Stronger Together!: An Examination of Conference Themes Across National, Regional, and State Library Organizations

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Abstract

A conference theme sets the tone for attendees and speakers of the conference. The authors hypothesized that national, regional, and state library organizations frequently planned conferences surrounding a theme. This research examined the prevalence of conference themes across national, regional, and state library organizations to determine the accuracy of this hypothesis. Findings show that most library conferences have a theme. Further examination using textual analysis showed that there were clear trends in the assignation of themes to a conference by library organizations.

Keywords: themes; conferences; state library organizations; regional library organizations; national library organizations

Introduction

Stronger Together! Be the Change! The Future is Now! We have all read them in countless advertisements for upcoming conferences. They are the themes around which the conference will be centered. To the conference attendee, these can be an exciting indication of what to expect from conference programming. To the potential conference speaker, they can be a source of misery as one attempts to disassemble and reconstruct the content of their paper to fit neatly into the conference's oftentimes vague and extraneous theme. Regardless of one's outlook on the usefulness of themes, the authors set out to discover the status of the usage of themes in library conference planning.   The purpose of this study is to examine the prevalence of conference themes across state, regional, and national library organizations and to identify trends in usage. This was accomplished by examining the websites of a predetermined list of 109 library associations to identify the presence of themes in their conference programming. The authors hypothesize that conference themes are used frequently among all library association types and that there are obvious trends that emerge from the usage of themes.

Background

Professional organizations or associations have existed for the last ten centuries. Beginning in the 11th century in Europe, merchant and craft guilds were formed for the "mutual aid and protection and for the furtherance of their professional interests" (Britannica, 2021).   As guilds began to decline in the 16th century, the first trade organizations were formed. The oldest types of trade organizations were chambers of commerce, also known as "commercial associations, boards of trade, and development associations" (Britannica, 2006).   The first chamber of commerce in the United States was formed in New York in 1768. Around the same time attempts were being made by medical professionals in New England to form various

professional societies (Godfrey, 1893, p. 1). The Massachusetts Medical Society is now recognized as the oldest continuously operating professional society in the United States, having been in operation since 1781 ("Massachusetts Medical Society," 2021). Many professional organizations, such as the American Society of Civil Engineers (1852) and the American Chemical Society (1876), formed throughout the 1800s, but it was not until the 1880s that the United States saw growth in the number of organizations (Institute of Medicine, 2005, p. 138). By the 1960s, there were over 350 national professional organizations in the United States (p. 138).   Library associations have been in existence since 1876 when the profession's oldest organization, the American Library Association (ALA), formed during the centennial exposition in Philadelphia (American Library Association, 2021). Since then, many library associations have formed at the state, regional, and national levels.

Associations play an important role within a profession. Their purpose can be categorized as educational, informational, regulatory, or advocacy. In the educational role, professional associations often offer certifications, accreditation, and professional development. In the informational role, many professional associations publish journals and other literature to increase public awareness. In the regulatory role, associations provide oversight of professional standards and practices.   In the advocacy role, some professional associations engage in legal actions and policy development to advance the interests of the professional. All associations provide great benefits to members including opportunities for service, networking, mentorship, skill-building, personal and professional development, collaboration with colleagues, job searching, and awards (Mata, et al, 2010, p. 451).

Most professional associations host regular meetings of their members, typically in the form of an annual conference, where many of the abovementioned benefits can be realized.

Conferences also serve as a place to update members on association happenings, disseminate new ideas, products, or results from recent work, create awareness of a need and inspire members to act, and promote learning new concepts and ideas (Mundry, et al, 2000, p. 3-5). The characteristics of a successful conference include a clear purpose and outcome, organization and logistics, value, variety, effective use of time, quality of leaders and facilitators, and quality of content and design (p. 6-8).

The quality of content and design can be the most impactful on a conference's participants, particularly at an academic conference where the purpose is to share research and ideas. Many planners take a focused approach to conference planning and often will center the content of a conference around a particular theme. In their article on "Anxiety Free Conference Design," Briziarelli and Tice (1996) state that "Developing a **theme** is an important first step in designing a **conference**. The **theme** establishes the range of topics to include in the agenda and lets participants know what general knowledge and skill areas they will learn about. In addition, the **theme** provides a reference point from which to begin marketing the **conference** to potential attendees and presenters" (p. 47). Black and Ubbes (2009) suggest that "associations should look to the identification and selection of conference themes that have more of a connection to the mission and vision, more impact on the potential conference participants, set the desired tone for an event, or potentially help to sustain the organization" (p. 37). While many organizations are dedicated to the use of themes in conference planning, some have taken a stand against them in recent years. The American Psychological Association has not used themes in conference planning in over a decade (Flaherty, 2018). In 2020, the American Historical Association eliminated themes from their conferences stating that themes encourage presenters to attempt "useless acrobatics" to fit their proposal within the boundaries of the theme (Flaherty, 2018).

While it is unclear when the use of conference themes emerged, it is most certainly a 20th-century construct. Ubbes and Black (2009) point out that "very little literature exists to provide guidance related to the conceptualization, development, and selection of effective conference themes" in the health education profession (p. 37). The same is true for library associations. Online records show that library professional organizations were using themes as early as the 1970s and the authors suspect that they were used much earlier than that.

Methodology

To identify the trends in themes among conferences held by library organizations, the authors gathered a wide range of data from state, regional, and national organizations to make comparisons.   Wikipedia maintains two entries that were useful for this study: *List of U.S. State Library Associations* ("List of U.S. state library associations," 2021) and *List of Library Associations [North America]* ("List of library associations," 2021). The authors reviewed each list according to specific criteria depending on whether it was a state, regional, or national organization. However, only organizations that hold conferences were considered, regardless of whether the conference content was online or not. Because the authors were aware of the limitations of Wikipedia, additional data was collected and confirmed using online search engines.

The authors reviewed the list of state library associations and selected the organization in each state whose audience was the most wide-ranging (i.e., typically "[insert state name] Library Association"). Smaller organizations (e.g., Cache Valley Library Association in Idaho) or those catering to a particular subset of librarianship (e.g., Indiana Health Sciences Librarians Association) were not selected to study.   Library associations serving U.S. territories also were not considered. Altogether, 50 states and the District of Columbia were included in this list.

Regional organizations were gleaned from the larger *List of Library Associations [North America]* and supplemented by the author's familiarity with missing associations (e.g., Ohio Valley Group of Technical Services Librarians). Regional organizations were only included in this list if their conference was not shared with other organizations. Some regional associations partner with state associations to hold conferences (e.g., Mountains Plains Library Association and Southeastern Library Association). Those partnerships were reflected in the state lists. Altogether, nine regional library associations were included in this list, as illustrated in Table 1.

Table 1. List of Regional Organizations

Regional Organizations
Association of Southeastern Research Libraries (ASERL)
Foothills Library Association
New England Technical Services Librarians
Northwest Archivists
Ohio Valley Group of Technical Services Librarians
Pacific Northwest Library Association
Potomac Technical Processing Librarians
Southwestern Association of Law Libraries
Western Association of Map Libraries

National organizations were also gleaned from the larger *List of Library Associations [North America]*. The authors focused only on library associations that were based in the United States. American Library Association (ALA) Divisions were excluded unless they hosted their own conference, separate from the ALA annual conference. For example, the Association of College & Research Libraries (ACRL), a division of ALA, hosts its own conference biennially. However, the conference offerings from the Reference & User Services Association (RUSA), another division of ALA, run concurrently with the annual ALA conference and therefore were not included in this study. Altogether, 49 national library associations were included in this list, as illustrated in Table 2.

Table 2. List of National Organizations

National Organizations
American Association of Law Libraries (AALL)
American Association of School Librarians (AASL)
American Indian Library Association (AILA)
American Library Association (ALA)
American Theological Library Association (ATLA)
Art Libraries Society of North America (ARLIS/NA)
Asian/Pacific American Librarians Association
Association for Library and Information Science Education
Association for Moving Image Archivists
Association for Rural and Small Libraries
Association for Science and Information Technology
Association of Architecture School Librarians
Association of Bookmobile & Outreach Services
Association of Christian Librarians (ACL)
Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL)
Association of Jewish Libraries
Association of Mental Health Librarians
Association of Research Libraries (ARL)
Association of Vision Science Librarians
Black Caucus of the American Library Association
Botanical Libraries Group
Catholic Library Association
Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals
Chinese American Librarians Association
Community of Industrial Relations Librarians
Electronic Resources & Libraries
Engineering Library Division of the American Society for Engineering Education
Evangelical Church Library Association
Library Information Technology Association (LITA)
Major Orchestra Librarians' Association
Medical Library Association
Music Library Association
National Association of Government Archives and Records Administrators
North American Serials Interest Group (NASIG)
Online Audiovisual Catalogers
Patent and Trademark Resource Center Association
Polish American Librarians Association (PALA)
Progressive Librarians Guild

Public Library Association
Reforma
Seminar on the Acquisition of Latin American Library Materials
SLA
Society of American Archivists
Substance Abuse Librarians & Information Specialists (SALIS)
Theatre Library Association
United States Agricultural Information Network
Urban Libraries Council
USA Toy Library Association
Visual Resources Association

The authors reviewed each library association's website and compiled two lists for each type of association (state, regional, or national). The first list detailed whether themes were available online or not and the date ranges of the available themes. The second list detailed the name of the association, the name of the theme, the year associated with each theme, and the type of association (state, regional, or national). Data was entered manually into Microsoft Excel. For those conferences with no themes entered in the spreadsheet, either no conference was held, or no information was available online.

To analyze the data, a textual analysis was performed using the online Web Frequency Indexer (WFI) (https://www.lextutor.ca/freq/eng/). The WFI is an analysis tool whose purpose is to sort text according to the frequency of words within the text. The authors extracted the list of themes from their Excel datasheet, copied and pasted them into the WFI, which then output the list of words within the themes based on frequency. This step was completed separately for each type of organization (state, regional, national). The authors then used the data collected in the original lists, along with the data output by the WFI, to analyze the most common keywords and categories of keywords that emerged, as well as trends in date ranges, and whether themes were related to conference locations.

Findings

State Analysis

The authors collected information about the use of themes for 45 state library associations. Five associations were not included because they did not provide themes for current or past conferences, and in one case none of the links worked to examine past conferences. For some only the theme for the current conference was available, while others, like Georgia, Hawaii, Kansas, Kentucky, Ohio, and South Dakota had themes going back more than 10 years. The authors examined a total of 299 themes.

A textual analysis of the words found that the most used word, not surprisingly, was "libraries," which appeared 88 times. Often the word "libraries" was preceded by the name of the state in which the conference was being held. Excluding articles, the only other word used more than 20 times was "future." The analysis also identified "number" as being used more than 20 times, but analysis showed that this count was received from dates and numbers in the themes, and not the word itself. Three themes were used by several library associations. One was "Be the Change," used by both the California Library Association (2014) and the Kansas Library Association (2008). "The Future is Now!" was used by both the Mississippi Library Association (2012) and the Maine Library Association (2018). "Stronger Together" was used by the Mississippi Library Association (2015), the Oklahoma Library Association (2019), and the North Carolina Library Association (2013), while the 2019 theme of the Minnesota Library Association was "Libraries: Stronger Together." The only one-word theme was "Reach!," the theme of the 2017 meeting of the Oklahoma Library Association.

That said, certain concepts were repeated, though the theme name was slightly different. Libraries were transformational, places to learn, and places to reimagine or reinvent. Libraries

were leaders, and they led forward, led change, and cultivated leadership. Libraries "bridge gaps," "bridge borders," and "build bridges." Communities are important to libraries. Libraries "build communities," "engage communities," "empower communities," "strengthen communities," "cultivate communities," and were the "heart of the community." The "future" is a common theme, as libraries "envision a brighter future," "shape the future," "embrace the future," "claim the future," "face the future," "illuminate the future," "prepare for a bright future," "grow into the future," and provide a "gateway to the future." Several themes call upon libraries to celebrate. Several library associations, including Kentucky, Michigan, Minnesota, South Carolina, South Dakota, and West Virginia, celebrated 100+ years of existence. Libraries offered information through themes such as: "Information: The Library Super Power," "Information, Innovation, Inspiration: Making the Connection," and "Navigating the Information Ocean: Charting the Course."

Most themes seemed to have no discernable relation to the state, but in a few cases, themes were very specific to the state association. In 2014, the theme for the Alaska Library Association was "No Safe Passage: Navigating the Shoals of Change." It was the only state association to use the term "raven" in two themes: "Raven About Libraries" (2004) and "Can't Stop Raven about Libraries" (2008). The Arizona Library Association, in a joint 2014 conference with the Mountain Plains Library Association, used the theme "Libraries: The Best of the West." The Hawaiian Library Association has twice used the Hawaiian language in its themes: "Kilokilo Ka Maka - Understanding Our Place(s)" (2018) and "Pulelo ke ahi haʻaheo i na pali" (2016). In 2014, the theme of the Rhode Island Library Association was "Making Waves," a nod to the state nickname "The Ocean State."

National Analysis

The authors examined 22 national library associations and identified 257 themes. All conferences had an associated theme, though the number of years for which themes could be found varied.

A textual analysis of the themes found that the most used word was "information," which appeared 43 times. "Information" was often affiliated with the subject of the national association, such as "visual information," "arts information," "health information," "serials information," "alcohol and drug information," "rural information," and "agricultural information." "Information" was also paired with "frontier," "odyssey," "revolution," "future," "community," "ecosystem," "technology," and "access." Selected themes about information were "Navigating the Information Maze" by the Association of Christian Librarians (1999), "On the Trail of Information" and "Information on the Speedway, Don't Re-invent the Wheel!" by the National Association of Government Archives and Records Administrators (2013, 2016), and "Information for a Sustainable World: Addressing Society's Grand Challenges" by the Association for Science and Information Technology (2020). One theme, "Beyond Borders," was used by the Art Libraries Society of North America (2005), the Substance Abuse Librarians & Information Specialists (2003), and the Society of American Archivists (2012). Several associations had one-word themes: "Connecting…" used by the Association of Christian Librarians (2004), "Rethink," used by the Medical Library Association (2011), "Elevate," also for the Medical Library Association (2019), "Access" used by the Black Caucus of the American Library Association (2002), and "Transformative!" used by the Society of American Archivists (2019).

"Future" was used in many themes, to emphasize libraries as the "gateway to the future,"

"crafting," "shaping," "choosing," and "creating" the future, "charting," "sailing into," and "stepping into" the future, as well as specifics such as the "future of serials" and the "future of Agbiosciences." The future was contrasted with the past, such as "Inside, outside, past, present, future," "celebrating the past, racing into the future," "visions of the future, reflections of the past," "present tense, future perfect," and "preserving the past, sustaining the future." The New Millennium and new frontiers were used in several themes. Imagination was also a theme, such as "imagine, innovate, inspire," "imagine the possibilities," and "preserve, enhance, reimagine." The importance of collaborating was emphasized through the themes of "Collaboration: Building Bridges in the 21st century," "Experimentation and Collaboration: Creating Serials for a New Millennium," "Growth, Creativity, and Collaboration: Great Visions on a Great Lake," and "Gateway to Collaboration," and "Creating a Culture of Collaboration." "Change" was used with "rapids of," "rivers of," "sea of," "mountain of," and "making waves for."

Themes for meetings of the national associations often contained words that were specific to the association. The Art Libraries Society of North America (ARLIS/NA), the Medical Library Association, North American Serials Interest Group (NASIG), and the Substance Abuse Librarians & Information Specialists (SALIS) themes used words specific to the association. The United States Agricultural Information Network used the word "agriculture" or "agricultural" in 11 of the 16 conferences held from 1991-2020. The themes for two meetings of the Seminar on the Acquisition of Latin American Library Materials were in Spanish, "'Nuestro Norte es el Sur': Mapping Resistance and Resilience in Latin American, Caribbean and Iberian Studies" (2016) and "Buen Provecho: Celebrating and Exploring the Richness of Latin American, Caribbean and LatinX Food and Drink" (2020).

Themes for national associations also promoted the locale that was hosting the

conference. The theme of the 2006 ARLIS/NA conference in Banff, Canada was "Transcontinental Perspectives: ARLIS/NA in the Canadian Rockies." The 2003 Association for Library and Information Science Education conference in Philadelphia used the theme "Declaration of Interdependence: Connecting Researchers and Practitioners." The 2011 Association of College & Research Libraries conference in Philadelphia had a similar theme, "A Declaration of Interdependence." The 2007 NASIG conference in Louisville was "Place Your Bet in Kentucky: The Serials Gamble." The 2012 National Association of Government Archives and Records Administrators conference in Santa Fe was "Blazing a Records Trail in the Land of Enchantment." Their 2019 conference in St. Paul was "10,000 Lakes, 10,000 Opportunities." The 2018 Association of Bookmobile & Outreach Services conference in Raleigh was "Let's Book It in Raleigh."

Regional Analysis

The regional associations examined were the Ohio Valley Group of Technical Services Librarians (OVGTSL), Northwest Archivists, Southwestern Association of Law Libraries (SWALL), New England Technical Services Librarians (NETSL), Pacific Northwest Library Association (PNLA), and the Potomac Technical Processing Librarians. The authors identified 77 themes. All conferences had a theme.

Excluding articles, the only words used more than 20 times were "technical," and "services." Since the primary audience for three of the regional associations was technical services librarians, it is not surprising that both of those words were prominent. A selection of themes for these three associations was "Technical Services: Outthink, Outwork, Outlast," "Building Bridges in Technical Services," "Technical Services in the New Millennium: Exploring the Electronic Frontier," "20/20 Vision: A New Decade for Technical Services," and

"Telling the Technical Services Story: Using Assessment & Data Visualization to Show Our Value."

The "future" was used in themes by several associations. In 2003, OVGTSL librarians were "Racing to a Bright Future," and in 2006 found themselves at the "Crossroads to the Future." In 2010, NETSL also used a similar theme with "Crosswalks to the Future: Library Metadata on the Move." In 2014, this association's theme was "Coming Up Roses: Growing Towards the Future." In 2014 PNLA adopted the theme "Mining the Past to Plan for the Future." The theme for the 2020 conference of SWALL was "See the Future." Several themes noted that libraries lead, such as "Libraries Leading the Way," and "Meeting Challenges, Leading Change." Only one conference had a one-word theme, "BIBFRAME," for the 2016 meeting of the Potomac Technical Processing Librarians.

Like the meetings of the national associations, some themes were related to the location of the conference. In 2012, PNLA met in Anchorage with the theme of "Into the Wild: Surviving and Thriving in Uncertain Times." In 2008, SWALL met on a cruise ship with the theme "Navigating the Sea of Information: Celebrating 50 Years of SWALL!" In 2015, this group met in Boulder with the theme "Go Bolder in Boulder." In 2019, OVGTSL met in Lexington, KY with a horse-country theme of "Unbridled Resources."

Discussion

Library associations favor a themed annual conference over conferences without themes. While searching for themes for library association conferences, the authors found that themes for the current year's conference were highly visible but finding themes for previous year's conferences of most associations was more difficult. The authors found that the archiving of information about previous conferences varied greatly.

Website information for state associations varied greatly, particularly concerning the type of information provided about previous conferences. Some state associations provided information on the current conference only, and while most provided themes for previous conferences, the number of years varied with each association. For example, Ohio has two state-wide associations, the Academic Library Association of Ohio (ALAO) and the Ohio Library Council. Themes for the ALAO can be found back to 1974, all on the Association's website, easily being the site with the most conference themes listed for any state association. Information for the current convention of the Ohio Library Council is available on its website, but no information about previous conferences is present. Presumably, one reason for this may be whether the association considers this information important to preserve and has made efforts to do so. Another issue is that many conferences for these associations, some of which have existed for 100 years or more, exist only on paper. Conference information on the Internet is relatively recent for these associations, but presumably, a paper archive exists somewhere.

Themes for past conferences for regional and national associations seemed more readily available, though again, the number of years varied. Among national associations, NASIG listed themes back to 1986, providing more themes than any other national association. Among the regional associations, NETSL conference themes back to 1998 were easy to find on the Association's website.

With few exceptions, themes are always more than one word, and brevity and conciseness seem to be preferred. Some themes contain subtitles, and a few are quite lengthy. The longest themes were conferences for the Seminar on the Acquisition of Latin American Library Materials. ""Nuestro norte es el sur": Mapping Resistance and Resilience in Latin American, Caribbean and Iberian Studies," and "Buen provecho: Celebrating and Exploring the

Richness of Latin American, Caribbean and LatinX Food and Drink," which both contained 16 words.

Library association themes look to the future, though often with an eye to the past. Change is embraced and inevitable. Libraries are important to communities, and themes often focus on libraries as "open," "innovative," and "inclusive." Themes can sound generic, but exclamation points in many themes are meant to convey enthusiasm. Many themes reflect the city or state in which the conference is held. Given the number examined, there were surprisingly few identical themes, even those that were two or three words.

Unlike the American Historical Association, which discontinued its use, themes remain very dear to librarians when planning a conference. Whatever the theme that is chosen, it is meant to inspire librarians to attend and participate.

Conclusion

Conference themes are the norm for conferences of most national, regional, and state library associations. Themes often reflect the audience of the conference, and those with a particular focus in the field of librarianship tend to have more specific themes. It should be noted that the number of themes that could be examined varied by organization. Archiving of past conference themes varied widely, and organizations might perhaps be more deliberative about preserving past themes given the time and effort to develop and promote an organization's conference. All organizations should make sure that website links are working, though the authors appreciate that management of an organization's website may be done by various people depending on the history and practice of the organization. Conference themes are desirable for most organizations and there are many themes available should one be tasked with planning a conference and need assistance determining an engaging theme.

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