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Librarians' Attitudes, Needs, and Barriers to Participating in International Conferences: A Survey of ALA Members

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ABSTRACT

This article presents the results of a survey of American Library Association (ALA) members exploring the interests, barriers, reasons, decision-influencing factors, support needs, and preferences of librarians in attending international conferences. The study reveals that although a majority of librarians expressed a strong interest in attending such conferences, more than half of them never or rarely participate, primarily due to a lack of institutional funding, which is more prevalent in public libraries. The primary reason for attending international conferences is to gain exposure to new perspectives and library practices in other countries. Factors such as the overall cost of the conference, its theme and reputation, and the availability of financial support also significantly influence librarians' participation decisions. To enhance and improve librarians' participation in international conferences, we recommend that professional institutions provide funding, advocacy, and informational support to help build their capabilities, networks, and awareness. Overall, the study highlights the significant potential for librarians to broaden their horizons and expand their professional development opportunities through attending international conferences and underscores the need for greater support and resources to facilitate their participation.

Keywords: International conferences, Public and academic librarians, International library practices, International networking

INTRODUCTION

The opportunities and challenges facing information professionals are rapidly unfolding across a vast international landscape. Global librarianship offers our colleagues the opportunity to become agents of change, advocates for international policy change, and catalysts for social

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justice (Chaparro-Univazo, 2007). International conferences, with their global scope and focus on bringing industry professionals together from all over the world, are important to librarianship. International conferences can give librarians a different cultural experience and provide new perspectives and insight into global library initiatives that may have a positive impact on their home organization (Egholm, et al., 1998). Being able to engage and collaborate with colleagues at an international level allows librarians to extend their professional network and achieve substantial professional growth. Presenting at an international conference enables librarians to share their perspectives with a wider audience and gain international recognition. The experience may push librarians past limits to reach their full professional potential (Thull, 2014; Arda for Researchers, 2022). As opined in Association of Council on Education, the responses on key institutional priorities from U.S institutions, contributions to internationalization in tenure guidelines and procedures between 2006 and 2011, the categories 1 and 3 of the findings showed international activities and presentation at international conferences on top the list (47%) that “should be considered in tenure and promotion decisions.”

In that study, out of the 91 tenure codes analyzed, 52 showed criteria and codes for the presentations and research publication to include professional associations and “The [tenure and promotion committee] will consider presentations of current research at refereed high quality professional conferences as evidence of a candidate’s professional achievement and growth. For example, the most important activities within this area include being an invited speaker at a national or international symposium or conference, and publishing and presenting research at refereed conferences sponsored by major professional associations, with selective review processes and highly selective acceptance rates” (Helms, 2015).

Considering the benefits and potential opportunities brought by international conferences, as part of the 2022 Emerging Leader Project of the ALA, the International Relations Round Table (IRRT) sponsored a group of emerging leaders² to investigate their members' interest in attending international conferences, as well as the barriers. After completing the IRRT member survey, the group wanted to expand outside the specific IRRT interest group, by gauging the needs and challenges of all ALA members. As such the group initiated a study to understand the needs and challenges of all ALA members to participate in international conferences. The ALA member survey intends to answer the following research questions:

1. What are librarians’³ interests in participating in international conferences?
2. What are their challenges in participating in international conferences?
3. What are their needs in participating in international conferences?
4. How do professional organizations support their members’ participation in international conferences?

Since these research questions have not been systematically studied, the answers can contribute to a better understanding of librarians’ and library workers’ interests, barriers, and needs to engage in international conferences. This article will present the ALA member survey results to inform future researchers.

² Group members include Elizabeth Dawson, Shoshana Frank, Timothy Furgal, Olanike Olaniyi along with member guides Erica Saito and Grace Liu; all participated in creating the ALA member survey.

³ Librarians are used as a collective term, which includes library professionals, library workers, information specialists, library managers, and other types of individual members at ALA.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Although there is some noticeable participation in international conferences among librarians, limited research has been done to understand the extent of librarians' interests and needs in attending international conferences. Our literature review only identified a few articles published over the past 15 years in the library field. The majority of these studies explored the benefits, reasons, and barriers of continued professional development activities while attending conferences in general or in specific international conferences such as the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) conference.

One of the most significant publications is from Kozłowska and Scoulas (2020), which explored the international scholarly activity among academic librarians in the United States. Some of their study questions related to librarians' participation in international conferences outside of the United States. The article provided considerable evidence on the interest and activities among the survey respondents in international conference participation. Their research found about 47% (n=87) of respondents participated in an international conference outside of the United States. More than 60% of librarians had been to international conferences one to three times in their careers. About 16% of the respondents reported that they attended international conferences more than seven times. In terms of roles played at these conferences, 39.88% of the respondents attended as participants and 34.52% attended as presenters. Among the US librarians who participated in international conferences, the majority of the respondents traveled to either Europe (32.37%) or Canada (30.64%).

International conferences bring considerable benefits to librarians. Thull (2014) highlighted the benefits of professional rejuvenation, networking opportunities, dissemination of information, and the ability to see new perspectives on librarianship. He further stressed that "the exposure, learning, and networking that can occur can be life-changing and help put our career choice into perspective in terms of its value not only to the patrons we serve directly but to patrons the world over" (Thull, 2014). Harker (2009), learned through their research that international conferences allow participants to get an outsider's perspective, and spark enthusiasm that leads to a later change in practice. Besides the informational impact (such as getting new information and ideas) and social impact (such as networking), Dumbell (2017, 2019) emphasized the affective impact and significant emotional benefits of conference attendance, such as feeling inspired, energized, motivated, grateful, valued, confident, and affirmation of meaningful work and belonging to a greater library community. Barry and Garcia-Febo (2012) discussed the multiculturalism of IFLA conferences and mentioned that new professionals benefited from being exposed to different views through interaction with colleagues from other cultures, religions, and library sectors.

When it comes to factors that influence conference attendance, Superio and Anderson's (2016) research on the attendance of the International Association of Aquatic and Marine Science Libraries and Information Centers Annual Conference, identified five different factors that affect members' attendance. These factors include; (a) destination stimuli (opportunity to visit another country and the attractiveness of the destination); (b) professional and social networking opportunities (interaction with colleagues and friends, developing a professional network, and involvement with the association); (c) educational opportunities (keeping up-to-

date with professional knowledge and fulfilling the desire to learn); (d) safety and health situations (safety and security situation at the destination, hygiene standards, and personal health conditions); (e) travelability (time required to travel, total cost, and personal financial situation). Research from the travel and tourism industry also iterates similar motivating factors. Malek, et al. (2011) specified the motives of professional and pleasure-seeking for attending an international conference, such as building professional relationships, having personal interaction, feeling part of a global community, gaining new knowledge, meeting like-minded people, looking for a peer reputation, getting away from home, getting new experiences, and visiting a new destination.

There are many factors that can negatively influence conference attendance, and the most significant barrier for librarians to attend international conferences is the lack of funding. Kozłowska and Scoulas' (2020) found that among the 53% who had never participated in international conferences, the most prevailing reasons were "too expensive" (45.28%), and "library doesn't finance international travel" (22.64%). Corcoran and McGuinness' (2014) research identified time, financial restraints, and lack of encouragement from employers as the main barriers for librarians to seek continued professional development. Dumbell's (2019) doctoral thesis summarized the barriers to conference attendance into four categories, including lack of funding, time constraints, awareness (lack of information about the event), and location of the event.

Dumbell's (2019) research summarized previous studies on the reasons for attending conferences into four concepts: information and ideas, networking, inspiration and invigoration, and other reasons such as specific duty. This research also discussed the nine factors that influence the impact of conference attendance, including attending with colleagues, the serendipity of encountering relevant content and contacts, social media use, experience, role and attributes of attendee, taking responsibility and planning, the time factor, alignment with strategy and budget, dissemination of ideas and culture of ideas. Regarding the roles that library associations can play in its members' professional development activities, Corcoran and McGuinness (2014) stated that professional library organizations need to reinforce their support of their members' endeavors and provide incentives to participate and should "build on librarians' personal motivation and job satisfaction, the likelihood of career progression, and deepening working relationships with non-LIS colleagues" (p. 176).

METHODOLOGY

We designed a survey questionnaire with 20 survey questions (see Appendix). The questions included several single-select multiple-choice questions, multi-select multiple-choice questions, and open-ended questions. These questions covered the interests, barriers, reasons, decision-influencing factors, needs, and preferences of ALA members in participating in international conferences, along with several questions to capture the characteristics of the survey respondents. The study proposal was submitted to the West Chester University Institutional Review Board and was approved with an exempt decision (IRB #: IRB-FY2022-336).

An online Qualtrics survey was constructed and distributed to ALA members through ALA Connect (a centralized ALA member communication platform) between May 16th to May 31st, 2022. Various members of the research team posted the survey several times to various distribution lists of ALA, ALA divisions, round tables, and sections. Those divisions include:

- ALA Members (43,100 members)
- Association of College & Research Libraries (ACRL) (7,100 members)
- ACRL sections (incl. Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education; Policy, Politics and International Relations Section; Instruction Section; University Libraries Section)
- Reference and User Services Association (RUSA) (1,900 members)
- RUSA sections (incl. Business Reference and Services Section; History Section; Collection Development and Evaluation Section; Emerging Technologies Section; Sharing and Transforming Access to Resources Section; Reference Services Section)
- Evidence Synthesis Methods Interest Group (738 members)
- ALA Emerging Leaders Interest Group (993 members)
- International Relations Round Table (1,000 members)
- Association for Library Service to Children (2,900 members)

These messages were sent to the approximately 43,100 members of ALA connect with the goal of reaching as many interested participants as possible. Given the structure of ALA connect which relies on individual member's subscription of the digests to receive the message, it is not possible to confirm how many members of the potential 43,100 actually saw the survey, and thus to calculate the response rate for survey participation. The survey was anonymous. No incentive was provided. The survey received 282 responses and 277 completed responses for the entire questionnaire.

SURVEY DATA ANALYSIS

Characteristics of the Survey Respondents

The survey respondents (n=277) encompass a diverse array of job functions within the library profession. As **Table 1** shows, approximately 24.6% of the surveyed respondents indicated that their primary job function is "instruction or reference," a percentage comparable to those who chose "library management/supervision" (22%). Around 10% served "mixed roles," whereas less than 10% chose one of the following functions: "cataloging or technical services," "acquisition, collection, or electronic resources," "outreach or engagement," "systems and information technology," "access services," and "special collection or archive." In addition, there are 11.2% (n=31) respondents who fall under the "other" category as their job functions are not covered by the above categories.

Table 1

Characteristics of Survey Respondents: Primary Job Function

Primary Job Function	n	%
Cataloguing or technical services	25	9.03%
Acquisition, collection, or electronic resources	20	7.22%
Outreach or engagement	16	5.78%
Instruction or reference	68	24.55%

Systems and information technology	7	2.53%
Access services	8	2.89%
Library management/supervision	61	22.02%
Special collection or archive	12	4.33%
General services (mixed roles)	29	10.47%
Other	31	11.19%
Total	277	100%

The survey respondents represent various types of libraries, with a significant portion (49.8%; n=138) coming from academic libraries. About 1/3 (30.3%; n=84) were from public libraries, while a smaller percentage (5% or less) were from school libraries, government libraries, or special libraries (see **Table 2**).

Table 2
Characteristics of Survey Respondents: Library Type

Library Type	n	%
Public	84	30.32%
Academic	138	49.82%
School	12	4.33%
Government	11	3.97%
Special (Corporate, Medical, Law, Religious, Museum, Private business, etc.)	15	5.42%
Other	17	6.14%
Total	277	100%

Regarding their years of experience in the profession, 32.5% (n=90) of respondents were in the library profession for more than 21 years. For the respondents who were in the library profession for less than 20 years, the years of service were relatively evenly distributed (15%-18%) among the other year ranges (see details in **Table 3**).

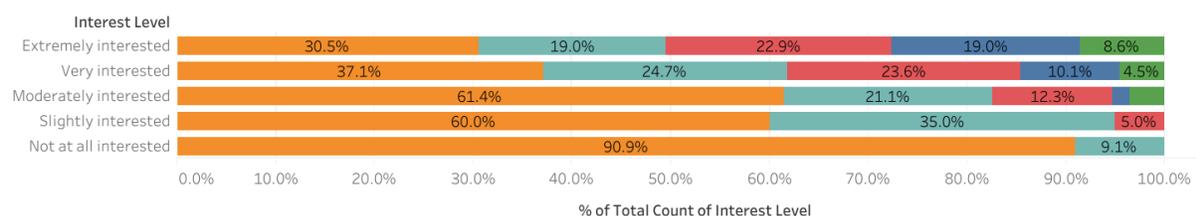
Table 3
Characteristics of Survey Respondents: Years in Library Profession

Years in Library Profession	n	%
0–5	48	17.33%
6–10	42	15.16%
11–15	49	17.69%
16–20	48	17.33%
Longer than 21	90	32.49%
Total	277	100%

Interests

The survey investigated librarians' interest level in attending international conferences hosted outside of the U.S., including both virtual and in-person conferences. A majority (68.8%; n=194 out of 282) of the respondents expressed their strong interest, among which 37.2% (n=105) of the respondents reported "extremely interested" and 31.6% (n=89) were "very interested." In addition, 20.2% (n=57) were "moderately interested," 7.1% (n=20) were "slightly interested," and 3.9% (n=11) were "not at all interested" in attending international conferences. In terms of the frequency of conference attendance, 43.3% (n=122) of respondents had "never" participated in any international conference before; 22% (n=62) "rarely (once in more than 3 years)" and 18.8% (n=53) occasionally (once in 2-3 years) attended international conferences. Only about 16% (n=45) of respondents attended international conferences frequently (on average once per year) (10.6%) or very frequently (on average more than once per year) (5.3%). A cross-tabulation analysis of conference attendance frequency and interest level (see **Figure 1**) finds that nearly half (49.5%) of respondents who are "extremely interested" in attending international conferences either never (30.5%) or rarely (19%) attended international conferences. The trend is also evident among the respondents who are "very interested" in attending international conferences — about 61.8% never (37.1%) or rarely (24.7%) attended international conferences.

Figure 1
Conference Attendance Frequency across Interest Levels



% of Total Count of Interest Level for each Interest Level as 100%. Color shows details about Percentage Distribution of Frequency at each Interest Level as 100%.

- Very Frequently (on average more than once per year)
- Frequently (on average once per year)
- Occasionally (once in 2-3 years)
- Rarely (once in more than 3 years)
- Never

Barriers

In our survey, respondents were asked to indicate their top one to three barriers to attending both in-person and virtual international conferences (see **Table 4**). When it comes to in-person conferences, a significant majority of respondents (82.3%; n=232 out of 282) identified "lack of financial support" as a primary barrier (39.12%), followed by "traveling (incl. visa, trip arrangements)" (15.7%; n=93), and "difficulty in scheduling or having to use personal time" (12.5%; n=74) (details in **Table 4**). About 9 out of 282 (3.2%) respondents reported "no barriers." About 12.8% of respondents (n=36 out of 282) selected "other" and specified the barriers. These additional barriers include Covid-19 (n=15), health issues (n=5), justification (hard to justify the international conference attendance to the management or supervisor) (n=4), and time away from work (n=4).

Table 4
Barriers to Attending In-person International Conferences

Barriers to In-person Conference (1-3 Multiple Select)	n	%	Margin of Error^a (±)
Lack of financial support	232	39.12%	3.93%
Language barriers	48	8.09%	2.19%
Traveling (incl. visa, trip arrangements)	93	15.68%	2.93%
Difficulty in scheduling or have to use personal time	74	12.48%	2.66%
Lack of supervisor support	30	5.06%	1.76%
Time away from family	35	5.90%	1.90%
Unfamiliarity with overseas destinations or safety concerns	36	6.07%	1.92%
Other (please specify)	36	6.07%	1.92%
No barriers	9	1.52%	0.98%
Total	593	100%	

^a Margin of error for sample proportion is calculated at a 95% confidence interval with n=593.

A follow-up question was posed to the respondents regarding the availability of institutional funding for attending an international conference. It was found that the availability of funding varied considerably across institutions (see **Table 5**). Notably, 29.8% (n=84) of the respondents reported that institutional funding was "not available at all."

Table 5
Institutional Funding Availability

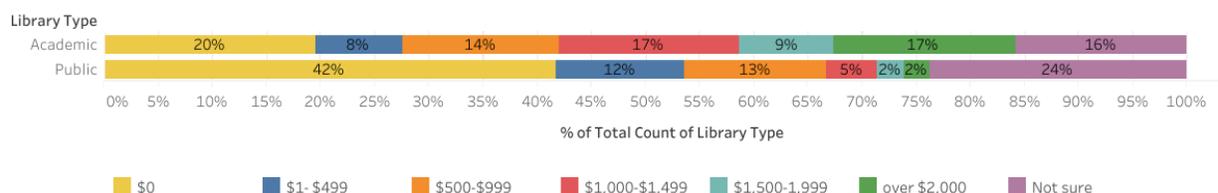
Institutional Funding Available	n	%	Margin of Error^a (±)
Not available at all	84	29.79%	5.34%
Available, but less than \$500	27	9.57%	3.43%
More than 500, but less than \$1,000	39	13.83%	4.03%
More than \$1,000, but less than \$1,500	29	10.28%	3.54%
More than \$1,500, but less than \$2,000	15	5.32%	2.62%
More than \$2000	29	10.28%	3.54%
Not sure	59	20.92%	4.75%
Total		100%	282

^a Margin of error for sample proportion is calculated at a 95% confidence interval with sample size n=282.

A cross-tabulation analysis was carried out to understand the differences in funding levels across library types, especially between academic and public libraries. The data presented in **Figure 2** highlights that there is a significant disparity between public and academic library respondents in terms of funding availability for attending international conferences. Specifically, 42% of public library respondents reported that funding was entirely unavailable for attending in-person international conferences, whereas only 20% of academic library respondents reported the same. Academic library respondents had access to a higher percentage of funding overall. Notably, 17% of academic library respondents reported having potential funding of over \$2,000 available, whereas only 2% of public library respondents reported having access to funding at this level.

Figure 2

Funding Level Comparison between Academic and Public Libraries



The respondents were also asked about the barriers to attending virtual international conferences. In contrast to in-person conferences, the top barriers identified were "different time zones" (25.9%; n=152), "unaware of the conference opportunities" (22.5%; n=132), and "conflicts in schedule" (17.9%; n=105), as outlined in **Table 6**.

Table 6

Barriers to Attending Virtual International Conferences

Barriers to Virtual Conference (1-3 Multiple Select)	n	%	Margin of Error ^a (±)
Lack of financial support	69	11.75%	2.61%
Language barriers	37	6.30%	1.97%
Different time zone	152	25.89%	3.54%
Conflicts in schedule	105	17.89%	3.10%
Lack of supervisor support	13	2.21%	1.19%
Unaware of the conference opportunities	132	22.49%	3.38%
Unfamiliarity with international conference settings	24	4.09%	1.60%
Other (please specify)	18	3.07%	1.40%
No barriers	37	6.30%	1.97%
Total	587	100.00%	

^a Margin of error for sample proportion is calculated at a 95% confidence interval with n=587.

When comparing the barriers encountered by respondents in both in-person and virtual conferences, the data highlights a notable difference in financial barriers (see **Table 7**). Specifically, 24.5% (n=69 out of 282) of respondents reported facing financial obstacles in attending virtual conferences. This percentage reflects a 57.8% reduction compared to the prevalence of financial barriers experienced in the context of in-person conferences. However, it is worth noting that "conflicts in schedule" emerged as a more prominent barrier in the virtual setting (11% increase). In addition, about 10% more respondents selected "no barriers" for the virtual conferences than for the in-person conference (details in **Table 7**). Varied responses were provided by the respondents as "other" barriers, which included internet connection cost, technology issues, trouble staying engaged (multi-tasking while working), computer screen fatigue, virtual meeting fatigue/exhaustion, work/life distractions, and perceived lower priority. Several respondents just expressed their dislike (n=5) of virtual conferences compared to in-person conferences.

Table 7

A Comparison of the Same Barriers between In-person and Virtual International Conferences

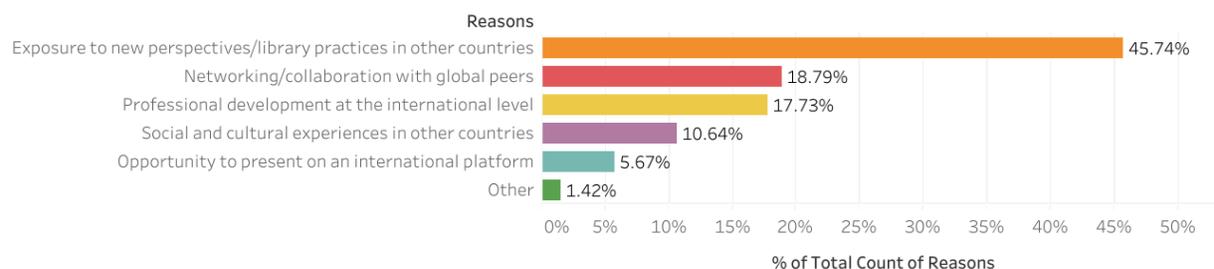
Barriers (1-3 Multiple Select)	In-person Conference			Virtual Conference			% Change
	n	% (of n=282)	Margin of Error ^a (±)	n	% (of n=282)	Margin of Error ^a (±)	
Lack of financial support	232	82.27%	4.46%	69	24.47%	5.02%	-57.80%
Language barriers	48	17.02%	4.39%	37	13.12%	3.94%	-3.90%
Conflicts in schedule	74	26.24%	5.13%	10 5	37.23%	5.64%	10.99%
Lack of supervisor support	30	10.64%	3.60%	13	4.61%	2.45%	-6.03%
Unfamiliarity concerns	36	12.77%	3.89%	24	8.51%	3.26%	-4.26%
No barriers	9	3.19%	2.05%	37	13.12%	3.94%	9.93%

^amargin of error for sample proportion is calculated at a 95% confidence interval with sample size n=282.

Reasons and Decision-influencing Factors

A single-choice question was utilized to get insights into respondents' most distinct reason for attending international conferences. As indicated in **Figure 3**, "exposure to new perspectives and library practices in other countries" was the most significant reason (45.7%; n=129), followed by "networking/collaboration with global peers" (18.8%; n=53), "professional development at the international level" (17.7%; n=50), and "social and cultural experiences in other countries" (10.6%; n=30). Only 5.7% (n=16) ranked "opportunity to present on an international platform" as their most important reason for attending international conferences.

Figure 3
Reasons for Attending an International Conference



The survey also included questions about the key factors influencing respondents' decisions regarding in-person versus virtual international conference participation. Based on the survey responses, three key factors emerged as the primary influences for attending in-person conferences: the conference's overall cost (including registration, travel, and accommodation) (24.2%; n=186), conference themes, topics, or its reputation (22.5%; n=173), and availability of financial support (20.7%; n=159). In contrast, the top three factors that influence decisions to participate in virtual conferences are the conference's themes, topics, or reputation (30.6%; n=219), conference schedule and timing (23.6%; n=169), and cost of the conference registration (22.2%; n=159) (details in **Table 8**). When comparing the factors that influence attendance at both in-person and virtual conferences, the availability of financial support appears to be less important for virtual conferences. However, the overall cost of the conference remains a significant factor for both types of conferences. Conversely, schedule/timing, conference's themes, topics, reputation, as well as conference speakers or participants carry greater weight in decision-making for virtual conferences than for in-person.

Table 8
Comparison of Decision-influencing Factors for In-person vs. Virtual Conferences

Decision-influencing Factors (1-3 Multiple Select)	In-person Conference			Virtual Conference		
	Count	%	Margin of Error ^a (±)	Count	%	Margin of Error ^b (±)
Availability of financial support	159	20.68%	2.86%	80	11.17%	2.31%
Overall cost of the conference	186	24.19%	3.03%	159	22.21%	3.04%
Conference themes, topics, or its reputation	173	22.50%	2.95%	219	30.59%	3.38%
Conference schedule and timing	74	9.62%	2.08%	169	23.60%	3.11%
Conference speakers or participants	39	5.07%	1.55%	80	11.17%	2.31%
Other (please specify)	13	1.69%	0.91%	9	1.26%	0.82%

Distance of conference location	53	6.89%	1.79%		
Attractiveness of conference location	72	9.36%	2.06%		
Total	769	100%		716	100%

^a margin of error for sample proportion is calculated at a 95% confidence interval with n=769.

^b margin of error for sample proportion is calculated at a 95% confidence interval with n=716.

As a follow-up question to the decision factors for in-person international conferences, the survey asked about the optimal time period for attending the conference. 41.5% (n=117) of respondents expressed a preference for conferences held during the summer months (June to August). However, a considerable proportion of participants remain uncertain about the ideal timing (25.9%; n=73).

Support Needs and Preferences

The survey questionnaire included five distinct support options that could be potentially facilitated through ALA or IIRRT. Respondents were asked to rank the support options that would provide the greatest benefit and enable library staff to participate in international conferences. The results indicate that a majority of respondents (57.1%; n=161) prefer receiving monthly newsletters about conference opportunities and proposals (see **Table 9**). The survey also found that 40-45% of respondents welcomed the options including “organizing webinars to navigate conference opportunities and prepare proposals” (40.1%), “creating a listserv to share conference information and facilitate discussions” (45.4%), and “creating a library guide on international conference opportunities and sharing tips” (45%). While the survey did not include financial support as an option, several respondents (n=10) identified the need for such support in the forms of scholarships, grants, or information on funding opportunities. Additionally, respondents identified other needs, such as “raising awareness of the benefits of attending international conferences”, “increasing management's support”, “advocating for virtual delivery or recording of international conferences to reduce carbon footprint”, and “encouraging hosts to organize hybrid conferences to facilitate attendance from abroad.”

Table 9

Support Needs for Engaging in International Conferences

Support Needs (1-3 Multiple Select)	Count	% of Choice (n=628)	Margin of Error ^a (±)	% of Sample (n=282)	Margin of Error ^b (±)
Organize webinars to help navigate conference opportunities and prepare for conference or proposals	113	17.99%	4.48%	40.07%	5.72%
Create a Listserv to share conference information and facilitate discussions	128	20.38%	4.70%	45.39%	5.81%
Create a library guide on international	127	20.22%	4.69%	45.04%	5.81%

conference opportunities and share tips

Send out monthly newsletters about conference opportunities, calls for proposals, etc.	161	25.64%	5.10%	57.09%	5.78%
Connect and post international conference opportunities on social media platforms	76	12.10%	3.81%	26.95%	5.18%
Other (please specify)	23	3.66%	2.19%	8.16%	3.19%
Total	628	100%			

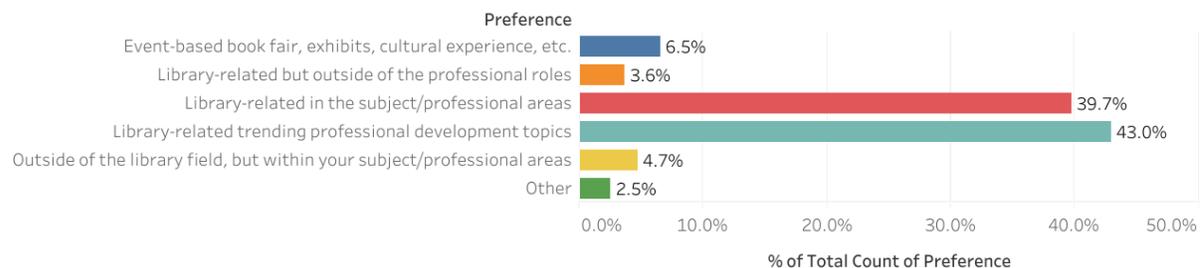
^a margin of error for sample proportion is calculated at a 95% confidence interval with n=628.

^b margin of error for sample proportion is calculated at a 95% confidence interval with n=282.

Regarding preferred conference types, participants were asked to select one option from the five distinct choices provided. As illustrated in **Figure 4**, librarians are primarily interested in conferences related to their profession, either on trending professional development topics (43%; n=119) or within their subject or professional areas (39.7%; n=110). Only 6.5% (n=18) of respondents are interested in event-based book fairs, exhibits, or cultural experience. Less than 5% of respondents are interested in the conference that is “outside other library fields, but within their subject or professional areas”, or “the conference that is library-related but outside of the professional roles” (3.6%), or “others” (2.5%).

Figure 4

Preferences by Conference Types



DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Our research suggests that there is a significant interest among respondents in attending international conferences, with nearly 70% indicating a strong desire to do so. However, among librarians who expressed interest, over 50% reported never or rarely attending such events. The most common obstacle cited was a lack of institutional funding, with 82% of librarians identifying it as a significant barrier. This barrier was more pronounced in public libraries compared to academic librarians. While funding is less of a concern for virtual conferences, nearly 25% of librarians still identified it as a barrier to attending virtual international conferences. Librarians cited exposure to new perspectives and library practices in other countries as the primary reason for attending international conferences. In terms of making decisions about attending such events, factors such as the overall cost of the conference, the

conference theme and reputation, and the availability of financial support were found to significantly influence librarians' decisions to attend in-person international conferences. While financial support is less considered when making decisions about attending virtual conferences, the overall cost of the conference still remains a significant influence for 22% of respondents. The research highlights the strong interest among librarians in leveraging international conferences to broaden their horizons and expand their professional development opportunities. However, we also found that there are significant barriers and challenges for librarians to pursue international conference opportunities. The research brings attention to the disparity between the support provided by public and academic libraries and calls for further efforts to address these barriers and promote greater equity and inclusivity in international conference participation.

The survey asked respondents for suggestions on how to help librarians participate in international conferences. Based on their feedback and our previous data analysis, six areas were identified for institutional support that have the potential to encourage, enhance, and improve librarians' participation in international conferences:

(a) Funding support

One area of institutional support that could encourage librarians to participate in international conferences is funding support. The survey results showed that lack of funding is a major barrier for librarians to attend in-person conferences. To address this, librarians suggested providing multiple funding opportunities in the form of grants, awards, scholarships, or vendor sponsorship. They also expressed the need for ALA to be a strong advocate for institutional support and provide resources and strategies to help them justify funding requests. Additionally, librarians would benefit from information support on international conference grant opportunities within or outside of ALA or from the event organizers. Given the high cost of attending in-person conferences, some librarians also suggested exploring low-cost or free virtual international conference opportunities, while recognizing that in-person conferences offer unique cultural experiences that cannot be replicated virtually.

(b) Advocacy support

Librarians expressed the need for help in raising library management's awareness of the benefits gained by attending international conferences. ALA can play a vital role in advocating for librarians with international conference organizers, such as negotiating discounted registration fees or advocating for virtual delivery. ALA can set standards for recording international conferences to reduce carbon footprint, resolve time zone issues, and scheduling challenges. Also suggested was keeping librarians aware of conference recordings and engaging with local library associations to encourage members to have "watch parties" or discussion sessions based on the international conference content relevant to their membership. Additionally, ALA can collaborate with international conference organizers and encourage them to offer hybrid conferences to increase attendance from abroad.

(c) Informational support

Providing information on international conference opportunities (including virtual conferences), calls for proposals, and funding opportunities on one convenient website will greatly support librarians in their participation in international conferences. Librarians have also expressed the need for information related to international travel, such as passport requirements,

travel arrangements, costs, and how to deal with medical or emergency issues. Knowledge sharing through annotated lists, blogs, listservs, webinars, and library guides can also be a valuable resource for librarians seeking tips and past experiences related to conference participation. Sending monthly newsletters about conference opportunities and calls for proposals can further enhance information sharing. To meet librarians' preferences, information gathering can focus on library-related conferences on trending professional development topics such as diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) issues, or on library-related subjects or professional areas such as copyright or collection-sharing. Many librarians have stressed the importance of timely information, as knowing about conference opportunities early on will assist in planning and funding requests for attending conferences.

(d) Capability building

To support librarians who plan to submit proposals and present at international conferences, the institution can provide training, workshops, or webinar sessions to help build their capabilities. These sessions can help librarians become more prepared and confident in presenting to audiences from different backgrounds, as well as handling unique situations that may arise during international conferences, such as presentation translation and dealing with poster mailing, carrying, or printing. Providing such training opportunities will help librarians to feel more confident and prepared when presenting at international conferences.

(e) Network building

In addition to providing useful information, institutions can also create a network for librarians to share information and support each other. This network can help coordinate attendance at international conferences and reduce lodging costs by connecting potential roommates. Librarians would appreciate networking opportunities before or after conference participation. One idea is to establish a "buddy system" for those new to international travel or to create a cohort of librarians attending international conferences. Research shows that attending conferences with colleagues enriches the attendees' experience, making the conference more friendly and the attendees feel more accountable. The shared experience often positively impacts the attendees' relationships with colleagues, as they discuss the content after being immediately exposed to it (Dumbell, 2019).

(f) Awareness building

To effectively address the support needs of librarians, it is essential to prioritize awareness building efforts. Transparent and effective communication channels can be established to ensure that librarians are well-informed about the various opportunities available to them. In order to achieve this, intentional marketing efforts are necessary to promote awareness of conference opportunities and to engage library leadership in supporting their employees' participation in international conferences. One effective way to promote awareness is by collecting and sharing testimonials about the value of international professional development. These testimonials can illustrate the positive changes and innovations that international conference experiences have brought to the library, as well as how they have enriched librarians' professional development. By highlighting the benefits of international conference participation, more librarians and institutions may be encouraged to take advantage of these opportunities.

In addition to supporting ALA members' participation in international conferences outside of the United States, it is important to recognize that ALA has a large number of international members from over 100 countries. Therefore, providing more opportunities and support for international members' engagement at ALA can help to bring diverse perspectives to the organization. One way to achieve this is by inviting international librarians to visit U.S. libraries through visiting librarian programs, sister library programs, or library exchange programs. Coordinated efforts and collaboration among ALA communities that focus on international engagement, such as IRRT or ACRL European Studies Section, can further advance opportunities for librarians to share experiences and knowledge across borders.

CONCLUSION

This study explored the attitudes, interests, and needs of librarians in attending international conferences, based on a survey of ALA members. The findings indicated that while there is a strong interest in attending international conferences, more than half of the respondents never or rarely attend such conferences. Lack of institutional funding emerged as the most significant barrier to participation, especially in public libraries. Nevertheless, exposure to new perspectives and practices from other countries is highly valued by librarians, and this remains the most compelling reason for attending international conferences. Factors such as overall cost, conference theme and reputation, and availability of financial support also play a crucial role in participation decision-making. Our research underscores the need for greater support and resources to help librarians pursue international conference opportunities. We recommend that professional institutions provide funding, advocacy, and informational support to enhance librarians' participation in international conferences, which can broaden their horizons and expand their professional development opportunities. Ultimately, these efforts will contribute to building the capabilities, networks, and awareness of librarians within the profession, and promote the growth and advancement of the library field.

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Appendix

Survey questionnaire

1. What is your interest level in attending international conferences hosted outside of the U.S. including both virtual and in-person? (jointly referred to as “international conferences” hereafter)?
 - Extremely interested
 - Very interested
 - Moderately interested
 - Slightly interested
 - Not at all interested
2. How frequently do you attend international conferences?
 - Very Frequently (on average more than once per year)
 - Frequently (on average once per year)
 - Occasionally (once in 2-3 years)
 - Rarely (once in more than 3 years)
 - Never (haven’t participated in any international conferences before)
3. What are the **top** barriers for you to attending an **in-person** international conference? (Select 1-3 answers)
 - Lack of financial support
 - Language barriers
 - Traveling (incl. visa, trip arrangements)

- Difficulty in scheduling or have to use personal time
 - Lack of supervisor support
 - Time away from family
 - Unfamiliarity with overseas destinations or safety concerns
 - Other (please specify)
 - No barriers
4. What are the **top** barriers for you to attending a **virtual** international conference? (Select 1-3 answers)
- Lack of financial support
 - Language barriers
 - Different time zone
 - Conflicts in schedule
 - Lack of supervisor support
 - Unaware of the conference opportunities
 - Unfamiliarity with international conference settings
 - Other (please specify)
 - No barriers
5. How much institutional funding is available for you to attend an international conference?
- Not available at all
 - Available, but less than \$500
 - More than 500, but less than \$1,000
 - More than \$1,000, but less than \$1,500
 - More than \$1,500, but less than \$2,000
 - More than \$2000
 - Not sure
6. What is the **most important** reason for you to attend an international conference?

- o Professional development at the international level
 - o Networking/collaboration with global peers
 - o Opportunity to present on an international platform
 - o Exposure to new perspectives and library practices in other countries
 - o Social and cultural experiences in other countries
 - o Other (please specify)
7. What are the **best** ways that the International Relations Round Table (ALA-IRRT) can support you in engaging in international conferences? (Select 1-3 answers)
- Organize webinars to help navigate conference opportunities and prepare for conferences or proposals
 - Create a Listserv to share conference information and facilitate discussions
 - Create a library guide on international conference opportunities and share tips
 - Send out monthly newsletters about conference opportunities, call for proposals, etc.
 - Connect and post international conference opportunities on social media platforms
 - Other (please specify)
8. What are the **top** factors that influence your decision for **in-person** conference participation? (Select 1-3 answers)
- Availability of financial support
 - Overall cost of the conference (registration, travel, and accommodation)
 - Distance of conference location
 - Attractiveness of conference location
 - Conference themes, topics, or its reputation
 - Conference schedule and timing
 - Conference speakers or participants
 - Other (please specify)
9. When is the best time period for you to attend an **in-person** international conference?

- o March - May
 - o June - August
 - o September - November
 - o December - February
 - o Not Sure
 - o Other (please specify)
10. What are the **top** factors that influence your decision for **virtual** conference participation?
(Select 1-3 answers)
- Availability of financial support
 - Cost of the conference registration
 - Conference themes, topics, or its reputation
 - Conference schedule and timing
 - Conference speakers or participants
 - Other (please specify)
11. What **types** of international conferences are you most interested in?
- o Event-based book fair, exhibits, cultural experience, etc.
 - o Library-related trending professional development topics
 - o Library-related in the subject/professional areas
 - o Library-related but outside of the professional roles
 - o Outside of the library field, but within your subject/professional areas
 - o Other (please specify)
12. What is your **primary** library professional area or job function?
- o Cataloging or technical services
 - o Acquisition, collection, or electronic resources
 - o Outreach or engagement
 - o Instruction or reference
 - o Systems and information technology
 - o Access services
 - o Library management/supervision

- o Special collection or archive
- o General services (mixed roles)
- o Other

13. Which type of library are you from?

- o Public
- o Academic
- o School
- o Government
- o Special (Corporate, Medical, Law, Religious, Museum, Private business, etc.)
- o Other

14. How many years have you been in the library profession?

- o 0–5
- o 6–10
- o 11–15
- o 16–20
- o Longer than 21

What are your ideas or suggestions for IRRT to help ALA members participate in international conferences?