The Value of Belonging: A Comparison of Professional Organizations' Membership Benefits

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abstract: The abundance of library associations provides many choices to academic librarians about where and how to belong. This exploratory article identifies and compares benefits of library professional organizations through content analysis of the groups' websites. Examination of the benefits described on the websites of 76 organizations indicates that they have a high degree of overlap. Many benefits are also achievable by participating in other external professional activities. While data were collected just prior to the start of the COVID-19 pandemic, thematic analysis of these benefits provides a framework for comparing the value of participation in formal and informal professional communities.

Introduction

Membership in a profession often includes belonging to one, if not many, professional organizations, associations, or societies. Academic librarians become members of and engage in professional activities within a variety of academic and professional organizations. These groups collectively reflect the broad scope of work and associated skill sets in academic libraries, such as public services, technical services, subject specialist work, data management, and special collections. The associations range from large general organizations to smaller groups specializing in a specific library function, subject area, or geographic area. With dozens of national and international library and information science (LIS) organizations, and many more local and regional organizations, choices about where and how to participate are potentially overwhelming. According to the *World Guide to Library, Archive, and Information Science*

Associations, there are 95 international and 67 United States organizations in LIS, in addition to many more local, regional, and interdisciplinary groups.[1]

While professional organizations offer a broad range of benefits, many also have shrinking memberships and dwindling engagement as resources to support their activities decrease or face growing competition. As associations adapt to changing professional needs, often due to advances in technology and the resulting evolution of career roles, many have faced financial struggles or undergone major changes. Library professional organizations have long relied on revenue from membership and conferences to support programming and services, but with fewer members, many strain to provide the same value and benefits to members on a smaller, more efficient scale.

In addition to the financial challenges of rescaling to a smaller membership base, many organizations struggle to recruit and retain a robust cohort of volunteers, who traditionally fulfill a range of essential roles from administrative, to programming, to strategic leadership. Specialization and segmentation in the profession have also led to the development of grassroots organizations that can more quickly and nimbly adapt to the needs of specific professional communities. Growing opportunities for connection and engagement on social media and in other casual forums may, at no financial cost, fulfill many communication and community-building roles that professional associations have historically played.

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Recognizing both the social importance of membership organizations in the LIS field and the growing pressures on them, the present work seeks to answer the following questions:

- How do professional organizations for academic librarians describe their membership benefits?
- Do organizations of different scales and scopes emphasize different benefits of membership?
- How do the benefits offered by membership organizations compare to those available through alternative platforms or means of professional engagement?

The disruptions that have occurred since November 2019, when the data to inform this article were collected, have amplified the challenges facing organizations in the library and information science profession. Many areas of our lives have changed immensely, and yet this time has also helped to draw us closer to what we value most. As individuals and communities seek to move forward, the authors hope that the findings of this article will inspire LIS professional organizations to better develop and communicate their unique values to members and to empower librarians to identify what they want from their professional memberships. Organizations need to recognize where their actions and their professed values do not align. By doing so, they will have the opportunity

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to rethink their approach to community and belonging and so create a more open and inclusive profession. In an environment where competition abounds, finances are short, and time is increasingly commodified, LIS professional organizations must develop distinctive value propositions to strengthen supportive relationships between themselves and academic librarian members, employers, and the profession.

Literature Review

There are many reasons to belong to professional organizations, and a casual search of the Web and professional literature reveals many anecdotal and promotional pieces lauding membership. As Sheri Jacobs describes in the book *The Art of Membership*, benefits are not unique from one organization to another. Organizations across sectors offer many similar "exclusive benefits," including advocacy, professional magazines or journals, discounts on publications and continuing education, newsletters, opportunities to volunteer and lead, networking, career resources, and personal services.[2]

Works highlighting a host of membership benefits are abundant in the library literature, often promotional in nature and published in the newsletters or journals of professional organizations.[3] Peggy Sullivan identifies library association roles in producing publications, supporting library personnel, developing standards, advancing legislation, building international relationships, and defending intellectual freedom.[4] Similarly, Susan Henczel draws out the work of national associations in education, research, advocacy, professional development, communication, industry and careers, professionalism and professional identity, contributions to society, establishing standards and legislation, and leadership development.[5] A 1990 survey of California academic librarians identifies more personal reasons for joining, such as networking, opportunities to influence the profession, the importance of membership in promotion and tenure, and use of publications, as well as speaking, publishing, and travel opportunities.[6]

Several authors highlight benefits of membership and participation in more localized or specialized organizations. As examples, Crystal Goldman and Mary Wise offer state and regional library associations, respectively, as cost-saving and more accessible alternatives. They offer ways to network, attend or present at conferences, contribute to professional literature, participate in mentoring, obtain training, advocate for libraries, and develop as a leader.[7] Miranda Henry Bennett recommends that subject librarians consider membership in nonlibrary professional organizations in their liaison areas. Bennett cites building current awareness, networking with disciplinary faculty, access to new perspectives, and contributions to subject expert identity among the benefits of such memberships.[8]

The literature also reveals that professional organizations across sectors face challenges. In the book *The End of Membership as We Know It*, Sara Sladek argues that membership has lost its meaning due to changing technology and generational values.[9] Harrison Coerver and Mary Byers identify associations' struggle to retain members, attract volunteers, and compete with other organizations and offerings.[10] Similarly, Kenneth Doyle and Scott Oser highlight challenges, including that organizations can no longer rely on professionals automatically joining, that an increasing number of information sources and services are available freely online, and that globalization has changed or-

ganization strategy. These challenges are compounded by employers no longer paying for memberships and commodification pushing people to look for opportunities at the lowest financial cost.[11]

Within the library profession, reasons suggested for declining membership at the national level include decreasing financial support, greater demands on people's time, broader availability of alternatives, perceived lack of value or irrelevance, voluntary participation requirements, retirements, and generational differences.[12] Stephen Abram identified 12 challenges facing library organizations. Among the challenges were advances in technology, new approaches to learning, altered demographics, changing vendor landscapes and opportunities for sponsorship, setting advocacy priorities, competition between organizations, and finding sustainable ways to maintain leadership and volunteers without burnout.[13] Many organizations have also struggled financially, especially as attendance at conferences and corresponding vendor support decrease.[14] When considering reasons why individuals drop memberships, Sue Kamm describes such motives as cost, lack of local opportunities, career changes, disorganization, or inadequate organizational structure to facilitate work.[15]

New mechanisms for professional engagement have also emerged. One manifestation includes young professional organizations that appeal to those working across sectors, typically rooted in a local or regional context.[16] Within librarianship, some long-standing organizations have changed to accommodate shifting professional identifies, values, and needs, such as the emerging American Library Association (ALA) Core Division[17] and a restructuring initiative in the Special Libraries Association (SLA).[18] Nontraditional opportunities for community-building, connection, and development have also proliferated. Among these groups are the League of Awesome Librarians[19] and the #CritLib community, which describes itself by saying, "Critlib is short for 'critical librarianship,' a movement of library workers dedicated to bringing social justice principles into our work in libraries."[20] These associations may replicate at least some of the benefits of traditional membership organizations.

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Methods

This study uses qualitative content analysis to explore how professional associations for academic librarians describe their membership benefits. The coinvestigators selected this method as a flexible, yet systematic, way to distill and compare the information presented on the websites of library professional organizations.[21] The authors developed a codebook, conducted representative sampling of organizations, performed qualitative coding on collected data, and developed themes.

The coinvestigators developed the codebook through an iterative process, starting with membership benefits identified in the literature.[22] All codes—henceforth referred to as "categories"—were developed to be mutually exclusive. The authors used a pilot of selected organizations to refine categories for improved coding reliability. Benefits that did not fit into a defined category were coded with a remaining residual category for

unique or overly vague benefits, such as those described with the phrase "and more." Each category was then grouped into themes of related benefits. Because member benefits are nuanced, some categories could be relevant to multiple themes; mentoring, for example, is related to both communication and networking as well as to learning and development. In such cases, the authors assigned the theme they deemed most essential. As summarized in Table 1, the final set of categories encompasses 29 defined classifications grouped into six themes and one residual "other" option.

In developing a sample, the authors identified a representative cross section of professional organizations relevant to academic librarians in the United States. The sample includes broadly scoped national and international organizations, called "primary organizations" in this study; associations that specialize in certain functions, such as library instruction or collections; subject-focused groups, such as those for law, medical, or music libraries; and geographically focused state and regional associations. In identifying candidate organizations, the authors consulted a variety of information sources, including the *World Guide to Library, Archive, and Information Science Associations*;[23] lists of affiliate organizations; and guides designed for library school students.[24] The authors also conducted targeted Web searches and consulted colleagues to identify the most pertinent professional associations in specific library functional and subject areas. Ultimate criteria for inclusion required that the associations publicize information about membership benefits on their public websites, as this was the focus of data analysis.

In several instances, the authors included library-focused sections of broader organizations from outside disciplines that offered professional engagement opportunities at a subject level (for example, the Engineering Libraries Division of the American Society of Engineering Education). The authors also included some divisions or units of a larger library organization, for example, the Association of College and Research Libraries, which is a division of ALA. In these cases, each organization publicized its own tailored membership benefits and represented the most active professional engagement opportunity for a given functional or subject area. For geographic consideration, the authors included all the main state and regional library associations in the analyses, which map to the ALA Chapters Directory.[25] Again, however, local organizations were included only if they listed membership benefits on public websites. Within these parameters, the authors analyzed information from 76 library membership organizations, comprising 5 primary, 8 functional, 15 subject-oriented, and 48 state or regional groups. A full list of organizations included in the analysis, with the links to their websites citing membership benefits, is available in the Appendix.

The authors collected and analyzed membership benefits information from the websites of each organization in the research sample and saved local archival copies of corresponding web pages using Zotero. For consistency, all data used in the study were harvested on a single day (November 5, 2019). The authors then transferred benefit statements into a spreadsheet to prepare for qualitative coding. Multiple categories were assigned to each benefit statement when applicable; however, multiple mentions of the same category (for example, the production of two distinct publications) were reduced to a single count for analysis. The coinvestigators first coded all benefit statements individually. To standardize coding, each coinvestigator coded the list twice and individually resolved any differences. Next, the authors compared their two sets of

Table 1.

Categories and definitions of membership benefits of library professional organizations, mapped to themes

Theme	Category	Description
Community	Belonging	Inclusiveness of membership; exclusive access to benefits; sense of community
	Collaboration and support	Opportunity to share expertise or work together without a specific platform or medium; general opportunities to communicate with other members, share ideas, etc.; support system for personal or professional issues
	Diversity	Mention of diversity initiatives, commitment to diversity, etc.
	Recognition	Awards and other types of recognition
	Reputation	Opportunities to develop recognition within the organization or community not associated with an award
	Social	Social events with an emphasis on fun or enjoyment
Connection and networking	Communication platform	Infrastructure or platform for connecting with other members, such as e-mail lists, ALA Connect, or social media
	Directory	Access to any list of membership or contact information
	Mentoring	Formal mentoring programs; mention of mentorship opportunities
	Network	Specific mention of networking; general opportunities to connect with other professionals in the organization
	Vendors	Vendors, sponsors, or exhibitors mentioned in any way
Financial	Funding	Merit-based awards for development (i.e., conferences, education, etc.); grants; specialized funds to support specific activities (e.g., disaster relief, intellectual freedom, speakers)
	Jobs	Resources for finding, advertising, and navigating job opportunities (e.g., venues for job postings, job boards, career centers, salary surveys)
	Offers	Savings opportunities outside the organization, possibly through vendor partners (e.g., tuition discounts, pet, insurance interest-free loans, car rental, liability insurance)
	Savings	Discounted rates within the organization (e.g., programs, conferences, publications)
Learning and development	Benefit to organization	Benefit to member's employer, the community that they serve, or both

Theme	Category	Description
	Certification	Accreditation program of some sort
	Information	Publications, newsletters, websites—often a "freemium" benefit
	Leadership development	Opportunities and resources for leadership development (e.g., retreats, training, leadership skills development)
	Professional development	Learning and educational opportunities for professional development (e.g., conferences, workshops, seminars, webinars)
Participation community	Engagement	Ability to network, connect, and engage with a of practice, interest group, division, roundtable, etc.
	Leadership service	Opportunities to serve in a leadership position
	Scholarship	Opportunities to present and publish professional content; venue for individuals to share their work with the organization or profession
	Service	Opportunity to volunteer with the organization in some capacity (e.g., membership on a committee, specific volunteer positions)
Professionalism	Advocacy	Lobbying; activities that give members information to advocate for themselves; legal updates
	Professionalism	Statement that membership enables a contribution to the profession at-large
	Representation	Provision of liaisons to other organizations
	Values	Benefits related to professional values, including when an organization sets library standards and guidelines or professional benchmarks; demonstration of an individual's values by joining; support for concepts in association or professional value statements (e.g., intellectual freedom, privacy, freedom to read)
	Voting	Opportunity to vote in organization's elections
Other		All benefits that fall outside the previous 29 categories

categories and collaboratively reconciled final classifications for each statement. After category assignments were finalized, the authors analyzed the data in terms of category and theme frequency and occurrence by organization type.

To address the question of how the identified benefit categories and broader themes compare to opportunities outside professional organizations, the authors performed an exploratory literature search. The search was informed by codebook descriptions as well as the thesauri associated with LIS literature databases, including ProQuest's Library & Information Science Abstracts (LISA) and EBSCO's Library, Information Science & Technology Abstracts (LISTA).[26] The authors used literature databases—LISA, LISTA, and Google Scholar—as well as open Web searches and input from colleagues to find alternatives to traditional professional association benefits.

Results

Membership Benefits

Most professional organizations identified a wide variety of membership benefits on their websites. On average, the sampled organizations cited 10.5 of 30 possible categories (including "other"). Primary organizations, on average, listed the most benefit categories (14.6), followed by subject organizations (11.1), state or regional associations (10.3), and functional organizations (8.4). The study methodology enabled a general analysis focused on significant differences and trends, but because the data were not collected through a random sample, the authors could not test for statistical significance.

The benefits most frequently identified fell into the categories professional development (93 percent), information (82 percent), savings (76 percent), and networking (71 percent). Those least commonly cited included reputation (7 percent), diversity (7 percent), certification (8 percent), social (14 percent), advocacy (17 percent), representation (17 percent), and mentoring (18 percent). See Figure 1 for a detailed breakdown of the percentage of library organizations that identified each category of benefits. Benefits that could not be classified into a category, designated under "other," were less common, occurring in three primary organizations (60 percent), two functional and subject organizations (25 percent and 13 percent, respectively), and eight state or regional associations (17 percent).

Organizational Similarities and Differences

In comparing frequency of theme by organization type, Table 2 shows that learning and development was the most common theme recognized across all types of organizations (96 percent), closely followed by connection and networking (91 percent). The least common themes across organization types were community and professionalism (78 percent). Functional groups less commonly cited the financial (63 percent) and professionalism (50 percent) benefits than other types of organizations did. State and regional organizations (92 percent) more likely highlighted financial benefits than did functional (63 percent) or subject organizations (73 percent).
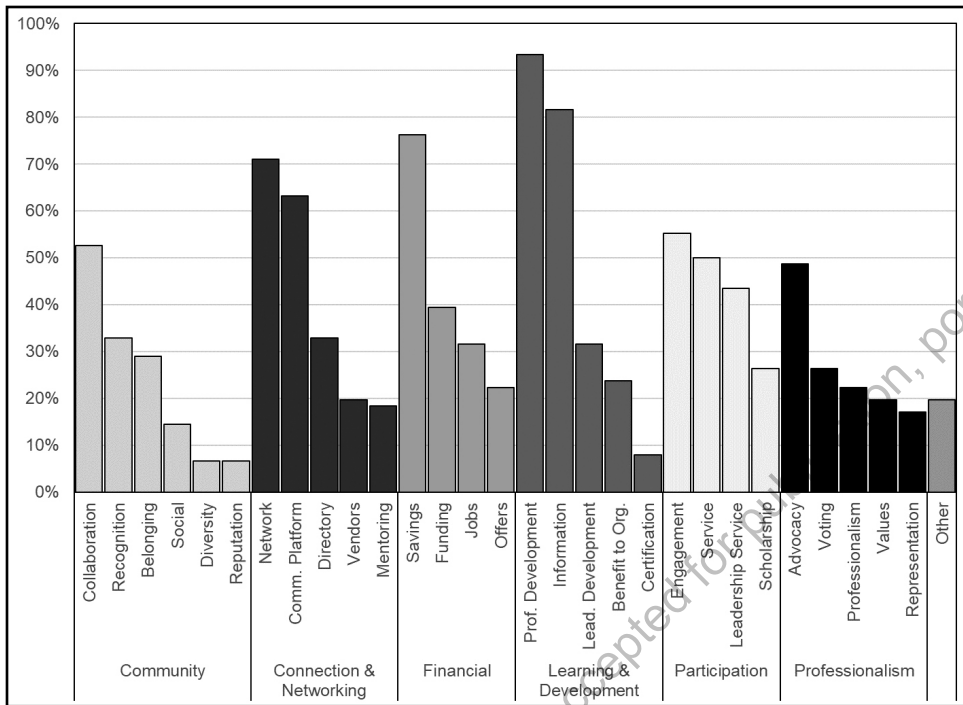
Figure 1. Percentage of library organizations that identified each category of benefits of membership.

Table 2.
Types of library organizations that identified each of six themes of membership benefits

	Primary*	Functional†	Subject	State or regional
Community	100%	75%	80%	75%
Connection and networking	100%	88%	93%	90%
Financial	100%	63%	73%	92%
Learning and development	100%	100%	93%	96%
Participation	100%	75%	80%	77%
Professionalism	100%	50%	67%	83%

*Primary organizations are broadly scoped national and international library organizations.
†Functional organizations specialize in certain functions, such as instruction or collections.

As illustrated in Figure 2, the frequency of occurrence of each category of membership benefits varied by organization type. The categories that exhibited the most substantial differences between organization types were engagement, leadership development, jobs, and recognition. Professional development and information both appeared frequently across organization types. Functional organizations less often identified benefits in the advocacy, recognition, leadership development, and funding categories and more frequently cited those in the service category, compared to other organization types. Subject associations more often listed benefits in the scholarship classification. Primary organizations led in several areas, including in the categories of jobs, engagement, professionalism, offers, benefit to organization, leadership development, collaboration, and recognition. State and regional associations listed the benefit categories at about the same rate as other types of organizations did.

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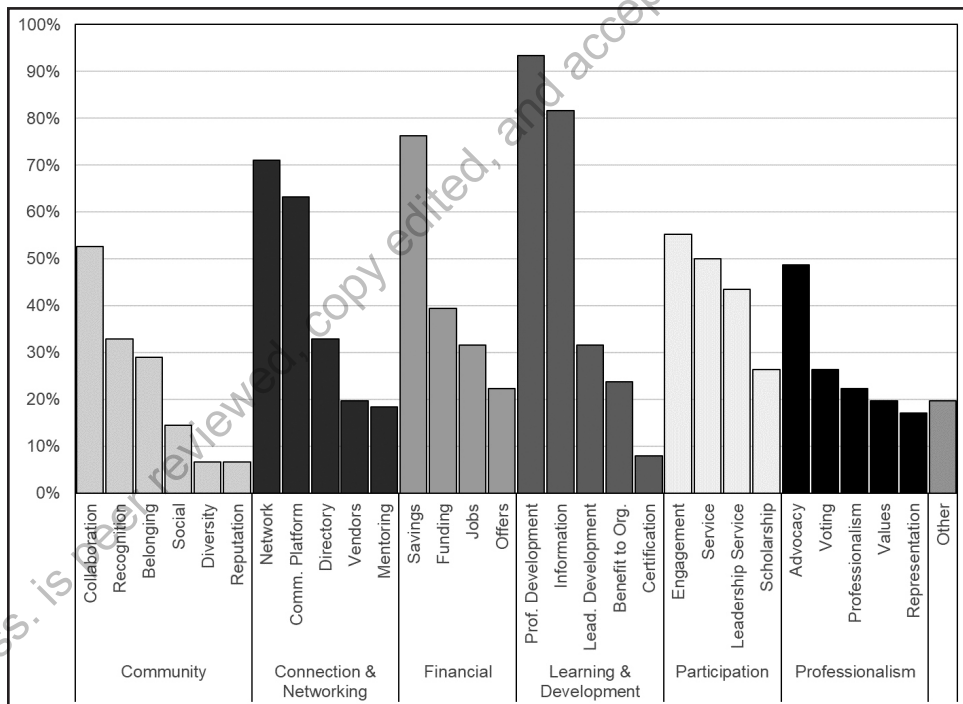

Figure 2. Percentage of types of library organization that identified each category of membership benefits. Functional organizations, which specialize in a particular library role, are indicated by black squares; primary organizations, broadly scoped national and international organizations, are shown with an X; state and regional organizations are indicated by gray triangles; and subject organizations by white diamonds.

While organizations did not necessarily provide benefits in every category, most advertised them in each of the six thematic areas, illustrated in Figure 3. On average, organizations addressed 5.1 broad themes, with 45 percent mentioning all six themes. All primary organizations addressed all six. Functional associations listed fewer themes than other types of organizations, averaging 4.5.

Alternatives to Professional Organizations

Results from the associated exploratory literature and Web search suggest a broad range of alternative benefit opportunities available outside membership organizations. Many associations make some perks available to nonmembers at an added cost, but other benefits seem exclusive to professional organizations. These results are presented by theme, highlighting a selection of opportunities outside professional organizations.

Benefits categorized in the learning and development theme, especially professional development and information, are widely accessible outside professional organizations. Numerous independent library conferences retain a traditional format and comparative costs—for example, the Electronic Resources & Libraries Conference, Charleston Conference, Internet Librarian, Access Services Conference, and Library Instruction West.[27] Professional development events centered on the participant-driven "unconference" model have also emerged at a significantly lower cost that expands accessibility. These include the Library Collective, STELLA (Science, Technology, and Engineering Library Leaders in Action), and #CritLib Unconference.[28] Further, countless opportunities for free or low-cost online learning webinars are available from membership- and nonmembership-based sponsors.
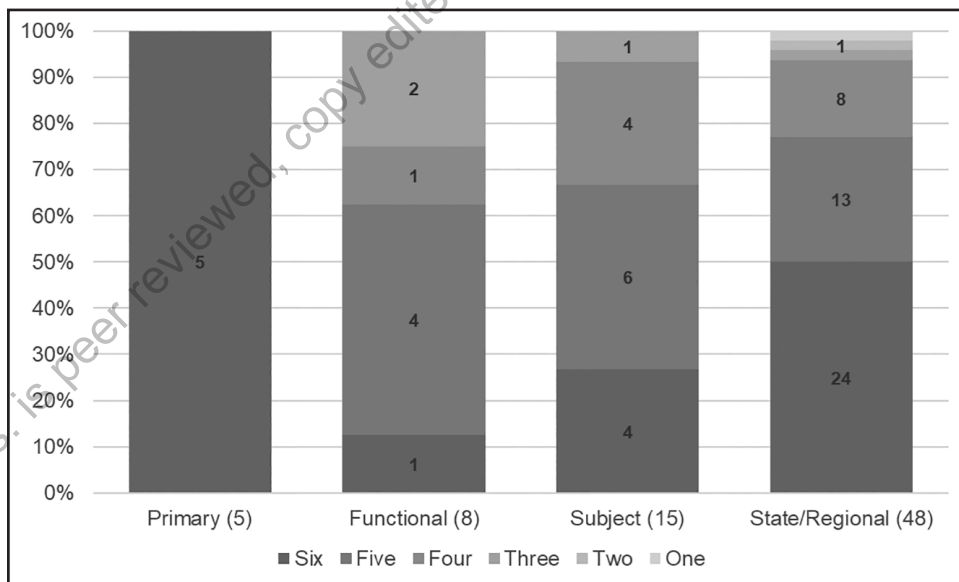

Figure 3. Comparison of the frequency with which primary, subject, functional, and state or regional library organizations addressed from one to six themes regarding benefits of membership. Raw counts are shown in parentheses.

Information resources are also broadly accessible outside professional organizations. Some associations have open access models making publications freely available to nonmembers, including *College & Research Libraries News*, *Journal of the Medical Library Association*, and *Law Library Journal*.[29] Journals and other information sources published outside professional organizations abound, in both traditional formats (such as *portal: Libraries and the Academy* and *The Journal of Academic Librarianship*)[30] and blogs (such as *Hack Library School* and *In the Library with the Lead Pipe*).[31]

Benefits in the categories of communication platform, network, mentoring, and vendors are widely available outside professional organizations. Familiar online spaces, including LinkedIn, Facebook groups, and Twitter feeds or organized chats, enable professionals to freely connect and engage within the library field as well as across professional domains, facilitating communication and relationship-building. Mentoring programs have wide appeal as membership benefits for general development and volunteer leader succession planning through professional organizations,[32] but external opportunities are also frequently available through the academic workplace or by casual connection. Within academic libraries, many mentoring efforts focus on early career librarians, offering orientation, professional development, and support through tenure and promotion or career-status processes. These programs also encourage engagement in research and service, provide venues for feedback, and promote skill development.[33] Beyond formal programs, many librarians also receive informal mentoring through proximity with peers or social media groups such as the Facebook group Library Think Tank.[34] Librarians also may find mentors in different contexts.[35]

Though vendors are essential partners to library professional organizations, opportunities to connect with them are broadly available outside organizations as well. Vendors seek to engage clients or potential clients outside membership organizations by conducting outreach and providing newsletters or professional development opportunities, for example SpringShare's SpringyCamp or Elsevier's Library Connect.[36] Librarians can also engage with vendors through product-specific conferences and user communities, such as the ELUNA (Ex Libris Users of North America) Annual Meeting and the OCLC Community Center.[37]

The jobs and funding benefit categories also frequently exist as external opportunities. Often, all or a portion of job listings on professional organization websites are publicly accessible, including the websites ALA JobLIST, the ASIS&T (Association for Information Science and Technology) Career Center, and the SLA Career Center.[38] Similar career resources also appear separately from organizations, such as job boards and career support resources available through LIS schools and independent Web sources such as INALJ (formerly "I Need a Library Job").[39] Though salary surveys are often conducted by large professional organizations and available to members at a discounted rate (for example, ALA and SLA), the information can typically be purchased by nonmembers as well. Salary data are also available through other means, such as the United States Bureau of Labor Statistics and the *Library Journal* annual Placements and Salaries Survey.[40] Financial support or funding may also be available from other sources, including employers and government agencies.

Some categories grouped under the participation theme are inherent to the broader structure of professional organizations, including service within the organization and

service in leadership roles, though similar opportunities may also be found through other organizations, consortia, and one's own workplace or community. Service within libraries may involve formal roles, such as election to committees and participation in cross-departmental initiatives, but it may also encompass tasks that go beyond standard work, including conducting a focus group, designing a website, or engaging with communities on campus, such as student clubs or international students.[41]

A part of participation is engaging with others who share common interests. Opportunities for engagement with a community of practice, a group where librarians help one another do their work better, are also available outside professional organizations. Examples in the literature highlight how librarians and allies have developed grassroots communities of practice facilitating engagement and collaborative growth around a variety of topics, including open educational resources, research data management, information literacy, outreach, and reference work.[42] Library journal clubs provide additional venues for professional engagement, including building knowledge and skills, reflecting on professional practices, connecting with colleagues around shared interests, promoting research culture and collaboration, and ultimately improving services for library users.[43]

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Librarians also have many opportunities to pursue scholarship outside professional organizations, including presenting at stand-alone conferences and publishing in independent journals. Many library professional organizations offer an option to present at conferences without requiring registration, though this choice often entails reduced access to conference programming. Judith Nixon developed a methodology to rank the top LIS journals and periodicals; of the 54 titles in her resulting list, 37 (68.5 percent) operate independently from professional associations.[44] Through a survey of academic librarian scholars, Tina Neville and Camielle Crampsie found that authors considered a journal's scope and fit to topic, whether a journal is peer reviewed, and its intended audience as the most important factors to take into account when selecting a journal for publication.[45]

Many categories under the professionalism theme are comparatively more exclusive to professional organizations, including advocacy, professionalism, representation, values, and voting. Many of these are tied to or in some way reliant on the structure of an organization or broader group. Advocacy is the category most frequently discussed in the literature. It takes many forms, and its success is often tied to relationships developed by proactive engagement with the broader community. While an individual can advocate for libraries, collective voices often have an advantage, and professional organizations provide many resources to support advocacy efforts.[46] Associations can help to shape specific messages, organize events, and develop promotional materials and websites. Advocacy can also be considered a part of one's job as a librarian, as expressed by Deborah Hicks: "Librarians [use] the provision of service as a way to advocate both

for services themselves and the profession."[47] Beyond providing high-quality service, librarians must proactively engage with stakeholders in their communities to build relationships, trust, and support.[48]

Though professional organizations help to foster community through their networks, engagement opportunities, and structure, benefit categories in the community theme are also represented outside formal organizations. The belonging and social categories are relatively amorphous benefits that cannot be easily quantified, but this sense of community can manifest through the library workplace or through informal networks and relationships, as discussed earlier. A professional reputation can also be built through exposure and interaction outside professional organizations, for example, by developing a record of scholarly publishing or through engagement in online social media communities.[49] Employee awards are frequently presented in library workplaces, enabling recognition among colleagues. Awards are also bestowed by independent entities, such as *Library Journal*'s Librarian of the Year and Movers & Shakers awards.[50] Consortia have a long history of collaboration and support for academic libraries and librarians, facilitating cooperative projects, enhanced services, cost savings, and resource sharing across institutions.[51]

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Diversity, while rarely mentioned in the benefit statements analyzed for this study, is an increasingly common focus in librarianship within professional organizations, the workplace, and casual networks. Professional associations, particularly ALA and ethnic caucuses, have facilitated a range of diversity programs since the 1990s.[52] Numerous surveys and reviews in the literature detail the depth and breadth of diversity initiatives by academic libraries, primarily efforts to recruit and retain librarians of color, diversity and inclusion training and development, and initiatives to advance inclusion and equity among library user groups.[53] Diversity initiatives in libraries and librarianship have sometimes been accused of ineffectiveness.[54] In response, opportunities in this area will likely continue to expand and evolve both within and outside professional organizations.

Discussion

The results of the present study indicate that library associations offer a broad range of benefits and high level of value. Most organizations included in the analysis tout similar benefits to their prospective members—for example, professional development programming, discounted conference registration, networking opportunities, and information resources. Many of these are also available outside professional organizations. Any librarian's decision to join may be influenced by specific needs and interests as well as the particularities that distinguish each organization's offerings. The following discussion further explores study limitations and considers the conceptual implications of each theme for the future of LIS professional organizations.

Limitations

The use of qualitative content analysis poses some limitations in understanding the benefits of organizational membership. Professional organizations, understandably, do not adhere to a standard website format, and thus the information available varied in structure, layout, and extent. Some organizations did not clearly articulate membership benefits and could not be included for analysis. In addition, websites were not equally useful, and the sites varied in their purposes. For example, some organizations view websites as channels for recruitment, while others see them as an information source for existing members.[55] This difference in the perceived purpose of websites likely leads to a variation in content around the membership benefits advertised. Finally, people may join organizations for reasons not readily describable in a benefit statement, such as a sense of personal obligation to join or fear of repercussions for not enrolling. This study is not comprehensive for all library organizations; many ethnic library associations, for example, did not provide benefit statements on their websites. In addition, the authors focused on personal rather than institutional-level memberships (for example, LYRASIS or the Association of Research Libraries). Further, the literature review process the authors employed to investigate opportunities outside professional associations was exploratory rather than exhaustive. The authors identified clear trends and opportunities but did not build a comprehensive understanding of the professional landscape.

Learning and Development

Professional development is an important means to keep up with changes in the field. To maintain currency and foster professional growth, librarians use many tools, including conferences, professional literature, e-mail lists, and other communication platforms.[56] These tools are widely represented among the benefits offered by professional organizations, and library associations play an important role in supporting learning and development. They seldom provide formal guidelines or requirements for ongoing learning and skills development, however.[57] Further, professional organizations are not the only source of learning and development opportunities, and their offerings often involve additional cost to members and are in many cases nonexclusive.

While conferences and professional development opportunities have been available online for years, the global COVID-19 pandemic forced many organizations to switch to the online format for the first time in 2020. The shift from in-person to online has, in many cases, made these events more accessible and inclusive by reducing travel costs and barriers to attendance, such as caregiving responsibilities or physical mobility challenges. While technology has opened learning to a global audience, current platforms limit opportunities for networking and offer fewer social and cultural interactions than in-person travel does.[58] Participants may also face "Zoom fatigue" and technological issues that hinder participation. Increased availability

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of high-quality virtual learning experiences may increase competition for attention, thus leading organizers to offer more interactive and generative events.[59] With the increased accessibility and abundance of online learning opportunities, librarians may need to step away from day-to-day work more often to focus on professional development.

A standout in this area is the benefit of leadership development, which aims to prepare library directors and other professionals to effectively manage advances in technology, overcome budgetary challenges, and navigate the job market.[60] Library professional associations have long provided leadership development opportunities, most frequently sponsored by regional, state, or national groups. Universities, state libraries, or other nonprofit organizations occasionally provide leadership development programming as well.[61] Ultimately, the opportunities to develop and practice leadership skills transcend individuals and institutions and are essential to ensuring sustainability and vibrancy in the profession.

Further, professional organizations regulate the flow of information and knowledge about librarianship. Professions have long used publications to define their scope, control the distribution of knowledge, and build legitimacy, as well as provide income for organizations.[62] Many forums for sharing knowledge exist outside organizations, however. Organizations have different philosophies about the control of professional knowledge. Their approaches range from restricting professional publications as an exclusive benefit to members, to offering them to nonmembers at stand-alone cost, to making these knowledge resources freely accessible to all. Organizations must consider what benefits they would receive from being widely known and how they could sustain themselves without the revenues generated from exclusive control of knowledge.

Connection and Networking

Communication and networking are frequently identified benefits across library professional associations, through both face-to-face and online opportunities. Professional organization programming has historically provided an important channel for in-person communication and networking, though the global COVID-19 pandemic has shifted many opportunities online. In a digital space, association e-mail lists have long helped members connect, and many organizations have also added social media platforms to their benefit offerings.

Professional organizations increasingly maintain their own tailored online social platforms. ALA Connect and SLA Connect, for example, offer structured and controlled alternatives to open online social communication. A study of Twitter feeds from LIS professional organizations suggests that most such communication is one-directional, however, and organizations could better leverage platform features to encourage interaction and engagement with members and related audiences.[63] This finding highlights potential problems inherent to communications initiatives that fail to center reciprocal dialogue. Regardless, library professionals continue to use social media heavily to foster individual connections and a sense of community.

Professional organizations also provide unique opportunities for members to communicate with vendors, and vice versa. The relationship between vendors and librarians is often viewed as a partnership in which both parties look to improve products and

negotiate sales.[64] Publishers and other vendors often support professional organizations and their members and may sponsor events, scholarships, and awards.

Financial

Many library professional organizations provide career support in the form of job boards, career centers, or programming, such as résumé reviews. The associations also offer members access to competitive scholarships, travel grant funding, and discounts, though many can be used only for the organization's conferences or other programming. Savings are also frequently cited as benefits in the form of discounts on an association's programming, resources, or services. Many discounts, however, apply only to opportunities available at an additional cost to members, such as conferences, publications, or webinars. Organizations also commonly advertise offers on pet insurance, rental cars, or other services as member benefits, though discounts can be accessed through different means.

Important considerations for financial benefits, and for benefits in general, are return on investment (ROI) and recognition that members may value different things about membership. Financial benefits are often identified transactionally—that is, in terms of members providing money in exchange for benefits that have monetary value, such as a subscription or discount. Many members also consider intangible benefits, however. Organizations should present prospective members with a value proposition that not only shows how their members profit but also describes how the

> **Organizations should present prospective members with a value proposition that not only shows how their members profit but also describes how the profession and society at large benefit from their work.**

profession and society at large benefit from their work. Associations should also ensure that their benefits align with their organizational mission and are perceived by members as providing value.[65]

Participation

Professional organizations may further differentiate themselves in opportunities to engage and provide service to librarianship. Chances for members to take part in organizations help to build trust, give members voice, define identity, and generate social capital, the collective value of mutually advantageous social cooperation.[66] Service is highly valued in the library profession and, in many cases, is considered part of the job. Scholarship, or sharing one's work through publications and presentations, is also esteemed within academic libraries, particularly for promotion and tenure or other career-status decisions.

The levels of engagement expected vary by organization. Organizational leaders often hold single-year terms, and all but the smallest organizations must hire staff, who can provide supportive benefits but also alter organizational power and engagement.[67]

In larger associations, professional staff furnish an infrastructure of support, handling administrative and technical matters. Smaller organizations, on the other hand, may offer more opportunities to get involved.[68] Individual efforts can be particularly impactful at state or regional levels, and participation in local chapters was identified as a benefit of belonging to some national organizations.

Service and scholarship are meaningful ways to become involved in the profession, and for many academic librarians are a part of the job. Many things motivate volunteers to serve in professional associations, but a 2018 study suggests that "satisfaction with giving back, socializing, and working together with others towards common goals and mission—had a strong and positive effect on a volunteer's intention to continue volunteering."[69]

Professionalism

Professional organizations also address issues affecting librarianship as a whole. Library associations set ethical guidelines and develop standards, socialize new librarians, and advocate for issues of professional interest. While benefit lists often focus on value to the individual, Jay Karen suggests that members look to professional organizations for both collective and individual benefits equally.[70]

The library profession was slow to adopt a code of professional ethics, with ALA adopting the first in 1938; many library organizations still lack this sort of statement.[71] In considering associations around the world, professional values vary by geography, culture, and politics. Goals related to service, privacy, and equity of access emerge in ethics statements across organizations, however.[72] Joacim Hansson suggests that documentation of these values provides not only guidance for professional practices but also legitimacy that supports resistance and resilience.[73]

Professional organizations, in tandem with academic and on-the-job training, ensure that new librarians develop not only practical skills but also familiarity with the relationships, power structures, values, and history of librarianship. Such knowledge enables them to engage and develop a sense of belonging to the profession. Further engagement in communities of practice, whether formal or informal, is a way for library students and new librarians to understand norms, practices, and issues within the profession even before they become practitioners.[74]

Community

Membership fulfills a fundamental human desire to belong to a community.[75] As suggested by Howard Ross and JonRobert Tartaglione, people often identify themselves by the organizations to which they belong and where they feel accepted.[76] While organizations may describe transactional benefits of joining, many reasons for maintaining membership are intangible desires to maintain connections or feel a sense of belonging to the profession.[77] The importance of such connection is also reflected in a growing body of literature in higher education scholarship, which suggests that belonging is important for student retention and success.[78] The academic library profession and professional organizations may benefit from similar investigations into the relationship between belonging and librarian retention and success.

Community may be more easily developed and marketed within targeted organizations focused on a professional subset—such as an academic subject, a library function, or local geography—where members may be more naturally united by shared experiences. Broader national or international organizations, which attract and serve a more varied member base, may provide a sense of community across their membership as well as within subdivisions organized around a shared interest. Organizations also face the challenge of members struggling to find a sense of belonging due to the group's breadth or cliquishness, which can result in segmentation and the formation of new organizations where individuals may find a better fit.

Professions are not homogeneous or static; over time, they may become segmented based on the scope of work, techniques, users or clients, colleagues, interests, and values. Rue Bucher and Anselm Strauss describe professions as "loose amalgamations of segments pursuing different objectives in different manners and more or less delicately held together under a common name at a particular period in history."[79] Such segmentation has substantial precedents within the library profession, in which the formation of new organizations has been rooted in members' sense of not belonging. For example, SLA left ALA in 1909, and the Research Data Access & Preservation Association (RDAP) split off from ASIS&T in 2019.

Diversity, equity, and inclusion have been a long-standing issue within many professional organizations in the field, but references to any aspect of diversity, equity, and inclusion were rare among the benefit statements analyzed. Ethnic library associations and caucuses formed in the 1970s to fulfill needs not met by other organizations. These groups sought to address discrimination and overcome biases around race, culture, and language within the profession and in the provision of library services. They stepped in when professional organizations did little to provide mentoring and networking, supported members in developing leadership skills, and recruited and fostered librarians from diverse backgrounds.[80] Five of these organizations collaborated to form the Joint Council of Librarians of Color (JCLC) to address common needs and periodically host the Joint Conference of Librarians of Color.[81]

To make a sense of belonging and the benefits of community attainable for all, it is paramount that library professional organizations take action on diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) and social justice initiatives. The library profession has historically lacked racial and ethnic diversity. Though DEI initiatives have proliferated, including diversity scholarships, residency programs, and recruitment resources, much work remains to transform librarianship into a truly diverse and inclusive profession.[82] The existing literature on DEI in librarianship primarily focuses on LIS education and the library workplace, but professional organizations also play a key role in recruitment and retention. They have the potential to provide essential community support to librarians from underrepresented and marginalized groups. In an increasingly diverse and

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globalized world, library professional organizations cannot ignore DEI and hope to thrive. Instead, they must become advocates for all members by refocusing membership benefits on community and belonging through a lens of diversity, equity, and inclusion; rejecting white supremacy; and supporting anti-racist education and action. Grassroots communities and platforms have emerged to address the lack of community benefits for underrepresented groups, including We Here™ and WOC+lib (women of color and librarianship).[83] In addition, library professional organizations must create an inclusive culture and serve as a resource for all members in learning and development related to diversity, equity, and inclusion.

Conclusions

Library professional organizations offer many benefits to members. Most benefits highlighted by library associations are transactional in nature—often emphasizing what members can get from an organization, such as professional development, content, career resources, and savings. The concept of membership has been co-opted by corporations (for example, Costco and Amazon Prime) with the goal of selling a product for profit, relying on the inherent goodwill of the idea of membership to increase sales.[84] Library professional organizations may benefit by considering and marketing membership less as a transaction—members paying a fee to get tangible benefits—and more as a value proposition. Professional organizations often emphasize the tangible or quantifiable benefits of membership—for example, professional development programming and publications. Many of these benefits are available to nonmembers at an additional cost or duplicated by free or low-cost alternatives outside professional associations. For this reason, organizations might better resonate with potential members by emphasizing the intangible benefits that they offer, stressing that the communities of practice and the people who belong make membership uniquely valuable.

> **Library professional organizations may benefit by considering and marketing membership less as a transaction—members paying a fee to get tangible benefits—and more as a value proposition.**

Any individual's choice to join an organization may be less about specific benefits and more about feeling a part of the community and gaining a sense of belonging. This intangible benefit is relationship-based, where individuals connect through a shared set of values and experiences. If belonging is a primary benefit of professional membership, however, organizations need to consider how they can nurture this sense of community for all members in a way that fosters authentic inclusion, integrates rather than tokenizes diversity, and provides equitable access to membership, leadership, and related opportunities. Diversity, equity, and inclusion will not solely benefit members from underrepresented groups but also will help the profession and professional associations.

Many stated benefits across the group of organizations analyzed overlap. The similarities may result from organizations striving to attract a broad spectrum of members

and to meet needs across a wide subset of library professionals, often driven by financial pressures. But balancing this breadth of benefits with limited resources to sustain member interest is a challenge. Many common benefits are duplicated outside professional organizations, which raises the question: what unique value does any library professional organization offer that makes it worth the financial investment? Membership organizations might revise their approach to benefits to reflect market pressures and changing professional needs. Going further still, library professional organizations might benefit from thinking deeply about duplication versus uniqueness compared to other organizations, analyzing why they exist, whom they seek to serve, and for what purposes.

The library profession would benefit from research that further examines both the member's and organization's perspective regarding the most valuable aspects of professional membership. A follow-up qualitative study using survey or interview methodology could explore how librarians make decisions regarding professional memberships as well as the benefits they find most and least valuable. A similar qualitative study might also target organizations' leadership or staff to collect data regarding their perception of the benefits most or least often used by members.

Additional research focused on changes in member benefits in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic and the resultant shift to virtual engagement would also provide valuable insights into the changing landscape of professional organization membership. For example, what would members value from their professional associations in a post-pandemic world? How can librarians best measure return on investment from professional memberships with enhanced virtual and hybrid engagement? These questions and more will help the profession better understand how organizations can modernize, enhance their relevance to members, and thrive in a changing world.

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Appendix

Library Professional Organizations Analyzed and URLs for Their Statements of the Benefits of Membership

Category	Organization	URL for member benefits
Functional	Association for Library Collections and Technical Services (ALCTS)*	http://www.ala.org/alcts/membership
Functional	Library and Information Technology Association (LITA)*	http://www.ala.org/lita/membership
Functional	Library Instruction Round Table (LIRT)	http://www.ala.org/rt/lirt/membership
Functional	Library Leadership and Management Association (LLAMA)*	http://www.ala.org/llama/about/join
Functional	NASIG (formerly North American Serials Interest Group)	https://www.nasig.org/site_page.cfm?pk_association_webpage_menu=309&pk_association_webpage=1159
Functional	Rare Books and Manuscripts Section (RBMS)	http://rbms.info/about/membership/
Functional	Research Data Access & Preservation Association (RDAP)	https://rdapassociation.org/membership/
Functional	Society for Scholarly Publishing (SSP)	https://www.sspnet.org/
Primary	American Library Association (ALA)	http://www.ala.org/membership/ala-personal-member-benefits; http://www.ala.org/membership/memberbenefits/benefitspersonal
Primary	Association for Information Science and Technology (ASIS&T)	https://www.asist.org/join/member-benefits/
Primary	Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL)	http://www.ala.org/acrl/membership/benefits
Primary	International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA)	https://www.ifla.org/membership/benefits
Primary	Special Libraries Association (SLA)	https://www.sla.org/access-membership-3/
State/ Regional	Alabama Library Association (ALLA)	https://www.allanet.org/member-benefits
State/ Regional	Alaska Library Association	https://akla.org/join/
State/ Regional	Arizona Library Association	https://www.azla.org/page/MembershipBenefits

Category	Organization	URL for member benefits
State/ Regional	Arkansas Library Association	https://www.arlib.org/membership
State/ Regional	California Library Association	https://www.cla-net.org/page/MembershipLevels#ivmMemb
State/ Regional	Colorado Association of Libraries	https://cal-webs.org/join.php
State/ Regional	Connecticut Library Association	https://ctlibraryassociation.org/Benefits_of_Membership
State/ Regional	Delaware Library Association	https://dla.lib.de.us/membership/
State/ Regional	District of Columbia Library Association	https://dcla.org/membership
State/ Regional	Florida Library Association	https://www.flalib.org/member-benefits-and-rates
State/ Regional	Georgia Library Association	https://gla.georgialibraries.org/membership/
State/ Regional	Idaho Library Association	http://www.idaholibraries.org/Membership
State/ Regional	Illinois Library Association	https://www.ila.org/membership
State/ Regional	Indiana Library Federation	https://www.ilfonline.org/page/personalmembership
State/ Regional	Iowa Library Association	https://www.iowlibraryassociation.org/index.php/members-only
State/ Regional	Kentucky Library Association	http://www.klaonline.org/benefits.cfm
State/ Regional	Louisiana Library Association	https://www.llaonline.org/LLA/Membership/LLA/Membership/Membership.aspx?hkey=846006b8-d972-4740-bba8-50df77ddbc46
State/ Regional	Maine Library Association	https://www.mainelibraries.org/page-1428200
State/ Regional	Maryland Library Association	https://www.mdlib.org/assoc_subscribe.asp
State/ Regional	Massachusetts Library Association	https://mla.wildapricot.org/joinmla
State/ Regional	Michigan Library Association	https://www.milibraries.org/membership-value-and-benefits
State/ Regional	Minnesota Library Association	https://www.mnlibraryassociation.org/page/BenefitsMemb
State/ Regional	Mississippi Library Association	http://www.misslib.org/MLAbenefits
State/ Regional	Missouri Library Association	http://molib.org/join-mla/
State/ Regional	Montana Library Association	http://www.mtlib.org/join-mla/

Appendix, cont.

Category	Organization	URL for member benefits
State/ Regional	Mountain Plains Library Association (MPLA)	https://mpla.us/services/membership/
State/ Regional	Nebraska Library Association	https://nebraskalibraries.org/join.php
State/ Regional	New England Library Association (NELA) http://nelib.org/membership/	
State/ Regional	New Hampshire Library Association	http://nhlibrarians.org/about/membership/
State/ Regional	New Jersey Library Association	https://www.njla.org/assets/docs/About%20 Individual%20Membership.pdf
State/ Regional	New York Library Association	https://www.nyla.org/max/4DCGI/cms/review.html?Action=CMS_Document&DocID= 410&MenuKey=membership
State/ Regional	North Carolina Library Association	https://nclaonline.wildapricot.org/Why-Join-NCLA; https://nclaonline.wildapricot.org/Join-Renew
State/ Regional	North Dakota Library Association	https://ndla.info/Membership_Benefits
State/ Regional	Ohio Library Council	http://olc.org/about-us/membership/individual/
State/ Regional	Oklahoma Library Association	https://www.oklibs.org/page/WhyJoin
State/ Regional	Oregon Library Association	https://www.olaweb.org/benefits
State/ Regional	Pacific Northwest Library Association (PNWLA)	https://pnla.org/membership/
State/ Regional	Pennsylvania Library Association	https://www.palibraries.org/page/Personal
State/ Regional	Rhode Island Library Association	https://www.rilibraries.org/Membership-Benefits
State/ Regional	South Carolina Library Association	https://www.scla.org/join-scla
State/ Regional	Southeastern Library Association (SELA)	http://www.selaonline.org/sela/membership/10.html
State/ Regional	Texas Library Association	https://txla.org/membership/why-join/
State/ Regional	Utah Library Association	http://ula.org/membership/
State/ Regional	Vermont Library Association	https://www.vermontlibraries.org/membership/
State/ Regional	Washington Library Association	https://www.wla.org/individual-membership-benefits
State/ Regional	West Virginia Library Association	https://wvla.org/join.php

Category	Organization	URL for member benefits
State/ Regional	Wisconsin Library Association	http://wla.wisconsinlibraries.org/about-the-wla/join-wla-or-renew
State/ Regional	Wyoming Library Association	https://wyla.org/
Subject	American Association of Law Libraries (AALL)	https://www.aallnet.org/community/membership/benefits/
Subject	American Chemical Society (ACS) Division of Chemical Information (CINF)	https://acscinf.org/content/cinf-membership
Subject	American Society for Engineering Education (ASEE) Engineering Libraries Division (ELD)	https://sites.asee.org/eld/why-join/
Subject	American Theological *Library* Association (ATLA)	https://www.atla.com/membership/member-benefits/individual/
Subject	Art Libraries Society of North America (ARLIS)	https://www.arlisna.org/membership/membershipbenefits
Subject	Association of Architecture School Librarians (AASL)	https://architecturelibrarians.org/membership
Subject	Business Reference and Services Section (BRASS) Reference & User Services Association (RUSA)	http://www.ala.org/rusa/sections/brass/involved
Subject	Education and Behavioral Sciences Section (EBSS) of ACRL	http://www.ala.org/acrl/aboutacrl/directoryofleadership/sections/ebss/ebsswebsite/join
Subject	International Association for Social Science Information Service and Technology (IASSIST)	https://iassistdata.org/about/membership.html
Subject	Literatures in English Section (LES) of ACRL	http://www.ala.org/acrl/sites/ala.org.acrl/files/content/aboutacrl/directoryofleadership/sections/les/lesbrochure/LESbrochure.pdf
Subject	Medical Library Association (MLA)	https://www.mlanet.org/join
Subject	Music Library Association (MLA)	https://www.musiclibraryassoc.org/?
Subject	Seminar on the Acquisition of Latin American Library Materials (SALALM)	https://salalm.org/about/join-salalm/
Subject	*Theatre Library* Association (TLA)	http://www.tla-online.org/membership/privileges/
Subject	United States Agricultural Information Network (USAIN) Agriculture	https://usain.org/Why-Join-USAIN

*ALCTS, LITA, and LLAMA merged into a new ALA division, Core, in 2020.

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