Special Libraries Association Annual Conference 2019

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About the Conference

Founded in 1909, the Special Libraries Association (SLA) is an association comprised of information professionals working in specialized settings. Its mission states that it “promotes and strengthens its members through learning, advocacy, and networking initiatives” (Special Libraries Association, 2019). This year SLA members and library science students gathered for the annual conference at the Huntington Convention Center in Cleveland, Ohio from June 14 to 18. In addition to sessions that covered a wide variety of topics, SLA also featured an INFO-EXPO where attendees could learn about new products and provide vendor feedback.

This conference report focuses on the sessions that would be of greatest note to business and other academic special librarians.

General Sessions

SLA Annual had three general sessions with keynote speakers. The speaker in the opening session was Leon Logothetis, a motivational speaker and author/creator of the Netflix series, The Kindness Diaries. This session focused on Logothetis’ experience travelling the world using only the kindness of others to get by1. The closing session featured Safiya Noble, who spoke about bias in search engine results and the ways that information professionals can work to mitigate some of this bias. The most interesting general session was the Fireside Chat Panel. The session started with an update from 2019 SLA President Hal Kirkwood (University of Oxford) on the organization's changes and challenges. This was a quick way to get up to date on SLA’s upcoming changes and initiatives. After the update there was a panel discussion about the information professional of the future. It was interesting to listen to directors from different library schools talk about how they are adapting to prepare students for the changing profession.

1 For more information, please visit https://leonlogothetis.com/netflix/.
Concurrent Sessions

SLA offered a large number of concurrent sessions that covered a full range of topics. My colleagues and I attended numerous sessions and evaluated them from an attendee standpoint. I was a first-time attendee and my colleagues at Kresge Library Services, Joel Scheuher and Danguole Kviklys, had previously attended the conference numerous times. Here are summaries of the most notable concurrent sessions that we attended. Additionally, I describe some universal characteristics of strong conference sessions.

Creating an Information Centre of Excellence

Matthew Donahue from Dow Jones and Robin Neidorf from Jinfo, Ltd gave a presentation about findings from their research on successful information teams. They surveyed major corporations’ in-house research teams in order to develop assessment tools that optimize research. The practicality of this presentation and its direct applicability to special libraries is what made this presentation great. The presenters studied what skills and characteristics one needs in today’s special library workplace. This insight is invaluable to the audience that SLA brings in. Additionally, the presenters gave attendees access to a workbook with the tools they developed. Providing a handout with concrete ways to apply what they have talked about was a great way for these presenters to make their presentation memorable and useful.


Bohyun Kim from University of Rhode Island Libraries and Sandra Hirsch from San Jose State University School of Information gave a talk on blockchain and how it may apply to librarians and scholarly communications. Kim started off by giving a succinct background on blockchain and how it fundamentally operates. Hirsch followed by describing the findings of her IMLS-funded research on blockchain and its uses in libraries. The discussion of the applications of blockchain in libraries was thought-provoking. The presenters highlighted key ways that libraries could start applying blockchain, and attendees walked away with a clear idea of what this technology means for their institution. The presenters’ ability to take a challenging concept and break down its applications for libraries in a succinct manner is what made this a standout session.

Go Ahead, Push My Buttons! Survival Techniques for When Your Staff Drives You Crazy

Tina Franks from The Ohio State University gave a spectacular presentation on how to deal with staff issues. The title accurately represents the content of this talk. She started by talking about how to recognize whether the problem stems from the employee or from oneself. One example illustrated steps that might be useful for people with contrasting work styles. In that example, she worked through a case in which a manager who gets to meetings ahead of time must work with staff who might be consistently late. Once the manager understands that these types of behaviors are a source of conflict, the manager can work on recognizing and remediating those types of situations. Franks then went on to discuss how she would go about overcoming barriers and taking action to deal with bothersome behaviors. This presentation was practical, and the presenter was very engaging, which made this a standout session.
Finding Hidden Business Resources: Mining Grey Literature, Deep Web and Other Hidden Business and Financial Resources

Mary Ellen Bates from Bates Information Services gave a useful presentation on searching for information outside of fee-based services and web searches. This is particularly important, given that limited budgets are a key constraint for many libraries. This presentation was full of practical tips and introduced many lesser-known resources. Bates began with a quick description of what the deep web and grey literature are and then dove straight into filling the audience’s brains with ideas for how to search differently. She suggested everything from using new search engines to (gasp!) calling industry librarians. Although the presentation was rich with content and moved pretty quickly, Bates engaged attendees and made sure that it never became boring. This session had every opportunity to be too much to handle, but Bates’s presentation skills made it feel like everyone could leave with the information they needed to be a masterful searcher of hidden resources.

The Art of Competitor Segmentation

Philip Britton from the Sedulo Group and Alysse Nockels from Tanium talked through the steps of competitor segmentation and its importance to an organization. The presenters’ choice to break down the topic into smaller pieces made it easy to understand. This is especially true when they brought everything back together to show the “big picture.” Along the way they did exercises and provided handouts to help attendees apply the content. This presentation, while maybe not initially meant to be about business reference, ended up being truly practical. Competitor segmentation is something that is incredibly useful when doing industry analysis with business student teams. The presenters’ organization and forethought really made this potentially intimidating topic easy to understand.

Social Justice in Cleveland: The Urban Economy

Laura Desmond from Jumpstart, Inc., Hannah Halbert from Policy Matters Ohio, and Robin Wood from the Cleveland Public Library gave the first of an annual series of presentations on social justice programs. This year they focused on the urban economy in Cleveland. Halbert focused on Cleveland’s economy. Wood then talked about how the library is working to help individuals through programming and resources. Desmond then spoke about Jumpstart’s work to promote entrepreneurship in the city. Halbert closed by explaining how these programs help and what future steps can be taken. The presenters are what made this session so memorable. The added perspective of non-librarians on the library’s importance was particularly interesting. All librarians would benefit from hearing about the community-minded action that these organizations are taking.

Common Traits of Good Sessions

After reviewing the sessions at my first SLA Conference, I have some general observations of what constitutes the best sessions. Great sessions were well-organized and provided the audience with clear learning goals. When the presenter had a plan and knew exactly what the attendees should walk away with, the presentations were enjoyable and felt useful. In addition to good presentation structure, one aspect that distinguished sessions was the practicality of the subject covered. Great sessions made it easy to understand their applications to our everyday work. Sessions that were easily applied to libraries
were not only enjoyable but also satisfying. There is something really rewarding about walking out of a presentation and knowing that I can go back to my home library and apply what I heard.

Organization continues to be a key to a great presentation. Too often, poor time management made for less valuable sessions and presentations. This led to situations where a rushed presenter failed to cover all the content that was advertised. Additionally, poor descriptions of the content to be covered led to many disappointing sessions. The conference pamphlet gave brief descriptions of each session so that we could decide which sessions we wanted to attend. The brief descriptions sometimes failed to give the format, leading to some surprises for attendees. Similarly, it was frustrating to sit down at a session and realize that the session was actually a vendor presentation. In the future, it might be useful for SLA to include a session type in the descriptions. It might also help to review descriptions of sessions to ensure that they accurately describe the content.

Conclusions

As a first-time attendee and a new professional, I found this conference to be very welcoming. There were a variety of events geared toward first-timers and new professionals that I really appreciated. A conference this large has the potential to be overwhelming, but having the opportunity to get together with others who are just starting out made it much more comfortable. From a content standpoint, the sheer number of new resources and concepts that I was introduced to was enough to make the conference worthwhile. In almost every session someone mentioned a resource I hadn't heard of before, and I was really impressed with the number of open access resources that I learned about. Despite a few sessions that were not what I expected, overall the SLA Annual Conference was a great way to learn about the state of SLA and to gain new information that will help me in my day-to-day work.
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