

Report on SLA 2011 – Sarah Caldwell, MLIS 2012

Attending the 2011 Special Libraries Association (SLA) Annual Conference was a great experience, and I'm very grateful to have had the opportunity to participate, thanks to the Frost-Gershenfeld SLA Travel Award.

One of my goals for the conference was to expand my understanding of what special librarianship is or what it can be, and a number of sessions and conversations helped me do that. On the first day I was drawn to a session titled "Embedded Librarianship"—that was a new term for me and I was curious. What I learned was really interesting, and I'm intrigued by the idea of librarians being more integrated into a particular team or department within an organization rather than existing in a separate "library/information services" realm. A separate library/information services unit may be more vulnerable (to cuts and questions of relevance) than individuals placed within teams. Over breakfast with a librarian at National Public Radio, I learned that their physical library has essentially disappeared and that the five research librarians are now embedded with the staff for different programs or areas.

Another new concept for me was "knowledge services" (along with "knowledge management," "knowledge development," and "knowledge strategy"). These terms came up in a couple of sessions that were heavy on the "consultant-speak" but were still really interesting to me in terms of learning about how people (information professionals) are out there pushing companies to recognize that their business strategy needs to be linked to a knowledge strategy. And according to the presenters, more and more companies are buying into this idea. I also spoke with a number of consultants/independent information professionals, and it was interesting to hear about the range of projects and experiences people have had. While I don't see myself becoming a consultant, it was fascinating to hear what these people are up to.

Another of my goals was to dig more deeply into government libraries, and there were ample opportunities to do so. I attended a session on mining public records led by two Department of Justice librarians. They presented a staggering array of resources (all online and most of them free) for finding information on individuals (birth/death records, marriage/divorce records, assets held, corporate affiliations, companies/charities, court records/filings, and more), and attendees were very interested and even grateful. It drove home the point that we can't all be experts in everything and that it makes so much sense to share the fruits of that much work (they've been using and compiling these lists for years). I think I still have the idea that as an information professional I should be able to find anything without any help. Wrong! It makes so much sense to rely on other people's expertise so that we can work smarter.

I also attended the Division of Government Information Business Meeting where I met the current chair and the chair-elect. I had volunteered in advance to distribute

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a brief survey to attendees and collect completed surveys after the meeting, which was a good way to meet a few people. Blane Dressy, executive director of the Federal Library and Information Center Committee (FLICC) and the Federal Library and Information Network (FEDLINK), spoke after the business part of the meeting was completed. Amongst other things, I learned about the Government Info Pro blog, a resource I think I'll be checking frequently in the future.

Another main focus of the conference was (drum roll) ... networking! The most fruitful conversations were the ones I had with people I had contacted before the conference, and I think for future conferences I will always try to have some appointments set up in advance. You know you're going to get the person's undivided attention and you don't have to try to catch someone as he/she is racing from one event to another. It makes for a much more relaxing exchange! I met with an NPR librarian, a librarian at the Pew Charitable Trusts, and an independent consultant, spending from 30-60 minutes with each one of them. I had also exchanged emails in advance with another consultant who in turn put me in touch with some students who share similar interests, and I was able to have lunch with them one day. I attended the Western States Chapters reception and the International reception and had some enjoyable conversations with a variety of people.

Since returning from Philadelphia, I participated in a "report-out" with the PNW SLA Chapter, and I joined the listservs for the Division of Government Information and the Washington, D.C. SLA Chapter. I'm continuing to explore nonprofit libraries in the Seattle area, and I want to look into internships in D.C. for next summer (I learned that at NPR, for example, you can be an intern up to six months after you've completed your master's degree). Next week I start an internship at the EPA Library here in Seattle, and I look forward to that hands-on experience in a special library.

Not that I had any doubts ahead of time, but I absolutely see the value of attending conferences, as both a student and a seasoned professional. Many of the people around me were very engaged in the sessions and other conference events and were clearly getting a lot out of it. I look forward to my next opportunity!