations Round Table (IRRT) and the Staff Organization Round Table (SORT) (ALA, 2007). The OLA has similar round tables and committees such as the Oregon Authors Committee and the Technical Services Round Table (OLA, 2007). These groups can be joined for different fees in addition to the annual membership fee (ALA, OLA, 2007).

Professional associations also help with professional development and job searches. The ALA’s resources give it an advantage in this area. They offer so much information on their website, sometimes it can be hard to find. They offer resume review services, job placement help, free publications and even medical, dental, and life insurance (ALA, 2007). One of their main roles is to be the accreditation organization for library science education programs throughout the country, ensuring graduates will be trained properly and represent the profession well. If one wants to check if a library science program is accredited, one would check with the ALA Office of Accreditation & Committee on Accreditation (ALA, 2007).

The OLA has a list of jobs within the State of Oregon, which is very helpful. Their idea of professional development comes from working with librarians while volunteering for the OLA. One can join one of the above mentioned committees or round tables and perhaps find a mentor (OLA, 2007). The OLA seems to be a less formal organization where it would not be hard to get
There is a lot of work to be done for people who choose to get involved (telephone interview with Bonebrake, February 9th, 2007).

Working for the ALA seems to be for experienced professionals, which someday I will become. When asked about her experiences in both the ALA and the OLA and how they compare, Sarah Beasley said that her work in the ALA is limited to the topic of academic librarianship. She felt she could work on a broader range of issues in the OLA (telephone interview with Beasley, February 9th, 2007). Aletha Bonebrake said that state associations support the national ALA, and thereby give it power (telephone interview with Bonebrake, February 9th, 2007).

When I think about the two different associations, I see that they are both interesting and exciting associations to be involved with. The primary differences between the two associations are national versus local, well-funded versus volunteer-based. Despite these differences, they both offer practical experience and information that would benefit any career in the field of library and information science. I think that a library professional at the beginning of a career, perhaps a graduate student such as myself, would benefit from first joining the OLA. It is easy to get involved, and I would benefit from the professional contacts. Aletha Bonebrake said that all the librarians in Oregon know each other by working on OLA projects or meeting at OLA events; they all meet through the OLA (telephone interview with Bonebrake, February 9th, 2007). When I asked Sarah Beasley if a degree from one university is better than another, she told me that she is not interested in an applicant’s course work as much as what they have done outside the classroom in libraries or internships (telephone interview with Beasley, February 9th, 2007). I imagine that impressive work in a professional association would fall into that category as well.

Joining and working for the OLA seems to be the place to start, and then perhaps later work up to the national level. At this point in life as a graduate student, it is much easier to get to a
conference in the local city of Corvallis, Oregon, than to fly to a distant major city for an ALA conference. The OLA conference often features speakers from the ALA, as the ALA and OLA are affiliated, though to what degree still remains less than clear (telephone interviews with Bonebrake, Beasley, February 9th, 2007). This year Emily Sheketoff, the Associate Executive Director of the ALA and manager of the Washington office is scheduled to give a speech entitled “Finding Community: Civics, Cyberspace and Change” (OLA, 2007). I am excited to attend.

After conducting my research on the ALA and OLA, I believe the OLA would be the first association to join. Though, I found that the ALA and OLA work together to offer a joint membership that is only $28 per year for students (ALA, 2007). Both organizations offer a lot for that price, and it may be the best choice for me to join both professional associations.
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