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Virginia's Emerging Leaders: An Update and Suggestions for the Virginia Library Association

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Virginia's Emerging Leaders: An Update and Suggestions for the Virginia Library Association

by Betsy Appleton, Megan Hodge, and Matthew Jabaily

The ALA Emerging Leaders Program

ALA's Emerging Leader program was founded in 2007 by then-ALA President Leslie Burger as one of her presidential initiatives. Its goal is for participants to network, gain a greater understanding of how ALA works, and to learn about leadership both theoretically and practically, all of which results in participants being placed "on the fast track to ALA committee volunteerism as well as other professional library-related organizations" (ALA, 2011).

Participants work on a project in a small group from Midwinter to Annual, at which they present the results of their efforts. Past projects have included creating a video game collection development policy, working on materials for ACRL's orientations at Annual, and creating a timeline of all ALA deadlines.

Matthew's Experience

Matt Jabaily (mjabaily@memphis.edu) is currently the Information Library Systems Librarian at the University of Memphis. While participating in the ALA Emerging Leaders Program he was the Education Reference Librarian at Old Dominion University. His professional interests are in the interactions between library users and systems.

I arrived at my first ALA Annual Conference in Washington, DC alone. None of my friends from library school in Wisconsin were making the trip. I barely knew my colleagues from my new job, and few of them were attending. But DC was just a three-hour drive

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away, and my sister, who lives in the area, offered me a place to stay. So I decided I would check it out.

In addition to being alone, I was also clueless. I knew nothing about ALA or the conference and relied almost exclusively on the conference manual, which was not particularly well-edited and assumed a fair amount of prior knowledge. Thus, I did not know that nearly all the Friday events were pre-conferences (or what a pre-conference was), and I didn't know that most of the important information about meetings and sections had been distributed weeks before via listserv. Suffice to say, I spent a good deal of time wandering around and discovering the session I was interested in required

registration or that the part of the meeting I was interested in wouldn't start for several hours.

This is not to say I did not have a valuable experience. I attended many excellent sessions and learned a lot about librarianship. But as I observed the experienced librarians, who were enthusiastically greeting old friends and discussing their artfully planned schedules, it became clear that I was doing it wrong.

A year later, in New Orleans, everything was different. Instead of being alone, I had dozens of friends and acquaintances that I had met as part of the Emerging Leaders Program during the Midwinter Meeting. Over the course of the conference, we explored the city together, shared great meals at restaurants, and stayed out late, partying on Bourbon Street. These friends also became great professional assets with whom I often communicate to exchange ideas and get advice.

I was fortunate to be sponsored in the Emerging Leaders Program by Learning Roundtable (LearnRT), an ALA group focused on continuing education and professional development. Their sponsorship was valuable in that it enabled me to afford attending both the Midwinter Meeting and Annual Conference, which would have been a significant hardship otherwise. The sponsorship was also invaluable,

as everyone on the LearnRT board went out of their way to make me feel comfortable and included. I was invited to their board meetings, where they regularly asked my opinion on issues and took my input seriously. They also provided ample opportunities for me to get involved in the organization.

I also worked on an Emerging Leaders project sponsored by LearnRT. Our group was charged with determining best practices for hosting a webinar series by communicating with webinar organizers from a variety of professional groups. Our group worked well together, and we learned a lot, not only about webinars, but how to collaborate on a project with other librarians. We completed a report, which was carefully reviewed by the LearnRT board, and presented a poster at the Emerging Leader poster session and the LearnRT Training Showcase. These were my first poster presentations, and they gave me the confidence I needed to present a poster at the Virginia Library Association Annual Conference a few months later.

The Emerging Leaders program included many talks and trainings, but for me, they were of secondary importance. The real value of the program was in the connections it forged between me and the professional community.

Megan's Experience

Megan Hodge (mlhodge@gmail.com) is an assistant branch manager for Chesterfield County Public Library. She is also the ALA New Members Round Table's Leadership Director and the chair/co-founder of the VLA New Members Round Table Forum.

I'm not sure what I was expecting upon learning of my acceptance to the program in mid-October 2010—a crash course in leadership skills, networking with other new librarians eager to change the

world, a sneak peek into the inner workings of ALA and lives of association celebrities—but my experience with the Emerging Leaders program was both more and less than I expected.

I'll get the negatives out of the way first, starting with project selection. ALA groups—divisions, round tables, offices, etc.—submit project proposals to the ALA Emerging Leaders Subcommittee for vetting. A list of approved projects and short summaries of each are provided to the Emerging Leaders and we vote on which one we'd

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like to work on. Some projects are very engaging and require a lot of coordinated effort, but others are merely busywork that it seems no one in the hosting group wishes to work on themselves. This creates a huge inequity in satisfaction among program participants. My own project was unfortunately in the latter group, and it also suffered from a lack of communication and guidance from our project mentors.

That being said, I'd be hard-pressed to come up with a better networking opportunity than the Emerging Leaders program. We had many opportunities to meet and learn from ALA's leaders, such as then-president-elect Molly Raphael, current president-elect Maureen Sullivan, and ALA Executive Director Keith Michael Fiels. All members shared valuable advice on networking (always carry a drink in your hand so you can't cross your arms and appear standoffish), leadership (just say yes to

opportunities that arise without worrying about whether you're experienced enough), and other topics. We also attended two valuable webinars: Influence When You Don't Have Power or Authority and ALA Demystified: How to Be Effective within ALA, the latter of which offered an opportunity to ask questions about how ALA works and how to get appointed to committees of an expert on the subject: former ALA President Leslie Burger.

Just as importantly, however, we got to know other librarians just like us: enthusiastic, passionate, and driven to be leaders in order to effect change in the profession and association. Several friendships were forged out of my experience, and many working relationships besides. These have been the program's most lasting legacies for me.

Betsy's Experience

Betsy Appleton currently serves as Electronic Resources Librarian at George Mason University Libraries, and can be reached ateapplet1@gmu.edu. She was previously a serials librarian in a medical library, and has worked in technical services in both special and academic library settings. Her research interests include e-resource acquisitions, management, and licensing.

If I have learned nothing else since my decision to become a librarian, I have learned that my most valuable professional asset is not the degree, the training, the skills, or the experience: rather, it is that I am always up for happy hour. Every time I've heard about a great professional opportunity, I have had a beer in my hand. It was in this way that I learned about the ALA's Emerging Leaders Program.

The encouragement I received from colleagues that completed the program in the past couple years gave me the confidence to apply, and I was fortunate to be

sponsored by the Association for Library Collections and Technical Services (ALCTS), and thanks to ALCTS, my Emerging Leaders experience continues to be rich: along with providing financial support for conference attendance, I am currently serving as ALCTS Board Intern. The opportunities to meet current ALCTS leaders and have an in-depth introduction to the work of the association are providing a valuable foundation for my continued participation in the leadership of the association.

The “fun parts” of the Emerging Leaders Program (outside happy hour, of course) were the workshops and webinars throughout the spring where lively discussions on leadership took place. I particularly appreciated that every discussion was framed positively. As we know from both pop culture and (perhaps) personal experience, it is easy and somewhat entertaining to point out examples of poor leadership. However, it is far more valuable to focus on what it means to be a good leader. When the focus is on actions one should take instead of habits one should avoid, one can begin to lead. These discussions energized and inspired, and I continue to consider some of the best examples of leadership discussed as I seek to further develop my own leadership, personally and professionally.

As Megan and Matthew note, there are some challenges inherent to the Emerging Leaders Program: it is difficult to craft a small group project that is to be completed in six months and satisfies the rest of the project criteria: that it is meaningful to the small group, has realistically achievable goals, and has an outcome of value to the group sponsoring the project. An added challenge is that these projects must be completed by teams comprised of individuals who, by definition, have relatively little experience working within

the framework of the ALA. However, it is in rising to overcome these challenges—or perhaps in not rising quite high enough to do so—that the Emerging Leaders Program proves most valuable: the program is a safe place to learn what it looks like to participate in a geographically-dispersed team that can get things done. I am particularly grateful that my Emerging Leaders experience is where I discovered the difference in preparation for and participation in a conference call versus an in-person meeting. Learning how to be flexible when unexpected life events occur in the lives of those on one’s team is something I will take with me in other leadership positions. I am better able to manage my time to ensure that neither my professional development nor my daily work tasks suffer at the expense of the other.

As valuable as all these Emerging Leader lessons are, the most valuable is the network of dynamic, energetic professionals with whom I will enjoy happy hour in the coming years. I am excited to see what the 2011 cohort will do as Emerged Leaders in the ALA, and look forward to the continuing opportunities for professional growth this program has nurtured.

Suggestions for VLA

While many state library associations sponsor Emerging Leaders (e.g., Georgia, South Carolina, Minnesota, Nebraska), currently VLA does not. The financial commitment is not prohibitive—\$1,000 per year—even for a relatively small state association, and offers numerous benefits. It would encourage the growth of future leaders in-state who will likely go on to management positions in both their own libraries and in VLA itself, and participation in the program will provide opportunities and contacts that are

invaluable for this growth.

Additionally, the experience of program participants after they have “emerged” could and should be tapped by related groups within VLA. The Leadership Development Forum, which organizes a biennial leadership academy, seems a natural fit. The New Members Round Table (NMRT) Forum, a group founded in the spring of 2011 in order to provide new or soon-to-be librarians (or those new to VLA) with opportunities for socialization, networking, and continuing education, is especially open to new ideas and projects that a newly graduated Emerging Leader may like to work on to increase opportunities for new librarians or to better the association in general.

Less specifically, Emerging Leaders graduates could be helpful additions to any VLA region, committee, or forum. The ALA program looks for librarians with the willingness to lead and desire to effect change, qualities that are especially desirable in our current economy, with experienced librarians retiring and the role of libraries changing. ALA tries to provide post-project committee and task force placements for its Emerging Leaders immediately after they graduate in order to capitalize upon their passion and drive, combined with what they’ve learned in the program; VLA would do well to do the same.

Alicia Blowers was also an Emerging Leader from Virginia in 2011. This year’s Emerging Leaders from Virginia are Rocco DeBonis (University of Maryland University College) and Rebecca Kate Miller (Virginia Tech).

To read more about the Emerging Leaders program, visit <http://www.ala.org/ala/educationcareers/leadership/emergingleaders/index.cfm>. **VI**