

Partnership

Canadian journal of library and information practice and research

Revue canadienne de la pratique et de la recherche en bibliothéconomie et sciences de l'information

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Shift Happens: The Recent Evolution of Canadian Library Associations

Des changements se produisent: L'évolution récente des associations de bibliothèques canadiennes

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Volume 15, Number 1, 2020

Special issue on Canadian library associations

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1070706ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.21083/partnership.v15i1.5904>

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Publisher(s)

The Partnership: The Provincial and Territorial Library Associations of Canada

ISSN

1911-9593 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this document

Cleyle, S. & van den Hoogen, S. (2020). Shift Happens: The Recent Evolution of Canadian Library Associations. *Partnership*, 15(1), 1–6.
<https://doi.org/10.21083/partnership.v15i1.5904>

Article abstract

Expectations weigh heavily on the shoulders of Canadian library associations. Association members and library workers increasingly demand that library associations assume the role of professional development provider, policy developer, advocate and lobbyist. As a result, associations must evaluate the landscape in which they are operating, and be prepared to align their mission, vision and values to ensure they are meeting the expectations of their respective library sectors and communities. This paper introduces five articles written by leaders in Canadian library associations that recently undertook a significant shift in their structure, focus and direction following a period of evaluation and reflection. Three guiding principles emerge from these articles: listen to your community, do not go it alone, and any shift, big or small, takes time.

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The Canadian Journal of Library and Information Practice and Research
Revue canadienne de la pratique et de la recherche en bibliothéconomie et sciences de l'information

vol. 15, no. 1 (2020)
Features (editorially reviewed)
DOI: <https://doi.org/10.21083/partnership.v15i1.5904>
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Shift Happens: The Recent Evolution of Canadian Library Associations

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Abstract

Expectations weigh heavily on the shoulders of Canadian library associations. Association members and library workers increasingly demand that library associations assume the role of professional development provider, policy developer, advocate, and lobbyist. As a result, associations must evaluate the landscape in which they are operating, and be prepared to align their mission, vision, and values to ensure they are meeting the expectations of their respective library sectors and communities. This paper introduces five articles written by leaders in Canadian library associations that recently undertook a significant shift in their structure, focus, and direction following a period of evaluation and reflection. Three guiding principles emerge from these articles: listen to your community, do not go it alone, and any shift, big or small, takes time.

Keywords

Canada, library associations, evolution, shift, partnerships, community

Author's Note

This series of articles was written before the impact of COVID-19. In these unprecedented times, library associations are facing considerable challenges, including cancelling face-to-face events, rescheduling or postponing annual conferences, and the loss of vital revenue-generating initiatives. As a result, many are confronting major financial struggles. As such, we hope that readers will look at the case studies presented in this special issue with a pre-COVID-19 lens. We also encourage readers to consider what a post-COVID-19 world will mean for all associations moving forward.

Introduction

Canadian library associations are evolving. Declining membership, volunteer fatigue, and fiscal uncertainty are forcing many library associations to reevaluate their mission, vision, and values through collaborative consultation and strategic planning. Adding to these challenges is the competing demand—created by Canada's plethora of library associations—for membership fees, loyalty, engagement, and support. Members are demanding value-added services, networking, and professional development opportunities. Furthermore, there are increased expectations for library associations to develop policy, lobby government, and advocate for the profession. Collectively these challenges have sparked a catalyst for change. Canadian library associations are responding by establishing new identities, discovering new partnerships, and reinvigorating their associations to meet the ongoing and emerging needs of their members.

The Canadian Landscape: Setting the Stage

From 1946 to 2016, the Canadian Library Association (CLA) was the national voice for Canada's library communities. After years of success, the association began to struggle with declining membership, financial solvency, member engagement, and the competing networking benefits offered through local associations (DeYoung, 2020, p. 6). Following more than a decade of national discussions and consultations about the role and value of CLA, the association made the decision to explore a new model and a federation of library associations was proposed. Around the same time, conversations about the role and value of other associations were also taking place. If Canada's national library association could evolve and shift direction, change for local associations was also possible. In January 2016, members voted to disband CLA and the Canadian Federation of Library Associations (CFLA-FCAB) was created. The stage was set for a substantial shift that would transform library associations across the Canadian landscape.

This paper explores the evolution and transformation of five Canadian library associations. Written by leaders and influencers within the Canadian library field, the authors share the steps they took to reinvent their organizations, how those associations adapted to demonstrate value to their members, and how they leveraged the expertise of their communities to better position themselves for future success.

Canadian Library Association (CLA-ACB) – Canadian Federation of Library Associations (CFLA-FCAB)

DeYoung, M. (2020). [From the Canadian Library Association to the Canadian Federation of Library Associations: A confluence of evolution and circumstance.](#) *Partnership: The Canadian Journal of Library and Information Practice and Research*, 15(1).

Marie DeYoung, past president of the Canadian Library Association, provided an historical perspective on the circumstances that led to the dissolution of CLA and the formation of the CFLA-FCAB. She noted that despite repeated efforts to create a responsive association and to attract members, in the end financial urgency drove the association to dissolve. DeYoung (2020) observed, “in spite of repeated efforts to attract and retain members and to have a governance model that reflected desires of the membership, success was difficult to achieve” (p. 4). With the exception of CARL-Portage, the dissolution of CLA, in many ways, served as a catalyst for the cases that followed.

Manitoba Library Association (MLA)

Stefanko, A. (2020). [Leading change and restructuring the Manitoba Library Association.](#) *Partnership: The Canadian Journal of Library and Information Practice and Research*, 15(1).

This article discussed the reasons and the consolidation process of library associations in Manitoba. Alix-Rae Stefanko (2020), past president of the Manitoba Library Association (MLA) and president of CFLA-FCAB, described how the incorporation of CFLA-FCAB “triggered the opportunity to re-examine the roles, work, and efficacy of existing library associations in Manitoba and how they engage at the national level” (p. 5). Stefanko recounted the extensive consultations of a cross-association working group, which sought to ensure all associations could see themselves in the merged MLA. This approach resulted in a larger, more inclusive association better positioned to lobby and advocate for its members.

Association pour l’avancement des sciences et des techniques de la documentation (ASTED) Fédération des milieux documentaires (FMD)

Savard, R., Villalonga, L. (2020). [La Federation des milieu documentaires \(FMD\): Une federation d’associations et d’institutions.](#) *Partnership: The Canadian Journal of Library and Information Practice and Research*, 15(1).

Réjean Savard and Lionel Villalonga, president and executive director of the Fédération des milieux documentaires (FMD), shared the challenges and collaborative approach they undertook to establish a new federation that would see l’Association pour l’avancement des sciences et des techniques de la documentation (ASTED) evolve into FMD. Like CLA, ASTED dissolved and was reborn as a federation. The authors acknowledged that the new federation reduced competition for membership: the federation serves associations and associations serve individuals. They discussed that

the Federation needed to demonstrate to its stakeholders that change would be more than in name only; it would be a deep and new transformation. Savard and Villalonga (2020) noted, “il semblait évident pour tous que cette nouvelle entité ne devrait pas être le fruit d'un simple changement de nom, mais bien une transformation profonde et nouvelle” (p. 2).

Canadian Association of Research Libraries (CARL) – Portage

Humphrey, C. (2020). [The CARL-Portage partnership story](#). *Partnership: The Canadian Journal of Library and Information Practice and Research*, 15(1).

Chuck Humphrey, former director of Portage, discussed the value of partnerships and the potential of associations to influence national engagement. Cooperation, coordination, collaboration, and compromise, are highlighted throughout the article and feature prominently in the success of the CARL-Portage story. Humphrey (2020) observed that “the experiences of Portage have demonstrated the utility of working in partnership with stakeholders from the top down and the bottom up” (p. 5).

Canadian Research Knowledge Network (CRKN-RCDR) – Canadiana.org

Bengtson, J., Shepstone, C. (2020). [Spinning in: The merger of Canadiana.org with the Canadian Research Knowledge Network](#). *Partnership: The Canadian Journal of Library and Information Practice and Research*, 15(1).

Jonathan Bengtson, former president of Canadiana.org and current president of CARL, and Carol Shepstone, former vice chair of CRKN's board of directors, acknowledged that regardless if new associations are organically created, or if existing associations merge, their common goal is “creating responsive collaborations to meet emerging needs of our users and providing leadership to our institutions and communities” (Bengtson and Shepstone, 2020, p.1). They discussed the successful “spinning in” of Canadiana.org into CRKN. They noted this merger was the result of perceived opportunities and synergies, and afforded Canadiana.org governance stability and to move forward with its mandate. Library associations “exist to bring us together to collectively solve problems, create new capacity, or explore new ways to work together for our shared benefit” (Bengtson and Shepstone, 2020, p. 1). The authors further acknowledged “... no single organization, or handful of organizations for that matter, can possibly meet all our needs” (Bengtson and Shepstone, 2020, p.1).

Lessons Learned: Three Guiding Principles

The associations represented in these articles have faced many challenges. There are many other examples illustrating the shift within Canadian library associations that merit further discussion in order to better inform the dialogue around association value and impact. The library leaders who head these associations are strong visionaries who stepped up and recognized that change was needed in order to align the mission, vision, and values of their associations with the demands of the current library landscape. Library associations are taking on the larger overarching work that individual

libraries and library workers cannot do on their own and creating community in the process.

Three guiding principles emerge from these articles:

1. Listen to Your Community

Library associations need to acknowledge their value, their role, and the impact of their voice. All associations—new and established—need to regularly evaluate the evolving demands of their members and recognize all members need to feel they have a voice. Through consultation and grass roots strategic planning exercises, associations can define the role and sphere of influence as envisioned by their members. Only with member support can the lobbying and advocacy voice of the association have strength. If associations do not hear what the members tell them, members will not support any shift in scope or mandate.

2. Do Not Go it Alone

No association should go through a shift alone. With so many Canadian library associations, a great wealth of expertise and insight is readily available to be drawn upon. Equally, it is important to ensure that associations are not working at cross-purposes with one another. Open dialogue between associations is critical to creating a trusting and respectful landscape, which allows mutual understanding to develop. This insight creates the possibilities for partnerships and collaborations between associations resulting in an overall richer Canadian library landscape.

3. Shift Takes Time

Change is constant; however, shifting focus and direction takes time and requires extensive stakeholder consultation. Not one of the associations represented in this feature was able to accomplish their goals in a quick timeline. In fact, they all took several years. As a result, members had to work diligently to maintain momentum, as new executives transitioned into the leadership roles for their associations. Working groups, extensive consultation, and good documentation are the cornerstones of realizing this kind of organizational change.

Conclusion

Canada is home to a diverse variety of library associations, federations, alliances, consortiums and networks. These organizations strive to serve and meet the expectations of their library sectors. In order to remain relevant, associations must be willing to adapt to the evolving needs and demands of their members. Continued member support is critical to their success. Byrne (2005) reminded us that “unless associations show they can adapt to the changing needs and attitudes of new professionals, rather than wait for them to conform to association norms, I’m out” (p. 213). It is imperative that associations constantly evaluate their services, consult with their members, and shift direction as needed. However, despite valiant efforts,

associations are not always able to meet these expectations. The dissolution of CLA and its eventual emergence as CFLA-FCAB stands as a reminder that “in spite of repeated efforts to attract and retain members” success, although attainable, is often difficult to achieve (DeYoung, 2020, p. 4).

References

Byrne, G. (2005). I don't wanna pay if I can't play: One new librarian's vision of library associations. In S. Cleyle & L. McGillis (Eds.), *Last one out turn off the lights: Is this the future of American and Canadian libraries?* (pp. 207-213). Scarecrow Press.