

The Future of BRASS

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In July 2018, facing declining revenues and potential restructuring of RUSA, the BRASS Executive Committee charged the Future of BRASS Task Force to consider all possible scenarios, along with the pros and cons of each, for the future of BRASS. The Task Force shared its results in January 2019 (BRASS, 2019). This article takes another look at BRASS by focusing on its purpose and future potential, reasoning that the future of BRASS is less dependent on where we belong than on what we do and how we do it as a professional organization.

Going forward: What could we do?

The purposes of a professional organization have three dimensions. First, for individual practitioners, an organization provides social and networking support, and creates platforms to benefit members' professional growth. Second, for the profession, it upholds the professional standards through its influence on education, recruitment, and research practices, and promotes the value of professional services through advocacy efforts and collaboration with stakeholders. Third, for the society, it creates a bonded community of purpose and helps advance the societal values that the members believe in (Merton, 1958).

At the national level, ALA has manifested its purposes in many different ways, while BRASS has been organized mostly to support the professional development of our members through annual conferences, BRASS meetings, committee services, programs, listservs, publications, etc. In recent decades, the development of the Internet, social networking, and conferencing technologies made professional knowledge more accessible and opportunities for professional development more readily and freely available. Many associations see declining membership numbers, because their professional development functions become less essential with the barriers of membership dues. Although professional development services can be improved through better knowledge management practices (Agarwal & Islam, 2016), nowadays, the most valuable parts of a professional organization do not lie in its professional development services, but the services that members cannot get from anywhere else or achieve on their own. So, we need to look deeper into the professional and social functions of an organization to find the answers for future development. Looking into the future, there are five areas of opportunities for BRASS to enhance its value to the business librarian community:

- (1) **Coordinate the development of a knowledge system for business information and business research.** The development of any discipline relies on generations of scholars' efforts in building a knowledge system for the discipline. Matured knowledge is written into textbooks. The approaches to write the textbooks vary, but with continued efforts, the core knowledge sustains and evolves. The knowledge of business research is very scattered and exists mostly as how-to knowledge and is hardly transferable in its current form. Still, we need more efforts to discover the core, the most valuable aspects of our knowledge that can stand the test of time. Sources

and interfaces change rapidly and the knowledge of specific sources and interfaces becomes outdated quickly. Of more lasting value are the systematic, theoretical, and categorical understanding of what, who, where, how, and, most important, why. One of the early efforts to systemize business information was made by Mr. Michael Lavin in his three editions of *Business Information: How to Find it and How to Use It* (Lavin, 1987, 1991, 2000). Some of the knowledge about information sources in his books are outdated, but some of Lavin's explanations on the reasons why business information existed in certain forms still hold true today. The recently developed *Business Research Competencies* is a step forward to systemize business research approaches and provides a blueprint for us to further develop a knowledge system for learners (Reference and User Services Association, 2019).

(2) **Advocate for the value of business information literacy and business library services.**

Academic business librarians get used to advocating for themselves through constant marketing efforts. Many notice that the value of business information literacy and the role of business librarians as teaching partners have **not** been well acknowledged by the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB) and its accreditation standards. However, daily practices and collaboration with faculty indicate the common ground in understanding the value of business information literacy skills and the importance of librarians' work. Some business schools recognized the importance of "information literacy" skills in their accreditation reports to AACSB (West Chester University, 2016; Texas A&M University-San Antonio, 2018). Business librarians need more support from professional organizations to advocate their value among business faculty and education leaders through AACSB and its accreditation standards. Business librarians in both public and academic libraries also need an advocating voice to raise awareness of the value of business library services in supporting evidence-based decisions, and the businesses and economic development of our community.

(3) **Establish business librarianship career pipelines and cultivate new leaders.** The weakness of business librarian applicant pools has been discussed for many years by the Academic Business Library Directors' (ABLD) group (Fleming & Doyle, 2020). To achieve sustainable development, a professional organization should invest in cultivating new professionals and new leaders. BRASS has the potential to communicate and collaborate with library schools in developing curriculums, recruiting adjunct faculty, and identifying practicum opportunities. It is a promising collaboration since the knowledge and skills needed for business librarianship will open various opportunities for students to pursue reference, research, competitive intelligence, and knowledge management positions in libraries, consulting firms, and corporations (The San José State University School of Information, 2020). For professional development, it is important to understand that leadership is not a position; it is an action: "leaders are those who inspire themselves and others to do the right things at the right time. They build an inspiring vision, set direction, and create something new which is capable of changing the gridlocked beliefs" (CIO Look, n.d.). In this sense, everyone can be a leader. BRASS can seek opportunities to participate in the leadership development programs in ALA or leverage business liaison networks to develop internal leadership training and mentoring programs.

(4) **Foster vendor relations through open engagement and trust building to promote the quality, integrity, transparency, and affordability of business knowledge and information sources.**

Libraries face many challenges related to business resources, from data acquisition, affordable textbooks, and text and data mining, to rising privacy concerns over vendors' practices in acquiring users' personal information (Fleming & Doyle, 2020). Many business faculty and researchers have expressed their concerns about business data quality and its serious consequences, which have not been made fully aware of by business librarians (Liu, 2020). Many business sources are not in compliance with the basic requirements of academic integrity in being transparent about data sources. Current pricing models and management practices of business data sources create many barriers for libraries to optimize the budget and for business researchers to equally access business knowledge. The changes in these situations rely on open engagement with the vendor community and allow for consumer feedback and concerns to be openly discussed with the database providers. BRASS is in a very good position to facilitate such conversations to build understanding and trust between users, librarians, and database vendors and more importantly, to develop a collaborative mechanism to promote the quality, integrity, transparency, and affordability of business sources, which will benefit business librarians and the business research community immensely.

(5) **Build a united, collaborative, and inclusive business librarian community.** It does not take long for a new business librarian to realize that they need to make hard decisions to choose to join ALA or SLA to be part of the business librarian community. It may take some time for the new professional to realize that they are excluded from ABLD group. Over time, they would realize that there are many different subgroups and regional business librarian communities. The division and fragmentation of the business librarian community has its long and complicated history. Even though it is challenging to unite business librarian communities through a bureaucratic structure, it is still promising to unite the business librarian community as a learning organization. Academic business librarians could greatly benefit from the corporate business librarians' frontline knowledge about research. The synergy of knowledge in academic and public business libraries host great power to better our community. As one of the largest business librarian groups, BRASS is in a good position to lead the collaboration among the business librarian communities.

How can it be achieved?

Successful organizations share some common traits, including: collective vision, shared goals, strategic planning, and effective member communication and engagement. To better serve the business librarian community, BRASS needs to identify the collective visions, shared core values, and common goals among business librarians and align its organizational structure and functions to achieve these visions, values, and goals. Strategic planning, if done wisely, will provide a clear direction and framework for members to work together more efficiently to address our strategic priorities. Effective and transparent member communication and engagement are essential for successful strategic planning, strategy implementation, and continuous development of our organization. The definition of engagement has

four components: involvement, interaction, intimacy, and influence (Forrester, 2007). The member engagement of BRASS can be manifested at four levels:

- Involvement - building strong communication channels
- Interaction - connecting members through various professional development opportunities
- Intimacy - fostering the sense of an inclusive and bonded community
- Influence - promoting shared visions and values

Most members serve BRASS as volunteers and face challenges to take on more responsibilities beyond regular committee work, but even minimal efforts, if coordinated well with a clear vision and strategy, can achieve a level of success that would be impossible to achieve individually. Although the restructuring of RUSA makes the future of BRASS uncertain, I believe no matter where the organization goes, if there is a clear vision and strategy, we will be able to thrive as a professional organization.

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