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We virtually brought our colleague to a library conference

Expanding education and networking opportunities

The benefits of attending a library conference lead to advantageous opportunities for career advancement, learning through shared knowledge, relationship-building through networking, and scholarship through presenting papers or posters. Unfortunately, it is not always possible for every librarian to make it to every conference to reap these benefits, whether it is due to lack of funding or conflicting schedules. ALA's list of reasons to attend its most recent Annual Conference includes becoming a better advocate, relationship-building and networking, and being exposed to new ideas that bring a fresh energy to libraries.[1]

Alternatives for those who cannot attend in person, such as online streaming of sessions and lectures, can open up conferences to a wider range of participants. While online viewing is beneficial for gaining knowledge, it cannot replicate the personal interactions that are constantly taking place among attendees. Richard D. Vega and Ruth S. Connell's study found that "two of the most-cited reasons attendees gave for going to conferences were professional rejuvenation and networking, both of which are benefits not directly related to conference content."[2] In light of this, we wanted to find a way to incorporate these benefits virtually.

Mercer University Library serves graduate and undergraduate programs on multiple campuses in the state of Georgia, including Macon, Atlanta, McDonough, and Douglasville. As research services librarians on the Macon campus, we recently had the opportunity to attend and present at the annual Georgia Libraries Conference (GLC). However, in order to provide continual service at our library, one colleague would need to stay behind at the reference desk. We sought ways that our colleague could participate in the conference without being physically present but while still gaining the benefits of personal interaction, networking, and professional development.

There were a few obstacles to overcome: How would we manage the reference desk during a busy time in the semester? How would we handle intermittent Internet connections at the conference center? And would conference goers be willing to talk to our colleague via video conferencing app?

Thankfully, every obstacle that we encountered we were able to work out, and we successfully brought our virtual colleague along with us to the conference.

Virtually come as you are

The 2018 GLC theme was Open to All, and this theme encompassed a wide array of

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library interests like information literacy, programs for veterans and the homeless, and accessibility initiatives. The conference also listed a theme that resonated with us as colleagues, "inclusivity in recruitment or professional development opportunities."[3] Our group poster presentation, "All Aboard! Destined for Promotion," was accepted to the conference. This poster focused on our collaborative efforts to support each other and our varying interests leading to promotion. Promotion is available to all Mercer library faculty, which is encouraged but not required. It is how we as librarians are recognized for our commitments and contributions to the university.

The poster features an adapted version of a MARTA (Metropolitan Atlanta Rapid Transit Authority) map, designed by Lee Olson, which shows the various professional development paths that Mercer's Research Services Librarians are taking towards promotion. Activities on each path can include articles, books, book chapters, grants, presentations, committees, webinars, volunteer opportunities, and much more. Goal-setting during annual evaluations and individual travel and professional development budgets should be aimed with promotion as our final destination.

While working on the poster, we knew that everyone in our Research Services department would not be able to attend the conference in person, which in a way contradicted the Open to All theme of the conference. Given that Research Services is also solely responsible for staffing our library's reference desk, someone had to stay behind to serve our patrons and manage our virtual services. Kristen Bailey volunteered to cover the desk during our time at the conference. We brainstormed ways to virtually include all of us in the presentation and decided to use Apple FaceTime on a personal tablet so that Bailey could have one-on-one interactions with conference attendees. This device and application ensured that we would still have an online data connection, in case the conference center's Wi-Fi signal was not strong enough to allow for video streaming. We brought along an extra charger just in case our battery ran low.

The poster presented by Gail Morton and Lee Olson at Georgia Libraries Conference 2018 (https://libraries.mercer.edu/ursa/handle/10898/9934).

We also decided to FaceTime Bailey at key points of the conference, our presentation being one of them. The one technical problem we did not foresee was the quality of the audio. The poster presentation area was an open area and very loud, due to the amount of people. At first, it was a little strange for Bailey when attendees had to bring the iPad up close to their faces to hear, but no one seemed to mind too much.

Back on campus, Bailey's experience with the virtual attendance was fulfilling but sometimes hectic. She occasionally had to leave the FaceTime conversation to answer student ques-

tions and call back when she was done. The interactions with the conference attendees were often interesting and funny—one co-worker from another campus held the iPad above his head and spun around to give Bailey an "overhead," 360-degree view of the conference area. The experience was also interesting for librarians working in other departments of the library (Technical Services and the Archives) that day. They also stopped by to say hello to conference attendees and to photobomb the conversations. Overall, Bailey found the experience enjoyable and felt that she had an opportunity to professionally develop while offering essential support to her co-workers and patrons.

The poster was very well-received, and Bailey was able to take an equal role in the presentation. The FaceTime app worked very well, and we had a clear connection throughout. She spoke with attendees about the poster and answered questions like "Does your university have tenure?" and "Who decides on the promotion of a librarian?" She was able to "meet and greet" with those who came to look at the poster. Her virtual presence also drew attention to our presentation, and the visitors loved that we all participated in the presentation, whether we were there in person or virtually. With support and advocacy from colleagues, we were all able to advance our career goals together.

I'm forever yours, virtually

The success of the poster presentation allowed all of us to share knowledge, build relationships through networking, and engage in scholarship, but it was only one piece of the entire conference experience.

In her article "Reconsidering the Scholarly Conference for the Contemporary Academic,"

Gail Morton attending the conference physically with Kristen Bailey, attending virtually.

Michelle Deardorff states "in-person meetings at conferences may create opportunities that might not be replicable in a virtual world. The happenstance at conferences in which casual acquaintances end up at dinner sharing common interests is another important byproduct."[4]

Casual meetings and library small talk happen at conferences, and those who are physically in attendance have plenty of opportunities to engage with other librarians. Recreating these benefits of conference attendance for Bailey turned out to be easier to overcome than we had initially anticipated.

Deardorff offers suggestions about the importance of conference attendance, particularly for early career librarians:

Those earlier in their career want to create professional networks outside of their graduate program. They seek opportunities to meet other scholars in the field, not only for purposes of future collaboration but also for mentoring. It may be the relationship building at conferences and meeting people with shared interests that become the most valuable aspects of their attendance.[5]

Bailey is an early-career librarian, and since this was our first time using FaceTime to bring someone into a conference, we sought to give her the benefits of networking and relationship-building. We had not expected that those we encountered would respond so enthusiastically to a virtual attendee. After the presentation, we continued to take Bailey with us via FaceTime. She "ate lunch" with us, and everyone at the

investopedia.com/terms/r/returnoninvestment. asp.

3. Carol Tenopir, "Beyond Usage: Measuring Library Outcomes and Value," *Library Management,* 33, no. 1/2, 2011, pp. 5-13, https://doi.org/10.1108/01435121211203275.

4. "Value of Academic Libraries: A Comprehensive Research Review and Report," researched by Megan Oakleaf (Chicago: Association of College and Research Libraries, 2010).

5. Heather Morrison, Jihane Salhab, Alexis Calvé-Genest, and Tony Horava, "Open Access Article Processing Charges: DOAJ Survey May 2014," *Publications* 3, no. 1, 2015, pp. 1-16, https://doi.org/10.3390/publications3010001. The calculation of the mean figure of $964 included the DOAJ journals that do not charge an APC. Morrison, et al. determined a mean dollar amount of $1,221 when analyzing the DOAJ journals exclusive of the zero-charge DOAJ publications.

6. University of California Libraries, "Pay it Forward: Investigating a Sustainable Model of Open Access Article Processing Charges for Large North American Research Institutions (Final Report)" 2016, http://icis.ucdavis.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/07/UC-Pay-It-Forward-Final-Report.rev_.7.18.16.pdf.

7. Unpaywall (https://unpaywall.org/) and Open Access Button (https://openaccessbutton.org/) both harvest content for their databases from multiple sources, including IRs. If your repository is not currently included in the Unpaywall data sources list, you can request indexing (https://unpaywall.org/sources).

8. Ruth Kitchin Tillman, "Where Are We Now? Survey on Rates of Faculty Self-Deposit in Institutional Repositories," *Journal of Librarianship and Scholarly Communication,* vol. 5, no. General Issue, 2017, doi:10.7710/2162-3309.2203. ✂

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table took turns talking to her on the tablet—even the server wanted to say hi. We went to visit vendors, and some even recognized her from a previous conference. She was also able to pick out items to fill up a tote of library swag. She helped sell raffle tickets at the conference scholarship auction, and she spoke with a graduate student about a possible internship at Mercer University.

With the exception of a few raised eyebrows, most of the attendees at the conference enjoyed what we were doing, loved engaging with our virtual friend, and thought it was a very creative way to bring along our colleague who had been left behind at the reference desk. Our Georgia librarians were supportive, enthusiastic, and inclusive—Open to All.

Attending conferences can be challenging when you still need to provide student services, and we see the need to offer more technological choices for prospective participants. While we were able to bring Bailey using our own resources, there were still limitations. If more options were made available for virtual conference attendance, we could have brought more of our colleagues with us. Providing more choices, we believe, would expand the benefits of conference attendance to more librarians and create supportive network opportunities for those who are unable to physically take part in them.

Notes

1. "Making Your Case to Attend," ALA Annual Conference and Exhibition 2018, accessed October 29, 2018, https://2018.alaannual.org/youll-be-more-valuable.

2. Robert D. Vega and Ruth S. Connell, "Librarians' Attitudes Towards Conferences: A Study," *College & Research Libraries* 68, no. 6 (2007): 513, doi: 10.5860/crl.68.6.503.

3. "Open to All," Georgia Libraries Conference 2018, accessed October 8, 2018, http://www.galibcon.org/.

4. Michelle Deardorff, "Reconsidering the Scholarly Conference for the Contemporary Academic," *PS: Political Science & Politics* 48, no. 2 (2015): 316, doi: 10.1017/S1049096514002248.

5. Ibid. ✂