



PERSPECTIVES FROM A FIRST TIME CONFERENCE ATTENDEE

FLA CONFERENCE 2024

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This year, I took my first steps toward growing a fulfilling career in librarianship: attending the 2024 Florida Library Association (FLA) Conference. When I was in my last semester of library school at FSU, I received an e-mail from the university about the upcoming conference. At the time, I had only heard of the FLA from my time as a volunteer at Largo Public Library and occasionally in my graduate courses. In earnest, I didn't even know librarians had a conference just for them. I quickly did further research on the FLA and whether I should attend the conference. I soon found that the association and the conference were excellent opportunities to build upon my knowledge and experience in the library field. As well, I couldn't pass up the chance to meet and connect with hundreds of librarians and information professionals from around the state! After making the decision to join the association, I registered for the conference and knew that an exciting experience awaited me.

THE INS AND OUTS

As a recent graduate at the conference, I was in a position that afforded me an opportunity for self-discovery, deeper exploration of the library field, and professional growth. In the week I spent in Orlando, I surrounded myself with several intellectual and personable librarians who provided depth to my understanding of the field. Initially, I was somewhat apprehensive about interacting with professionals that had much longer and more successful careers than mine. I felt as if I could not contribute any new ideas to conversations and that others would not care to connect with me. Thankfully, that could not have been further from the truth!

I was pleasantly surprised by each person's high level of generosity with their time, their service-oriented mindset, and their willingness to spend time with me even for just a few minutes. Truly, I found that engaging with the conference attendees, speakers, and association leaders was not a daunting challenge but simply an open invitation to strengthen the ties between our collective of information professionals.

With networking, I also learned how to stretch beyond my comfort level and take the oft scary first step in networking: being the first to reach out. It is no secret that for many, meeting new people can be challenging and nerve-wracking at times. Especially in a professional setting, there sometimes arises a level of vulnerability that seems too uncomfortable to face. Luckily, I have learned that this is the very feeling that we must embrace in order to succeed in those first steps of networking. Once we remove that barrier for ourselves, we are that much freer to chat and network with anyone no matter their position or years of service. Plus, if this experience has taught me anything, it is that librarians of all levels of experience are exceedingly friendly and open.



Jasmine George; photos provided by the author

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Another aspect of the conference that led to an enjoyable time was the positive attitude each conference leader, speaker, and attendee possessed. The speakers of the main and breakout sessions were not self-important lecturers or gatekeepers of knowledge. Instead, they used their platform to spark new interests and encourage conference attendees to lead in their own ways. One of the first breakout sessions I attended was about urban fiction and adult literacy. I enjoyed hearing from a St. Petersburg Library System Librarian as she discussed the tenants of urban fiction, how the genre can connect to audiences that may not typically see themselves in literature or media, and how librarians can promote their collections to include titles from this genre. The librarian graciously made sure that the attendees of her session were aware that she approached her presentation from the point of view of a fan of the genre, not a high-brow expert in urban fiction. This admission was well-received and reassuring. Despite being the person to deliver the presentation and conduct the breakout session, she maintained that she and the conference attendees were equals and simply learning from peers. From this, I came to understand that we are not simply practitioners of our field. Librarians are ardent enthusiasts of the world and all of its pockets of information. Our work uplifts and celebrates each and every corner of our community not simply for the sake of our field, but for the existence of the greater good.

KEY TAKEAWAYS

Reflecting upon my time at the conference, there is a certain throughline that has had a lasting effect on me. I found that every person's career began from humble means. I chatted with several librarians with impressive careers, and they did not hesitate to regale me with stories of their first few years in the field. Even those in management and leadership positions also willingly shared their long career journeys, never choosing to inflate their own egos or paint an inaccurate depiction of the field. Every conference attendee—whether a graduate student or an award-winning library director—treated each other with high regard and genuine interest in lending their knowledge and experiences to lift each other up. I am so grateful that I had the privilege to spend my week with such an inspiring and endlessly curious group of librarians.

WAS IT WORTH IT?

To those that are new to the field of librarianship, curious about joining the FLA, or considering attending the next FLA conference: go for it! I can say with verity that I had never smiled and laughed more than I did in a room full of strangers-turned-connections. The FLA Conference promises a diverse array of topics and sessions to engage with, an elite selection of leaders and experienced professionals to learn from, worthwhile networking opportunities, and a wonderful spirit of collaboration and camaraderie that you will take with you once you leave the conference space.

LOOKING TO THE FUTURE

In all, the 2024 FLA Conference allowed me to further develop my professional career and equipped me with the tools necessary to support others through innovative and empathetic information service. I am eager to use my new findings to enrich the lives of those around me. Here's to continually broadening horizons, redefining the outlook of librarianship, and championing libraries as vital pillars of our community.

