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Chapter report: Continuing education today is practical and sexy

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Chapter Report: Continuing Education Today is Practical and Sexy

by Christine Watkins

ALA chapters face a couple of challenges in providing continuing education for librarians. First, the demand is largely voluntary. Unlike teachers, librarians generally are not required to acquire continuing education units (CEUs) for recertification or promotion. Exceptions exist, such as CEUs for certification of nondegreed library staff in some states, but the bulk of the demand comes from librarians who either need or want to keep up with changes in the profession or seek renewal and reinvigoration of their career.

The second challenge comes in the form of competition. State libraries, library schools, consortia, and other groups routinely offer a range of programs either specifically aimed at librarians or adaptable to library audiences. Finding a niche or strategies that “combine and conquer” seem to be more successful than head-on competition.

Continuing education is almost synonymous with chapter membership. Typically the main component of annual conference programs, it is often the common bond of collaborative programs between ALA and chapters and between chapters and other library organizations. Questions of why do it (rationale), what to do (content), and for whom (marketing) are central to the planning of effective continuing education programs.

While there doesn't seem to be a single clearly articulated philosophy, a number of common themes and practices, as well as some innovations, mark the following programs that range from the bayou to the Bahamas, the Great Lakes to the Lone Star State, from the keyboard to the surfboard, and from Web pages to millage raises.

WHAT'S A CHAPTER TO DO ...

“Teach what isn't being taught,” says Marianne Hartzell, executive director of the Michigan Library Association (MLA). MLA's offerings over the years have ranged from weeklong intensive leadership workshops to hands-on, practical skill sessions. “Most of our programming today is very practical,” Hartzell says. “Participants can take what they've learned, go back to their libraries, and put it to use the next day.”

The “basics” as far as Hartzell is concerned include nuts-and-bolts financial management. “No one should be let out of library school without knowing where money comes from,” she states. Hartzell is something of a guru on the subject, as anyone knows who has attended the Chapter Relations Committee's Presidents-elect Workshop at ALA

Annual Conferences and Midwinter Meetings. Her rapid-fire presentation—a short course in managing a budget, a board, and avoiding typical blunders in nonprofit management—blends common sense, business sense, and a sense of humor.

Along these lines, one of the offerings available from MLA is a workshop on millage and bond issues for library staff and trustees. Participants learn how to get a measure on a ballot and work for its passage. Other workshops, which may focus on topics like technology or even summer reading programs, still contain the basic message that libraries need to support themselves in order to survive.

“As library funding becomes less automatic and more competitive, being able to see libraries as part of a much bigger picture that includes corporations, government, and other organizations will become an increasingly critical skill,” Hartzell believes.

WHAT ELSE IS NEW?

If you want to get high marks on your session evaluations, consider holding your next workshop on a cruise ship. If you really want to lock in those positive comments, add the power of subliminal suggestion by choosing a ship named Ecstasy. Check it out for yourself by signing up for “Sailing into Leadership 2000: Perfecting Personal Skills,” sponsored by the Texas Library Association (TLA) from July 11-14. The four-day cruise includes a six-hour workshop conducted by Sarah Weddington. A former aide to President Carter and the plaintiff's attorney in *Roe v. Wade* before the Supreme Court, Weddington is a nationally known leadership trainer and speaker.

“Our philosophy is to provide continuing education that's unique,” says Pat Smith, TLA executive director, a member of the ALA Executive Board, and a master of understatement. In fact, the cruise is consistent with TLA's focus on continuing education in the leadership vein and certainly seems to be similar to the TLA's emphasis on offering programs that attract an audience among the crowded field of continuing education providers in the state.

The “Tall Texans” program, a weeklong intensive mid-career workshop, is a long-standing tradition and typically attracts two to three times the number of nominees that can be accommodated. And a new program this year, the Leadership Development Institute being held in conjunction with ALA's Office for Intellectual Freedom in response to an increasing number of censorship calls and questions being received by TLA, had five times the number of applicants anticipated.

Rather than trying to compete with other programs, TLA has adopted a policy of trying to coordinate offerings to everyone's benefit. The latest initiative is TLA's CE Providers Interest Group, intended to get

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For more information on ALA-Accredited Library Schools call ALA at 1-800-545-2433 ext. 2153 or visit www.ala.org/alaorg/oa/uslis.html.

Student Reflections

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forward to contributing to our field as a professional in all senses of the word. An extra, unexpected bonus was the bonding between the members of the Oregon cohort. The mutual respect and support we give one another has been vital to me during the program, and I hope will continue long after the graduation ceremony."

Karen Nordgren, Portland State University Library

"One of the unexpected benefits of driving the five hours from Southern Oregon to Portland for the MLS classes was spending some of that time on the road discussing theories and models and considering them in the context of our own work and personal situations. Each trip became a part of the weekend process: both as an opportunity to share our understanding of the readings and projects we'd done since the last class, and to recognize on our return trip what we'd accomplished during the weekend. It didn't keep us from counting down the number of remaining trips, or figuring how far around the globe we could've driven in those hours, but it was certainly a big part of our distance learning.

Additionally, the emphasis on presentations enabled us to become adept at speaking before the group. To me, that was a major success for everyone."

*John Sexton
Jackson County Library System*

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other players to the table to support, rather than detract from, each other's efforts.

SOLD-OUT SESSIONS

Lillian Gassie, chair of the Louisiana Library Association (LLA) Continuing Education Committee, pursued a similar strategy in publishing the inaugural issue of its *CE Newsletter* this fall. The online newsletter touts LLA's own series of computer workshops, as well as providing a listing and registration information for programs offered by other organizations. The computer workshops—which covered topics such as basic operating systems, troubleshooting, and desktop publishing—were all over-subscribed in advance of the registration deadline. Based on the success of this initial offering, LLA hopes to be able to expand offerings in other parts of the state.

Like many chapter programs, these workshops were offered on a cost-recovery basis. The success story resulted from a combination of offering the right product and making sure the word got out. Members were surveyed for program preferences, and disseminating registration information via an attractive, accessible form not only resulted in full sessions, but in the beginnings of an ongoing information network. An online survey is being used to build a CE database for use statewide.

You don't have to take my word for it. See for yourself at www.ucl.usl.edu/~wxw9898/ce.html. 

Christine Watkins is a freelance writer and project consultant in Chicago. This article is reprinted by permission from American Libraries, Jan. 1997, p.11.