**EBD#12.37**

**2017-2018**

ALA Executive Board

Spring 2018 Meeting

**TO:** ALA Executive Board

**RE:** Business Update: ALA Conference Services

**ACTION REQUESTED:** Discussion

**REQUESTED BY:**  Paul Graller, Director, Conference Services

**DATE:** 17 April 2018

**BACKGROUND:**

ALA Conferences have a long history, almost inseparable from the history of the Association itself. The first ALA conference was held in 1876; with a few exceptions (1878, 1880 and 1884), conferences were then held every year until the war years of 1943-45. Of those early conferences, six were international conferences, held in conjunction with various European associations, and another four were held in Canada – but were oddly not considered “international.” Throughout this long history, ALA conferences have served the purposes of governance, education, business, networking – and sometimes entertainment. Complaints about schedule conflicts are almost as old as the conference. In 1889, the newly-formed College and Reference Section held its first meeting separate from the general body of conference attendees -- and it was only a few years later that members began complaining about missing meetings because of schedule conflicts. The number of meetings held at annual conference hit 987 in 1967 and was up to 2500 by 2000 (Chicago). It remained reasonably stable at that level. Exhibits began in 1893 (in conjunction with the World’s Fair); there were 375 by 1967 and 1,600 by 2001 (San Francisco).

In addition to the Annual Conference, ALA began holding an annual business meeting in 1908: the Midwinter Meeting. Over the next four decades, the number of types of sessions grew and by 1952 the Association began a regular cycle of expansion and restriction of the Midwinter Meeting. Based on recommendations of a Board/Council committee in 1965, the Midwinter Meeting would be primarily “for carrying out the business of the Association through meetings of the Council, boards, and committee.” The Board was also authorized to authorize a “limited number of program meetings, institutes, conferences or workshops…” and “the occasional movement of the Midwinter Meeting to an appropriate center other than Chicago. ALA staff was authorized “to experiment with a limited number of commercial exhibits at the Midwinter Meeting…” The educational function of the Midwinter Meeting continued to grow; increased education and exhibits encouraged stronger regional attendance. The tug and pull between “business” and “content” continued.

The ALA Conference Committee was established in 1996 (New York). Based on historical resistance to a “centralized” conference committee, it was structured as a “representative” group, to bring stakeholder groups to a shared table. Over the past two decades, the ALA Conference Committee has sought to add structure to what seemed to many a chaotic conference, beginning with the creation of program “tracks” to increase the discoverability of conference content.

Starting at the 2016 conference (Orlando) the ALA Conference Committee embarked on a major redesign of the ALA Annual Conference. The redesign aimed to open up the program submission process by implementing (for the first time) an open call for programs, a shared rubric and a jury process. The redesign also aimed at facilitating conference participation by attendees by controlling what had seemed to be an endless appetite for additional meeting rooms (over 350 concurrent). The revised conference design controls use of space – thereby affecting costs (e.g., busing, AV) and creating a more welcoming experience for members, who had often complained about the inconvenience of negotiating a widespread campus. The first “redesigned” conference is the 2018 ALA Annual Conference in New Orleans.

Beginning at the 2018 Midwinter Meeting (Denver), the ALA Conference Committee, while still continuing work on redesign and evaluation of the Annual Conference, turned some of its attention to the ALA Midwinter Meeting. That consideration will continue at the 2018 Annual Conference in New Orleans.

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**ALA Annual Conference and ALA Midwinter Meeting: Current Status**

**Annual Conference**

Although Annual Conference revenues are strong, in recent years attendance has become more sensitive to the local availability of drive-in audience. This shows in Las Vegas, Orlando and New Orleans numbers, for instance. It impacts both paid and complimentary attendance. Exhibitors have begun to recognize this and have tightened up their budgets for exhibit space and marketing opportunities like the program book and COGNOTES advertising. Recent mergers have also impacted exhibit space sales and the numbers of new and first-time exhibitors is shrinking throughout the industry (including other library conferences, BookExpo, etc).

Staff continues to closely monitor both exhibitor and attendee participation and reduce expenses where appropriate in the months leading up to conference. The goal is to control these variable expenses while not putting the attendee experience at risk. In addition, the continued shrinking of the campus will allow for reduced expenses, while keeping attendees in fewer facilities to maximize their learning and networking experience. In 2018, in the first year of the new process for creating the overall schedule and assigning meeting space, we reduced the number of meeting facilities to five: the convention center, headquarter hotel and three hotels. Many new feature areas have been added to the exhibitor floor to maintain traffic levels and to increase attendee engagement with participating exhibitors. Stages, product pavilions and interactive areas like “The Playground”, introduced in 2017, have supported ALA’s intent of making the exhibit floor a part of the learning opportunities presented at conference.

The Annual Conference locations for the next five years (2019-2022: DC, Chicago, Chicago, DC, Chicago) should act to grow conference attendance, exhibit sales and increase overall revenues. Although both cities are high cost cities and union facilities, net revenue should strengthen and increase.

Midwinter Meeting

Attendance at Midwinter has had a dramatic decline of almost 10%/year each of the last three years. Many factors have impacted this: location, regional membership, competition for reduced travel time and budgets, and lack of focus among sessions. Total revenue has been relatively flat, due to price increases, while expense for a basic level of services has increased. Exhibitors, in reaction to the decline in attendance and noticeable lack of traffic on the exhibit floor, have reduced space and have now begun to decline the opportunity to exhibit. Midwinter continues to return overhead to the association, but that is declining and net revenue is trending negative. Left alone, these trends will continue to diminish Midwinter’s contribution, both financially and as a valuable interactive experience for participants.

Conference Services, in conjunction with the ALA Conference Committee, has undertaken a research program over the past nine months to measure participants’ assessment of Midwinter and their needs for a future event. Research has identified many problems at Midwinter from potential attendee understanding of session offerings to lack of value for exhibitors. The next step in the process will be to review potential options and models for the future. Some of the options under review include:

1. Keep the structure and scope of Midwinter while continuing to reorganize and focus the educational opportunities. This must also include the inclusion of no conflict time for the exhibit floor. It is clear without an appropriate amount of no conflict time, the exhibit floor will continue to shrink at a faster pace.
2. Eliminate Midwinter. This will eliminate the overhead contribution made by the event, but will maintain many expenses associated with fulfilling events dictated by policy, such as Council Meetings. This would free up staff time and allow the association to focus on the production of the Annual Conference, potentially improving the educational opportunities and financial performance of the Annual Conference.
3. Colocation of existing small division events and valuable portions of Midwinter. This would bring ALSC National Institute, YALSA Symposium, LITA Forum, Symposium on the Future of Libraries, and Boards and Council together in one location. One potential outcome would be a reduction in expenses by sharing facilities, but the lack of focus would recreate many of the challenges that the Midwinter Meeting faces now. While the January dates are desirable for relocating some of the small division events (especially those focused on youth), it may not work for others. A further idea – to make Midwinter a venue for not only those small divisions with an existing meeting, but for all small divisions to host more expanded offerings – would threaten to replicate our existing Midwinter and contribute to the aforementioned lack of focus.
4. Create a new youth focused event that would revolve around the excitement and media coverage associated with the Youth Media Awards. Two of the only benefits to participating in the Midwinter Meeting for a segment of the publishing exhibitors are activities associated with the YMA’s and ability to expose authors and spring titles to the library market. These are an asset for ALA and cannot be replicated anywhere in the marketplace. An event that can draw attendance and exhibitors could produce revenue, although not comparable to current Midwinter levels, but could be profitable and provide support for necessary activities like Board and Council meetings.

Attachments: ALA Annual Conference and ALA Midwinter Meeting Charts















