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#Why Membership? Professional Associations in the Millennial Age: A Call to Action through Mentorship

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#Why Membership?

Professional Associations in the Millennial Age: A Call to Action through Mentorship

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Photo by Grace Lumpkin Southberland

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Jenkins wants to live in a world where libraries are fiercely funded, all mockingbirds are spared, and every love letter is written by hand. When she's not writing, reading, and thinking about libraries, you can find her re-reading *Ender's Game*, and opening wardrobe doors really, really fast—just in case.

Questions about New Member Round Table? Send them on over to nmrt.ola@gmail.com, or connect with Jenkins directly at JLumpkin@uw.edu.

As a new and emerging member of the librarian profession—although not the library universe—I have been thinking long and hard about the benefits of joining a professional association, such as the Oregon Library Association (OLA), the American Library Association (ALA), and possibly many others. I am certainly not the only one to be kicking this old chestnut of an issue around. Mirroring the challenges and opportunities facing the library world in general, professional associations also face the task of re-invention. Whether this evolution is perceived as a Herculean burden, or a welcome exercise in reinvigoration, the question mark of value rests heavy on the heads of library associations.

Perhaps in a different age, a different era, the return on investment for joining a professional association was not shrouded in an apparent veil of mystery—or possible irrelevance. At one time, it may have been viewed as the responsibility of a new member of a profession to participate: as a necessary rite of passage, a prerequisite to join the ranks fully, the apprenticeship necessary to the magician, the admission charge to the secret society. *Finally*, you might have whispered back in those days. *Finally*, she slowly unfurls from the darkness and into view: the librarian behind the curtain.

Unfortunately, the polished gleam of professional associations has begun to tarnish. Given that professional associations are quickly losing luster, how do we engage those who are currently turned off or turned away from them? How do we entice membership from a new generation, for whom membership may be valued only in terms of the potential networking? What is the value of professional associations—perceived value and actualized value—within the context of the new millennium? Put forth in twitter-ese: #WhyMembership?

Recently, I have been working with some brilliant folks at OLA to re-vamp and re-imagine the New Member Round Table, which has fallen somewhat behind other competing priorities. I have spent some time thinking and talking about the support that is gained from claiming a place within the larger library context, the strength that comes from collaboration across the boundaries that sometimes creep up within our day-to-day professional lives. The ways in which we define ourselves are certainly useful as identifying handles, but these handles can also constrain the space and freedom



which collaboration needs to thrive. Conference attendance can provide the stretching room needed to breathe existence into ideas which we hold in mind sometimes in those last moments before sleep steals them away again, or until the noise of the immediate needs within our personal and professional lives chases them back into the dusty confines of wish lists and rainy day projects. This space to breathe is truly invaluable, and the dazzling riches of conference collaboration can be powerful beyond measure.

Nevertheless, part of the challenge for the somewhat loosely defined millennial generation may be that the kind of collaboration which is so valued from conference attendance can be fairly easily accessed through a multitude of social media networks. It seems that this carries the collaboration aspect of professional membership from the realm of conferences to the device in your back pocket. How do we change the message, the hook, the focus, to one that fosters new voices, cultivates robust leaders, and creates sustainable professional associations for years to come?

Here's an answer: we change the argument for the value of membership from one which is transactional to *transformational*.

The incredible Mentorship program established by the OLA Membership Committee is an invaluable way to share the splendors that surround us in the Oregon library landscape. Mentorship can support and sustain us throughout our library journeys—whether we are just beginning with the first step or at full gallop, miles ahead. If professional associations like the Oregon Library Association are the “Yellow Brick Road” for finding your way through a strange, new professional terrain—the Mentorship program provides the ruby red slippers. It's an easily accessible and transparent way to contribute to the future of the profession—and it doesn't simply apply to those new to the profession or to libraries.

Consider this: we can all act as mentors to each other. In fact, we likely do provide some forms of mentorship on a daily basis. We act as the fearless guides, companions, even sherpas, for those seeking information. We instruct, explore, and fascinate others with infinite worlds—both seen and imagined. We create moments of discovery, develop the spark of creativity, and transform communities. We also transform each other in the process. We surely participate in different forms of mentorship, as well, without even realizing it: from new-hire mentorship for those new to our organization, to reverse mentorship with those Millennials, and even flash mentorship—or “pop-up mentorship,” as I like to call it. Without necessarily intending to do so, we informally transfer knowledge, social capital, and professional development to each other in dozens of ways which can mimic or replicate mentorship.

Through OLA, the mentoring process can be writ large: because membership is not a simple *quid pro quo* equation. With an association membership, we're not selling a loaf of bread or a pair of jeans. Professional associations offer the same gleaming pearl of a prize that you offer each time you open your library doors: it could change your life.

We could embed you so deeply within the mechanisms of the next and the new and the this-just-in faster than a Snapchat post. We could coach you through how to approach an upcoming levy or how to propose a bill that would change the face of funding for your library. We can be a shoulder to lean on and a kick in the pants. We can push you, cajole you, fight for you, and then offer to stitch you up if we lose. We can remind you of the first time you cracked a spine and smelled that new hardcover, just because it just smells *so good*.



We represent the radical notion that membership in professional organizations fulfills a promise to the future of the profession, and to the institution of libraries themselves. We are each a part of the ballast which secures libraries' infrastructure to the community, and we each have a responsibility to sustain that infrastructure. The question is not, in fact, what are the benefits of professional associations to the individual member; rather, it is what strengths and skills can each member bring throughout the professional association.

Of course, this is easy to say and difficult to enact. There are barriers and roadblocks, from funding to organizational support—even from just plain not feeling welcomed or included. Of one aspect, there can be no doubt, no hesitation: we are stronger when we stand together. There are moments in our professional lives when the crucial question—the pivotal, defining question—becomes not whether you have a voice, but how loud you want that voice to be. Professional associations are, perhaps above all, amplifiers. They are the microphones and bullhorns which proclaim: *We are not going anywhere. We are here to stay.* 

