Survey of Librarians and Virtual Library Conferences
-Dennis, Sarah

Background

More than a year and a half ago, a pandemic began to infiltrate the lives of librarians and the workings of libraries across the globe. Many, but not all, librarians shifted to alternate work locations, job duties may have drastically changed, and communication through online environments became the norm.   Due to safety concerns, library conferences shifted to online environments with varying degrees of success. With so many library conferences quickly switching to online environments and then more recently creating hybrid or virtual only conferences, determining what worked well and what did not becomes important to conference planning in the future. This survey was designed to determine what worked in virtual conferences and why and how demographics may be a factor in the various experiences. There was also a component linked to professional organizations and whether someone belonged to them played a part in their experience with virtual library conferences.

Methods

This research was conducted using a survey created in Qualtrics that consisted of 24 questions. This consisted of multiple choice and open-ended questions. Demographic information was collected but no personal information was requested. After gaining IRB approval, the survey was then distributed using library-focused listservs. These listservs included ALA and IFLA to reach a broad audience and receive diverse responses. The other listservs used were Liblicense, Serialist, and ER&L. Because there were many complex responses to the open-ended questions, codifying this information has been laborious. Participants self-reported as being over 18 and as having attended library conferences, but the survey was not intended to be limited to librarians. This research also tried to include vendors, staff, students, and others to gather more dynamic responses. The survey was available for six weeks with 680 responses collected, but only 582 surveys were completed . Although data analysis is still ongoing, there are overarching themes found in the responses that could be useful to those planning conferences now.

Results

Firstly, it is important to realize that virtual experiences need to continue to be part of the library conference world in order to support an accessible and open profession. This does not mean that in-person conferences should be a thing of the past. Instead, there are multiple ways to make conferences better for everyone, in-person or virtually.

Demographic information was collected from respondents but not required for participation. Participants were overwhelmingly found to work in academic environments, 66.72%, with public library environments following at 17.85%. The participants also overwhelmingly self-identified as Librarians at 85.47%, as opposed to students or retired, for example. Almost 75% of

participants identified as female and 75% of participants were between the ages of 35 to 64, (35-44 at 25.35%, 45-54 at 25.70%, and 55-64 at 25.70%). Participants also identified as White, not Hispanic, in the majority of responses. Sixty-four percent of respondents had no dependents and 57% were Married or in a Domestic Partnership.

When exploring why survey participants belonged to professional organizations, it was examined across these factors; whether or not the person would attend a virtual conference if an in-person was available, what type of position they hold in the library profession, and what type of institution the participant works for. The most common reason for belonging to a professional organization across all three factors was "Professional Development Opportunities". This is followed by "Networking Opportunities" and "Library Community Connections". Professional organizations are often the organizers of library conferences and knowing what those who belong to these organizations expect from their membership may help increase membership or conference attendance and satisfaction. More information about how membership in a professional organization influences conference participation and attendance preferences gathered from this survey is still being explored.

Of the librarians that replied that they would not attend a virtual library conference, the main factors, by order of importance, that motivate them to attend a conference are "Learning about developments in the field", "Connecting with the librarian community", and "Networking". For those who replied that they would attend a virtual conference, the main factors, by order of importance, that motivate their conference attendance are, "Learning about developments in the field", "Connecting with the librarian community", and "Presentation Opportunities", in that order. The first two factors are the same whereas in the third option there can be seen the difference in priorities. Creating a conference that can accomplish these first two factors well will meet the majority of conference go-ers' needs. Innovative networking solutions for virtual conferences will be the next hurdle in creating an environment that rivals the in-person experience. In all open answer questions regarding library conferences, the issues mentioned most often concern networking, travel, cost, flexibility, and work-life balance.

- *Networking* - this includes the connections between librarians, with vendors/exhibitors, and creating or maintaining a library community.
  - The lack of networking, especially spontaneous networking, has been greatly missed in the virtual environment. It is one of the most often mentioned aspects in regards to virtual library conferences that needs to be improved.
  - Some participants find social interactions stressful and/or distracting, which makes virtual more attractive options. Some also responded that networking was not an important part of conference attendance for them and instead were focused on learning opportunities. Which leads to the conclusion that any innovations in virtual conference networking to be participation optional.
  - Recommendations
    - Put effort into creating engaging networking opportunities, perhaps using platforms people may already be familiar with like Twitter or Slack.
    - Do not make the networking a forced/required engagement.

- ■ Being able to chat more freely is needed, whether it is during presentations or between sessions. This can be better enabled when a person can see who is in the session with them. The person can then strike up a conversation about the session, for example.
- ● *Travel*
  - ○ Not traveling was one of the most frequent reasons listed for preferring virtual conferences.
  - ○ Cost and time were mentioned most often in regards to reasons for not traveling.
  - ○ There was often the comfort of being at home mentioned and how much easier virtual conferences were in comparison.
- ● *Cost*
  - ○ Respondents stated that they could attend more conferences because the cost was lower.
  - ○ Another frequent response regarding virtual was that more people from a library could attend a conference because the cost was lower.
  - ○ In conjunction with travel, there were personal costs that are associated with in-person conferences that would not be reimbursed. For example, the boarding of animals during an in-person conference.
  - ○ Budgets being cut was a frequent response and many people admitted to having to pay for a conference out-of-pocket.
  - ○ Recommendations
    - ■ Keep the cost of virtual conferences low. This is the most important part of making virtual conferences a successful option.
- ● *Flexibility*
  - ○ Pre-recorded sessions or the availability of material after the conference were mentioned often.
  - ○ Recommendations
    - ■ Make the conference material available to virtual participants before, during and after the conference. This adds to the flexibility and appeal of virtual conferences.
    - ■ Limit the amount of synchronous sessions. Often there are desk schedules, life schedules, and other meetings that will take precedence. Asynchronous is much more flexible.
    - ■ Stretching the conference schedule out over a longer period of time, for instance a week rather than two packed days, may add to the enjoyment of the conference. Participants often mentioned being burnt out by sitting in front of their computer all day. Instead, blocking a few hours off each day of a week for the conference may be a better experience. There could be some debate over making these small blocks of time focused on one topic. This way, if someone is only interested in one or two topics it may be easier to schedule those time periods off rather than two whole days.
- ● *Work/Life Balance*

- ○ Virtual allows for people to attend a conference but not leave work deserted and takes into consideration complicated personal schedules.
- ○ Work: Although being able to not abandon work for an in-person conference is a benefit of virtual conferences, work obligations can diminish the learning opportunities of a virtual conference.
- ○ <u>Recommendations</u>
  - ■ In order to be more productive at the conference try to carve out or safeguard conference time. This needs to be supported by an employer if the virtual format is the preferred type of conference.
  - ■ Participants also need to be aware of distractions and the best ways to combat them.
- ● *Generally*
  - ○ Include plenty of breaks throughout the virtual conference experience.
  - ○ If a hybrid conference is too much to plan, try alternating years. One year in-person, the next year virtual.
  - ○ There has not been one platform identified as better or worse than another on a large-scale. Meaning that there is still room for growth in this area and librarians could be part of that growth.
  - ○ Virtual is great for people with low vision, auditory issues, or those who do not move around well in cities and crowds. It also gives opportunities to people from smaller or underfunded libraries.
  - ○ Virtual presenters should expect to work harder to avoid technical issues, engage with a virtual audience, and foster more interaction. Participants responded that they were often bored or easily distracted. This can also be true for those who are serving in a host capacity during the session. Having questions ready for a Q&A session that may not be very chatty or being aware of the presenters technology needs can make a crucial difference in the success of the session.
  - ○ The reasons participants gave for attending conferences were "Learning about developments in the field" at 29%, "Connecting with the Library Community" at 25%, and "Networking" at 20%. If virtual conferences can focus on getting these three things right, then virtual conferences can be successful in the future.
- ● *Of Interest*
  - ○ Environmental factors were listed at multiple points as a reason to support virtual conferences.
  - ○ Political reasons were also mentioned as a reason for preferring virtual. This comment pertained to those not wanting to spend money in states that had political views they did not support. A virtual conference would be a compromise of still attending the conference while maintaining certain convictions.

Conclusion

With librarians participating in the new experiences of virtual conferences, organizations have the opportunity to provide professional development to a wider audience of librarians, vendors, students, staff, and many others. Conferences are important events for these stakeholders in

order to share ideas and make connections. There has not been one virtual conference format or platform identified as the best for library conferences. Which means that a library conference has many ways to still uniquely support its community and be inclusive to more people in this profession. Opening up the possibilities as to how a successful library conference, virtual or hybrid, can be achieved brings more people to the table for a more diverse, rich conversation about the profession.