

APPENDIX B: Enhancing the Conference Experience – A Guide for Conference Organizers and Attendees

Appendix of Collective Wisdom: An Exploration of Library, Archives and Museum Cultures

Both the white paper and the appendix are available online at:

<http://www.coalitiontoadvancelearning.org/projects/collective-wisdom-white-paper/>

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Professional associations—and the conferences they organize—exist to support and enrich practitioners within a given field, with a primary purpose to provide continuing education and professional development (CE/PD). Traditionally, those affiliated with the library, archives and museum (LAM) sectors find support nationally through their respective national organizations, including the American Alliance of Museums, American Library Association and Society of American Archivists, as well as those on the regional, state or local level. Increasingly, research and trends signal the need and interest in improving understanding and communication among the sectors. By working together, LAMs can benefit from expanding their networks, fostering an exchange of ideas and learning transferable skills. The following guide can assist you and your organization with becoming an advocate for conferences, as a vehicle for working across sectors and building an empowered case for support for collaboration.

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OVERVIEW OF THE BIG THREE LAM CONFERENCES

Attending the annual conference of a significant professional organization in each LAM sector served as the primary vehicle for the Collective Wisdom cohort's cross-sector cultural exploration. This overview of the "big three" professional organizations and their conferences is culled from the cohort's reflections and discussions of their shared experience.

American Alliance of Museums (AAM)

Snapshot of AAM

- Mission: To champion museums and nurture excellence in partnership with our members and allies.
- Membership: Representing more than 30,000 individual museum professionals and volunteers, institutions and corporate partners serving the museum field, the Alliance stands for the broad scope of the museum community.
- AAM offers 22 Professional Networks for those who wish to engage with others of similar interests or professional roles.
- Conference: Average attendance of 6,000 at an annual spring conference at a rotating location around the country.



Cohort experience at the 2016 AAM Conference & MuseumExpo in Washington, D.C.

- Robust content on outreach, programs, collections care, membership and philanthropy
- Diversity of session formats offered with opportunities for engagement
- Large footprint in a major conference facility, with manageable feel
- Numerous evening and off-site events at local museums or heritage and cultural organizations; tickets must be purchased in advance for an additional fee
- Large exhibit hall featuring diverse range of vendors and service providers to museums, with many focused on exhibition design
- Keynote speech and awards ceremony recognizing leadership in the field
- Overview session for first timers and new members with networking games
- Bookstore selling AAM museum-specific publications
- Features a Reinforcement Crew community service opportunity geared toward helping local museums through volunteer projects
- Registered attendees receive links to archived recordings of sessions, such as the keynote and select presentations, for future viewing

American Library Association (ALA)

Snapshot of ALA

- Mission: To provide leadership for the development, promotion and improvement of library and information services and the profession of librarianship in order to enhance learning and ensure access to information for all.
- Membership: Representing over 60,000 libraries and corporate supporters plus individual librarians, volunteers, board and friends group members, ALA is a multi-type library organization that promotes library services and librarianship across the spectrum of its membership.
- ALA features 11 membership Divisions, each with a type-of-library or type-of-library-function specialization, and 20 Round Tables (membership groups) as well as member communities that offer opportunities for in-depth involvement based on interests and professional roles.
- Conference: Average attendance of 25,000 at the annual summer conference and 10,000 at the mid-winter conference, both at rotating locations around the country.



Cohort experience at 2016 ALA Annual Conference in Orlando, FL

- Robust content on technology, cataloging, programs, community engagement and diversity/equity/inclusion
- Sprawling footprint over multiple locations
- Exhaustive list of meetings of the roundtables, divisions and committees, all noted by acronyms
- Evening events mainly dedicated to awards ceremonies or group meetings and receptions, some of which are invitation only or ticketed
- Large exhibit hall with an extensive array of vendors, including publishers and authors that provide discounted and/or free products, plus showcases for cooking demos to book signings
- Opening and closing keynotes, with awards presentations, as well as numerous presentations by notable authors, entertainers, politicians or tastemakers
- Traditional session presentation format (presenter or panel delivered from podium)
- Interactive areas, such as makerspaces and magazine (zine) making tables, as well as quiet spaces and service booths
- Extensive shop selling everything from handmade jewelry and t-shirts to books and posters
- Features a community service day in the conference host city
- Strong level of advocacy for the profession and brand awareness of libraries as necessities, plus focus on social justice, and diversity and inclusion
- Registered attendees receive links to recordings of selected conference proceedings and archived sessions for future viewing
- Offers conference accommodations that are responsive to the varying levels of accessibility needed
- A culture of flexible attendance at sessions

Society of American Archivists (SAA)

Snapshot of SAA

- Mission: To promote the values and diversity of archives and archivists. The preeminent source of professional resources and the principal communication hub for American archivists.
- Membership: SAA represents more than 6,200 professional archivists employed by governments, universities, businesses, libraries and historical organizations nationally, as well as students and institutions.
- SAA includes numerous opportunities for engagement by its members and enthusiasts, including committees, working groups, sections, roundtables and affiliate groups.
- Conference: Average attendance of 1,000 at a late summer conference at a rotating location around the country.



Cohort experience at Archives*Records, the 2016 Joint Meeting of SAA and CoSA (Council of State Archivists) in Atlanta, GA

- Robust content on data management, community engagement and sessions of shared interest to the LAM fields, such as diversity and inclusion or heritage preservation
- Friendly atmosphere, which is in one location and easy to navigate
- Numerous meetings of the roundtables, committees, sections and working groups
- Small exhibit hall with a solid diversity of vendors and service providers
- Food and evening events included in registration fee
- Featured keynote and sessions of traditional panel format
- Intimate welcome reception for first timers and new members
- Small bookstore selling a wide range of SAA and related publications
- Features a community service day in the conference host city
- Registered attendees receive links to archived sessions for future viewing
- Strong social media culture, thanks in part to the conference program's numbering system that offers ease of communication and ability to follow session-specific conversations



From left: Sofia Becerra-Licha, Stephanie Allen and Alison Eisendrath check out the literature at the SAA Conference bookstore. Photo by Christina Newton.

Conference Attendance: Why People Do and Do Not Go To Conferences

Reasons for attending a conference

- To network and advance personal and professional learning and skillsets
- To serve as a representative at meetings of roundtables, committees and interest groups
- To present a session or professional paper
- To explore exhibit hall vendors and service providers
- To learn about latest trends in the field through sessions, keynote addresses, author talks and more

Types of conference attendees

- Staff of libraries, archives and museums
- Board members and trustees
- Volunteers
- Students
- Businesses and service providers
- Nonprofits and government agencies
- Elected officials

Barriers to attending conferences

- Lack of financial resources
- Time
- Geographic barriers
- The interests of the employer or focus of a position
- Numerous options (state, regional, national, specialized)

Additional barriers to attending conferences in other sectors

- Loyalty to specific associations/conferences
- Lack of resources for attendance
- Lack of interest/curiosity from leadership or organization in trying something unfamiliar
- Increased specialization, i.e., as a professional becomes focused on a particular set of tasks and functions within their position, they may feel compelled to explore only professional development opportunities that build those skills rather than taking in broader topics for their field or related professional fields.

HOST A CONFERENCE: Conference Organizer's Guide to Enhancements for Cross-Sector Engagement

All of the Collective Wisdom cohort members had previously attended their own sector's major annual conference. As they explored the less familiar territory of another sector's conference, it was natural to make comparisons and exchange ideas about what worked well and where there was room for improvement. The fresh eyes of the sector "outsiders" contributes to this guide of recommendations for enhancing the user's conference experience in general, and the cross-sector connection in particular. The ideas come from all three conferences.

Enhance the User Experience

Create a memorable experience

- Experiment with session formats that provide engaging experiences and interactions, such as audience participation formats and hands-on activities.
- Offer room setups with round tables to introduce flexibility for more engaging experiences and interaction. Let the speakers move chairs and tables to fit their presentations if you can't arrange the space in advance; be prepared with volunteers to help put the space back in place.
- Offer "pop-up" sessions that are chosen by the membership/attendees, feature current trends, and encourage interactive and flexible formats. For example, SAA solicits sessions proposals that have "popped up" after the earlier proposal deadline; selection is based on popular vote by those who will be attending the conference.
- Explore ways to limit the amount of time between proposal submission deadlines and the conference to minimize changes to the program and assure participation by originally published speakers.
- Ensure that session titles and descriptions match the content so that attendees know what to expect.
- Guide session presenters to deliver presentations that provide inspiration and tangible skills.
- Limit number of committee meetings that compete with educational program participation, or consider incorporating an education aspect as part these meetings.
- Offer informal, interactive opportunities, such as "makerspace," "play" areas, research or genealogy center, or "pop-up" topic tables.
- Offer recordings of specific sessions in lieu of in-person attendance and/or for later distribution, which can be an additional revenue stream or member benefit.
- Provide a convenient registration process online and on-site, as well as knowledgeable and helpful customer service.
- Include food and drinks in registration costs, or provide easy access to affordable food nearby, such as via food trucks.
- Create manageable floor layouts and post clear directional signage. Keep conference as intimate as possible by keeping sessions and programs as close to the main area as possible.
- Become a sustainable/green event by providing online brochure and registration in advance and on-site services such as an event app, recycling and water stations.
- Provide internet service that works, especially if offering a downloadable event app. Just because your attendees are at a conference doesn't mean that they are off the grid. In fact, they want to talk about their

participation—and you want them to.

- Find ideas/inspirations from those on all levels whether local, state, regional or national.
- Keep the conference inclusive for people no matter their background, position, ethnicity, gender, etc.
- Bigger isn't always better.

Promote LAM-friendly opportunities

- Co-host an event or program with another organization outside your sector or typical circle of partners or invite them to present at your conference (or other CE/PD program) to offer an alternative view or training technique.
- Develop a Library, Archives and Museum track/focus as part of the conference program.
- Incorporate cross-sector focus in the conference session proposals process (RFP) and distribute outside the routine circles to broaden the audience.
- Engage LAM advocates from across the sectors in developing conference program/topics, serving as presenters, and in the distribution of conference publicity to expand audience.
- Provide reduced registration fees to members of other LAM associations.
- Provide a discounted membership rate to members of other LAM associations.
- Provide access to professional literature to members of other LAM associations.
- Tie educational offerings to the academic arena so that they are academically applicable towards a bachelor's, master's or doctorate degree, or provide certificate credit for attendance.
- Incorporate informal LAM gatherings such as a reception or educational meet-up to create comfortable atmosphere for cross-sector introductions.
- Share how your sector is tackling an issue of relevance to other sectors (e.g., collections management, disaster preparedness, programs, community outreach, management, fundraising).

Foster cross-sector connection on topics of shared interest

- Diversity, equity and inclusion
- Advocacy and philanthropy, in order to better articulate our value in an era of shrinking resources
- Staff compensation, retention and diversification
- Digitization, digital access, database management and metadata
- Conservation and emergency preparedness and response
- Sustainability (environmental to financial)
- Training opportunities that address the needs of institutions that cut across sectors (e.g., libraries that have archival materials or object collections)
- A space of trust and communication to nourish collaboration between sectors, especially for training opportunities

Expand Your Reach to the Public

The following ideas for promotion and outreach are most pertinent to specific sectors. With a cross-sector mindset, they may provide inspiration for adaptation to another sector.

Libraries:

- Coordinate book fairs and/or author talks/signings around your conference that are open to the public.
- Host a Book Read-Out event, in which local celebrities highlight banned books, local issues or other current topics by reading aloud favorite book passages.
- Create a walk/run event for a local literacy agency or for the hosting library association to raise funds for advocacy.

Archives:

- Host an open house and explain archives procedures to break down barriers to admittance.
- Coordinate an oral history project.
- Invite the community to take part in crowd-sourced projects such as identifying photographs or transcribing collection materials.

Museums:

- Develop “museum week/month” in partnership with host location that coincides with the conference.
- Host behind-the-scene events at local museums for the public to also attend.
- Offer free admission to the conference keynote speech or other special programs of relevance to a wider audience.

Universal recommendations:

- Write and distribute a press release about your conference/other events and invite the media to attend.
- Work with the host convention and visitors’ bureau (CVB) to assist with conference site selection and additionally with the media to develop advertorials focused on cultural and heritage tourism marketing.
- Invite local officials and policy makers to speak at your conference (e.g., presentations, keynote, welcome remarks, award presentations, evening events, ribbon-cutting).

ATTEND A CONFERENCE: Conference Attendee's Guide to the Cross-Sector Experience

Library, archives and museum (LAM) sectors often overlap. Libraries, archives and museums all curate exhibits; museums and archives have library collections; and archives feature object collections. Cross-sector collaboration can be a powerful tool to break down barriers between allies that share beliefs in preservation and the stewardship of historical and cultural treasures and spaces, and that serve a broad spectrum of the public. By learning and working together, professionals in the LAM sectors can benefit from expanding networks, fostering an exchange of ideas and learning transferable skills.

The following guide can assist you with becoming a savvy conference goer and advocate for connecting across sectors. The recommendations are derived from the Collective Wisdom cohort's experience attending the "big three" national conferences: American Alliance of Museums, American Library Association and Society of American Archivists.

Reasons to consider attending a conference outside your field

- Explore cross-sector collaboration opportunities for your institution (e.g., digitization projects, collaborative programming, etc.)
- Discover how another sector may be addressing a similar problem or leveraging a particular resource
- Expand your professional network
- Find presenters/trainers who may be able to offer a different perspective on a common theme
- For professionals who may jump between LAMs during their career, conferences provide a window into the type of work that they do, and how it might vary across sectors
- Find ideas/inspiration for your own organization's conferences on a local, state or national level
- Gain information and expertise about an aspect of your organization or position that is found in another conference

Barriers to seeking cross-sector conference opportunities

- Loyalty to specific associations/conferences
- Lack of additional resources for attendance
- Lack of interest/curiosity from leadership or organization in trying something unfamiliar
- Increased specialization, i.e., as a professional becomes focused on a particular set of tasks and functions within their position, they may feel compelled to explore only professional development opportunities that develop those skills rather than taking in broader topics for their field or related professional fields.

Gaining support

The barriers noted above are common and often entrenched. Across the field, practitioners are at a tipping point of increased connection and collaboration between sectors, but it's going to take a lot of persuasion to really tip the balance. The Collective Wisdom cohort had a unanimously positive experience as a result of associating with peers in other sectors, whose paths would not have crossed if not for this deliberate intention to stir up the mix. Take their wisdom and turn it into talking points to persuade your institution to support your own cross-sector conference exploration.

Articulate the value of expanding your horizons

- Do your homework: conference organizers post suggestions on their websites on how to make a case for attending, providing templates for how to develop a plan of attendance or how to write a letter of request to your supervisor. You may be able to adapt these suggestions to fit your needs. (e.g., ALA 2017 [Making the Case to Attend](#))
- Determine how the program will relate to and benefit your work and the organization's goals.
- Draw inspiration from the *Collective Wisdom: An Exploration of LAM Cultures* white paper.
 - The section on Outcomes and Impact (pages 10-12) describes the numerous ways in which cohort members benefited personally and professionally, including cross-sector mentoring, new perspectives on their work, and even promotions as a result of their participation.
 - The section on Finding Convergence Across LAMs (pages 13-14) may help you identify your own points of convergence.
- Look for conferences outside of the "big three" that are inherently more cross-sector or focused on your area of expertise; for example Digital Library Federation for digitization issues, Museum Computer Network for emerging technologies, or Cultural Heritage and Social Change Summit for issues of equity, diversity and inclusion.
- Seek and establish relationships with your counterparts in other sectors to demonstrate your intent to build cross-sector connections.
 - In Appendix A of the Collective Wisdom white paper, the sections on Cross-sector Outreach (p A2) and Cross-organizational Communication (p A3) have good ideas for where and how to make those connections.

Boost your resources

- Determine your professional development budget and ask for support early on.
- Research and apply for volunteer and/or scholarship opportunities from the conference organizer.
- Research CE/PD support from organizations outside your sector and from government agencies that provide technical support through grant funding.

Planning your travel

Your institution will appreciate any effort you can make to manage travel expenses.

- Take advantage of Early Bird rates on conference registration and make hotel reservations using group discounts and early booking.
- Check flight schedules to look for affordable fares; book at least 21 days in advance or sign up for emails from your favorite carriers to be informed of sales.

- Share expenses with colleagues/friends, such as sharing a hotel room or carpooling.
- Schedule transportation to and from and during the conference; look for shared options and affordable public transportation.
- Plan your wardrobe for a professional yet comfortable appearance. Items that compliment mean less to pack, which will help avoid baggage check fees. Pack layers as temperatures can fluctuate inside and out. Don't forget to check the weather forecast!
- Pack comfortable shoes. For large conferences, such as ALA Annual, be aware that you may do a lot of walking between session locations.
- Determine what tech you might take: smart phone, tablet, laptop, other (especially if you are presenting). Research travel guidelines and Internet availability (and any potential costs).

Enhance Your Experience

Planning your conference schedule

- Review the conference schedule in advance to determine what you want to experience, noting dates and times to determine your travel schedule. Do you want to add on additional days to attend pre- or post-conference activities or for sightseeing?
- Identify sessions and events that look likely to have general cross-sector interest or application to your particular areas of interest.
- Look for meetings or sessions sponsored by the Committee on Archives, Libraries and Museums (CALM) to get involved in a national cross-sector effort.
- Plan ahead and note deadlines, especially on event tickets, if applicable.
- Download the conference event app, if available, and review the online schedule. Many such apps allow for creating a custom schedule or saving sessions of interest.
- Remember to schedule “me” time whether a quiet meal, time for workout or meeting friends.
- Pack business cards as well as any brochures or other items you wish to share, depending on weight and necessity.

At the conference

- Depending on the size and nature of the conference, you may feel like a bit like a “[stranger in a strange land](#).” Remember that others may be just as curious about you as you are about them.
- Be bold—start conversations with anyone, including presenters and conference officials. Anything you would say to break the ice with a new connection within your own field can be used with people from other LAM disciplines.
- Letting people know that you are from a different sector is a good conversation starter. They are likely to be intrigued that you are there to explore and learn from their sector.
- If the person you're talking to works in a field you know little about, ask follow-up questions about things that aren't familiar to you. For example:
 - Person: Yeah, I work at a public library.
 - You: Oh, really? What do you do there? And what does your job entail? Have you had any interesting

public programs or community-based projects recently? or What do you most like about working in a public library?

- Be aware that practitioners from other LAM sectors may not understand specialized jargon or have the same types of experiences as you.
- Tell people about the projects you work on; it may spark a conversation about the differences and similarities with their own projects.
- Approach all sessions and events with openness. Even when the topic seems not to apply to your work, you may find a kernel of an idea or some strategy that you can adopt or adapt to your purpose.
- Visiting the exhibition hall will give you more insight into the products and services that are of high interest to the sector.
- Check out the bookstore—you might be surprised how many books or literature are on topics of interest to you.
- Participate in conference social events for an added exposure to the sector culture.

We hope to see you at a conference!

