

# An Exploratory Study of State and Regional Health Science Library Professional Associations

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**abstract:** Given challenges posed by the COVID-19 pandemic and existing challenges for academic professional associations, the Michigan Health Sciences Library Association (MHLA) surveyed the leadership of health science library associations in the United States to investigate how smaller state and regional associations engage and add value for members. The survey revealed many respondents are planning to or have returned to the frequency of programming delivered prior to the pandemic and are increasingly providing virtual offerings. These findings will impact the strategic planning for small library associations as they explore ways to recruit and retain membership.

## Introduction

Health sciences libraries, in service of academic institutions and health systems, provide critical resources and information for students, faculty, and practitioners of health professions. As many librarians in this field work within small libraries or serve as solo practitioners, it is important for them to be connected to other professionals in the field doing similar work. Traditionally, the platform for this connection has been the professional, membership-driven library association. Many such associations exist for librarians of all types and provide a wide variety of benefits to their membership. Health science library associations are the critical network for librarians who assist in addressing clinical questions and evidence-based information for health research and at the point of need for health care.<sup>1</sup>

*portal: Libraries and the Academy*, Vol. 26, No. 1 (2026), pp. 109–125.

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However, membership-based professional library associations are facing significant challenges. One such organization is the Michigan Health Sciences Library Association (MHSLA). In response to declining funding, staffing, and increasing competition with other available associations, the librarians of the MHSLA Research Committee decided to investigate these issues within a larger context by reviewing the literature and surveying those in leadership roles of state or regional US health science library associations.

### Study Objectives

The members of the MHSLA Research Committee and an invited research colleague from outside the state collaborated on this project. The purpose of the study was to investigate the following research questions:

- What services and benefits do other state and regional health science library associations offer their members?
- How has the COVID pandemic impacted these benefits and services?

### Literature Review

Professional library associations, like other membership organizations, “exist to achieve the common goals of [their] members” and will only persist if those members derive sufficient value for their time, energy, and fees.<sup>2</sup> There are many benefits to membership in such library associations, which have historically provided critical resources and opportunities for the growth of individual librarians and the profession as a whole.<sup>3</sup> These benefits include professional development, ongoing training, publication and presentation outlets, and the ability to network with other professionals.<sup>4</sup> There are many opportunities for professional involvement in library associations, from large international and national organizations to smaller local or regional associations.<sup>5</sup> For health sciences librarians specifically, mentoring and continuing education (CE) provided by professional associations can assist in the transition to work in this field.<sup>6</sup>

Membership is declining or stagnant in nearly every professional library association.<sup>7</sup> While COVID-19 contributed to this decline, in 2023 Robert Stevens et al. reported that memberships in professional academic associations were trending downward, even prior to the pandemic.<sup>8</sup> Some reasons for this decline include decreasing financial support from workplaces, retirements combined with generational differences in the perception of the role of professional associations, and trouble seeing the value of such memberships.<sup>9</sup> Librarians are finding more informal ways to connect, network, and learn from one another. Avenues include social media, low-cost or free webinars, independent library conferences or unconferences, and communities of practice; many of these alternative professional opportunities are available online.<sup>10</sup>

In their 2021 survey of business librarianship associations, Betty Garrison and Steve Cramer found that the two most prominent markers of organization success are effectively maintaining relevancy and providing targeted programming for members. Members consistently rated programming as one of the most important benefits of membership in a library organization, followed by networking and conferences. Conversely, the largest disappointments in professional library association membership were poor communication



and few invitations to get more involved.<sup>11</sup> A lack of communication and relevant programming were also identified as major challenges for the local and regional library associations in India.<sup>12</sup> Member engagement is critical to the success of an organization; James Shedlock and Elizabeth Perkin McQuillen found that Medical Library Association (MLA) members who attended meetings or otherwise engaged with the organization more frequently were also more likely to vote in association elections.<sup>13</sup>

Notably, many respondents of Garrison and Cramer's survey emphasized the value of "smaller, local, or specialized organizations" and that they preferred these associations to their larger counterparts overall.<sup>14</sup> Other studies have also demonstrated the benefits of membership in smaller library associations that focus on specific subject areas, functions, or geographic regions. One of the biggest benefits is reduced cost; often membership fees and programming costs (such as travel and registration for state, local, or regional conferences) are much lower than those of national organizations.<sup>15</sup> These were also the findings of Laura Soito and Amy Jankowski, who in 2023 reviewed websites of professional library associations and found that local or regional associations were more likely to focus on the monetary benefits of a smaller organization. In addition, there are networking advantages to spending time with librarians who do very similar work or who are in similar locations.<sup>16</sup> Other rewards of membership in these smaller associations include increased opportunities for service, mentorship, and easier transitions to leadership roles within the organization.<sup>17</sup>

Considering declining engagement among members, the New Jersey Library Association College and University Section / Association of College and Research Libraries New Jersey chapter (NJLA CUS / ACR-NJ) formed a Membership Assessment Task Force, which undertook a survey and focus groups of its membership. They discovered confusion about how their organization operates and its purpose; members seemed to expect that the smaller association should be providing services and resources at a similar level to a larger organization. However, members did show a desire for inclusion and belonging, to be part of the profession and to serve, and were very interested in the professional development opportunities their membership could provide. The Task Force made several recommendations, including improving communication and marketing, as well as partnering with other library organizations and "maintain[ing] collaborative relationships" with them.<sup>18</sup>

Associations can provide additional value beyond the transactional (such as programming, conferences, and formal networking and mentorship programs in exchange for a membership fee). It has been shown that participation in library learning communities "positively impacted" participants' "attitudes and beliefs."<sup>19</sup> Although associations are not the same as learning communities, it is reasonable to assume that librarian members could derive similar positive feelings about the profession from their memberships. Susan Henczel's 2016 survey of national library professional association members found that a perceived impact of association membership for individuals included attitude and

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behavioral changes toward the profession, in addition to the benefits of professional development identified in other studies; Mary Dunne, similarly, found that members of the Health Science Libraries Group of Ireland found belonging to a professional community and gaining value as a profession to be very important to members, in addition to the programming opportunities and chances to gain expertise in the field.<sup>20</sup> It is clear from the literature that if they are to both recruit and retain a broad and diverse membership, professional library associations also need to provide motivation and purpose for their members, a sense of community and belonging, and leverage the personal satisfaction derived from making a noticeable difference to the profession.<sup>21</sup> These more intangible benefits must contribute to providing a value proposition for their members if a professional library association, big or small, is to thrive.<sup>22</sup>

## Background

MHSLA was founded in 1977, and its current mission "is to promote excellence in health sciences librarianship by providing its membership with opportunities for professional growth, fostering communication between members and their regions, facilitating resource sharing, increasing awareness of new technologies, providing high-quality continuing education, and conducting research in health sciences information services."<sup>23</sup> MHSLA is funded by individual and institutional memberships. As with most local, regional, and state professional associations, MHSLA is completely run by volunteers. The association members comprise the executive board, along with all the committee chairs and committee members.

However, not long after the formation of the association, reductions in the number of health sciences librarians were beginning to impact the successful completion of MHSLA's mission. A SWOT analysis conducted in 1987 identified a shrinking workforce as a key weakness.<sup>24</sup> This workforce reduction is largely due to practices such as the closing of standalone hospital libraries and creation of health systems with a few librarians supporting multiple hospitals.<sup>25</sup>

This trend, exacerbated by COVID-19, continues today. Furthermore, financial support for libraries and librarian professional development fluctuates. Through the years MHSLA has lost several academic and public library members due to a lack of financial support for professional development from their institutions. In 1978, the organization had 193 individual members; the current membership is 85. Where once MHSLA had nine regional groups, there are now two.<sup>26</sup> The active groups are the Metropolitan Detroit Medical Library Group (MDMLG) and the Western Michigan Health Sciences Libraries Association (WMHSLA); and, while these groups are active, they also compete with their parent organizations for volunteers' time and energy.

Many of the strengths that were identified in that 1987 SWOT analysis are no longer viable, as MHSLA no longer has sufficient volunteers or funding to drive them. The annual three-day conference, a highlight for many members, was reduced to two days in 2018 and presently is a one-day function. The membership newsletter, previously available biannually, ceased regular publication in 2021. Due to advances in technology and online systems, the formerly maintained Michigan Statewide Health Sciences Union List of Serials (MISHULS) and DOCLINE group are no longer needed, nor is the duplicate book program.<sup>27</sup> With fewer members, the pricing for consortial purchases increased.



While members are already stretched thin within MHSLA, there is even more competition for filling volunteer positions with the other professional library associations in the state and elsewhere. The Michigan Academic Library Association (MiALA), a state chapter of the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL), maintains a Health Sciences Interest Group whose goals are closely aligned with those of MHSLA, MDMLG, and WMHSLA. The Michigan Library Association has a robust advocacy presence within the state, duplicating the work of MHSLA's Outreach and Advocacy Committee. While CE classes and webinars from the Medical Library Association are still provided to members by MHSLA, this benefit could also be obtained through membership in the MLA itself.

With so many active professional associations in one state in addition to national options, membership overlap among the groups creates the challenges of offering unique programming and filling required leadership and committee chair positions within the organizations. As recruitment for volunteers to fill board and committee positions has become progressively more difficult and annual education conference expenses outpace the organization's financial status, MHSLA leadership has had to ask tough questions about the services and benefits provided to their membership. How can their group set themselves apart to justify their existence? Or, is it time to consolidate efforts?

As seen in the literature, many associations have engaged in information gathering, but most of the studies have sought input from members as a whole.<sup>28</sup> There is a lack of information from leaders of professional associations specifically or exclusively. In addition to what could be learned from the literature and its own history, the MHSLA Research Committee decided to investigate activities of state or regional health science library associations, particularly considering the impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic, from the perspective of those associations' leaders.

## Methods

The researchers developed a short, seven-question Qualtrics survey for state and regional health science libraries associations in the United States. Using website information, researchers created a list of non-MLA-chapter state and regional health science library associations and their leadership. Leaders were identified as those holding officer roles such as president, chair, vice president, vice chair, secretary, or treasurer. The researchers did not include the MLA chapters themselves, though these could also be considered regional associations, because they were interested in the smaller, independent state and regional library organizations.

For states where locating health associations proved challenging, researchers approached colleagues to request appropriate organizational leadership contacts to complete the survey. Researchers also reached out to existing state library associations more broadly if they had health science interest groups or other informal groups of health science librarians among their membership. Researchers emailed the survey link to each organization directly, including to all known officers. Respondents were also invited to forward the invitation to others serving in a leadership role for the association. In all, researchers primarily contacted leaders from state associations (n=31) and some from regional consortia or groups (n=9); some of these were smaller associations within a

state, and others were multi-state or focused on a multi-state metropolitan area. Some states had multiple groups, while other states had no associations at all and were not contacted for the survey.

The survey asked respondent questions about the types of programming offered to members before the pandemic, the frequency, whether that programming decreased during the pandemic, and if the organization planned to return to pre-pandemic operations. An open-ended question asked respondents to share other services or opportunities their associations provided to members beyond programming. Two demographic questions asked about the size of the organization and whether a health science interest group existed within a larger professional association such as MLA or ACRL. The final open-ended question allowed study participants to share other information about their association. See the Appendix for the full survey.

The survey, while not tested for accuracy and validity, was submitted to the Central Michigan University Institutional Review Board, which approved the exempt study protocol on August 14, 2023. Officers of the identified state and regional organizations received up to three email invitations (an initial invitation and up to two reminders) between mid-October and early December of 2023. As mentioned, multiple leaders per association were invited to respond, allowing the current study to benefit from the knowledge and perspective of multiple people.

## Results

### Study Demographics

The survey received 40 responses, representing health science library associations (HSLAs) across the United States, however, only 31 of those usable provided data. Many respondents' organizations are small, as seen in Figure 1. Fifty-eight percent of respondents (n=18) reported 50 or fewer members, and 32% (n=10) reported 51 to 100. Only 10% of respondents (n=3) reported a membership greater than 101.

Most respondents indicated that their HSLA was affiliated in some way with MLA; a few reported affiliations with other large organizations such as ACRL or the Special Libraries Association (SLA). Respondents provided more details on the types of programming and other services provided by their HSLA, both prior to the COVID pandemic and from 2022-present.

### Pre-Covid Programming

As shown in Figure 2, many respondents reported that their HSLA hosted an annual meeting or conference for its members before the COVID-19 pandemic, and many also provided in-person CE taught by members or outside speakers. Some respondents noted that their organizations hosted webinars (providing CE credit or not) as well as other in-person, non-CE programming such as journal clubs. Very few groups were providing more structured offerings such as professional development or training courses.

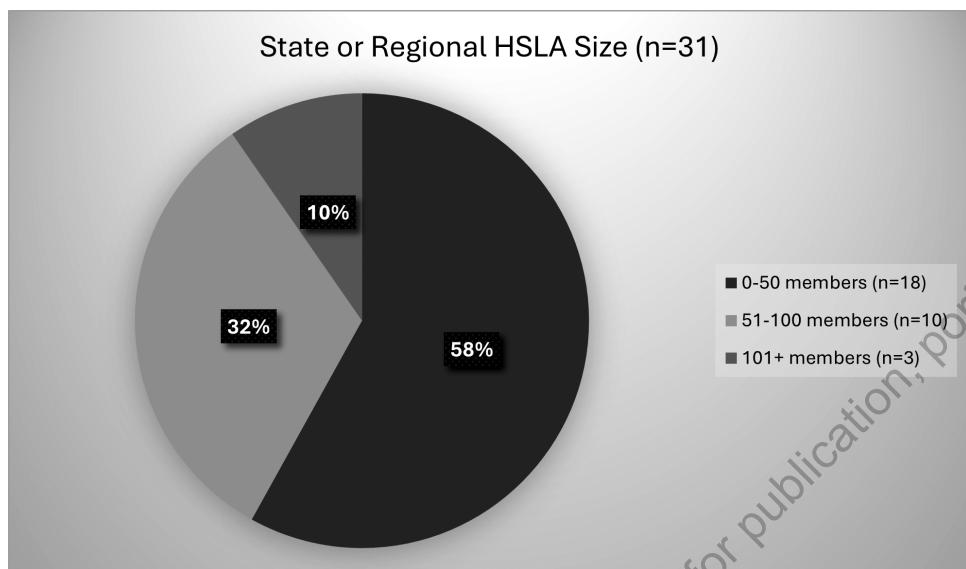


Figure 1. Size of respondent health science library associations in the US.

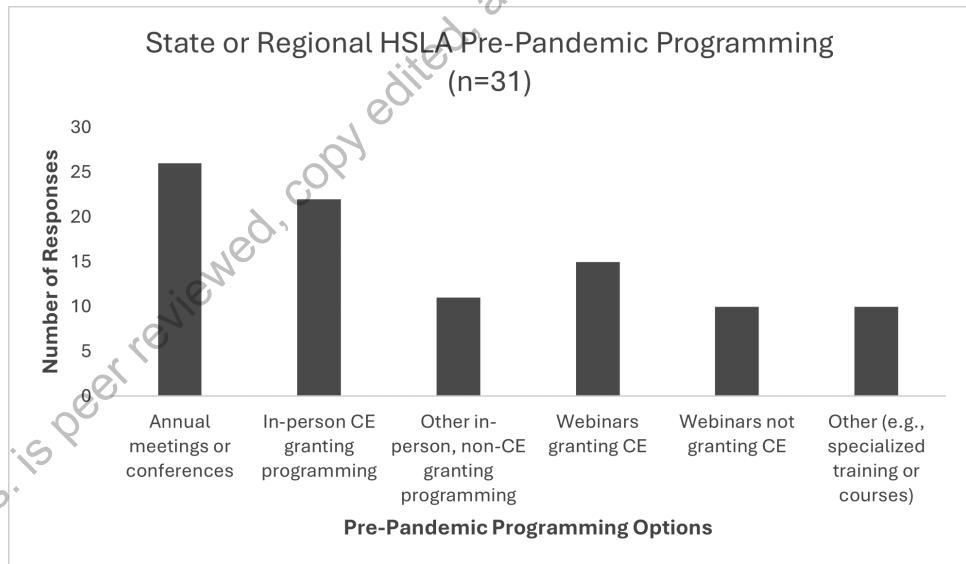
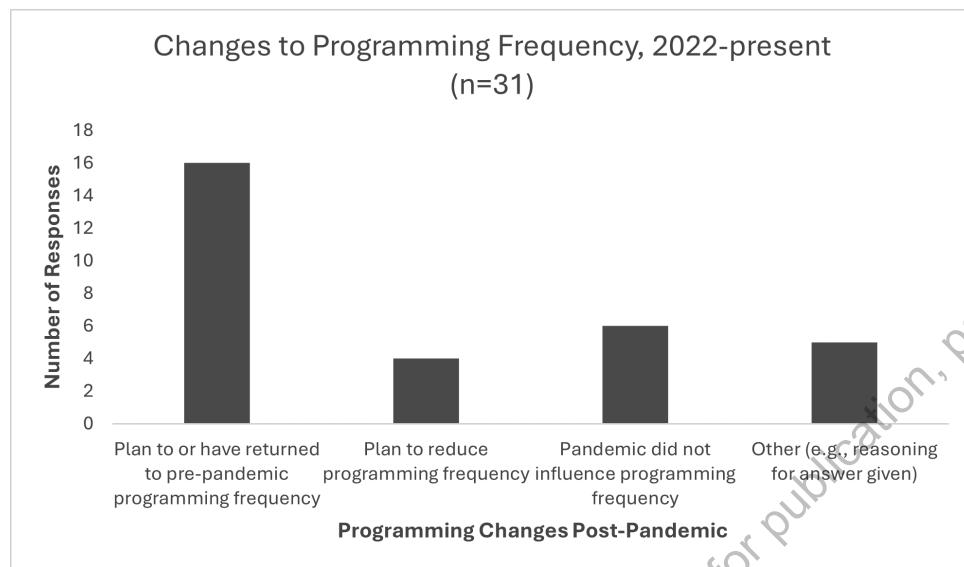


Figure 2. Programming offered by state or regional health sciences library associations pre-COVID-19. Respondents could choose more than one option.



**Figure 3.** Changes to state or regional health science library associations' programming frequency, from 2022 to time of survey.

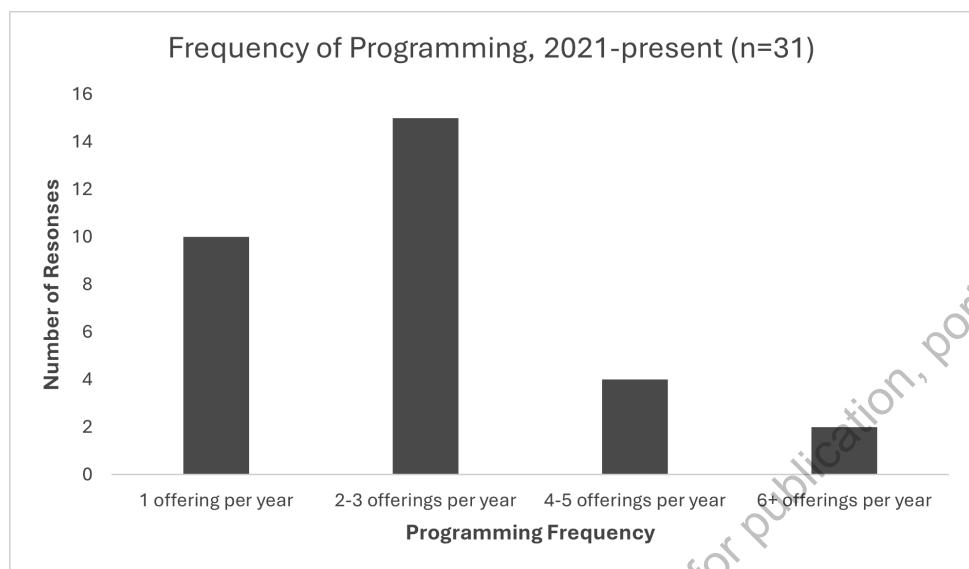
### Organizations After the Pandemic

While respondents were conflicted about whether the COVID-19 pandemic caused a decrease in programming from their HSLA, the majority reported that their organization did, or has plans to, return to the frequency of programming that was offered prior to the pandemic (see Figure 3). In the open-ended "Other" field, three respondents shared that they were focusing on virtual programming.

As seen in Figure 4, all respondents reported that their organizations offered some programming from 2021 to the present; the majority provide one to three offerings per year, with several respondents indicating four or more. Several of the respondents noted that programming has moved to a majority in online formats rather than in-person, and others noted that membership changes due to retirements or budgets influenced the programming offered by state organizations.

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Twenty-one respondents provided information about the services and opportunities their state organization provides, beyond programming. Other member services or benefits provided by HSLAs reported in response to this open-ended question include newsletters, websites or blogs, and job posting boards (n=6). Many respondents indicated that their organization provides scholarships to its members to attend professional development events (n=8). They also emphasized social benefits such as networking and mentorships provided by the HSLA, which also included regular discussion sessions or meetups, many virtual (n=10). A few respondents (n=3) spoke about discounts on collection subscriptions such as ebook packages, which are granted as a benefit of membership in the HSLA.



**Figure 4.** Frequency of professional development and programming offered by state or regional health science library associations from 2021 to time of survey.

When asked whether their state has health science interest groups within a larger professional organization, many of the 19 respondents shared that they did not have a local or state professional association within a larger group. Of those respondents who did, most (12) were affiliated with the MLA, which is understandable given that researchers designed and distributed the study to health science librarians and information professionals.

### Other Lessons Learned

The final question of the survey invited respondents to share anything else they thought the researchers should know and received 12 open-ended responses, with one respondent simply replying "NA." The other eleven respondents shared additional information about their organizations including membership costs, officer roles, committees, and ongoing work or activities. Four respondents discussed shrinking membership and low numbers, and three of those reported that their organization had become inactive. Only one reported that their organization had completely ceased: "our health science interest group this year ceased operations due to lack of members." The others spoke of rebuilding efforts from 2022 to present. These efforts are in various stages of planning. One respondent concluded the response to this question by saying, "The board met this week and we are developing growth strategies to implement in 2024 because we feel the need to increase the membership numbers." Another simply stated, "We became completely inactive during the pandemic and are working on rebuilding the organization."

Not all the respondents spoke of declining membership; three reported maintaining strong numbers or even growth. Five respondents spoke of growth or plans to grow their membership and opportunities through virtual offerings and greater efforts to

reach remote members. One respondent reported that they “maintained relatively strong membership numbers throughout the pandemic and made an effort to meet virtually as often as possible.” Another observed, “the pandemic pushed us into developing better ways to involve remote members and that has helped us rethink our [activities].” An additional respondent reported their success in these initiatives, saying, “We are small but mighty. During the pandemic, our membership stagnated around 25 members. Since then, we have been able to encourage growth, due in part to the offering of our professional development in a virtual format. We currently have 44 members.”

Four respondents described expansion of in-person programming as well as online. One reported plans for new offerings such as scholarships or conferences in 2024. Another reported that, while membership dues and fees for programming had been waived during the pandemic, they plan to resume collecting revenue soon.

## Discussion

This exploratory study of state and regional HSLAs aimed to investigate the roles and offerings of state-level HSLAs. The research questions focused on the activities of state and regional health science library associations:

- What services and benefits do other state and regional health science library associations offer their members?
- How has the COVID-19 pandemic impacted these benefits and services?

At the conclusion of the study, four main themes were apparent:

1. State or regional HSLAs are often affiliated with a national library association,
2. many associations’ professional development opportunities have reverted to pre-pandemic offerings,
3. membership numbers have fluctuated as associations find their roles post-COVID, and
4. many associations are working to provide programming for their members with a new focus on virtual offerings.

These findings may provide guidance to state and regional HSLAs about how best to maintain the associations’ long-term viability, grow membership, and maintain a creative program of CE for health sciences librarians who are new to the profession and for those with years of experience.

The data demonstrate that most respondent organizations are affiliated with a national association. One reason for national affiliation may include the opportunity for

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increased resources, such as funding, training, and professional development opportunities, which enhance an organization’s capabilities and reach. Such affiliation could also provide a stronger advocacy platform, allowing for more effective influence on state and national policies. Addi-



tionally, members gain access to a broader network of professionals, fostering collaboration, knowledge sharing, and best practices beyond the state and across the nation.

Membership numbers are varied. Some state or regional health science library associations are experiencing a decline in membership, which impacts the number and modality of programs offered by the organization; one group has ceased operation entirely. It has been identified that associations need to increase their membership in order to persist, which some respondents of the survey have done. Studies support the notion that success lies in effectively staying relevant and offering targeted programs for members, communication, and a sense of belonging as ways to sustain or increase membership.<sup>29</sup>

An example of a success story from the literature about membership growth is the Canada chapter of the Chinese American Librarians Association (CALA), which has doubled in size since it was formed in 2018 despite the COVID-19 pandemic. The Canada chapter of CALA attributes some of this success to “strategic partnerships,” “joint initiatives,” and successful collaborations with other associations.<sup>30</sup> Other suggestions in the literature for professional library associations to recruit and retain members include effective two-way or reciprocal communication, proactive engagement and involvement of members, relevant programming, and affordability.<sup>31</sup> Along these same lines, one respondent to the survey reported a doubling of membership numbers. Perhaps with strategies such as those employed by Canada’s CALA, other associations could follow suit.

The findings also highlight that most state or regional HSLAs returned to pre-pandemic levels of professional development offerings, suggesting that, despite small membership numbers, the associations are experiencing a demand for networking as well as advancement in the field. Most associations offer between one and three programs during the academic year, and many of the responses to the open-ended questions in the survey (questions 2, 4, and 7) reported a focus on virtual engagement. Recent studies support the idea that providing creative programming confirms the notion of engaging members, offering networking opportunities, and serving the profession to sustain a state-level association.<sup>32</sup>

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The findings also reveal the additional services offered beyond programming to engage members. State associations that offer services like blogs, virtual programs, and scholarships, as mentioned in responses to question 4, enhance member engagement and professional development by providing accessible and diverse learning opportunities. These services also help to create a supportive community, fostering networking and collaboration among members regardless of their location. Studies from the literature also discussed the benefits of fostering motivation and purpose among members by creating a sense of community and belonging while also enhancing the personal satis-

faction that comes from making a meaningful impact on the profession.<sup>33</sup> In addition, joining smaller library associations that focus on specific subjects, functions, or regions offers significant advantages. A major benefit is the reduced cost, as membership fees and expenses for events like state, local, or regional conferences are often much lower than those of national organizations.<sup>34</sup>

### Limitations

Due to the small number of respondents, this study is not generalizable, but it provides a geographically broad snapshot of how professional health sciences organizations operate at the state level. This study was also specific to health sciences library associations, and with the health sciences library staffing issues identified earlier, the results may not be applicable to professional library organizations more broadly. Even so, these study results could inform leaders of existing library associations about the expectations of their members, reassure them that many of their challenges are not exclusive, and suggest possible solutions to those challenges. While this study did not investigate specific changes in membership numbers or in the quality or success of the programming offered, these are areas of interest for future research.

### Conclusions

Health science library associations are striving to maintain balance in a climate that sees members requesting both in-person and virtual events. Programs have begun ramping back up to pre-pandemic levels, but more often include a wider variety of offerings for members near and far. Although membership has generally decreased for the responding HSLAs, demand for professional development has increased. Many organizations have responded by offering one to three opportunities each year. For the largest group of respondents, from organizations with 100 or fewer members, networking and scholarship opportunities have become important, providing opportunities for members to meet and attend physical or virtual professional development programs.

Results show that the COVID-19 pandemic might have played a part in the overall decrease of offerings, but it may also account for an increase in virtual opportunities for members. To better understand the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on HSLA membership activities and professional development offerings, further studies should be completed to focus on programming prior to the pandemic, during the most active pandemic years (2020–2021), and from 2022 to the present. A more in-depth look at the types of activities before and during may help us determine whether there has been a shift in the types of activities provided, and, if so, whether those shifts are long-lasting. Additionally, membership changes during those periods should also be tracked to determine whether a change in the number of members per organization from pre-pandemic numbers might be contributing to the offerings requested and the needs of the HSLA members.

For MHSLA specifically, these results could play a pivotal role in future strategic planning for the organization's impending needs. According to their responses, leaders of professional associations understand the need for change in those organizations to better engage their membership. They also understand the impact their leadership can have on members' sense of community and professionalism.<sup>35</sup> To counteract decreasing



membership, MHSLA leaders should investigate additional methods of outreach and consider a formalized publicity campaign to attract new members from across Michigan. As recommended by leaders of the associations surveyed in this study, the organization should consider adding virtual programming to meet the needs of membership based in a larger geographic area across the state, while still offering opportunities for physical meetings for those who are able to attend. If membership increases in more areas of the state, in-person events could take the form of less formal events, meet-ups, and regional functions.

Beyond solely internal MHSLA opportunities, the organization should look beyond what it can offer alone and consider potential partnerships with larger regional or national organizations as well; MiALA and the Michigan Library Association could be two such programming partners with a larger reach and common goals of providing education and networking opportunities for their membership. Partnering would increase awareness of MHSLA, allow potential members to network with current members, and could offer more professional development opportunities to all organizations.

As other smaller library professional organizations examine their current positions and plan for the future, they should consider both practical and intrinsic member needs and the benefits that their associations can provide. Providing virtual and in-person programming and networking opportunities throughout the year can engage members and meet them where they are. With reasonable pricing and targeted member benefits, state and regional library associations can continue to provide professional grounding and career growth for their member librarians in the years to come.

### Acknowledgements

The authors wish to acknowledge Merle Rosenzweig, Taubman Health Sciences Library, University of Michigan, in the conceptualization and planning of this research project. The authors also wish to acknowledge Stephanie Swanberg, Michigan School of Psychology, and Amanda Kelly, Henry Ford Macomb Library, Henry Ford Health, for their thorough and helpful peer review of this work prior to submission to the journal.

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## Appendix

### Questions and Responses

**Question 1. What types of programming did you offer to members pre-COVID.? Please check all that apply.**

In-person continuing education (CEs) developed and taught by members or outside speakers	22
Other in-person, non-CE programming (e.g., journal club, etc.)	11
Professional development courses that use one or multiple modalities (e.g., Self-Paced Course, MOOC, Coursera)	3
Webinar(s) developed by either organization members (e.g., MLA webinars) or non-members that grant CEs	15
Non-CE webinar(s) developed by either organization members (e.g., MLA webinars) or non-members	10
Specialized training course(s) (e.g., MLA Research Training Institute, Data Specialization)	4
Annual meeting or conference(s)	26
Other, please describe	3

**Question 2. If professional development opportunities or other programming decreased during the pandemic (2019–2021), is it your organization's intention to return to pre-pandemic operations?**

The pandemic did not influence the frequency of programming	6
No, my organization plans to offer fewer programs/year in the future	4
Yes, my organization plans to return to or has returned to our pre-pandemic frequency of programming	16
My organization became inactive during the pandemic and we will not be resuming operations	0
Other, please describe	5

**Question 3. From 2021-present, how frequently did your organization offer professional development opportunities or other programming?**

Did not offer any	0
One time a year	10
2–3 offerings/year	15
4–5 offerings/year	4
6 or more/year	2



**Question 4. Besides programming, what other services or opportunities does your state organization provide?**

[Responses removed for anonymity.]

**Question 5. How many members are part of your organization?**

0–50	18
51–100	10
More than 101	3

**Question 6. Does your state have health science interest groups within any or all of the following larger professional association groups? Please check all that apply.**

ALA/ACRL	1
SLA	1
ASIST	0
MLA	12
Other, please describe	5

**Question 7.**

What else should we know about your organization?

[Responses removed for anonymity.]

**Notes**

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This mss. is peer reviewed, copy edited, and accepted for publication, portal 26.1.