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An Outsider Inside: A Louisiana State University Student at MAC 2015

By Steven Wade, Louisiana State University



Steven Wade

At the beginning of my last semester studying archives at Louisiana State University, the tough realities of the job search suddenly became very real. On top of the usual challenge of distinguishing myself from the dozens and dozens of other qualified applicants out there, I knew I wanted to find work in the

Midwest, outside the circle of contacts I had made in the Southeast. As the saying goes, “It’s not what you know, it’s who you know,” so I set out to the MAC 2015 Annual Meeting in Lexington, Kentucky, to get to know some of the people there. I am originally from Kentucky, so while I was coming home in a way, it was hard not to feel like an outsider knowing I would probably be the only attendee with Louisiana on my name badge.

I’ve always been a quiet person. Striking up a conversation with someone I’ve never met before is a bit like jumping into a very cold lake. I try to avoid it, but after the initial discomfort, it’s not so bad. I suspect other aspiring archivists and librarians feel similarly. Reporting on a survey of library professionals, Mary Jane Scherdin (1994) found that more than 60 percent self-identified as introverts, compared to only 35 percent in the general population.¹ As much as some of us may prefer the quiet solitude of the stacks, a professional conference offers the opportunity to come out of our shells and mingle with colleagues, share what we’ve been working on, and learn some new tricks of the trade.

Networking is a big part of attending a conference, so after I arrived in Lexington, I made a point of getting to the conference hotel early, with the goal of forcing myself into some kind of interaction during the 30 minutes before the first session. As it turns out, finding someone you already know can be a great way to break the ice and meet new people; in less than five minutes I ran into several people I knew from the 2014 SAA conference in Washington, DC. Another good way to meet people is the MAC Pals program, designed to pair up first-time MAC attendees, like me, with more experienced members. I found that

even when my Pal, Michael Doylen, wasn’t around to introduce me, I could simply say his name and everyone seemed to know who he was.

The job search was a motivating factor for me to attend the conference, so one session I was determined not to miss was called “Networking Your Way into the Profession.” In this informal, discussion-style session, several hiring managers and young professionals offered some insider tips and advice on how to take advantage of internships and professional contacts in the quest to land your first full-time paid position. As it turns out, working hard in school, getting good grades, and racking up a lot of debt won’t result in employment falling into your lap out of some mythical job tree. That’s just reality. To get the rest of the way there, you might have to offer your services in a temporary, part-time, or voluntary capacity until this potential future employer knows you well and can find the money to pay you. Each presenter shared his or her own personal experiences of struggle and rejection. One presenter told about waiting tables for several years until she finally got the job she wanted. The good news is that there are ways into the profession for those who work hard and put themselves out there.

The MAC Annual Meeting isn’t just for new professionals, though. If you’re already into your first year or two of professional work, facing the challenges of processing a collection, a big appraisal project, or trying to get published, MAC meetings are your opportunity to connect with others in a similar situation. I learned about new ways to process and preserve oversized materials, solutions for preserving audiovisual materials, and how to clean up and reprocess a collection after a team of inexperienced volunteers had worked on it. Conference presentations can teach you things you didn’t learn in school or have forgotten since. Personally, I’m more of a visual learner, so I value sessions that demonstrate new technology or techniques. In their presentation, “Not Everything Digital Is a Disk Image,” Bertram Lyons and Jason Evans Groth demonstrated to a packed audience how to use simple tools like a command prompt and a spreadsheet to great effect when profiling collections of files.

One of the things that appealed to me about the MAC Annual Meeting in Lexington was the variety of ways that information was presented. The sessions, from smaller discussion-based talks to larger lecture-style presentations, appealed to all sorts of learning styles. If you prefer to browse, student and professional poster galleries are a must, while still allowing you to stop and talk with the presenter when a topic catches your eye. Several industry vendors, such as Ancestry.com and Hollinger, had tables set up as well.

I don't want to give the impression that a conference is only about what you can get out of it. There are plenty of opportunities to give back as well. Annual Meetings provide a huge audience of people willing and ready to hear about what you've been doing. If you're not up for leading a session, a poster is a good way to present a processing project or original research. It is very rewarding to have someone take interest in your work, and you never know how your insight might help someone.

Finally, no professional conference is complete without a little square dancing, right? According to the conference program, the opening reception promised "delectable Kentucky-inspired food," "a vintage-inspired photo booth," and "a live band called the Goodbye Girls." As

people began to trickle into the Carrick House located on Lexington's historic Third Street corridor, the first order of business was to line up for the open bar. After securing an Ale 8 (a delicious ginger and citrus soda found only in Kentucky), I set out to converse. Before long, the hall was full and the band took the stage. It took some determined coaxing from the singers and a little encouragement from the free wine and beer, but soon a good crowd had formed on the dance floor and the square dancing lesson began.

If you are currently in school or new to the profession, much can be gained by attending a professional conference such as the MAC Annual Meeting. I encourage everyone, but especially students, to do what you can to attend! Drive 10 or more hours, overcome your inner reservations, and introduce yourself to the world of archival professionals. The experience will open doors and give you the opportunity to speak, listen, and learn about what is happening in the field.

Note

1. Mary Jane Scherдин, *Discovering Librarians: Profiles of a Profession* (Chicago: Association of College and Research Libraries, 1994), 132.

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