



Column: A New Generation in Librarianship

Empowering Librarians Worldwide: Enhancing the International Librarians Networking Program (ILNP)

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ABSTRACT

This paper details the analytical process and presents recommendations for the enhancement of the International Librarians Networking Program (ILNP), informed by participant feedback. The work was done as part of the 2023 American Library Association's (ALA) Emerging Leaders program. The recommendations span four critical dimensions: communication enhancement, application process revision, poster project refinement, and the establishment of an alumni group. These proposed enhancements aim to effectively address the challenges articulated by ILNP participants, elevate the program's overall quality, and align it with the overarching objectives of the International Relations Round Table (IRRT). IRRT's mission revolves around empowering librarians worldwide through networking and the exchange of professional knowledge, making these proposed improvements integral to realizing this mission.

KEYWORDS

program assessment, survey analysis, cross-cultural engagement, professional organizations

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Introduction and Background

The International Librarians Networking Program (ILNP) was created in 2019 to bolster the mission of the American Library Association's (ALA) International Relations Round Table (IRRT). Originally conceived by the 2019 cohort of ALA Emerging Leaders, this networking program seeks to empower librarians worldwide through focused dialogue and professional knowledge exchange grounded in each participant's unique experiences. In 2020, the first official cohort of international librarians began the program, which has continued each year since. Since this founding, more than 500 participants from 50+ countries have participated. The program holistically aims to advance ALA's international goals and stimulate global interest in library-related matters and the profession of librarianship.

Annual iterations of the program have led to rich relationships between librarians across institutional and cultural contexts. The current program allows applicants the chance to pair with a librarian from another country or region of their own country. Subsequently, groups then schedule weekly discussions on various topics relevant to both librarianship and their unique operational context. Very few participants are American; these information professionals hail from almost every continent. The program itself runs with the assistance of ALA-affiliated volunteer liaisons who help facilitate discussion and connection between participants. Primarily, the ILNP, in conjunction with IRRT resources, provides a framework for librarians working across the globe to further cultivate their own professional development and to make rich interpersonal connections. As the networking program enters its fifth year of operation, the impact continues to strengthen, as evidenced by the rising number of applicants, participants, and countries represented amongst both applicants and cohorts (Table 1).

Table 1

Statistics of Current and Past Participants in the International Librarians Networking Program

Year	Applicants	Countries	Selected Applicants	Selected Countries
2020	450	70	95	46
2021	270	39	62	27
2022	250	56	168	48
2023	582	56	188	49

Applicants find out about the program through both social and professional networks of administrative organizers and participants. While ALA is limited to paid members, this greater opportunity for professional development is available to individuals across the globe without financial obstacles, such as membership dues. Furthermore, there is no required mandate to be affiliated with a special type of institution, library, or other governing body. Individuals complete a short application, which is then screened by volunteers affiliated with the IRRT. Subsequently, participants are grouped into pairs or trios for multi-month intentional conversation and cross-cultural exchange. The only requirement is that individuals feel comfortable conversing in English with their peers, as this is the language the issued prompts and other administrative components are shared in. While language is a limiting component for some interested applicants, the program as a whole provides an opportunity for knowledge sharing and professional development that would otherwise be hindered by prescribed financial barriers, nationality limitations, and other obstacles to inclusion.

As members of the 2023 class of ALA Emerging Leaders, our project focused on analyzing and providing recommendations for the current program's structure with the aim of identifying areas of success and opportunities for improvement. The ultimate goals—shared by our team, the IRRT team, and the ILNP team—encompass improving program retention, reducing turnover, enhancing communication, increasing poster output, and creating recommendations for the alumni network.

Analysis of the International Librarians Networking Program

Virtually all participants joined the ILNP to expand their professional network, connect with other librarians from around the world, and learn about the experiences and practices of their peers. Minimal participants in the program have any affiliation to ALA itself. The networking program therefore provides an inclusive and wide-reaching venue beyond these more formal structures for networking. The program creates an opportunity for sharing existing ideas, envisioning new innovations with other librarians, and developing skills to inform their work at their home libraries. Throughout the program and at its conclusion, participants provided feedback using a Google form. In general, participants expressed happiness with the program (Table 2). Almost all participants noted that they would recommend the program to their peers; in 2020, 100% of participants indicated they would recommend the program; in 2021 the percentage was 98%, and in 2022, it was 93%.

Table 2

Survey prompt: How Satisfied Are You with Your Experience in the Program? (1 low, 5 high)

Year	1	2	3	4	5
2020	2	2	9	14	15
2021	2	1	6	28	20
2022	4	3	6	12	19

Note. 143 end-of-program surveys were analyzed.

The survey results, while covering a wide range of components, can be categorized into three main areas: reasons for joining, challenges faced during the program, and overall program satisfaction. Several participants noted they faced communication issues with their partners. Participants also noted challenges with time zone differences, expressed not having much in common with their partner, and often felt unprepared for the weekly meetings with their partner. One of the most common suggestions of participants was to include a suggested reading before the meeting, which they felt would allow the conversation to flow more smoothly.

Our group scrutinized the qualitative and quantitative data provided by participant surveys to draw the conclusions shared in this article. As a result of being a volunteer-led initiative, ALA-affiliated facilitators possessed minimal time for analyzing the surveys they compiled over the years. Our review was the first formal investigation of this actionable feedback. Soliciting additional volunteers would aid in the administrative and reflective practices of the program.

In addition to the general project recommendations we arrived at, our ALA Emerging Leaders cohort presented two main ways in which the year-end survey process could be improved upon, to ensure that survey data is a consideration for future iterations of the program. The elimination of text-based responses for each question would allow statistics to be generated and gathered more easily and make data much more readable. The addition of more program facilitators would also allow more time to be dedicated to analyzing end-of-program survey results.

Project Recommendations

After reviewing survey data spanning several years, our group offered a series of recommendations to enhance the ILNP. Communication issues stood out as a recurring concern, with participants frequently expressing disappointment regarding their partners' limited engagement. These issues often resulted from scheduling conflicts or partner abandonment, leading to unresolved tensions and involuntary program departures. To address

this, we suggested an enhanced partner matching process, emphasizing factors like time zones and language compatibility, which would also require additional planning group efforts. Another idea involved creating a standby participant pool for quick replacements when individuals exited the program early, providing continuity for those eager to continue. Changing the role of liaisons was additionally advocated for. While this would increase liaison workload, it would enhance the participant experience and interaction. This was a direct request from many respondents. Many participants had expressed a desire for more personalized guidance and interaction from liaisons, potentially necessitating a reduction in liaison group assignments or the introduction of structured activities to cater to varied communication preferences.

The application process for the program had leaned towards simplicity, resulting in a rising number of applications each year. Our recommendation was to strengthen the application process with short-answer questions, filtering out participants who were not genuinely committed to the program. This refinement would yield a more dedicated and prepared group, highlighting the program's commitment to quality and fostering a greater sense of responsibility. Other suggested improvements included requiring the submission of a résumé and professional recommendation and encouraging applicants to reflect on their motivations. These additions underscored the program's focus on lifelong learning and career advancement, moving away from a checkbox application process.

Regarding the required culminating poster project, participants often found themselves confused about its requirements and objectives. We suggested adding more structure to the process through clear guidelines and offering professional development webinars on creating academic posters. To make the poster project more meaningful, our recommendation was to organize an asynchronous virtual poster session towards the program's conclusion in collaboration with organizations such as the ALA or the IRRT. This envisioned session would provide participants with valuable presentation experience and a formal scholarship entry to enhance their résumés. Collectively, changes seek to improve the poster project's value and purpose, making it a more rewarding part of the program.

Lastly, survey data consistently highlighted the desire for sustained connections beyond the program's duration. In response, we recommended the creation of an ILNP alumni group, providing a platform for ongoing communication, idea exchange, and relevant updates among international librarians. Our preferred platform was a Facebook group due to its global accessibility and flexibility for discussions. This alumni group would alleviate concerns about the program's limited duration, fostering a sense of community and enabling networking opportunities to extend beyond the ILNP. In summary, these recommendations were intended to enhance communication, refine the application process, clarify the ending poster project, and

establish an alumni group, ultimately transforming the ILNP into a more dynamic, sustainable, and rewarding experience for participants, and reinforcing its role in connecting and empowering library professionals worldwide.

Conclusion

The ILNP has led to unique cross-cultural exchange and knowledge sharing for global informational professionals. The program provides a critical space for international librarians to connect across geographical contexts. By participating, individuals can learn from one another and gain an understanding of approaches, tactics, and opportunities to further their work. With the program now entering its fifth year of operation, the qualitative and quantitative research conducted by our team has provided nuanced, impact-oriented recommendations key to improving program participant experiences. These recommendations reflect the requests of many participants to date, as expressed through surveys collected by ILNP. Their application provides the opportunity for ILNP to further develop and reinforce its role in connecting and empowering library professionals worldwide.

The value of participant engagement cannot be understated and has been pivotal in identifying the best steps forward for a very successful program. IRRT's impact on international librarians is magnified by the opportunity to provide international information professionals with a program that merges professional development with increased dialogue and innovation across socio-cultural contexts. The ILNP creates cross-cultural connections and should be celebrated for creating an opportunity for information professionals to network, learn, and grow together. The suggestions at hand aim to provide an actionable path towards continuous improvement of the program. We look forward to the iterations of the networking initiative for years to come and aspire to guarantee the program's continued success through the institutionalization of these reflective recommendations.