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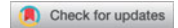
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Building and Sustaining a Grassroots Library Organization: A Three-Year Retrospective of Library Pipeline

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ABSTRACT

This article is an overview of Library Pipeline, a grassroots library organization dedicated to supporting structural changes by providing opportunities, funding, and services that improve the library as an institution and librarianship as a profession.

KEYWORDS

Grants; innovation; library associations; nonprofits

Many librarians in the United State belong to a professional organization like the American Library Association (ALA), attending their annual conferences, reading their journals, and serving on their committees and working groups. While traditional professional societies can offer a great deal to the average library worker, the founders of Library Pipeline found that there was a need for an organization that explicitly supports innovation, both in its values and in its regular operations. Library Pipeline is a platform for projects. We encourage our members to spend less time in meetings and more time prototyping ideas. Our approach to supporting librarianship lies in a vision that is open, inclusive, and constantly seeking improvement.

We operate with transparency and autonomy in mind, and expect much of our members. Membership in Library Pipeline is not just a line on one's CV; it is a commitment to building community, growing as a professional, and putting in work on things that matter. Since the organization was announced in November 2014, Library Pipeline (or Pipeline) has undergone changes and launched two exciting initial projects: the Green Open Access Working Group and the Innovation in Libraries grant (in partnership with the Awesome Foundation). In this article, we describe our growth to date and offer an inside look at how we have built a small but vibrant professional organization from the ground up.

Like many grassroots organizations, Library Pipeline started with a call for volunteers who were

poised to take on important issues like innovation in libraries, library publishing practices, professional development, and collaboration. As the various topical committees formed, we each began working on environmental scans in our areas of interest. The Innovation Committee found that there was a need for material support for library innovation—few librarians felt as though they could take the risk needed to prototype new ideas, given the budget crunch that many of us are facing in our organizations. The Publishing in LIS Committee found that access to library research was a major obstacle for librarians, with much of our work being locked away behind paywalls. The Professional Development Committee found that access to information about opportunities was an issue for many in our profession, and suggested ways that Pipeline might mitigate this problem.

However, not all committees were successful in coalescing around a shared vision and mission. The Strategic Problem Solving group discovered, through the process of assembling a toolkit, that their mission of fostering collaboration in the interest of solving problems was ironically not as easy to set down into strategy. In addition, the Governance Committee—tasked with doing the important work of securing funding, gaining official nonprofit status, and other operational issues—paused their creation when a committee chair could not be identified. Both committees were later dissolved and their work integrated into that of the Innovation Committee and Pipeline Advisory Board, respectively.

Upon completing their environmental scans, the committees found themselves at an impasse: where do we go from here? Library Pipeline did not yet have funding to bring members' more ambitious ideas to life, nor did it yet have 501(c)3 status, which prevented the group from easily securing grant funding or other support. Moreover, while we were rich in *interest* from our volunteers, we were poor in *time*: some members found themselves unable to continue dedicating attention to Pipeline. Similarly, with Pipeline's co-chairs tied up for a period in new jobs and other responsibilities, the organization hit a lull.

It was in this transitional era that Stacy was invited to serve as Board Chair for Library Pipeline. Her plan for the organization was simple and short-term: over one year, each committee will launch a 'minimum viable project' that would pilot an idea suggested in their environmental scan. By necessity, committees would choose projects that were possible to deliver without funding. We hoped this strategy would re-engage our members by offering tangible work with short-term rewards that proved that Pipeline was a necessary organizing force. These completed projects could also serve as evidence of our group's relevance when applying for later funding.

Since July 2016, two such projects have launched: the Green Open Access Working Group, coordinated by the LIS Publications Committee, and the Innovation in Libraries grant, brought to life by a subset of the Innovation within LIS Committee and partners at the Awesome Foundation. The Green Open Access Working Group was an idea launched by Pipeline members Marcus Banks and Lisa Gonzalez with a simple premise: librarians were not making their own work Open Access as often as their support for the concept would suggest, so the Working Group would coordinate volunteers to regularly, gently remind LIS authors of their self-archiving rights. The initiative launched in October 2016. Within one month, they had 29 volunteers encouraging self-deposit of articles from 43 LIS journals, and written support from several journal editors. The group's pilot ends in April 2017, after which time the coordinators hope to report success in opening up the LIS literature at greater rates through encouraging self-archiving.

The Innovation in Libraries micro-grant was spearheaded around the same time by Pipeline members Josh Finnell, Robin Champieux, and Bonnie Tijerina. The grant is a community-funded effort that follows on

the Awesome Foundation's model: a group of individuals pays a monthly sum out of their own pockets to fund 'awesome' ideas, to the tune of \$1,000 USD a month. The "trustees" who fund and select the grant awardees were carefully recruited from around the world, with an aim to create a funding body that would support innovation in all its diversity. The initial six-month pilot project recently concluded with six funded-grants from across public, academic, and special libraries.

The initial success of Pipeline's minimal viable projects planted seeds of success for the future of our grassroots organization. We have demonstrated that Pipeline is a vital platform for innovative projects, due in large part to the creativity and dedication of our volunteers. We continue to operate on 100% volunteer labor, which sets us apart from most other professional organizations. Our Advisory Board is deep into the process of sorting out procedural items (approving board bylaws and the like), with an aim to review and possibly reorient Pipeline's strategic direction, based upon the wishes of our membership.

Library Pipeline is now seventy members strong—a tiny group compared to the size of the ALA, but what we lack in numbers we make up for in dedication and vision. We do not charge membership fees like most other professional organizations; instead, we simply ask that members commit their time and expertise to Pipeline initiatives that will improve our profession for the better. Throughout the process of launching and sustaining a grassroots library organization, we gleaned a few insights and lessons.

Motivation is hard

All Library Pipeline organizers to date have butted up against a common problem in organizing: How do you build a virtual organization with distributed members who are short on time and resources? The typical incentive for professional service—prestige for working in a well-known professional group—does not exist in the case of an upstart like Library Pipeline. That can prove challenging when our members, who have limited hours in a day to dedicate to service, have to make a choice between organizing with us or organizing with a recognized professional organization. We also face the challenge of motivating a distributed membership, most of whom have never met in person. Building trust and camaraderie amongst members is a challenge in any organization, and our

organization's virtual nature means we face additional hurdles. Addressing both of these issues will take patience and time as we build capacity and put new and better communication systems into place for both outreach and inreach.

Trust the process

The decline in momentum we faced after our committees completed their environmental scans was due primarily to the uncertainty of operating outside of the structure and security of a traditional professional organization. We all know and understand (for the most part) the traditional process of collaborating in the context of professional service: making decisions at semi-annual, in-person committee meetings; how to fundraise and spend funds from within a recognized 501(c)3 nonprofit; and so on. However, what do you do when you simply have an idea and a group of highly skilled people who can potentially make it happen, but no clear instructions or framework within which to bring it to life? Pipeline members and leadership alike have had to learn how to "trust the process"¹; the process being the creation of minimum viable projects and a willingness to test and continuously improve our grassroots and shoestring means of organizing. We are starting to see some very positive results, but a lack

of certainty is understandably intimidating to many librarians.

What lies ahead is the important but unglamorous work of organization building and logistics. Based upon the soon-to-be-confirmed strategic direction for the group, we may formally incorporate as a nonprofit, seek large-scale funding, and ramp up our efforts for both new member recruitment and existing member inreach. Pipeline also hopes to soon launch a minimum viable project with the Professional Development committee and recruit that group's chair(s).

If you are the type of library professional that is interested in 'less talking, more doing', we invite you to join our ranks² and grow our grassroots organization at <https://www.librarypipeline.org>.

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Notes

1. <https://qz.com/890093/trust-the-process-how-three-years-of-losing-on-purpose-turned-the-philadelphia-76ers-into-winners/>
2. https://docs.google.com/forms/d/e/1FAIpQLSfh_93k_zA5JMjgp4bX-ULkisBeIBFYTo1blDDY626NM_DMNA/viewform?c=0&w=1