

So What Did You Do During the Pandemic?

The Planning, Hosting and Outcomes of a Virtual Summer Research Forum

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Abstract

As the COVID-19 pandemic progressed, traditionally in-person professional events were quickly converted to online only forums, conferences, and meetings. Academic libraries and academic library associations also treated the new, largely virtual professional environment as an opportunity to launch new professional development opportunities. This article describes the planning, implementation and reactions to the Summer Research Forum conducted by the Association of College and Research Libraries - Louisiana Chapter. The motive was to provide an online platform for Louisiana librarians to showcase their current research projects. The Summer Research Forum consisted of ten lightning round presentations, followed by a moderated open discussion related to the pandemic's impact on academic librarians. We surveyed the attendees afterward and asked them to provide feedback on their experience, as well as to rank the benefits of attending this virtual professional development program. The results of the survey will be discussed in this article.

Keywords: virtual professional development, continuing education, state library chapters, academic library associations, lightning rounds, COVID-19

Introduction

Over the past several decades, state legislatures have decreased funding for higher education, which in turn has led to budget cuts to academic libraries (Associated Press, 2012; Jordan, 2002, p. 25). In an effort to maintain funding for services and staff, budget items such as professional development (PD) are not always prioritized. When academic institutions are not able to fund PD, librarians have to choose between using personal funds or not participating in PD activities. There is a genuine concern that this situation can create a divide between those who have access to PD opportunities and those who do not. In 2020, as indicated in the literature, the COVID-19 pandemic disrupted the normal operations of educational institutions and in many cases resulted in the elimination of PD budgets. Additionally, academic library associations were forced to cancel in-person conferences, workshops, and meetings or move them online.

This article provides an analysis of the virtual Summer Research Forum (Forum) hosted by the Association of College & Research Libraries - Louisiana Chapter (ACRL-LA) and the results of a follow-up survey sent to all attendees. This study explores the perceived benefits of attending a virtual PD event, specifically the Forum, which consisted of lightning round presentations and a moderated open discussion. Did attendees like the virtual format? What did they think about the lightning round presentations? What aspect of attending the Forum did they say was most beneficial? Data retrieved from our survey suggests that the Forum's mission of PD was a success based on format, topic content, and accessibility.

Literature Review

A review of the literature supports the previous statement that COVID-19 significantly impacted libraries' ability to sustain outreach and special events. In addition to moving regular library services online, faculty and staff at these institutions were left scrambling to provide

research sharing outlets, such as conferences and workshops, at the level of quality and engagement as pre-pandemic face-to-face events. In particular, the cessation of local and in-house PD and training opportunities had a more immediate impact on library faculty and staff (Lindsay et al., 2021, p. 62).

While many librarians lamented the loss of face-to-face conferences, forums, and symposia with their networking and travel opportunities, others saw it as a fresh alternative, one that required less time and less expense. Virtual training programs were viewed as opportunities for professional improvement and greater accessibility (Carroll & Mallon, 2021, p. 3). This was by no means a new perspective. In 2014, Munro and McLure were already debating the pros and cons of virtual conferences. Travel, lodging, and related expenses at conference events can be costly. In addition, the time required to travel out of the office creates a staff shortage in which patrons will have to lean on the remaining staff members for support. Attending a virtual meeting saves logistics costs as well as staffing-related expenses. Less-than-comfortable hotels, the stress of travel and flight delays are common drawbacks to on-site conferences (Antell et al., 2014, p. 39). For librarians in smaller/rural Louisiana academic institutions, the cost of attending national-level PD events is prohibitive (Kendrick, Leaver, & Tritt, 2013, pp. 56-58). Therefore, lower-cost regional and state PD opportunities are both more convenient and essential.

Concerning accessibility, those individuals who have an impairment may benefit from being engaged with others in a virtual meeting while in the comfort of their workplace setting without additional stress or discomfort. As an aid of equitable access and inclusion, virtual meetings provide an opportunity for individuals that may not have considered participating. Beyond the realm of librarianship, other academic disciplines have demonstrated the advantages of virtual PD. Some employees with disabilities may feel more comfortable training in the virtual

realm, since it reduces anxiety, promotes self-sufficiency, and allows the individual to improve their skills before they apply them to a real-life scenario (Burke et al., 2021, p. 742).

This is not to say that the virtual environment is without flaws, as Wolski et al, in addition to Munro and McLure, point out. Virtual presentations have their own challenges such as an inability to pick up non-verbal cues, pacing and audience reception, the amount of screen space PowerPoint presentations require, and the attendees' ability to turn off their cameras during a session (Wolski et al, 2021, p. 32). Other technical challenges include handling the change from speaker to speaker, managing the progression of presentation slides, and keeping the entire event on a specified timeline, as well as addressing any glitches within the virtual platform. "A solely technological medium increases the impact of technical problems and the need for contingency planning . . ." (Wolski et al., 2021, p. 32).

With regard to smaller, more localized events, focus shifted to how a virtual format could impact event content and planning. With established events, as well as new ones, the question became how much alteration would have to be done to accommodate the virtual environment? How would the event coordinators manage participants' content and activity? Beyond the pandemic induced restrictions, was a virtual event really the best choice or just the most popular one amongst peer institutions? (Fritz et al., 2020, pp. 420-421). Many events that were cancelled early in the shut-down period were not revisited due to their inability to be converted to an online format (Lindsay et al., 2021, p. 60).

Providing shorter, 'content rich' webinars, day-long forums and symposia proved more useful to many academic libraries as well as regional/local library associations. For example, the College and University (CUS) section of the North Carolina Library Association not only created a program called, "Webinar Wednesdays," it also organized a one-day virtual symposium (Peuler

& McCallister, 2019, pp. 106-7). Other institutions successfully paired the small work groups with the more focused content approach to PD. Vanderbilt's library created 'communities of practice (CoPs)' small groups of employees to address PD needs. "These smaller, Mini CoPs were still organized under an overarching theme (in this case, online learning), but each micro-community was empowered to pick the specific discussion topics relevant to their membership." Participants in these events appreciated the opportunity to share their own projects with other attendees (Carroll & Mallone, 2021, p. 5).

Collaboration among the hosts and participants of any virtual event is essential to a successful virtual event, a fact that was strongly underscored in the literature discussing COVID-era events. Some events required multiple committees to successfully organize the event, create the agenda, form the marketing strategy, and handle the technology (Peuler & McCallister, 2019, pp. 107-8). To track the project's progress, share documents and manage presentation proposals, organizers relied on a variety of online collaboration platforms, including Microsoft Teams, Google Drive Google Forms and LibGuides as well as other forms of cloud technology (Sullo & Brody, 2021, p. 32).

Approaches to marketing online events were varied. Social media was mentioned frequently as an effective promotional tool. Some institutions, such as the Music Library at the University of North Texas, leveraged the UNT Libraries External Relations Office, which in turn manages the Libraries Social Media Workgroup, to promote their "First Chair Chats" event (Wolski et al., 2021, p. 28).

Once the decision to go forward with a virtual event was reached, the next challenge was to find an appropriate virtual platform that would meet the needs of organizers and presenters alike. To accomplish this, one of the tools that libraries turned to was Zoom. The University of

Tennessee, for example, subscribed to Zoom, an online conferencing tool, although the library seldom used the product. Once library staff began working remotely, faculty librarians, in particular, began to learn more about and to adapt Zoom to deliver distance learning, facilitating instruction and assisting faculty in its use (Lindsay et al., 2021, p. 62). Zoom provided a reliable virtual platform for panel discussions.

Reactions or feedback on these virtual professional programs were largely positive, whether they were full scale conferences or short focused programs (Peuler & McCallister, 2019, pp. 109-10). In some cases, the virtual meeting format was so well received, that the decision was made to make it a regular event. For example, feedback on the Midcontinental Chapter of the Medical Library Association's first virtual annual meeting indicated that "...82% of the respondents would attend a virtual MCMLA annual meeting again. A virtual meeting will now be a part of MCMLA's meeting rotation" (Fritz et al., 2020, p. 359). Attendees also appreciated having access to recorded sessions on platforms such as YouTube, where they could leave comments and questions about the presentations, after the event was over (Peuler & McCallister, 2019, p. 110).

Takeaways from these virtual events, in addition to reduced costs, were the reduced carbon footprint, and expanded accessibility that they offered. "In this, we can see opportunities to reach a broader audience and to help further expose collections and resources to larger audiences" (Fritz et al., 2020, p. 425). Pacing of the program by moderators gave attendees time to type their questions in the chat. Creating separate logins and presentation space for presenters was a necessity, as was limiting event content, and providing adequate breaks to combat 'screen fatigue,' and long stretches of sitting (Lessick et al., 2016, p. 359).

Challenges encountered during the events ranged from errors caused by lack of double-

checking and editing to accepting too many proposals (Peuler & McCallister, 2019, p. 111-12). Attendees' need for face-to-face interaction can't be adequately met in a virtual environment. Presenters lose the ability to see the audience's reactions to their material, measure their engagement, and react accordingly (Fritz et al., 2020, p. 425). According to Carroll and Mallon (2021), "For the near future, it may very well be difficult to disentangle the considerations of convenience versus relationship and community building in a non-socially and -physically distanced world." It is notable that few sources mentioned having significant technical issues or resistance to using the virtual format.

The literature indicates that the potential problems with holding virtual events are far outweighed by the benefits to library staff and students at all levels. The keys to success lie in good planning, clear goals, awareness of the target audience and relevant content that will meet the audience's needs.

The Summer Research Forum

The Executive Board (Board) of the ACRL-LA decided to host a free, virtual PD event, the inaugural Forum in summer 2021. The Forum organizers consisted of the chapter president, vice-president/president-elect, and the chapter's liaison to the Louisiana Library Association. We volunteered to plan and promote the two-hour virtual event to take place on June 4. With approval of the full Board, we agreed to allow nonmembers to attend (and present) in order to provide PD opportunities for all academic librarians in Louisiana in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic. This decision was also partially a recruitment strategy, as we were hopeful that attendees would find the event beneficial and in turn consider becoming a member. Therefore, the Forum was open to all academic librarians, archivists, academic library staff, or library graduate students in Louisiana. The goals of this virtual event were to highlight research projects

in Louisiana, encourage future collaboration, and provide an opportunity for presenters to hone their presentation skills.

We used a shared document in Google Docs to organize the details for planning the Forum. We decided that the Forum would consist of multiple lightning talks of either five, 10, or 15 minutes in length, in order to provide more presenters with an opportunity to speak within the two-hour event. The final number of presentations and length of each would depend on the number of accepted proposals. Since the lightning round format would not allow for traditional questions and answers after each presentation, we wanted attendees to have an opportunity to chat with their peers. Therefore, the Forum also would have time dedicated to a moderated pandemic-related open discussion. The reason behind this decision was to provide an opportunity for attendees from across the state of Louisiana to have a conversation about the pandemic's impact on academic librarians, discuss lessons learned during the work from home period, and the eventual return to the library buildings.

We created a proposal form within Google Forms that requested names, emails, role at their institution (librarian, staff, student), job title, chapter membership status, proposal title, proposal description, and their preferred length of presentation (five, 10, or 15 minutes). Proposals could include research or work-related projects and could be at any stage of completion. We sent the call for proposals out to the chapter membership and to other statewide academic library email lists in mid-March. Presenters were notified of their accepted proposals in late April. In total, there were 10 proposals submitted. We decided to accommodate all 10 proposals and to plan the Forum schedule accordingly. This meant that some presenters were given 10 minutes for their lightning talks, while others were given five minutes. Finally, 20 minutes were set aside for the moderated discussion. We asked the presenters to submit their

slides so that a combined slide deck could be created, and the slides would be advanced remotely by one person.

The Forum registration form was created within Zoom and gathered names, emails, organization, job title, and whether they were a member of ACRL-LA. We used a variety of promotional methods to encourage Forum registration, including emailing the registration information to all chapter members, to several academic library email lists, and posting the Forum schedule and registration form to the chapter's website. Additionally, we asked the Board and chapter members to share the event at their respective institutions and with their colleagues. Finally, the chapter president sent personal emails to the library directors and deans at Louisiana's historically Black colleges and universities to encourage their library staff to attend. After several rounds of promotional emails, 87 people were registered to attend the Forum. A reminder was sent out to all registrants the week of the Forum.

Ultimately 60 people attended the Forum and represented 15 library institutions across the state of Louisiana. The chapter president welcomed all attendees to the inaugural virtual event and introduced the speakers for the first lightning round, which consisted of five 10-minute presentations. These topics included reference staffing and scheduling models in special collections, academic librarians and the fear of making mistakes, cross-departmental online collaborations, the role of academic libraries and undergraduate research, and university archives' digital preservation of campus and student experiences. After a short break, the president introduced the second lightning round speakers. The topics of these five-minute presentations included teaching visual literacy using a manuscript facsimile, online appointment scheduler for special collections, a textual analysis research project on propaganda and the new media, progress on a study of climate change publications, adjusting to remote work and project

management during the pandemic.

As mentioned earlier, the slides were advanced remotely by one of the organizers, which provided for smooth transitions between speakers. Immediately following the second round of presentations, the chapter vice-president posed questions to the Forum participants about how the pandemic affected their work and their respective libraries. While several attendees contributed to this moderated conversation on camera, many more added their thoughts and follow-up questions in the Zoom Chat. In all, it was an interactive and robust exchange between Forum participants, leading the organizers to consider providing more time to this portion of the Forum in the future. In the concluding remarks, the chapter president reminded attendees of the affordability of chapter membership and how national ACRL members could join at no additional charge. Following the Forum, the Zoom recording was edited to correct major transcription errors and then forwarded to all registrants.

Methodology

This study used both qualitative and quantitative methods to assess attendees' experiences at the Forum and their perceived value of this event as a virtual PD opportunity. Attendees who also presented were included in the study. Respondents were asked questions about whether attending the Forum was beneficial and were asked to identify the aspects that were most beneficial to them, such as relevant and timely content, free PD, virtual format, or opportunities to hear from colleagues or to network and find collaborators. Participants were asked demographic questions including their race or ethnicity, current role, years of experience in libraries, state chapter membership status, their institution size, and state region.

Additional questions asked the respondents whether they liked the virtual format of the Forum and the schedule of five or 10-minute lightning round presentations, whether they would

attend the Forum again as a virtual or in-person event, and whether they agreed with statements related to the open discussion portion of the program. Finally, the respondents were asked to answer open-ended questions about their overall thoughts on the lightning round presentations and to provide feedback including recommendations for improvement. A survey instrument (see Appendix 1) was created using the Qualtrics survey software. An IRB exemption was approved by the Louisiana State University’s Institutional Review Board in June 2021.

Results

The study sample consisted of academic librarians, library staff, and graduate students in Louisiana who attended the Forum in June 2021. The survey was emailed to all 60 attendees on June 21, 2021. The survey was closed on July 9.

There were a total of 17 responses to the survey, resulting in a response rate of 28%. Table 1 summarizes the descriptive statistics for the survey respondents. As noted in this table, a majority of study participants were ACRL-LA members, had five to 10 years of library experience, and identified as White. Additionally, most participants worked in a public university or college library and were employed as a librarian, archivist, or library administrator. Most participants’ employer institutions were located in Louisiana Workforce Commission’s (2019) Regional Labor Market Areas (RLMA) 2 and 4, which includes the Baton Rouge and Lafayette regions.

Table 1 <i>Summary of Respondents’ Descriptive Statistics</i>	
Member of Louisiana Chapter of ACRL (N=17)	Yes 59% No 35%

	Unsure 6%
Race or ethnicity (<i>N=18</i>)	White 89% African American 6% Prefer to not say 6%
Current role at institution (<i>N=18</i>)	Librarian/Archivist 61% Administrator/Manager 22% Graduate Student 11% Library Staff 6%
Experience as librarian or library staff (<i>N=15</i>)	Less than 5 years 0% 5-10 years 60% 11-20 years 33% More than 20 years 7%
Type of institution (<i>N=15</i>)	Public university/college 80% Private university 0% Community college 7% Other (consortium) 7% Other (state agency/special/public library) 7%
Louisiana region (<i>N=15</i>)	RLMA 1 13% RLMA 2 53% RLMA 3 7% RLMA 4 20%

	RLMA 5	0%
	RLMA 6	0%
	RLMA 7	0%
	RLMA 8	7%

Participants were asked how they learned about the Forum and could select multiple options. The majority (N=14, 52%) learned about the Forum from ACRL-LA email promotions, while 15% (N=4) selected an internal list/email at their institution. Less than 15% reported they learned about the event from a personal email from an ACRL-LA board member or Forum organizer (N=3, 11%), from another academic library organization (N=3, 11%), from a colleague (N=2, 7%), or the ACRL-LA website or social media (N=1, 4%).

All survey participants said they liked the virtual delivery of the Forum. When asked whether they would attend it again online (see Table 2), all respondents agreed they would attend the Forum again as a virtual event (N=17, 100%). In contrast, only 35% (N=6) said they would attend the Forum if it were held in-person, while the majority said they were unsure (N=11, 65%).

Table 2			
<i>Virtual vs. In-Person</i>			
<i>(N=17)</i>			
	Yes	No	Unsure
Attend again, if a virtual event?	100%	0%	0%
Attend again, if an in-person event?	35%	0%	64%

Respondents were asked about the format of the Forum, including the lightning rounds and the open discussion components of the virtual event. Eighty-eight percent (N=15, 88%) of participants said they liked the lightning round format of ten presentations (each at five or 10-minutes in length), while 12% (N=2) had no opinion. Respondents were asked how strongly they agreed or disagreed with two statements about the moderated open discussion (see Table 3). When asked whether the discussion was engaging and added value to the event, a clear majority either strongly agreed (35%) or somewhat agreed (47%). When asked if they felt comfortable participating in the conversation, a smaller majority agreed with the statement, with 24% strongly agreeing and 35% somewhat agreeing. Twenty-four percent (24%) neither agreed or disagreed and 18% did not feel comfortable participating in the conversation.

Table 3		
<i>Open Discussion</i>		
<i>(N=17)</i>		
	Discussion was engaging and added value to the event	Felt comfortable participating in the conversation (in chat or on screen)
Strongly agree	35%	24%
Somewhat agree	47%	35%
Neither agree nor disagree	12%	24%
Somewhat disagree	6%	18%

Strongly disagree	0%	0%
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All respondents agreed that the Forum was beneficial to them (N=17, 100%). Survey participants were asked to rank five statements in order of which aspects of the Forum provided them with the most benefit (see Table 4). Based on the results, more respondents ranked hearing presentations from their peers as their top benefit of attending the Forum (38%) followed by the convenience of a virtual format (25%), relevant and timely content (19%), and free PD (19%). In contrast, 81% (N=16) of respondents ranked networking and finding collaborators as the least beneficial aspect of attending the Forum.

Table 4					
<i>Benefits of Attending Forum as Virtual Event</i>					
<i>(N=16)</i>					
	1st	2nd	3rd	4th	5th
Hear presentations from colleagues/peers	38%	19%	19%	0%	0%
Virtual format was convenient	25%	31%	25%	19%	0%
Content was relevant and timely	19%	31%	31%	19%	0%
Free professional development	19%	19%	25%	19%	19%
Network or find collaborators	0%	0%	0%	19%	81%

Study participants were asked open-ended questions to provide feedback, recommendations for improvement, and their thoughts about the lightning rounds including the topics, presenters, and format. Respondents appreciated the diversity of presentation topics and

the opportunity to hear from their colleagues on current research projects. While there were some critical comments about the shorter five-minute presentations, most of the respondents said they liked the virtual format and thought the event was well organized.

Discussion

Lightning Rounds Format

While the library literature includes examples of virtual PD events such as mini CoPs and webinars, lightning talks are not included in these discussions. A large majority of our respondents said they liked the lightning round format of the Forum, which indicates a desire by academic librarians to see more of this type of programming offered by professional associations. Additionally, several respondents commented positively about the variety of topics presented and the number of presenters:

“I thought it was great! It was my first time seeing a lightning round presentation and I really liked the format. I really want to present next year!”

“Great variety and diversity. Was very stimulating!”

“Nice variety of topics, from research projects to initiatives undertaken as part of regular work duties.”

“I think it was interesting being able to see a large amount of presenters and a quick run down of what they were doing.”

One survey respondent pointed out that the shorter lightning round presentations allowed for participants to hear from more of their colleagues but without the longer time-commitment that a conference or full-day event would require:

“Sessions were just long enough to get a feel for their research/findings. It gave an opportunity to hear from a lot of our colleagues on what was happening at their

respective institutions while not taking up too much time in our own workday.”

In contrast, we received some critical feedback from a few attendees (who were also presenters) concerning their allotted presentation lengths. One participant noted that “5 minutes was not enough time to present” while another was concerned that attendees may have misunderstood their research, “[. . .] the format forced me to seriously focus my research, but it also forced me to rush the presentation and leave out much important information. This risks leaving the audience confused and uninformed.” Finally, one respondent expressed a desire to see longer presentations, “[. . .] I’d like to see a combination of lightning rounds and full presentations in the future.”

Open Discussion Format

According to our survey, most attendees thought the discussion was engaging and beneficial. However, since this was a local event, there was a likelihood that the participants worked with or were acquainted with each other. As a result, many attendees did not feel comfortable participating in the conversation. We hypothesized that they were hesitant to participate in the discussion because their opinions might be interpreted as critical. Researcher Ardichvili (2008) points out that an individual's participation is greatly influenced by the organization's culture and the individual's level of trust (p. 545).

Benefits of Attending Virtual Professional Development Events

As stated earlier, the COVID-19 pandemic pushed virtual conferences, programs, and events to the forefront for many library associations. As the literature pointed out, many librarians experienced difficulty attending in-person conferences and other PD programs due to the associated costs of travel or staffing limitations at their libraries. Given these difficulties, those at the local and state level stand to benefit from this shift to a virtual format. In addition,

academic library associations must be able to demonstrate their value to current and prospective members. Since the Forum was hosted by a state academic library association, we were especially interested if our event addressed the difficulties, as well as providing the benefits mentioned above. We also wanted to see if the attendees' responses aligned with the assumed benefits of a virtual PD program.

Attendees said that hearing presentations from their colleagues and peers in Louisiana was the most beneficial aspect of attending the Forum. As one attendee stated, “[I] really enjoyed the opportunity to listen and learn from a lot of colleagues from around the state!”

The virtual format provided librarians, library staff, and graduate students with more accessible opportunities to participate in PD events, present their research, receive feedback, discover what their peers were doing, and ultimately learn from each other. As all the presenters were from Louisiana and many of the topics were about projects at their libraries, attendees may have reported this aspect of the Forum as more beneficial to them than when attending a national conference or event.

The virtual format was ranked as the second highest benefit of the event (25%, in contrast to 38% for the highest ranked benefit). The convenience of a virtual meeting, which does not require complicated travel paperwork, fees, and transportation scheduling, made it a popular alternative, a benefit that was borne out by the literature as well. The threat of mass COVID-19 infection at large gatherings has significantly increased this popularity. It is likely that the continuing effects of the pandemic, coupled with concerns over travel costs and safety, might ensure that online meetings will continue to be the norm for the foreseeable future.

Additionally, all survey respondents said they liked the virtual delivery of the Forum and would attend it again in the future as a virtual event. However, 64% were hesitant to commit to

attending the Forum if it were in person, reflecting a need for these types of virtual PD programs to continue in the post-pandemic future. To further illustrate this point, one participant noted, “Definitely loved the virtual format! Not sure if I'd be able to attend an in-person event just for lightning rounds- maybe if it was tacked on to a larger event.”

Furthermore, the organizers received the following compliment regarding the Forum, which we consider the highest form of praise for our inaugural virtual program, “Best online professional event I've ever attended.”

The third most popular benefit for attending the Forum was that the content was relevant and timely, which is related to the top benefit of hearing presentations from colleagues. As stated earlier, many respondents pointed out that they loved the diversity of the lightning talks. Additionally, several presentations focused on how libraries responded to the COVID-19 pandemic, such as how to manage projects remotely during the work-from-home period and how archivists preserved student experiences during the pandemic. Perhaps participants were particularly interested in learning about projects and research in progress at Louisiana's academic libraries. Additionally, the open discussion portion of the Forum was focused on how the pandemic impacted academic libraries and their interactions with students and faculty.

Cost, according to the literature, can make attendance at PD/conference events very difficult, if not prohibitive. Our survey suggests that, while important, the fact that our event was free was not the most crucial consideration for attendance. It ranked behind hearing about peers' research activities, relevant and timely content, and the convenience of virtual format. Possible reasons for this lower ranking could include the fact attendees knew in advance that the event was free, so cost was a non-issue from the start. It may also indicate that the opportunity to interact with colleagues, even in a socially distant virtual environment, was worth some

monetary expense, had there been any.

Participation in virtual events allows academic librarians a more accessible way to network and share ideas with peers within the profession, as well as locate collaborators with similar research interests. We were surprised to learn that our survey respondents ranked networking and collaboration as the least beneficial aspects of attending the Forum. Perhaps attendees preferred face-to-face networking at conferences and related PD events, which allow for longer conversations than what the Forum could offer.

Limitations

Our study was not without limitations. We had delays in receiving IRB approval and as a result, our survey was sent out to attendees three weeks after the Forum. This delay could have impacted our response rate. With more responses, perhaps we could have obtained more data to measure differences by region, institution, and experience. Additionally, we should have included a question about the number of employees at the participants' institutions. This could reveal patterns about who benefits the most from virtual PD as it relates to staffing concerns, i.e., those with limited staff and therefore limited time to devote to PD.

Future Plans

The ACRL-LA intends for the Forum to be an annual PD program and we plan to make improvements moving forward. Although we accepted all applications for this Forum, that may not be possible with future events as we anticipate receiving a larger number of submissions in the future. We may limit presenters to only chapter members as a benefit of membership.

Given some survey comments about the very limited time frame for each presentation, we may need to be more selective. This process could be expedited by having a set theme for each forum, or by simply inviting those not chosen to resubmit for the following year's session.

Or it could result in the organizers hosting a longer event. Additionally, we may consider a combination of short lightning round presentations and full presentations (30-45 minutes in length) to allow for different types of research to be more fully presented.

The Forum was open to nonmembers for the inaugural year and the organizers would like to continue to make this type of PD accessible for all academic librarians within Louisiana. If we implement the plans mentioned above, we can continue to invite nonmembers to attend.

Future research should look further into virtual PD, its accessibility, and its impact on academic librarians.

Conclusion

As our study indicated, participants who attended this state-level PD program benefited most by hearing about research projects from their colleagues. The lightning round format provided attendees with an opportunity to hear a variety of relevant topics from a wide range of presenters within a limited time period. This in turn led to greater interaction and the transfer of scholarly knowledge among attendees. The virtual delivery of this type of meeting was convenient for attendees, helped mitigate traditional PD challenges, and contributed to the overall accessibility of PD opportunities in Louisiana. In summary, the Forum proved to be beneficial to Louisiana librarians, library staff, and library students who attended this virtual PD event during the COVID-19 pandemic. This study demonstrates that librarians can benefit when library associations provide virtual options for PD programming.

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Appendix 1: Survey Instrument

The purpose of this survey is to assess your experience attending the Summer Research Forum and your perceived value of this event as a virtual professional development opportunity. The study will be conducted online through Qualtrics and you will spend approximately 4 minutes completing this questionnaire.

Inclusion criteria: You are eligible to participate if you are aged 18 years or older and attended the Summer Research Forum on June 4, 2021.

Exclusion criteria: You are ineligible to participate if you are under the age of 18. There are no risks involved in participating in the study. While you may not directly benefit from this research, results will help practitioners better understand the values of virtual professional development opportunities provided at the state-level.

The following investigators are available for questions about this study: [investigators names and contact information have been removed for journal submission]

You may choose not to participate or to withdraw from the study at any time. Results of the study may be published, but no names or identifying information will be included in the publication. Subject identity will remain confidential unless disclosure is required by law.

This study is approved by the [institution name has been removed for journal submission] IRB. For questions concerning participant rights, please contact the IRB Chair, [name and contact information removed for journal submission].

1. By continuing this survey, you are giving consent to participate in this study. Your information collected as part of this research, even if identifiers are removed, may be used for future research.

Yes, I give permission

No, I do not give permission

{If no, skip to the end of the survey.}

Demographics

2. Are you a current member of the Louisiana Chapter of ACRL (the Association of College & Research Libraries)?

Yes

No

Not sure

{If “No”, skip to question 2A.}

{If “Not sure”, skip to question 2B.}

2A. Why are you not a member?

I was unfamiliar with ACRL-LA prior to this event

ACRL-LA is not relevant to me or doesn't provide value to my career/position

I'm interested in joining, but haven't done so yet

Other _____

2B. Why are you unsure whether you are a member?

I used to be a member, but I'm unsure whether I renewed my membership

I'm a member of ACRL (national), but I'm not sure if I'm a member of the Louisiana Chapter.

Other _____

3. What is your race or ethnicity? (Select all that apply)

African American

African or Caribbean

Asian or Pacific Islander

Latinx

Native American

White

Other _____

Prefer not to answer

4. What is your current role at your institution?

Librarian/Archivist

Library Administrator

Library Staff

SLIS Graduate Student

Other _____

{If “SLIS Graduate Student”, skip to question 8.}

5. Years of experience working as a librarian or as library staff:

Less than 5 years

5-10 years

11-20 years

More than 20 years

6. Type of academic institution:

Public university/college

Private university

Community college

Other _____

7. What region of Louisiana is your institution located? Refer to the Louisiana Workforce Commission's Regional Labor Market Areas (RLMAs) in the image below to locate your region.



RLMA 1

RLMA 2

ORLMA 3

ORLMA 4

ORLMA 5

ORLMA 6

ORLMA 7

ORLMA 8

Evaluation

8. How did you learn about the Summer Research Forum?

ACRL-LA email promotion

ACRL-LA website or social media

Personal email from ACRL-LA Board member or Forum organizer

Other academic library organizations (LLA, LOUIS, SLIS, etc.)

Internal listserv/email at my institution

Shared by a colleague

Other _____

9. Was the Summer Research Forum beneficial to you?

Yes

No

{If “Yes”, skip to question 9A.}

{If “No”, skip to question 9B.}

9A. What was the most beneficial aspect of the Summer Research Forum? Please rank the following statements based in order of what was the most beneficial to you.

_____ Content was relevant and timely

_____ Free professional development

_____ Virtual format was convenient for me

_____ Opportunity to hear presentations from colleagues/peers across Louisiana

_____ Opportunity to network or find collaborators

_____ Other

9B. Please explain why the Summer Research Forum was not beneficial to you.

10. Did you like the lightning round format (ten total presentations with either 5 or 10 minutes each)?

Yes

No

no opinion

{If “No”, skip to question 10A.}

10A. If not, what format would you prefer?

Forum was too long. I like the lightning rounds but would like to see fewer overall presentations.

Forum was too short. I'd like it to include more lightning round presentations.

Forum was the right amount of time. I'd like to see fewer, but more in-depth presentations.

Other _____

11. Overall, what were your thoughts on the lightning rounds presentations (topics, presenters, format)?

12. To what extent do you agree with the following statements about the open discussion, "The Future Isn't What It Used to be...But That's Okay"?

	Strongly Agree	Somewhat agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Somewhat disagree	Strongly disagree
The discussion was engaging and added value to the event.	○	○	○	○	○
I felt comfortable participating in the conversation, whether in the chat or on screen.	○	○	○	○	○

13. Did you like the virtual format?

Yes

No

14. Would you attend the Summer Research Forum again next year, as a virtual event?

Yes

No

I'm not sure

15. Would you attend the Summer Research Forum in the future, as an in-person event?

Yes

No

I'm not sure

16. What recommendations do you have for improvements to future research forums? Please share any additional feedback.