

feature

The View from ALA

“I Can Stand a Little Pain” or Why You Should Get Going in ALA

By *Steve Matthews*

Having served on ALA Council, off and on, through the last twenty years, and since last year, as a member of the ALA Executive Board, I am often amused, a little taken aback and, truth be told, mildly troubled when a fellow member of AASL or YALSA says to me, because of my participation in ALA Council, something like “Boy, you must have a high tolerance for boredom,” or “I guess Big ALA is necessary, but I’m really focused on what I can accomplish in YALSA, that is what has real transfer for me in doing my job. Is there any way we could reduce ALA dues?” Other than an immediate sense of personal inadequacy and a slight tinge of guilt for finding my time spent on Council stimulating and, yes, productive, I reaffirm my commitment. But I also realize that these honest and

straightforward exclamations aren’t uttered to puncture my sense of purpose, but actually provide essential reality therapy from members who, like me, have limited resources and an urgency to build library programs and services that are top-notch and who value action and effectiveness over what sometimes seems like an interminable process and obstructionist infrastructure.

At this point, I need to reveal my intent (code word for: AGENDA). (Confession is sometimes sweet.) I am full tilt convinced that ALA would be stronger and better if more members of YALSA and the other youth divisions would choose to participate in ALA committees, ALA Council, and the Executive Board. That seems to me to be a no-brainer, but let me explain why it’s so important. YALSA is an amazing energy cell of creativity and

resourcefulness. With our leadership and staff, we have constantly reevaluated how better to pull members into the mix and how to help librarians whose lives center on serving teens do that with great books, media, games, and super connectivity. YALSA has built a vibrant community that has been one of the strongest advocates for diversity in librarianship and has pushed the envelop with more and more ways for members to participate, learn, and trade ideas virtually. There is always passion and fun and purpose in what we do, and we need to share that with the rest of the association.

Therefore, because I am baring my Councilor’s soul, I will reveal the seven additional one liners I hear from youth division members for why they are staying in the YALSA/ALSC/AASL pool and avoiding the ALA ocean of uncertainty. Of course, because I want YALSA folk to step up and be more active in ALA, I need to provide short antidotes for why these observations and objections should not be barriers but instead incentives to jump into the ALA fray.

The Seven Reasons Why You Don’t “DO” ALA (and Why You Should)

ALA is Too Big and Impersonal

Response: Any organization, group, endeavor seems unknown, alien, or even hostile at first. Make it your own. Help it thrive. You will be rewarded with great new friends and colleagues and a new understanding of the big picture.

ALA is Bureaucratic and Hopelessly Slow Rather Than Seismic and Full of Punch

Response: Complexity and a myriad of interests can make process more time

STEVE MATTHEWS is the Librarian, Foxcroft School, Middleburg, Va. He is an ALA Councilor-at-Large and serves on the ALA Executive Board. He was a member of the YALSA Committee to choose the recipient of the first (2009-10) YALSA Award for Excellence in Nonfiction for Young Adults.

consuming, but accomplishments like ensuring intellectual freedom, expanding the diversity of the profession, and working for libraries and information access in Washington are ongoing and touch all of us.

Participating in Council or ALA Committees Requires More Travel Than I Can Afford or Have Leave to Do

Response: While Council does require two physical meetings a year, many ALA committees do not. If you are present at the table (real or virtual), you can help shape the policy to encourage better participation. I have found many cheap ways to make travel work through the years when my school paid only my registration, and I have gotten to know some great people and wonderful cities in the process. It is, in part, giving back.

It's Always the Same People Batting Around the Same Ideas in the Same Old Ways

Response: At least a third of the members elected to Council are totally new every year, which means that they have never served before. The best fix for too much old blood, is to provide the option to voters for some new blood. And then, we need to vote somewhere close to the numbers we actually have in our divisions. In addition, fill out that committee volunteer form for ALA.

I Have a Life. Why Would I Spend Precious Time Deliberating Endlessly the Many Fine Points of Policy or Arguing About Organizational Structure. That Seems Mind-Numbing

Response: Policy and organization should be the catalysts for effectiveness not

inscrutable barriers for participation. Helping to shape the vision and empower members to accomplish what they need to get done is the central task of a governing body and something YALSA members know about first hand and in 3-D.

I Am a Doer Not a Pontificator. I Need to See Results

Response: Council desperately needs to be about results. When it falls short in that endeavor, we all lose. ALA, through its Council, has achieved great results in establishing our values and goals as a profession, in reaffirming our devotion to open access and the right to read and view, in advancing cooperation, and in promoting libraries and librarianship.

How Would My Being There Make a Difference? I Am Just One Person

Response: Our whole profession rests on the assumption of the transformational power of ideas. Creativity and innovation are the future of our work and our society. If you do not step up and contribute, then the possibility of one voice influencing and inspiring many becomes an impossibility. Be there. Make it happen.

Finale: The Three Step ALA Involvement Action Plan

Further Infiltrate and Bolster ALA Connect

YALSA has been a leader in the use of ALA Connect. Each YALSA member should expand her or his ALA Connect

universe in one deliberate way. Establish an informal group around an endeavor or idea, monitor a committee or taskforce, or respond to their work, demonstrate what works on ALA Connect and what needs to improve as we build a tool that will only be as powerful as our determination to make it succeed. Demo your ideas, encourage others.

Volunteer for an ALA Committee or Two

ALA Presidents-elect are always looking for willing and able members to serve. They are very interested in newer members participating. Needless to say, some committees have a legion of volunteers, others not so many. Make your desire to serve known. Your interest and initiative will be appreciated and acknowledge. Go to www.ala.org/template.cfm?template=/cfapps/committee/volunteerform/volunteerform.cfm to find the form (available each year from August to November).

Nominate Yourself to Run for ALA Council by the Nominating Committee or by Petition

The ALA Nominating Committee actively seeks nominees for Council that reflect the diversity in the association. By nominating yourself, you are demonstrating your commitment to the organization and the profession. The deadline each year to submit your name to the Nominating Committee is August 15. However (don't panic!), nomination by petition is possible up through the Midwinter Meeting (www.ala.org/ala/aboutala/governance/alaelection/index.cfm). YALS