

VLA NMRT Forum: Supporting the Next Generation of Virginia's Library Leaders

by Rebecca K. Miller

The Need for the VLA NMRT Forum

Editors of the recent *Library Trends* double issue devoted to workforce issues in library and information science describe librarianship as "an aging and diversifying workforce."¹ It seems that, regardless of the current economic crisis, the recruitment of quality, diverse professionals and their subsequent success within the profession remains critical for the future of librarianship within the state of Virginia. Nationally, the library community has responded to this need to recruit and retain new information professionals by focusing on the importance of networking, professional associations, and mentoring relationships. Although we have a thriving state-level library association and many passionate library and information professionals in the Commonwealth of Virginia, we have not had a designated space and support system for new library professionals since 2004, when the Virginia Library Association (VLA) New Members Forum dissolved.² In light of current workforce issues and emerging labor trends, the need for a state-level new members group within the Virginia Library Association becomes clear. This essay will briefly review the many benefits of a state-level New Mem-

bers Round Table (NMRT) and the efforts leading to the recent, official formation of the VLA NMRT Forum, a group established specifically for Virginia librarians or library school students with ten or fewer years of professional experience.

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Recruiting and Retaining Librarians in Virginia

Library school students and all types of new information professionals within the Commonwealth of Virginia will be able to benefit from a professional organization devoted to their unique needs. Although Virginia does not have any residential, ALA-accredited graduate school programs for library or information science, over twenty ALA-accredited distance programs are available to Virginia residents.³ This means that Virginia is home to many students enrolled and succeeding

in distance education MLS, MIS, and MLIS programs; these students need a professional support network that will introduce them to the profession, encourage them to serve within professional organizations, and structure formal opportunities for networking and exploring local library issues.

Once students graduate from library school programs and begin their first professional experiences, research shows that many new library professionals become frustrated with "bureaucratic brick walls and resistance to new ideas."⁴ Although many new librarians come to their first jobs "bright-eyed and eager," they quickly become disillusioned as their idealism for libraries dissolves, "along with their enthusiasm and new ideas."⁵ While new professionals in any occupation may become disillusioned because of bureaucracy, embedded organizational cultures, or economic and financial con-

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straints, we in librarianship should proactively address these and other issues and work hard to provide support systems for new librarians so that we have enough quality information professionals to meet the growing need for librarians. Virginia has addressed this need head-on by creating a space for both library school students and new professionals within VLA. This is supported through research, which underscores the benefits of professional associations; this research also emphasizes that membership and participation in professional organizations improve a librarian's knowledge base, opportunities to advance, and most important, overall success and satisfaction within the profession.⁶

Benefits for VLA

The relationship between new and emerging professionals and professional organizations remains a reciprocal one. In addition to the benefits that new professionals receive from professional organizations, these groups also profit from the involvement of new members. In an article published in *C&RL News*, Jeffrey Bullington and Susanna Boylston describe ACRL's New Member Mentoring Program, a program that participant Stephen Stillwell says highlights the need for a constant supply of new blood and fresh ideas within any professional organization.⁷ Regardless of specific organizations or programs, it is undeniable that new members bring an enthusiasm and verve to professional organizations. Library researcher Donald Frank writes that "if the associations are going to continue to provide opportunities to learn and to participate actively, they must be responsive to their members" and that "to be relevant in the future, associations must focus on renewal," a process easily facilitated through new librarians and the perspectives that

they bring with them.⁸ In a piece for *American Libraries*, librarian Jen Waller even coins the term *jaybrarian*, derived from the early twentieth century term "jay" that was used to describe newcomers unfamiliar with urban or sophisticated environments, in order to describe newly graduated LIS students.⁹ Waller writes that "jaybrarians" are often "full of optimism and enthusiasm, all polished and shiny, eager to take their place in the library world," and that these newcomers see the library world differently, often offering valuable ideas for improvement and change.¹⁰

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In addition to bringing new perspectives to librarianship, new members bring current knowledge and competencies to librarianship, keeping the profession relevant in an ever-changing information landscape. Recent research revolving around core competencies for librarians in a Web 2.0 world have identified characteristics such as embracing Web 2.0 and social media tools, trend-spotting, and reimagining library services as a part of this environment.¹¹ Library school students and new librarians stand ready to bring their recently acquired knowledge about cutting-edge library trends and technology to the libraries and professional organizations of which they are a part. While new librarians have much to gain from their wiser and more experienced counterparts, they also have much to share with them. New members groups like the VLA NMRT Forum emphasize the importance of taking advantage

of this mutually beneficial relationship between newer and more experienced library professionals, bringing together ideas and knowledge that work to form a balanced, relevant body of professionals.

In more ways than one, new members essentially provide the lifeblood of professional librarianship and remain poised to make many significant contributions to the library workforce in the Commonwealth of Virginia. By providing new and emerging Virginia librarians with a support system and a channel for making these professional contributions, the VLA NMRT Forum essentially facilitates overall enhancements to the Virginia Library Association, growing the membership and increasing the quality of programming and other professional development opportunities.

Efforts, Resources, and Future Endeavors for the VLA NMRT Forum

New librarians in the Commonwealth of Virginia began the petition to create VLA NMRT as a VLA forum early in 2011. VLA NMRT Forum coordinators Rebecca Miller of Virginia Tech and Megan Hodge of Randolph-Macon College identified a general purpose and seven specific goals for the group. Modeled after the American Library Association New Members Round Table's mission, the forum's general purpose is "to help new and emerging information professionals become actively involved in the Virginia Library Association and the larger professional committee." The forum's seven specific goals include initiatives to:

- Structure formal opportunities for involvement, training, committee experiences, and leadership on the local, state, and national levels.
- Provide a wide variety of programs to assist, encourage,



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and educate those new to the Virginia Library Association and the profession.

- Develop and implement ongoing programs for library school students that encourage professional involvement and networking.
- Develop resources and programming specifically for encouraging new and emerging librarians to learn more about and become more involved in the Virginia Library Association.
- Create a specific and unique space in the Virginia Library Association for new and emerging professionals to network with each other and explore relevant issues and topics through face-to-face meetings, social media tools, and other modes of communication.
- Bring new vitality, energy, and ideas to the Virginia Library Association through the active inclusion and encouragement of new and emerging library and information professionals.
- Honor outstanding new professionals in the state of Virginia, recognizing new (fewer than ten years in VLA) professionals who demonstrate excellence, enthusiasm, and leadership.

The petition to officially form the VLA NMRT Forum garnered a total of thirty-six signatures from

interested and potential VLA members, nearly double the twenty signatures required for an interest group petition.¹² On May 16, 2011, the Virginia Library Association Executive Committee officially approved the formation of the VLA NMRT Forum, effective immedi-

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ately. Megan Hodge is currently serving as chair until the forum can meet to elect leadership; to start with, Hodge and other group coordinators have many ideas for programming, events, and resources. Some of these ideas include special programming and social gatherings at the Virginia Library Association 2011 Conference in Portsmouth, gatherings during ALA conferences, structured mentoring programs, a group-authored blog for new professionals, awards for new Virginia librarians, and support for new members inter-

ested in pursuing various types of leadership positions. Be sure to stay tuned for more details about events and activities taking place during the Virginia Library Association 2011 Conference: group coordinators have established a blog to communicate information about the forum's news and events to interested VLA members. The blog is accessible at <http://vlanmrt.wordpress.com>. If you or someone you know is interested in becoming involved with this group, please visit the blog and leave a comment. Alternatively, you can contact either of the group's two coordinators: Rebecca Miller (rebeccakate.miller@gmail.com) or Megan Hodge (mlhodge@gmail.com).

Now an official VLA forum, the Virginia Library Association's New Members Round Table has a long way to go; however, the energetic coordinators are hopeful about its long-term survival and success. Indeed, this group's success is vital to the overall success of the Virginia Library Association. As we continue to work toward actively involving new and emerging Virginia librarians within the profession of librarianship, we strive to enact the mission of the Virginia Library Association: we will bring new zeal to VLA's mission

to “improve library and information services and the profession of librarianship in order to advance literacy and learning and to ensure access to information in the Commonwealth of Virginia.”¹³

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Notes

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6. Donald Frank, “Activity in Professional Organizations: The Positive Difference in a Librarian’s Career,” *Library Trends* 46 (1997): 307–319.
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9. Jen Waller, “Consider the Jaybrarian,” *American Libraries* 39 (2008): 55.
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13. Virginia Library Association, “About Us,” *Virginia Library Association*, 2011, http://www.vla.org/?page_id=3780. ■