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Random Ramblings — The Future of the ALA Midwinter Meeting

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I have a long-standing tradition of watching the exhibits shut down at both the **ALA Midwinter Meeting** and **Annual Conference**. I find it fascinating to observe how efficiently the vendors dismantle their booths with only a slightly hidden smile to be done with the conference rigmarole. I also ask vendors about the conference, perhaps because I served on the **ALA Conference Committee** twenty years ago. I have never encountered such unhappiness as I did after the **2018 Midwinter Conference** in Denver. Most were quite willing to express dissatisfaction with the traffic in the exhibit hall. I noticed the relative emptiness of the exhibits myself, not only during this closing time but earlier in the conference. Another indication was how early the vendors started packing up. One vendor told me about several exhibitors who left Sunday night and completely skipped the last day. Many others started dismantling their booths around noon, well before the 2:00 pm official closing, since so few customers were on the floor. Only a few had fully functioning booths at the end.

Attendance figures document a slow but steady decline in registration for **Midwinter**. Since 1995, Denver was the lowest at 8,036 with last year's Atlanta meeting in second place at 8,995. In only one other case (Dallas, 2012, 9,929) was registration below 10,000. (The high water mark was Washington in 2001 at 14,739.) Two other factors may make the actual number of people in the exhibit hall even worse. First, many registrants may not have shown up because of major weather problems at several hubs including Chicago and Detroit. I personally know several friends who were no-shows. Second, the figures above include vendors. The figures on the **ALA** website don't break down attendance between the two groups except for the last two years. In Atlanta, the number of vendors was 2,916 (32.42% of the attendees). While the absolute count in Denver declined to 2,691, the vendor percentage increased to 33.49%. These numbers are important because vendors want to talk to potential customers, not to other vendors.

What I describe above is concrete confirmation that the **ALA Midwinter Meeting** faces problems in general coupled with some specific issues with the Denver location. Overall, the statistics on **Midwinter** attendance indicate that meetings in major population centers with sought-after tourist activities attract more registrants. Denver isn't all that easy to get to by car since it isn't located as close to population concentrations as some other cities. Furthermore, driving or flying there in the winter poses the risk of being caught in a major snowstorm. On the other hand, the comments I heard about the difficulty in finding a flight are mostly contradicted by the fact that Denver is the fifth

busiest airport in the United States according to **FAA** statistics on passenger traffic. Denver is a middling tourist destination at #22 in the *U.S. News & World Reports* "Best Places to Visit in the USA" though getting to the Rockies would require a more extended stay. **ALA** has held **Midwinter** there three times in the past (2009, 1993, and 1982) so that at least some **ALA** members should remember what the experience was like. Advantages included a compact conference footprint, a wide choice of restaurants on the 16th Street Mall, and free downtown transportation.

Midwinter also faces fundamental changes that have led members and **ALA** leadership to question its viability as attendance declines.

The first issue is what it cost to attend. Tracking the increases is difficult because transportation and hotel charges vary by location and date of booking. The only easily comparable cost is registration. In 2001, early bird registration for a regular member cost \$90 in contrast to \$230 for the 2018 meeting, an increase of 156%. The cheapest registration category, Exhibits Only, has an even greater percentage increase of 200% from \$20 to \$60. (The Consumer Price Index inflation rate for the same period is 42.4%) On the other hand, registration is not the most important component of total costs. My subjective experience is that hotel costs have increased the most. I don't use the **ALA** hotels because I can normally find a cheaper acceptable alternative on my own. Comparing the **2009 Denver Midwinter Meeting** with the one in 2018, I paid more than double with an increase from \$49 to \$101 per night. The "Average daily rate of hotels in the United States from 2001 to 2017" from **Statista** gives an increase of \$83.62 to \$126.72, a percentage increase of 66%; but I believe that costs have increased much more in the desirable markets where **ALA** holds its conferences. Airfare remains a relative bargain. "According to the **U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics**, prices for airline fares were 10.91% higher in 2018 versus 2001." To conclude, there is no doubt that conference costs have gone up; but calculating the exact increase is difficult.

I believe that employer funding for conference attendance has decreased. With all the news that libraries of all types are facing rising costs that their budgets don't adequately cover, I'm confident in saying that I doubt that funding for conference attendance is increasing in many libraries and that decreases are more common. I would expect that administrators at higher levels receive more funding and may, in fact,

be the type of attendees that vendors welcome since they have the authority to spend money. A more tantalizing question would be whether self-funding conference attendance makes economic sense. Does attending **Midwinter** provide activities that enhance performance, one of the main criteria for advancement in all types of libraries? Does networking at meetings and social events improve visibility

enough to increase professional opportunities? Is spending time in the exhibits to learn about new products valuable? The clearest answer may be for academic librarians for whom committee membership and speaking opportunities are often important to receive tenure and promotion. Overall, regular attendance at **Midwinter** may

lead to a better new job but at a significant cost. Sporadic participation probably has much less value.

The structure of **Midwinter** has also changed significantly since I started attending in the mid-1970s. **Midwinter** was supposed to be a business meeting in contrast with the **Annual Conference** that featured programs and other general activities. In fact, the rules used to prohibit any type of official programming at **Midwinter**. Much has changed since then. While I don't know if the total number of **ALA** committee and committee-like units has increased or decreased, many **ALA** committees have disappeared. The goal was to reduce the expenses of renting hotel meeting rooms. In addition, individual room assignments were often replaced by having a number of organizationally related committees meet together in a large room. For the committee that I chaired, the negative effect was that observers, who often became future committee members, no longer attended. Many divisions revamped their committee structures to replace committees with more fluid groups where all that was needed was a convener or two on the model of the discussion groups that already existed. These meetings focus on content rather than process, require no future commitment, and are said to appeal more to younger librarians. From my own experience, this change has its benefits because standing committees sometimes created make-work projects to justify their continued existence. I remember one committee that spent years developing guidelines that, as far as I can tell, had no consequences. On the other hand, these committees often planned excellent programs for the **Annual Conference**. Others still have substantive work to complete.

continued on page 54

Random Ramblings from page 53

The Internet has caused a second major change because committees are able to accomplish some or all of their tasks online. I was on a committee where only about one-third of the members attended **Midwinter** so that I personally felt that the meetings were a waste of time. Perhaps such low participation encouraged committees to cancel their **Midwinter** meetings, given the cost of attending as described above. While this reduced the need for meeting space, it also reduced the need to attend and thereby decreased conference revenue.

To counter this trend, **Midwinter** has expanded to become much more than a business meeting to give members a reason to attend even without an official function and to encourage those with formal responsibilities to stay longer. Discussion groups, interest groups, and similar bodies have found ways to morph into quasi-programs without officially breaking the rules. The publicity for such meetings would talk about speakers to get the discussion rolling even if the time for discussion was the same as that allocated at official programs. The main Webpage for the **Denver Midwinter Meeting** features an *Opening Session*, an *Auditorium Speaker Series*, the *Arthur Curley Lecture*, a *President's Program*, a *Networking Uncommons*, and a *Closing Session*. Other activities include the *ALA Masters Series* and several days of scheduled films. Visiting the exhibits is a major attraction for many, aided by the fact that **ALA** has added a series of events in the exhibit hall to increase traffic to make the vendors happy. These include *Book Buzz Theater*, the *PopTop Stage*, and *Meet the Authors* as well as the opening receptions and many vendor special events to attract potential buyers to their booths. In other words, **ALA** has dropped any pretense that **Midwinter** is only a business meeting. Those coming to **Midwinter** without official responsibilities will find plenty to do.

My final topic is examining the importance of holding **Midwinter** to **ALA** as an organization. Some **ALA** units need to meet more often than annually to conduct their business successfully. I'd put on this list **ALA Council**, the

division and round table governing boards, the Committee on Accreditation, and other similar bodies with heavy workloads. Perhaps some could meet virtually, but I doubt that all could. In the end, perhaps **ALA** might need to hold a greatly reduced **Midwinter** meeting only for those with such responsibilities to mimic what **Midwinter** was when I started my career in the early 1970s. Unless **ALA** could subsidize the members of these groups, an unlikely outcome in the current environment of resource scarcity, serving on these groups would impose a financial burden that would work against early career librarians participating and favor administrators and late career members.

The answer to the question of whether **ALA** makes money from **Midwinter** does not have a simple answer. The short answer is that **Midwinter** has officially lost money for the last three years from the figures available in the current Treasurer's Report — \$80,001 in 2017, \$297,473 in 2016, and \$23,871 in 2015. The "real" financial impact is somewhat different as I learned from **Jim Neal** as Treasurer when I asked him about the deficit a few years ago. Some of the costs are overhead expenses that **ALA** would incur whether **Midwinter** happened or not so that canceling the meeting wouldn't save the full amount of the "official" deficit. The best analogy that I use to explain this phenomenon is that, even if the overall cost of having a car is \$.50 per mile, not driving four miles to the store doesn't save \$2 because the fixed expenses (insurance, depreciation, etc.) aren't reduced. For the last two years, the Treasurer's report gives these overhead costs as \$724,334 in 2017 and \$721,549 in 2016. In other words, **ALA** would be poorer if **Midwinter** disappeared even with the apparent deficit. To return to my initial point, vendor revenue is a significant factor for a successful **Midwinter** so that unhappy vendors who don't return hurt **ALA's** finances.

What happens next? The future of **Midwinter** is on the agenda for **ALA** administrators and elected leaders. In his June 1, 2018 email to members, **Jim Neal**, **ALA** President, states that "work has begun on rethinking **Midwinter**." Some members will also continue their efforts to defend, eliminate, or modify **Midwinter** for some or all of the reasons above. According to its website, **ALA** has chosen

the locations for **Midwinter** for 2019 through 2024 — Seattle, Philadelphia, Indianapolis for the first time, San Antonio, New Orleans, and Denver. Using total registration since 1995, Philadelphia has traditionally been a popular site followed in order by New Orleans, Seattle, and San Antonio. The selection of venues continues the tradition of moving around the country to encourage attendance by a more geographically diverse group of **ALA** members. This decision contrasts with a different strategy for the **Annual Conferences** that will be in Chicago three times and Washington, DC twice during the same time span. Having a signed contract with any of these sites would make it more difficult to eliminate or significantly modify **Midwinter** because of cancellation costs.

I see several possible future actions. More members could push for eliminating **Midwinter** by action through **ALA Council** or discussions at membership meetings. **ALA** is structured so that a relatively small but persistent group can force consideration, though not adoption, of such a strategy. The trend could continue to encourage attendance by further increasing activities beyond official meetings. Perhaps surveys of **Midwinter** attendees could help determine whether this strategy has been successful. Perhaps the most important consideration depends upon the financial effects of **ALA Midwinter**. These results are determined directly or indirectly by revenue from member and vendor attendance as well as the relative cost to **ALA** of the host city. Significant "real" rather than accounting losses might force change.

I don't see any easy answers to the **Midwinter** dilemma. The collective decisions of members and vendors to attend or not will most likely determine the outcome. As a retired **ALA** member, I know that I'll eventually face the decision whether to sign up or not when my mandatory official duties end. Will attending **Midwinter** be worth more to me than a vacation? That is the question. 🌳

Note: I wish to thank Rebecca Gerber and David Sievers, ALA Library, for their help in providing historical statistics for this column.

Rumors from page 39

a three-year pilot to publish up to 150 monographs from university presses in digital-first open access editions. "While the print monograph remains the indispensable format for advancing scholarship in history, the publishing economics for university presses are increasingly distressed," said John Sherer, Spangler Family Director of UNC Press and primary investigator for the grant. "Cost-recovery models are leading to higher prices and lower overall dissemination of and access to vitally important content. This pilot is attempting to

fundamentally rethink the workflow and dissemination model for the monograph in order to dramatically expand access and increase impact while maintaining the exceptionally high editorial quality associated with university presses." A working group made up of university presses, libraries, and content platforms will oversee the pilot. More information about the pilot can be found here: <http://www.longleafservices.org/blog/oa-monographs/>.

MECA (Manuscript Exchange Common Approach) is collaborating toward the shared goal of systems interoperability. Authors lose time and effort when their manuscript is rejected by a journal and they have to repeat

the submission process in subsequent journals. Plus, it is estimated that 15 million hours of researcher time is wasted each year repeating reviews. Both of these challenges could be addressed if journals and publishers could transfer manuscripts between publications using different submission-tracking systems. With the growth of cascading workflows, manuscripts are regularly transferred within a publishing group. But a growing challenge is to transfer the manuscript (and, optionally, peer-review data) across publishers and manuscript systems and even to and from preprint servers. A group of manuscript-management

continued on page 59