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Recommended Citation

Steiner, Sarah, "Committee Service and the Fledgling Librarian: Creating Community, Confidence, and Employability" (2006). *University Library Faculty Publications*. 15.

https://scholarworks.gsu.edu/univ_lib_facpub/15

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Steiner, Sarah K. "Committee Service and the Fledgling Librarian: Creating Community, Confidence, and Employability." Info Career Trends (Mar. 2006). Available electronically here: <http://www.lisjobs.com/newsletter/archives/mar06sksteiner.htm>.

Committee Service and the Fledgling Librarian: Enhancing Community, Confidence and Employability

by [Sarah King Steiner](#)

As a librarian-in-training, you face many demands on your time - classes, homework, a job, a marriage, a family - the list can go on and on. In the midst of all these school- and life-related responsibilities, committee service is something people often defer until after graduation. This is unfortunate, because the benefits of participation in committees, round tables, and other groups early in your career cannot be overstated. With only a small time commitment, local professional service can provide you with an invaluable - and underrated - way to meet people, gain experience in the profession, and land yourself the job or promotion you want.

Are you ready to consider volunteering? Let's talk about a few places where you might want to get involved, namely the university, local, and statewide level. Many of these smaller organizations are unable to fill leadership roles, and are thrilled to have volunteers. I've been involved in several small groups, and every single one has struggled to find willing participants. My involvement helped me to connect with many future colleagues and significantly build my nascent resume - and, now that I'm a little more established and have been on a few search committees, I can vouch for how professional activities can help keep your application out of the trash can.

University Organizations

Most universities that have accredited LIS programs also have student chapters of the American Library Association (ALA), the Special Libraries Association (SLA), and the American Society for Information Science & Technology (ASIS&T). These groups often orchestrate social events for current students and work in conjunction with the university library to staff book sales and fundraisers. Due to the student-based makeup of these groups, officer turnaround is high; most students come and go within a year or two, and a whole new crop of members needs to be recruited. Interest in these groups waxes and

wanes from year to year, but, even if your school has highly popular student groups, the chance that they don't want your help is very slim.

One notable perk of getting involved on the university level: your professors will probably be involved as well, and it never hurts to get to know them. Remember, not only will they be grading you; one day they may be writing you recommendations, acting as references, and nominating you for Beta Phi Mu.

Local and Statewide Organizations

University groups aren't the only ones that have trouble filling leadership roles; local and statewide groups can also be starved for contributors. These groups boast many of the same benefits as the university groups: they require little or no travel and only a little bit of your time, yet provide a great learning opportunity and a chance to widen the net of your acquaintances even further.

If you decide to participate on the statewide level, you'll have many more options for involvement, so you'll be able to choose roundtables, interest groups, or committees based on your personal interests. Be sure to check out the New Members Round Table (NMRT) in your state. NMRTs are particularly germane to library school students, yet attract surprisingly low numbers of volunteers. Find out who the chair of your state NMRT is, and write that person an e-mail. If your state library association doesn't have an NMRT, think about working to start one!

How to Get Started

Before you decide on a group, take a few preliminary steps. Attend a few meetings and see if the committee is something you're interested in, both socially and professionally. If you don't mesh with the people, you may wish to choose another group, and, if the committee deals with a topic that you find irrelevant or boring, it might also be a good idea to look elsewhere. The bottom line is: you don't want to sign up for something you won't follow through with, especially if you think backing out will create bad feelings with the other group members.

If time is a major hurdle, avoid overextending yourself by volunteering to act as an officer with fewer responsibilities. President, secretary, and webmaster are always work-intensive positions, but treasurer or archivist tend not to be. Also, find out if the committee you're volunteering for will allow you to attend meetings remotely via conference call or the web; this practice is quite common, and can help you overcome a tight schedule.

Moving Up With the Bigwigs

Your experiences on the local level will not only prepare you for your first professional position, they will also help ready you for national involvement - should you feel so inclined. Competition for popular national committee spots can be stiff, but can bring you prestige and allow you to meet librarians from around the world. You might consider getting started as a national committee intern: just remember that, when you go national, you will be expected to attend annual or semi-annual meetings in potentially remote locations.

Still feeling intimidated about accepting a leadership role as a new grad or student? Don't worry! Chances are you already have the skills you need to serve and do a good job. While it might not be plausible to run for president of ALA, there are countless other groups and committees that make excellent entry points for future librarians. Just don't be afraid to start small, and don't forget to add your activities to your resume. Good luck and happy volunteering!

Sarah King Steiner is a Learning Commons Librarian and chronic volunteer at Georgia State University in Atlanta. She's worked with the student ALA at the University of South Florida and with the state NMRTs of Florida, North Carolina, and Georgia.