

Martha Stuit and Joanna Thielen

Introducing library students to library conferences

Reflections on a student-led conference from two recent graduates

Library and information science (LIS) students benefit from an introduction to professional library conferences during their graduate studies. While they are invited to attend library conferences, participating can be intimidating without prior experience. To provide this necessary experience, the ALA student chapter at the University of Michigan School of Information (UMSI) has hosted QuasiCon, an annual student-led conference, for the last five years.

From QuasiCon, students learn transferable skills in attending, presenting, and/or planning a professional-like conference. These skills equip them to enter and engage more fully with the library profession during and after library school. Additionally, professional librarians gain value from the opportunities to present, lend their expertise, and connect with students.

As two 2016 UMSI graduates now working as librarians, we recognize how planning and presenting at QuasiCon for the past two years has strengthened our professional library experience. For this article, we researched QuasiCon's history and reviewed attendee feedback from 2016 conference to better understand its impact. We feel that this type of conference can be implemented at another university and hope to inspire the creation of similar student-led conferences.

QuasiCon's origins

In late 2011, several UMSI students (now alumni) recognized that they had little experience with library conferences and also wanted to discuss libraries outside the classroom. They planned and hosted QuasiCon in early 2012

to meet these needs. The name, "QuasiCon," comes from combining elements of a traditional conference and an unconference. Organizing formal presentations created a venue for students to practice attending and presenting at a library conference. Unconference-style discussions created a venue to explore ideas about libraries separate from coursework.

QuasiCon has evolved into a daylong, themed event. QuasiCon 2016 consisted of a keynote address, lightning talks, panels, and demonstrations. Presentation topics included makerspaces, data literacy, digital humanities, and user-centered research guides.¹ The 2016 theme, "What libraries can do for you!" was inspired by the ALA's Libraries Transform campaign. It drew 47 attendees, including ten professional librarians and three UMSI faculty members.

Planning QuasiCon

The volunteer planning committee of approximately ten students plans the conference annually. Officers of the ALA student chapter serve on the committee, especially to help coordinate funding. A second-year student, who served on the committee in the previous year, serves as chair by delegating

Martha Stuit is librarian at Washtenaw Community College and user information services specialist at the University of Michigan, email: stuitm@umich.edu, Joanna Thielen is research data librarian/science librarian for Biology, Chemistry, and Physics at Oakland University Libraries, email: jthielen@oakland.edu

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and managing tasks across a flat hierarchy. Each committee member takes on specific responsibilities, like marketing, within a subcommittee.

Planning takes place throughout the year, mostly during regular meetings in the four months prior to QuasiCon. Forming a diverse committee brings a variety of perspectives and ideas, which is helpful in the planning process.

All committee members develop valuable transferable skills in marketing, fundraising, website management, proposal evaluation, event planning, and project management. They advertise the conference by soliciting proposals, creating professional marketing materials with the QuasiCon branding, and posting information on the event website.

While some funding comes from the ALA student chapter, fundraising is still a crucial component to QuasiCon. Committee members seek monetary or in-kind support from libraries, local bookstores, and professional organizations to cover the cost of food, swag, an honorarium for the keynote speaker, and small gifts for presenters.

To select presentation proposals, committee members objectively evaluate submissions for content and relevance to the theme, as well as devise the conference schedule. At the conference itself, they handle on-site logistics, like registration, and serve as session moderators.

Each committee member spent between 50 and 60 hours planning and hosting the 2016 conference. To sustain QuasiCon despite students graduating annually, the planning committee passes on organizational memory through Google Drive documents.

This collaborative service work gives students experience with a professional-like committee. Since many librarians must participate in

service work, students benefit from having this experience before their first full-time positions.

Presenting at QuasiCon

To present at QuasiCon, students must submit competitively selected proposals corresponding with the conference theme. The call for proposals is from November to early January. Students generally propose presentations related to their classes, internships, or part-time jobs.

Professional librarians also submit proposals. At the past two conferences, a total of six professional librarians presented.

By presenting, students gain experience addressing questions and moderating a dialogue. QuasiCon is a stepping stone between giving in-class presentations and presenting at professional library conferences. Students add these presentations to their CVs and can discuss them with potential employers.

QuasiCon 2016 offered a new unconference session: demonstrations of unique library services or collections. This interactive session was unstructured and participation-based. Examples include a crowdsourced readers' advisory service and materials from the Unusual Stuff to Borrow Collection of Ann Arbor District Library.² Students gained the opportunity to present in a more informal, but still professional, capacity.

Participating in QuasiCon as a student

Even if they are not presenting at QuasiCon, attending has numerous benefits for students. First, they must register in advance on the QuasiCon website, mimicking the protocol of a professional conference. Second, at QuasiCon, they learn the often unspoken



conventions of conference attendance. While professional librarians are likely accustomed to navigating conferences, students can struggle with identifying relevant presentations. In 2016, students had to choose from three concurrent presentations during each of the three sessions. Also, incorporating common elements of conferences, like name tags and business casual attire, elevates QuasiCon's atmosphere to mirror a professional conference.

Third, attending sessions gives students a model for professional presentations. They see peers and professional librarians present. Students gain ideas for their own research and learn about topics outside of their classes or jobs. They can ask questions and join the dialogue. A 2016 participant commented on the evaluation form that QuasiCon “[helped] me think of issues in the libraries I wouldn't have thought about.”

Fourth, QuasiCon offers an inclusive environment that celebrates diversity. The planning committee provides food that meets dietary restrictions and solicits presentations on diverse topics. In 2016, Jennifer Taggart, assistant head of youth services at Bloomfield Township Public Library and a 2016 *Library Journal* Mover & Shaker, gave the keynote address about best practices for inclusive programming and collections for patrons with special needs. Other diverse topics included tribal libraries and international comic books and graphic novels. Notably, QuasiCon is a free event and therefore accessible to all attendees. Most attendees do not have to travel out of town, unlike most professional conferences.

Fifth, like a professional conference, QuasiCon cultivates formal and informal networking with librarians and professional organizations. The Michigan chapter of a national library organization recruited members in 2015 and 2016. A member of the state health sciences library association shared career opportunities in health sciences and medical libraries in 2016. Networking with professional organizations motivates students to join and contribute on the local, state, or national levels.

During formal networking sessions, librarians discuss their career paths, exchange business cards, and offer advice. Librarians also network through informal conversations with students throughout the day, such as chatting at lunch. At QuasiCon 2015, a student received a part-time job from networking with a librarian. Such opportunities to network with librarians at QuasiCon train students how to interact professionally and grow their professional network.

Prospective UMSI students have attended QuasiCon, where they met professional librarians and current students. The experience gave them a deeper understanding of a career path in librarianship and can influence their decision to attend UMSI.

Finally, QuasiCon helps students address professional trends like ACRL's Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education.³ In presenting and contributing to discussions at QuasiCon, students fulfill the frame of “Scholarship as Conversation.” Feedback on the 2016 evaluation indicated such learning. A student wrote that QuasiCon “helped me practice presentation skills.” By developing their voices at QuasiCon, students build their information literacy skills in addition to their professional participation.

Participating in QuasiCon as a professional

Professional librarians, including UMSI alumni, are integral to the success of QuasiCon. They engage with students, see the range of student interests, and hear about current LIS curriculum. Professionals have said that they gain ideas from students' engagement with the library profession. Meeting current students also allows librarians to scout future talent for internships or professional positions.

In addition to their own learning, professionals contribute as mentors at QuasiCon. They share their expertise by presenting and networking. A 2016 librarian attendee said that, “it's exciting to hear about things [students] do outside the classroom.” Conversations with professionals give students prac-

tical insights into the roles and responsibilities of professional librarians and complement the theory learned in classes. Furthermore, librarians demonstrate professional engagement and lifelong learning by participating in QuasiCon.

Reflecting on QuasiCon as new librarians

Having both recently earned our master's degrees and started working as professional librarians, we see how our involvement with QuasiCon has had a positive and lasting impact on our professional development.

During the job search process, we both found that having presented for an unknown audience at QuasiCon boosted our confidence in doing the same during in-person interviews for academic positions. Serving on the planning committee for two years has given us valuable transferable skills for service work. We believe that this prior experience with committee work set us apart from other recent library school graduates. QuasiCon equipped us with experiences that we could discuss in interviews and skills that distinguished us in a tough job market.

In terms of professional conferences, QuasiCon gave us practice with developing quality presentations with visual aids and prepared us to deliver presentations at professional conferences, which we have since successfully done. By attending QuasiCon, we learned to weigh and choose among concurrent presentations. We have consequently maximized our time at subsequent professional conferences. Additionally, planning QuasiCon gave us a deep respect for the time and effort needed to host a professional conference. We hope to be involved with other conference planning committees in the future.

Here are our individual takeaways: Joanna Thielen is now research data librarian at Oakland University in Rochester, Michigan, where she helps campus constituents organize, store, and preserve their research data. Outreach to faculty and graduate students is an integral part of her job. Attending QuasiCon allowed her to practice her networking skills, which gave her the confidence to network with professionals at subsequent local, state, and national confer-

ences. As a professional librarian, she is now more confident and prepared for professional interactions with unfamiliar faculty and graduate students. Also, as a faculty member at Oakland University, serving on the planning committee for two years (including one year as chair) has given her the skills to immediately participate in library and university service work.

Martha Stuit now works as librarian at the Washtenaw Community College's Bailey Library and as user information services specialist at the University of Michigan Library-Ann Arbor. She provides reference services, engages in collection development, joins instruction efforts, and contributes to projects. By assessing QuasiCon and applying feedback to make data-driven decisions and positive changes, she gained experience in finding solutions collaboratively and objectively, as well as managing a budget responsibly. She applies those skills to her current duties. Also, participating in QuasiCon highlighted the value of learning from colleagues for her. She recognizes conferences as a way to stay up-to-date and grow in the library profession, and she consequently seeks out such lifelong learning opportunities.

Final reflections

QuasiCon is a unique professional development opportunity for students and professional librarians.⁴ From participant feedback and our personal experience, an overarching theme emerges: QuasiCon prepares students to participate in the library profession by introducing them to conferences. This preparation benefits both students and the library profession. Students learn that they can contribute to the professional dialogue, practice conveying their ideas, or serve on a committee. Professional librarians support this learning by participating. While we specifically reported about a student-led conference at UMSI, many aspects can be translated and scoped to another library school. We hope that our reflections inspire others to start similar student-led conferences.

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include addressing the challenge of involving different stakeholders. IL has multifaceted aspects and implications that open possibilities for engagement beyond the LIS field. One way of doing this is choosing challenging main conference themes of societal and political relevance. For example, with workplace literacy as the main conference theme for ECIL 2017, we hope to include human resources specialists, career advisors, and trade units.

In 2016 ECIL organized an introductory pre-conference event as a participant-driven meeting about critical information literacy, the CIL Unconference.⁷ This experience is prompting us to consider introducing other fresh conference formats. This way, we hope to attract younger participants at the beginning of their research or professional careers, who might find such casual formats more attractive.

What might serve ECIL best is to conduct a thorough evaluation of its attendance, conference content, review of evaluations by attendee and rapporteur reports, citation analysis of presented papers, and, now, the published conference proceedings. Such an evaluation might also include comparisons with other international IL conferences and, thus, result in a mapping of global perspectives on IL. This mapping might involve examining the missions and activities of other organizations, including the International Alliance for Information Literacy and the European Network on Information Literacy to ascertain the potential, need, and benefits of future information sharing or collaboration.

Notes

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3. Mihaela Banek Zorica, Lucia Amante, Gloria Bastos, Serap Kurbanoglu, Sonja Špiranec, Yasar Tonta, and Vlasta Zabukovec, "Erasmus Intensive Programme: Information and Communication Technology in Supporting the Educational Process," <http://yunus.hacettepe.edu.tr/~tonta/yayinlar/tonta-zorica-erasmus-IP-programme.pdf> (accessed December 18, 2016).

4. European Conference on Information Literacy, <http://ilconf.org>.

5. Sheila Webber, "ECIL Closing #ecil2016," Information Literacy Weblog, October 13, 2016, <http://information-literacy.blogspot.com/search/label/ecil2016> (accessed January 25, 2017).

6. Sirje Virkus, "Knowledge Management and Information Literacy: An Exploratory Analysis," in: S. Kurbanoglu, et al (eds), *Information Literacy: Key to an Inclusive Society*, CCIS, vol. 676 (in press) (Berlin: Springer).

7. CIL Unconference, <http://cilunconference.wixsite.com/home> (accessed January 7, 2017). *✍*

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1. QuasiCon 2016, "Schedule," ALA Student Chapter at the University of Michigan School of Information, last accessed September 14, 2016, <https://quasicon2016.wordpress.com/schedule/>.

2. "Unusual Stuff to Borrow," Ann Arbor District Library, last accessed September 14, 2016, www.aadl.org/catalog/browse/unusual.

3. ACRL, "Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education," ALA, January 11, 2016, www.ala.org/acrl/standards/ilframework.

4. We would like to acknowledge and thank both the graduate students who started QuasiCon and the Planning Committee volunteers for their innovation, dedication, and hard work to create, plan, and host QuasiCon.

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