

## New Perspectives in Leadership

### How to Be a Library Leader Even If You're in School or Underemployed

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*This essay is based on a presentation given at the American Library Association's Annual conference in New Orleans on June 25, 2011 at the first annual New Leaders Discussion Group. The discussion group was sponsored jointly by the New Members Round Table and LLAMA. My part of the panel involved providing advice, based on my own experiences, on how to stand out as a leader even if there are no obvious opportunities available, followed by leading a round table discussion on how the other program attendees can find or make their own leadership experiences.*

What a time to start library school--August 2008, almost a year into the recession. Like any good future librarian, I had done my research, and I knew that I was going to have a difficult time finding a job after graduation because of the economy and because I was restricted geographically. I'd read that 70% of jobs are now obtained through networking and knew that in order to compete against all the other students in library school graduating at the same time--not to mention all the experienced librarians who were continuing to be laid off, who were competing for the same entry-level jobs--that I'd need to create a track record of success and leadership while I was still in school.

There are no accredited MLS programs in Virginia, so like many aspiring Virginia librarians, I went to library school online. While the University of North Texas's SLIS has a very active student association, none of its benefits were available to distance students. I could not run for office, attend programs, or participate in the job-finding extravaganza called All-School Day, because all programs were held on campus. Additionally, while I loved the flexibility of being able to work full-time while completing my degree, I really missed the personal interaction with my classmates and professors. Although we met for four days at the beginning of our first two semesters, the rest of our studies were completed entirely online.

Based on what I've heard from other librarians, library school is what you make of it, whether one's program is traditional, online-only, or a hybrid. There are many students who are content to sit in the back and go home immediately after class rather than participate in school events. However, even if you're more involved, networking and developing relationships with people you've met once or twice is admittedly difficult. You have to be more proactive about making connections and finding opportunities for involvement—or, in many cases, make your own.

If you see a need that's not being met, you *can* have an impact, with just a little effort and collaboration. Leadership positions have always appealed to me because people in such positions have the most power to effect change and get things done, so running for office for my library school's student association seemed like a good idea. However, the people I spoke with

weren't too keen on the idea of a distance student in Virginia serving as an officer for an association based in Texas. Therefore, one year into my two-year program and with the encouragement of my program director, I founded a Virginia branch of the UNT LISSA. I polled my classmates on what kind of programming they wanted, and then coordinated four virtual events for them based on these survey results. These included a chat with our NMRT library school liaison right before Annual (which in 2010 was held in Washington, D.C., a short drive for most of my cohort), and two find-a-job panels. One panel consisted of five public librarians and five academic librarians, all of whom were in administrative positions and had served on hiring committees. They provided very helpful job-seeking advice. The second panel consisted of ten federal and military librarians, and was opened up to the library school student body at large because its content was deemed universally useful. This second panel ended up being the most-attended virtual event in UNT SLIS history, and coordinating both panels resulted in making valuable contacts I still keep in touch with today. While not everyone will have the ability to create a new student association with programming expressly tailored to your interests, there are often times when you might think, "I wish my state association did x" or "I'd love to talk with other people who are going through the same thing I am. I wish there was some way to do that." Instead of wishing and complaining, do something. You may be surprised at how little bureaucracy you actually need to go through.

Don't rely on other people like your professors, your coworkers, or your classmates to tell you about opportunities. You have to actively look for them. This doesn't mean you need to spend hours every day searching the Internet, just that you need to be efficient. I recommend subscribing to, at minimum, NMRT-L and getting updates to the ALA Opportunities Exchange (<http://connect.ala.org/oppex>) sent to your e-mail or RSS reader. If you want to do more than the bare minimum, you can keep an eye on additional sources that sometimes list great opportunities, but be warned you'll have to wade through lots of non-professional development related information to get to it. Examples include the LinkedIn group discussions for NMRT, ALA, and New Academic Librarians, and the ALA discussion lists for your area(s) of interest (e.g., collib-l if you're interested in being a college librarian, ili-l if you want to do instruction, etc.). By subscribing to ili-l, I saw a call for committee chairs for the ACRL-IS Local Arrangements Committee, and was able to take on a committee chairmanship in the middle of the traditional ALA committee year simply because I put my name forward. Lastly, scout around the ALA site for information on scholarships and other funding possibilities. Not only will you gradually become more familiar and comfortable with the labyrinth that is [ala.org](http://www.ala.org), but you will learn about all sorts of great opportunities that way. This is how I found out about the Student-to-Staff Program, a program sponsored by ALA in which 40 students--one from each library school—receive full funding to attend the Annual conference each year in exchange for helping out an ALA office or division with a project or effort for a few hours each day of the conference (<http://www.ala.org/ala/mgrps/affiliates/chapters/student/resources/studenttostaffprogram.cfm>). My library school never advertised this program, so had I not read about it on [ala.org](http://www.ala.org) and pestered my professors about it, I probably would not have been able to attend Annual 2010.

The conference, which was held in Washington, D.C., in late June 2010, was my first national-level conference, and it was quite an eye-opener! Do try to attend Annual, at least, every year. I know conference attendance is expensive, but the networking and learning opportunities are

priceless. There are lots of conference scholarships available—just apply! I've won several and served on the award committee for another, and you'd be surprised at how few people actually take the time to apply. But go even if you don't win a scholarship. You are at a stage in your career where you can meet many potential mentors and be taken under the wing of more experienced professionals. They'll be impressed you came under your own chutzpah. Through the Student-to-Staff program, I met 39 other dedicated, enthusiastic library school students -- most of whom had had to compete for their participation in the program, unlike me— and in my assignment as a reporter for CogNotes, I felt confident enough to approach library rock stars after their presentations and ask questions I would have been too shy to ask otherwise. I also signed up for NMRT's conference mentoring service, and was paired with a former Emerging Leader who was not only very encouraging about applying for the program, but offered to review my application whenever I decided to apply. I've kept in touch with her since then and I believe her advice regarding my application was instrumental to my being accepted into the 2011 Emerging Leaders class. I've tried to pass it forward, so to speak, by since offering to review the applications of other prospective Emerging Leaders (and if any readers count themselves among this group, please e-mail me!).

Don't be afraid to ask for what you want. Despite its dizzying number of committees and bureaucratic structure, I have found that it's surprisingly easy to get involved in ALA in the ways you want. One thing to keep in mind is that in order to get appointed to committees—arguably the most important and direct way of becoming involved with the association and making a difference to the profession—the people making committee appointments like to see that you have experience serving on committees already. This sounds like a catch-22... but NMRT guarantees committee appointments to any member who applies. NMRT is very willing to give you what you want when possible: in the spring of 2010 when I was filling out my committee volunteer form, in the 'comments' section I noted that I was particularly interested in serving on the Nominating Committee as I wanted to run for office at some point and figured serving on the committee would give me an inside scoop on how the whole process worked. Deana Groves, then NMRT Vice President/President-Elect, appointed me chair of the committee. Ask and ye shall receive.

Likewise, if you see a need that's not being met, you can make it happen. I consider myself a pretty tenacious person when it comes to professional involvement, but I found my state association difficult to break into as a new member once I'd paid my membership fees. There didn't seem to be much going on for new members/new librarians and Virginia is a very spread-out state geographically (unlike, say, Connecticut or metro New York), so meeting other Virginia librarians outside of my workplace was difficult. Rebecca Miller, a librarian at Virginia Tech and chair of VLA's Membership Committee, felt the same way, so we joined forces to create a New Members Round Table for the Virginia Library Association. Obviously we weren't the only ones who felt underserved; our petition received almost twice the number of signatures required for legitimacy, and VLA's Executive Committee approved our forum's creation in a special (unanimous!) vote by e-mail. Since then I've polled our petition signers on what projects they think VLA NMRT should focus on first, and have a great team of project leaders who will be creating and maintaining a Twitter community to promote the forum and foster communication among members, further developing our blog ([vlanmrt.wordpress.com](http://vlanmrt.wordpress.com)), and setting up socials

and networking get-togethers around the state. While we're just getting started, this is the accomplishment I feel most proud of: our members are so excited to be working with a group that is giving them the opportunity to meet other Virginia librarians and to create things that are useful to *them*. I know there are similar opportunities waiting for many of you out there. When I was researching state-level new member round tables, I only found a few online.

This story has a happy ending. I successfully ran for office in the 2011 ALA election and have been elected NMRT Leadership Director for 2011-2013, and after a year and a half on the job market--10 months after completing my degree--I accepted a position as an Assistant Branch Manager for a local public library system in June. It was the perfect fit: they wanted a go-getter and someone who was active in the profession on both the state and national levels. That's me. It can be you, too!

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