The authors discuss and debate the role of conferences in the professional life of a law librarian.

¶1 Christine Sellers: The 2011 AALL Annual Meeting in Philadelphia is fast approaching. Are you going?

¶2 Phillip Gragg: Definitely! I think AALL, in particular, is a time to recharge, renew, and recenter ourselves on law libraries.

¶3 CS: I hope to be going, as I’ve gone every year since 2006. I always look forward to it for a variety of reasons: learning about new trends, networking with other law librarians, seeing what other people are doing in their libraries, seeing new vendor products, etc.

¶4 PG: I see the Annual Meeting as a chance to review what we’ve done in the past, consider the progress we’ve made in the past year, and look toward the future—and those aren’t just pleasant platitudes. To me the academic year has a definite flow, and the AALL Annual Meeting is an important part of the academic cycle.

¶5 CS: There are also the business meetings of the committees and boards, which is the only chance all year for some face-to-face time. Although they tend to be only an hour long, I find these committee meetings can set the tone of the committee for the entire year. It’s also a great opportunity to hammer out who will be doing what and when. Conference calls fill in the gaps during the rest of the year, but it’s great to put faces to names.

¶6 PG: Yes, it is a great time to put names and faces together and to see our friends and colleagues who are literally scattered all over the United States. In addition to the socializing and networking that goes on, one of the most valuable things we get out of interacting with other librarians in person is that we have set aside time to ask, “How is your library doing this?” and “How is that working for you?” I view the libraries somewhat like the fifty states—each an experimental test bed of constantly changing features and services designed to satisfy each school’s unique constituency. Of course this occurs both informally, in the bars and hallways of the convention center, and formally, in programs.

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CS: I submitted a program proposal this year on behalf of the Law Library of Congress. It was my first time submitting one, even though I’ve spoken on a panel at the conference before. There will be a panel of us speaking on THOMAS, the legislative information database. This touches on what I see as another purpose of conference attendance, and that is representing your employer. I’ve always thought of it as part of my job to be the best representative of the place where I choose to work. This representation can be formal, in presentations or meeting interview candidates, or informal, when talking about a project you’re excited to work on or how your workplace may have solved a problem.

PG: When we walk out into the professional world we take with us our aspirations and personal reputation, but we also are caretakers of our employer’s message and that of the parent institution. While I always enjoy hearing what people are working on personally, those reports also let me know how the library and faculty at a particular institution work together, how much support they receive for existing services and new initiatives, and what the future of the institution looks like. It’s also an opportunity for us to consider what institutions and which people we might like to work for in the future and which places and people we’d like to avoid. I will admit to being focused on the academic experience, but I’d imagine that for court and law firm libraries there is much useful information to be gained as well.

And, even though I work in public services, the most illuminating programs I have been to are technical services oriented. (When I attended CONELL in 2007, Cornell Winston suggested that we each attend at least one program per conference outside our comfort zone, and it is a great idea.) This might simply be because these programs shine the light of knowledge on my areas of greatest ignorance, but I have always believed that librarians should be conversant in all operations of the library, or better yet, knowledgeable. I rely heavily on technical services librarians to provide our patrons with the best quality service, so I try to keep my mind in both sides of the library.

CS: I also think the social aspect of conferences can be invaluable. As Walt Crawford has said: “The chance to get together with people you only see at such conferences and to meet people in the flesh who you’ve only known via blogs, chat rooms, and other virtual means may not sell conference attendance to management, but it adds some real value to the conference experience.” However, going to a conference isn’t just fun and games. Crawford also emphasizes resume building, professional and personal networking, association business, learning from those who know more, teaching what you know, sharing information and ideas, getting away for perspective and recreation, and having fun.

PG: You’ll get no argument from me there, but I would point out that how and where people achieve those goals varies from person to person. I genuinely enjoy law libraries as a profession, and I have learned as much about management and teaching over a cold pint of beer with a sage mentor as I have in programs.

2. Id.
§12 CS: Other librarians have also taken up the question about whether it’s right to have fun at conferences. Steve Lawson declared:

The fun also gets to the question of “what am I bringing back?” There is one thing you are sure to bring back from every conference: yourself. Did the conference make you more excited, more engaged with the problems of your library, more ready to tackle the next project or challenge? Then I’d say that you brought something valuable back.3

§13 These are questions we all struggle with to some extent, especially in times of budget constraint. What benefit is my employer getting out of my attendance at a conference? I think the quote above touches on something—that the benefit is sometimes intangible and hard to quantify. It doesn’t line up in numbers on a spreadsheet.

§14 PG: Well, you’re apparently preaching to the choir again, because I couldn’t agree more. If a conference does nothing more than inspire and reenergize an already productive employee, then there is a true return on investment. For many of our AALL member institutions, budget-constrained times have been with us for at least two fiscal years and promise to be around for perhaps another two years. During this time, I have heard of travel being restricted in a number of ways, not always intelligently. Indeed, there are difficult decisions to make when not everyone can attend, but having a rigid set of criteria might not serve the library staff and the patrons in the most effective manner.

§15 Let’s take a rule, for example, that in order to attend a conference, a librarian must be presenting or on a committee. A newer librarian might have a difficult time getting on a panel or may be so new to the profession as to not have been able to sign up for a committee. But this person might benefit more from attending than any of her more experienced colleagues.

§16 CS: I think you’re right, but I also think it’s a tough balancing act for managers to decide who will or who won’t go to conferences, if such a decision has to be made. I think there’s a greater expectation of attendance for academic law librarians. In the law firm and government libraries where I have worked, conference attendance isn’t guaranteed. It simply can’t be with budgets the way they are.

§17 Although we’ve primarily spoken of AALL as an example, there are other conferences out there. Smaller regional conferences for law librarians, such as SEAALL (Southeastern Chapter of the American Association of Law Libraries), and other librarian conferences, such as SLA (Special Libraries Association).

§18 PG: Oh yes, I almost forgot about SEAALL, where you and I first met! SEAALL was in Baton Rouge in 2007, although it had originally been scheduled for 2006. After Hurricane Katrina, the city was in no condition to host, so on short

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notice the folks in North Carolina put together what I understand was a great conference (I was still in library school at the time). One year later, SEAALL was held in Baton Rouge. I served on the Local Arrangements Committee, and while it was a lot of hard work, we also had a lot of fun. Of course the culmination of our efforts were the programs and the receptions.

¶19 Another conference that I have attended that we haven’t yet mentioned is the annual meeting of the Association of American Law Schools (AALS). AALS just happened to be down the road in New Orleans in January 2009, so I was able to attend for minimal expense. Not only did I attend sessions on anthropology law and criminal law, but I went to a very enlightening session called “Deaning: Myths and Realities.” AALS is overwhelmingly attended by law professors and deans, but there is always a strong contingent of librarians (most of whom are library directors), and AALS offers several programs addressing library issues.

¶20 I was fortunate enough to attend again this year in San Francisco, and AALS put on a full-day workshop aimed at deans and librarians. What I have found is that the conversation has a broad perspective. It’s unlikely you’ll find much discussion about the new cataloging standards or a deep analysis of patron types, but what you will hear are all the factors that weigh on the mind of a director and, even more importantly, how the library fits into the overall picture of the law school. I think academic law librarians can benefit from this level of thought and conversation, especially those who aspire toward a directorship.

¶21 My interest in law libraries was created and fostered while I was in law school by the outstanding librarians I worked with at the University of Iowa College of Law. My goal in librarianship has always been to make the law student experience a meaningful and valuable one, and an AALS conferee will find that that is often the focus of conversation. Moreover, as people move up the chain of command in any organization, they will find themselves having to address a growing number of constituencies. Law library directors in particular are responsible for the library but also serve as senior-level managers on matters important to the school, but unrelated to the library itself. AALS addresses the universe of the law school, and pulls us out of our sometimes cloistered condition.

¶22 **CS:** Attending AALS, which is mainly a conference for law professors, relates to discussions in the blogosphere regarding librarians going to “client” conferences. Bonnie Swoger recently wrote a blog post on “why academic librarians need to stop going to library conferences.” She points out the “disconnect between the library world and the research world” and advises librarians to pay attention to what researchers are saying, as well as to participate in the discussion.4

¶23 Your discussion of AALS shows how much law librarians can benefit from “law” conferences. Another example might be a law firm librarian attending an American Bar Association (ABA) conference in order to make connections with attorneys. Although the attorneys in a law firm are in close physical proximity to

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librarians, I know from experience that there can be a line between attorneys and librarians that a conference might help to erase. I don’t think attendance at these conferences dilutes our loyalty to librarianship, but instead broadens our horizons. As I write this, I’m getting ready to head off to the ABA Midyear Meeting in Atlanta, Georgia, so I can report back on the advantages of attending an ABA conference. Would you say that if it’s a good idea for law librarians to attend the same conferences as the scholars/customers we serve, then perhaps more of us should attend AALS?

¶24 **PG:** I’d agree with that. There are library-specific programs, but there are plenty of other topics discussed to keep the focus broader than the law library.

¶25 **CS:** But then don’t we somehow get back to budgets and money and there never being enough to attend one conference, much less two? How does one decide?

¶26 **PG:** One answer does not fit all, but I do have one suggestion. We are always looking for ways to maximize our budgets, so I’d suggest that those library directors who are in close geographical proximity to the AALS annual conference send one or two librarians. They might even be able to expand their travel/conference budget with a special request to the dean. AALS is in Washington, D.C., next year, so there are many court, government, and law school libraries that could send their librarians for relatively little cost.

¶27 **CS:** Well, I think no matter which conferences people are able to go to, we both agree attendance is important, for ourselves personally, the profession, and our employer.