



# State Library Conferences as Professional Development Venues: Unbalanced Support for the AASL-Defined Roles of the School Librarian

[Judi Moreillon](#), Assistant Professor, Texas Woman's University, School of Library and Information Studies

[Maria Cahill](#), Assistant Professor, Texas Woman's University, School of Library and Information Studies

[Rebecca McKee](#), doctoral student, Texas Woman's University, School of Library and Information Studies

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## Abstract

*The American Association of School Librarians (AASL) released new guidelines for school library programs in the summer of 2009. Empowering Learners: Guidelines for School Library Programs (AASL 2009a), hereafter referred to as EL, spells out the five roles that school librarians must practice to empower library users. The purpose of this content-analysis study was to investigate the professional-development offerings available to school librarians through state-level conferences and determine the degree to which these sessions promote the five roles for school librarians as identified in EL.*

*Using a stratified random sample, the researchers selected conferences held in the 2010–2011 academic year and sponsored or cosponsored by state-level school-library associations. The researchers developed and tested a domain matrix based on four of the five roles described in EL as topic domains (the leader role is embedded in the other four roles), and developed subcategories in each domain using the descriptors in EL. Using the matrix, they analyzed the titles and descriptions of twelve conference-program offerings. The results of the study show unbalanced conference-sponsored professional development in terms of the EL-defined roles for school librarians.*

## Introduction

To optimally support a school community, a school librarian must play a number of professional roles and master various competencies. In *Empowering Learners: Guidelines for School Library Programs* (AASL 2009a), hereafter referred to as *EL*, the American Association of School Librarians (AASL) delineates the school library practice necessary to meet the needs of 21st-century learners. Additionally, in *EL* AASL spells out and prioritizes the five roles that school librarians must embrace to empower library users: leader, instructional partner, information specialist, teacher, and program administrator.

*EL* builds upon the association's previous guidelines *Information Power: Building Partnerships for Learning* (AASL and AECT 1998), but, in addressing the needs of society and education, increases the focus on learning for knowledge and emphasizes the important of the instructional partner role. Further, AASL recognizes the increasing need for librarians to practice leadership roles (Gordon 2009). In *EL* the role of "leader" was added to the other four roles previously described in AASL guideline documents.

*EL* charges that school librarians serving as leaders embrace "challenges and opportunities to empower learning through their roles as instructional partners, information specialists, teachers, and program administrators" (AASL 2009a, 46). *EL* further proposes that as leaders school librarians are visible and active in their learning communities; they communicate with and engage in collaborative activities with all library stakeholders and with decision-making communities in their schools, districts, and states. They also actively participate in their national associations. In *EL* leaders are described as librarians who build relationships and partnerships, integrate 21st-century skills throughout the school environment, demonstrate professional commitment and knowledge, and take a global view through active participation in the local and global learning communities to develop effective programs and to advocate for student learning (AASL 2009a, 17). Thus, an effective school librarian must demonstrate the ability to lead through mastery of the other four roles.

## Literature Review

Having recently published new guidelines, it is imperative that AASL get the word out to practitioners in the field. Not only must the association disseminate the goals and objectives of the national organization, it must also ensure that practitioners fully understand how to implement and use the guidelines to affect practice (Sawchuk 2010). In the field of school librarianship, research repeatedly points to the incongruity between guidelines for best practice and enactment of those guidelines by practitioners (McCracken 2001). To address this issue, the AASL initiated Learning4Life (L4L), an implementation plan to disseminate both the guidelines and *Standards for the 21st-Century Learner* (AASL 2007). AASL offered L4L and other sessions focused on the new guidelines at 2010 and 2011 ALA Midwinter Meeting and Annual Conference, the 2010 Fall Forum, and 2009 AASL National Conference.

According to the National Center for Educational Statistics (Goldring and Gruber 2009), there were 50,910 full-time and 8,850 part-time state-certified school librarians in 2007–2008. Only 8,000, or 13.39 percent, of those professionals are members of AASL, and even fewer, approximately 2,250 of them, or 3.77 percent, attended AASL's 15th National Conference in Minneapolis in 2011 (Jacobsen 2011). However, a larger number of school librarians do attend state-level conferences for library professionals, and these venues offer support for school

librarians' professional development and advancement toward the goals and objectives of the national professional association.

The library and information science community widely recognizes conference attendance as an accepted form of professional development. A number of leaders in library and information science (Abram 2008; Morse 2008; Natarajan 2008; Simmons and Fenton 2010) as well as leaders among school librarians (Alaimo 2004; Franklin and Stephens 2008; Johns 2005; Laughlin 2010; Needham 2008) have encouraged conference attendance for professional development and networking purposes. In a review of the literature on LIS conferences, Rachel Harrison (2010) concluded that they serve as unique forms of professional development unavailable through other modes of continuing education.

A review of research in library and information science revealed few studies related to conferences. Several researchers have analyzed national association conference offerings (Garner, Davidson, and Williams 2008; Julien 2007; Snelson and Talar 1991). One study analyzed the offerings at provincial library conferences (Wilson 2010). Only one very dated study focused specifically on school library conferences (Eisenberg et. al. 1990), the topic of this study. Carol A. Brown and colleagues (2011) examined workshops and job-embedded professional-development options for school librarians, as well as conference programs. Their results suggest that school librarians find conference programs that integrate networking and sharing components to be most useful. Further, school librarians identify professional development that is closely aligned with their own school goals and immediately applicable to their own practices to be most valuable.

As state-level or national-level professional-development venues, library conferences should support the goals and objectives of the national organization, and in the case of school librarians, the various roles as outlined in *EL*. However, it is unclear if library conferences actually address the development of all five roles of the school librarian. Furthermore, when programming at school library conferences supports the roles, it is unclear if the offerings are sufficiently aligned with *EL* priorities.

## Research Questions

The purpose of this content-analysis study was to investigate the offerings available to school librarians through state-level conferences and to determine the alignment of those offerings with AASL guidelines. Specifically, this study explored the degree to which state-level conference sessions for school librarians promote the five roles as identified in *EL*.

The following research questions guided the study: 1) How do the conference offerings align with and support the five roles of the school librarian as outlined in *Empowering Learners* and how do these differ across conference types? 2) What are the major topics of offerings available to school librarians at state conferences and how do these offerings differ by conference type? 3) How do state-level library conferences' offerings support school librarians' development as leaders, the newest role defined by the national association, and does this support differ across conference types?

## Methodology

### Sample

Using a stratified random sample, the investigators selected twelve conferences sponsored or cosponsored by state-level school library associations and held in the 2010–2011 academic year. The sample was drawn across three categories of conferences: state-level school-library-association-only conferences ( $n = 7$ ), state-level association conferences in which school librarians were a unit within a larger library organization ( $n = 4$ ), and conferences in which state-level school-librarian organizations partner with technology associations ( $n = 1$ ). The samples represent approximately 24 percent of the state conferences in each category.

For each state-level association's conference and for the conference in which a state-level school-librarian organization partnered with a technology association, the researchers identified all sessions with content that might inform school librarians about issues related to school libraries. Any sessions that did not seem relevant to school librarians were not considered in the analysis. For example, if a session focused on a public library's relationship with the larger city government and other government organizations, the session was not included in the data set. Additionally, the researchers counted and analyzed only the first instance of programs that were repeated during a single conference.

Across the entire sample, after sessions relevant to school librarians had been selected, the study consisted of a total of 615 conference sessions. These sessions included only preconference sessions, keynotes, concurrent sessions, and workshops, and did not address other possible avenues that conferences offer for professional development. Table 1 illustrates the number of sessions per conference type.

**Table 1. Number of program sessions across conference types.**

Conference Type	N (%)
School Library Association Conference (SLOC)	384 (62.44)
Full Library Association Conference (FLAC)	154 (25.04)
School Library Association and Technology Association Joint Conference (NLOC)	77 (12.52)
Total	615 (100)

### Data Analysis

Operating under the premise that leadership is embedded within each of the roles of the school librarian, the researchers developed a matrix of topic domains based on the other four roles described in *EL*. Under each domain, subcategories were identified based on the explanation of each role in *EL*. After field-testing the instrument to consistently achieve a minimum 85 percent inter-rater reliability, the researchers used the domain matrix (see figure 1) to analyze the titles and descriptions of offerings of twelve conference programs. Researchers examined each conference program independently, and then negotiated domains and subcategories when discrepancies occurred in their coding. For all conference program analyses, a minimum 85

percent inter-rater reliability was reached. Additionally, the researchers randomly selected one of the conference programs to reanalyze approximately eight weeks after the initial analyses. All researchers independently recoded the single conference program with 90 percent or greater agreement with the first analysis.

**Figure 1. Domain matrix.**

Category	Code	Topic	Details/Notes
Instructional Partner	1.0		
	1.1	Policy, Practice or Curricula Development	including in-service and/or professional development for teachers
	1.2	Collaborative Assignments Matched to Academic Standards	if technology not involved
	1.3	Collaborative Assignments Promoting Critical Thinking	
	1.4	Collaborative Assignments Promoting Technology / Info. Literacy	
	1.5	Collaborative Assignments Promoting Social Skills / Cultural Competencies	
	1.6	Instructional Design: Objectives, Goals, Assessments	
	1.7	Learning Commons: 24/7 Learning Environment	
Information Specialist	2.0		
	2.1	Technology Tools to Supplement School Resources	including databases; not hardware
	2.2	Creation of Engaging Technological Learning Tasks	activities in which the students engage; Skype; student-created book trailers
	2.3	Communication Tools: Students, Teachers, Global Learning Community	cloud computing; user choices; Web 2.0; teacher-created book trailers
	2.4	Emerging Technologies	trends; Second Life; apps; QR codes
	2.5	Information Literacy	citation generators
	2.6	Software & Hardware Evaluation	free; if software, stored on library computers/devices
	2.7	Technology Data Analysis	
	2.8	Information Ethics / Copyright	cyberbullying; netiquette; Internet safety
Teacher	3.0		
	3.1	Promotion of Critical Thinking	

	3.2	Literacy Skills	including storytime; storytelling; readers' theater; oral history; writing
	3.3	Research Skills	including content-area lessons; content-area instructional design (objectives/goals/assessment); inquiry learning w/o technology
	3.4	Pleasure Reading Motivation	including booktalks; reading incentive programs; new literature; live author visits; book clubs
	3.5	Multiple Reading Formats: Graphic Novels, Periodicals, Audio-books, e-books	
	3.6	Peer Learning	
	3.7	Trends in Literature	
	3.8	Social / Cultural Competencies for Students	
	3.9	Author/ Illustrator / Poet Talking about Their Own Work	
Program Administrator	4.0		
	4.1	Collection Development / Collection Management	cataloging; vendors; any tool that must be purchased
	4.2	Program Mission, Plan, Policies	intellectual freedom; disaster preparedness; social/cultural competencies that affect policies; standards; broad educational issues
	4.3	Staff Management	
	4.4	Budget	grant writing; grants
	4.5	Physical and Virtual Space	decisions made "behind the scenes" that impact users' virtual access
	4.6	Partnerships with Stakeholders and Sister Organizations	PTA, NEA, etc.
	4.7	Partnerships with Other Librarians / Professional Associations	Library-only associations
	4.8	Continuing Education	
	4.9	Personal Skills: Communication, Interviewing	
	4.10	Marketing / Advocacy	

The researchers uncovered several challenges in collecting the data for this study. Conference program publications are not standardized and, therefore, do not include identical information about sessions. For example, some programs include titles and affiliations for presenters; others

do not. As a result, the researchers relied solely on sessions' titles and descriptions to categorize sessions on the domain matrix. Without actually attending sessions or conducting exit interviews following the sessions, the researchers had no way to determine the impact of sessions on participants' learning; no claims regarding the quality of sessions were made in this study. In addition, the researchers did not contact conference planners to ascertain whether or not they were satisfied with the range of sessions offered or if they felt constrained by the session proposals submitted for their review.

## Results

The results of the analyses are presented below in the order of the research questions. This is also the order in which the researchers analyzed the data. They first determined which domain or role a session's title and description addressed and then further categorized each session into a subcategory under that domain. Finally, the researchers discussed how the "leader" role can be addressed in conferences.

### **How do the conference offerings align with and support four of the five roles of the school librarian as outlined in *Empowering Learners* and how do these differ across conference types?**

Table 2 displays the alignment of all conference program offerings with four of the five roles of the school librarian as outlined in *EL*. The number of sessions supporting the roles of teacher and program administrator are about equal, while the number supporting the other roles is considerably fewer. Just slightly more than one-fifth of the offerings addressed the information specialist role and only about one in every fifteen sessions focused on the instructional partner role.

**Table 2. Conference offerings' alignment with four school librarian roles.**

Role	Conference Type			
	SLOC N=384	FLAC N=154	NLOC N=77	Total N=615
	N (%)			
Teacher	162 (42.19)	39 (25.32)	9 (11.69)	201 (37.36)
Program Administrator	105 (27.34)	80 (51.94)	15 (19.48)	185 (34.39)
Information Specialist	86 (22.40)	30 (19.48)	48 (62.34)	116 (21.56)
Instructional Partner	31 (8.07)	5 (3.24)	5 (6.49)	36 (6.69)

### ***School Library Association-Only Conferences (SLOCs)***

The stratified random sample for this study included seven of thirty state-level conferences in the SLOC category. Slightly more than two-fifths of the sessions offered at SLOCs addressed the teacher role; nearly one-fourth focused on the program administrator role; approximately one-fifth dealt with the information specialist role; and about one-twelfth addressed the instructional partner role (see table 2).

Although the percentage of sessions related to the teacher role across the subset was high, great variability in the percentage of offerings existed among the individual conferences in this category. Nevertheless, at each of the SLOCs, more than one-third of the total program offerings supported the teacher role, and at one of the conferences programs addressing this role accounted for nearly half of the total programs offered. Programs addressing the teacher role offered at SLOCs included the promotion of critical-thinking skills, the teaching of research skills, and the discussion and examination of multiple reading formats, peer learning, trends in literature, and social and cultural competencies for students.

Across the sample subset, over one-quarter of the programs offered addressed the program administrator role. Program topics that addressed this role included those dealing with collection development, budgeting and grant funding, considerations of the physical and virtual library space, and partnerships with stakeholders, sister organizations such as PTA/PTO, and other library and educational associations.

In the overall subset sample, program sessions related to the information specialist role of the school librarian came in a close third behind those addressing the program administrator role. However, at three of the seven SLOCs within this sample, the number of programs addressing the information specialist role was equal to that of the program administrator role. Sessions addressing this role included information literacy, software and/or hardware evaluation, and information-ethics topics, which included cyberbullying and netiquette.

Program sessions supporting the instructional partner role accounted for a small percentage of total offerings across the sample subset, and at one SLOC no program sessions were offered to address this role. In fact, it is interesting to note that, among all but one of the SLOCs, fewer programs were offered to support the instructional partner role than any other role defined by *EL*. One conference in this subset did offer an equal number of programs supporting the instructional partnership role as those addressing the information specialist role. Program sessions supporting the instructional partner role included those focused on curricula development, professional development for teachers offered by the school librarian, and various types of collaborative assignments including those matched to academic standards, and those promoting critical thinking, technology, information literacy, and social skills.

### ***Full Library Association Conferences (FLACs)***

The sample included four of seventeen state-level conferences in the FLAC category. The program administrator role accounted for more than half of the programs (see table 2). FLAC sessions that focused on the administrator role fell into two main types, which accounted for 60 percent of the offerings: 1) sessions on collection development or management, and 2) sessions pertaining to program mission, planning, and policies. Collection-development sessions included purchasing decisions and vendor presentations. Program-mission sessions predominantly focused on developing library curricula and policy planning. In fact, looking at all four FLAC programs, sessions in these two areas of program administration were most frequently offered: 14 (56 percent), 9 (52.94 percent), 51 (50.50 percent), and 6 (54.55 percent). Staff management was the

next most frequent program-administrator session topic; 11.25 percent of the total sessions focused on this role.

The teacher role at FLACs accounted for a bit more than 25 percent of the sessions. Nearly an equal number of these sessions focused on literacy skills and on author-illustrator-poet talks. Among the FLACs, all but one offered more programs on the teacher role than on the information specialist role. In the FLACs overall, the information specialist role was addressed in just under 20 percent of the sessions. About one-third of these sessions focused on technology tools to supplement school resources, with a focus on using databases. Only five conference sessions involved the instructional partner role; four of them were offered at just one of the conferences in this category.

### ***Non-Library and School Library Association Joint Conference (NLOC)***

All of the NLOC conferences, including the one represented in the sample, were held in conjunction with educational technology associations. Logically, the information specialist role, which today focuses on technology resources and tools, was the most prominent in the sessions offered (see table 2). With more than three-fifths of the conference offerings supporting this role, it was by far the most dominant role addressed.

Approximately one-fifth of the NLOC offerings addressed the program administrator role. A closer look at these data shows that the majority of the program administrator role sessions also focused on technology: technology policies and standards, and use of technology in building partnerships and providing services. The teacher role was addressed significantly less than in either the SLOC or FLAC programs. The instructional partnership role was addressed twice as frequently in the NLOCs as in the FLACs, with the SLOCs giving the most attention to this role.

### **What are the major topics of offerings available to school librarians at state conferences and how do these offerings differ by conference type?**

As table 3 illustrates, the three topics that were most often addressed in session programs at state-level conferences for school librarians included: 1) motivating pleasure reading, 2) promotion of literacy skills (both part of the teacher role), and 3) the school library program mission, plan, and/or policies (which fall under the domain of the program administrator role). Sessions focused on motivating pleasure reading were those in which new and/or classic children's literature was promoted through booktalks, as well as sessions that addressed ways for librarians to promote reading for pleasure via reading incentive programs, book groups and clubs, and reading competitions. Sessions addressing the promotion of literacy skills included those that presented, promoted, or addressed storytimes, storytelling, readers' theater, and/or the teaching of specific literacy skills or strategies. Sessions related to the program mission, policies, or planning included those focused on evidence-based librarianship, strategic planning, and library and educational standards and policies. The seven program topics identified in table 3 accounted for nearly two-thirds of all of the program sessions available to school librarians at state conferences; however, these seven program topics supported only three of the four roles of the school librarian.

**Table 3. Major topics at all school library state conferences.**

Topic	Role	N	%
Pleasure reading motivation	Teacher	58	15.10
Promotion of literacy skills	Teacher	43	11.20
Program mission, plan, and/or policies	Program Administrator	39	10.16
Understanding of popular reading material: author/illustrator/poet talk	Teacher	33	8.59
Communication tools to connect the school with the global learning community	Information Specialist	32	8.33
Collection development and/or management	Program Administrator	20	5.21
Technology tools to supplement school resources	Information Specialist	20	5.21

### ***School Library Association-Only Conferences (SLOCs)***

Table 4 illustrates those topics with the greatest coverage at school library association-only conferences. Of the top seven program topics, three of them fall under the domain of the teacher role; two relate to the program administrator role; and two are connected to the information specialist role. Each of the topics listed in the table accounts for more than 5 percent of the combined total of program offerings at SLOCs. The top three topics offered in the sample saw wide coverage at SLOCs, but garnered especially broad coverage at at least one of the conferences. For example, 58, or 15.10 percent, of the programs across this subset of conferences related to motivating pleasure reading, but this topic accounted for over 26 percent of the offerings at one of the seven conferences. Similarly, the promotion of literacy skills was a topic of much focus across the subset as a whole, but accounted for nearly 22 percent of the offerings at one of the conferences. Finally, program sessions focused on the school library program mission, plan, or policies accounted for just over 10 percent of the total offerings, but represented 20 percent at one of the conferences.

**Table 4. Major topics of school library association-only state conference (SLOC) offerings, total (N = 384).**

Topic	Role	N	%
Pleasure reading motivation	Teacher	58	15.10
Promotion of literacy skills	Teacher	43	11.20
Program mission, plan, and/or policies	Program Administrator	39	10.16
Understanding of popular reading material: author/illustrator/poet talk	Teacher	33	8.59

Communication tools to connect the school with the global learning community	Information Specialist	32	8.3 3
Collection development and/or management	Program Administrator	20	5.2 1
Technology tools to supplement school resources	Information Specialist	20	5.2 1

### ***Full Library Association Conferences (FLACs)***

Table 5 shows a closer look at the top program topics applicable to school librarians at full library association conferences. Forty-eight, or 31.06 percent, of the programs involved sharing information or practices related to collection development and management, or were sessions related to school library program mission, planning, and policies. In addition to sessions dealing with collection development and management in general, sessions on this topic included presentations by vendors and sessions about products that could be purchased.

**Table 5. Major topics of school library sessions at full library association conferences (FLACs), total (N = 154).**

Topic	Role	N	%
Collection development and/or management	Program Administrator	24	15.58
Program mission, plan, and/or policies	Program Administrator	24	15.58
Literacy skills	Teacher	13	8.44
Understanding of popular reading material: author/illustrator/poet talk	Teacher	12	7.79
Technology tools to supplement school resources	Information Specialist	9	5.84
Staff management	Program Administrator	9	5.84

Two subtopics of the teacher role also each accounted for at least 5 percent of the FLAC programs. Thirteen sessions on literacy skills accounted for 8.44 percent of the sessions, and twelve talks by authors, illustrators, or poets accounted for 7.79 percent of the sessions. (It should be noted that author, illustrator, or poet sessions that focused on information beyond the presenter's own work were not included in this category. Those sessions were categorized according to the topic the presenter addressed.)

Sessions related to technology tools to supplement school library resources (in the information specialist role) and staff management (in the program administrator role) each accounted for 5.84 percent, or 9 of the 154 sessions. The use of databases was the most common topic within this subcategory of technology-tool sessions. The largest of the FLACs offered 21 technology-tool programs, just three fewer than the total number of teacher role programs it offered. The staff-management sessions were the third area in program administration that accounted for more than 5 percent of these programs.

Only five conference sessions, or 3.25 percent, involved the instructional partner role. All five of these sessions were offered at the largest of the four FLACs. Two of these sessions focused on

developing collaborative teaching policies, practice, and curricula. Another two sessions involved collaboratively planned and taught assignments that promote information literacy and/or technology use. And one session focused on the “learning commons,” a concept of the library as both a physical and virtual 24–7 learning environment for students, and a professional-development center for classroom teachers and librarians.

### ***Non-Library and School Library Association Joint Conference (NLOC)***

As illustrated in table 6, six topics had the greatest coverage at the joint school library association and technology association conference; each accounted for more than 5 percent of the total. Not surprisingly, four of the top six program topics supported the information specialist role. One of the program topics addressed the program administrator role, and one aligned with the teacher role. The top three topics addressed at this joint conference were the focus of nearly half of all of the programs offered: 1) creation of engaging technological tasks, including those in which students were directly and actively involved such as Skype visits with authors and content experts; 2) student creation of digital book trailers and other digital products; and 3) student engagement with various technology tools to achieve enhanced learning. Nearly one in seven of the conference offerings focused on participant evaluation of software that did not have to be purchased. (It is important to note that the researchers coded evaluation of free cloud technology to connect the school with the global learning community under the category Communication tools. Vendor presentations that involved purchasing technology tools were categorized in the Collection Development category under the program administrator role.)

**Table 6. Major topics of joint school library association and technology association state conference (NLOC) offerings, total (N = 77).**

Topic	Role	N	%
Creation of engaging technological learning tasks	Information Specialist	16	20.72
Software and hardware evaluation	Information Specialist	11	14.29
Program mission, plan, and/or policies	Program Administrator	11	14.29
Communication tools to connect the school with the global learning community	Information Specialist	10	12.99
Emerging technologies	Information Specialist	7	9.09
Promotion of literacy skills	Teacher	4	5.19

## **Discussion**

While membership and full participation in professional organizations have many benefits, including “networking, learning about issues facing school librarians, lobbying for school libraries, a venue for new learning techniques, and a list to help with quick solutions to problems” (Woolls 2011, 131), this study proposed to identify conference session offerings in terms of professional development related to the instructional partner, information specialist, teacher, and program administrator roles as described by AASL in *EL*. The researchers quantified the total number and percentages of sessions in each topic domain within single

conferences and across three different types of conferences, as well as by the subtopics within each role domain.

## Roles

In states where school librarians are required to hold classroom-teacher certification or to have successfully completed a specified number of years as classroom teachers, it is not surprising that a focus on the “teacher role” would be a vestige of this heritage. In the SLOCs, sessions centered on the teacher role dominated the offerings. Many of these sessions provided conference participants with opportunities for skill development in the areas of literacy instruction, storytime methods, and book-promotion strategies. While the teacher role is valuable for school librarians (Neuman 2001; Todd 2011), they must also add the values, knowledge, skills, and responsibilities of “librarian” to their classroom-teacher skillsets. The instructional partner, information specialist, and program administrator roles more clearly focus on the “librarian” aspects of the job description.

In FLACs the program administrator role was most often demonstrated in conference sessions. While these topics are important to the foundation of managing the library collection and program, they do not necessarily ensure that the program is integrated into the larger school community or that it maximizes its impact on students’ learning outcomes. Interestingly, the order of frequency of FLACs’ offerings, ranging from most to least, was program administrator, teacher, information specialist, and instructional partner—the precise opposite of the order of priority suggested in *EL* (AASL 2007, 16).

As expected, the information specialist role was most often the topic of NLOC sessions. School librarians who want to improve their knowledge of digital resources and tools and to increase their technological skills can find many opportunities to do so at joint school library association and technology association conferences. Also, when school librarians present at these conferences, they are demonstrating their expertise as information specialists for an audience that includes technologists and classroom teachers. The NLOC is a particularly fertile venue for professional development because it can build a foundation for collaborative work among colleagues with various job descriptions.

### ***The Underrepresented Role: Instructional Partner***

Representatives from each state affiliate who attended the AASL Vision Summit in 2006 ranked four of the five roles in this order: instructional partner, information specialist, teacher, and program administrator (AASL 2009, 16). If this ranking was correct, then none of these conference types are in alignment with this vision for the future of the profession. When enacting instructional partnerships through coplanning and coteaching with classroom teachers and specialist colleagues, school librarians are able to achieve one of the central leadership goals of “integrating 21st-century skills throughout the learning environment” (AASL 2009, 17). It is through developing instructional partnerships that school librarians have the greatest opportunity to impact student achievement on standardized tests because these tests focus on content-area curriculum. Developing instructional partnerships puts the work of the school librarian at the center of the school’s instructional program and can also be a pathway to leadership (Achterman 2008; Haycock 2010; Moreillon 2007, 2012; Todd 2011).

The fact that conference sessions on the instructional partner role were nonexistent in three out of the four FLACs and represented such a small percentage of the fourth conference’s sessions is a noteworthy and alarming finding of this study. Even at SLOCs, where all program planners and

attendees focus on professional development for school librarians, this role ranked last in terms of representation at all of the conferences and was not supported by any of the sessions at one of the seven conferences in this sample.

The NLOC program could have been a “natural” venue for sharing librarian-technologist or librarian-classroom teacher instructional partnerships. Since technologist, classroom teacher, and school library personnel were all in attendance at this joint conference, instructional partnerships could have been a strong focus. Unfortunately, only a very small number of sessions, just 6.49 percent, addressed the instructional partner role in the context of the school librarian’s work. This finding does not suggest that partnerships are necessarily highly valued or that such sessions are in demand in the joint-conference venue. If school librarians are charged with integrating 21st-century skills, which include technological literacy, throughout the school environment then doing so through instructional partnerships could be an effective and efficient way for school librarians to meet this goal.

The study results indicate that the profession is not capitalizing on opportunities to showcase this role nor are leaders of school librarians fulfilling their obligation to advance the profession in the direction of instructional partnerships. In the conclusion to her study of elementary school principals’ attitudes towards school librarians’ instructional-partner responsibilities, Audrey Church (2008) posited, “School library media preparation programs must prepare their graduates to positively present their key instructional roles. Library media specialists already working in the field must have the opportunity for training and professional development.” She added, “For those library media specialists in the field, training in these areas should be presented in the format of workshops, in-service opportunities, and conference sessions.” Church’s directive aside, this study’s results show, in terms of the instructional partner role, this professional development did not happen in 2010–2011 state conferences.

### ***The School Librarian’s Leader Role***

How do state conferences support school librarians in developing as leaders? In this study, the researchers found it impossible to determine whether or not individual conference sessions addressed the leader role for school librarians. Of the 615 conference sessions in this study, only two session titles included the word “leader,” and four session titles included the word “leadership.” Likewise, these terms were rarely included in session descriptions. Without attending sessions, the researchers had no reliable way to assess conference program offerings in terms of developing the leader role.

Attending state-level conferences is a way to be visible, active, and participate in a professional association. Conference participants demonstrate a professional commitment and, in a broad sense, attend conferences to build knowledge. Conference attendance often involves building relationships and partnerships. By virtue of their attendance, then, many school librarians demonstrate many of the behaviors of a leader. Still, as suggested in *EL*, a school librarian who is an effective leader must demonstrate the ability to lead through mastering the other four roles. The findings point to the need for AASL to consider further measures to ensure all school librarians embrace the new guidelines and implement best practices intended to empower school library patrons in the 21st-century.

### ***Subtopics***

Seven program topics identified in table 3 account for nearly two-thirds of all of the program sessions available to school librarians at all of the state-level conferences in this sample regardless of type of conference. Three of the four most frequently offered session subtopics

support the teacher role: motivating pleasure reading, promoting literacy skills, and understanding popular reading material (specifically, author, illustrator, and poet talks). Motivating reading and promoting literacy skills can be viewed as “traditional” activities of school librarians.

It is possible that sessions focused on literacy are highly important to school librarians given the current educational climate and focus on literacy that have developed since the advent of Reading First funding (U.S. Dept. of Ed. 2002). Additionally, there have been numerous calls in the school library field for school librarians to serve as literacy leaders within their schools and communities (Achterman 2010; Asselin 2003; Branch and Oberg 2001; Braxton 2008; Loertscher 2006, 2010; Moreillon 2007, 2012; Rosenfeld 2007). With a position statement on this topic, AASL has also worked to promote the school librarian’s role in reading (AASL 2009b). Although most of these literacy-leadership appeals suggest coteaching and instructional partnerships, basic and sufficient knowledge is a first step toward leadership (Zmuda and Harada 2008).

Sessions in which authors, illustrators, and poets talk about their own work have long been a staple of library conferences because readers/librarians enjoy meeting the creators of the literature they read and promote to students and classroom teachers. Librarians delight in sharing lesser-known anecdotes about the stories behind the texts, collecting autographed books, and having their photographs taken with their favorite authors, poets, and illustrators. While a measure of professional development may be associated with reading promotion and literacy sessions, these topics do not invite school librarians to expand or rethink their roles in the academic programs in their schools. Further, from the perspective of library science education, these topics are covered in graduate-level coursework.

Two of the major topics across all conferences dealt with library-specific information. Sessions related to the library’s mission, planning, and policies garnered 10.16 percent. While it is true that some of these issues, including acceptable-use policies, affect the entire school culture, these topics are also part of the core in formal library science education programs. Collection development and management, 5.21 percent of the sessions, was the other predominant topic related to the program administrator role. Sessions within this topic included timely trends, such as RDA (remote database access) and e-books, as well as standard collection-development fare in these areas. Of course, conference attendees benefit from learning the latest information in this area, but the question becomes, “How many program administrator sessions are needed to help preservice and practicing school librarians improve practice in this area?”

Two information specialist role topics were also among the major topics across conferences. Out of all 615 sessions, 8.33 percent dealt with electronic communication tools to connect the school with the global learning community. By far, sessions involving creating presentations and accessing knowledge using Web 2.0 tools dominated this subtopic. Librarian-created book trailers fell into this category and were a staple of the offerings at some state conferences. Technology tools to supplement school resources accounted for 5.21 percent of the sessions. These focused mainly on accessing and using databases in library instruction.

Together, these two information specialist topics garnered only 13.54 percent of the sessions across all conferences. (Information specialist topics were, of course, more frequently offered at the NLOC, which was held jointly with a technology association.) At a time when the technology landscape is changing daily, one could question why such a low percentage of conference sessions are focused in this area. While library science education addresses multimedia tools and resources, the dynamic nature of the information specialist role necessitates

continual and ongoing professional development for practitioners. Further, several leaders of school librarians have argued that school librarians' proficiency in this area positions them to serve as leaders to teachers, students, and other stakeholders (Boelens 2007; Gilmore-See 2010; Mardis 2011). Finally, Barbara Immroth and W. Bernard Lukenbill (2007) found that classroom teachers appreciate librarians' knowledge of newer technology and this value supports collaborative efforts.

Jo Ann Carr (2008) notes that, as leaders, school librarians are able to ensure that multiple literacies are woven into and throughout the curriculum. The leadership role involves school librarians in modeling the use of emerging technology to reach learners and to provide 24–7 access to the resources of the school library (AASL 2009a, 17). While technology-integration specialist may be one of the most visible leadership roles school librarians can play in the school's academic program (Everhart 2007; Johnston 2011), the paltry number of technology-centered conference sessions may not bode well for developing either the information specialist or the leader role.

Sessions involving the instructional partner role were not among the major topics in this sample of state-level conferences. Research in our own field suggests that planning with teachers, coteaching, teaching ICT (information and communication technologies), and providing in-service training sessions to teachers are among the school-library-related predictors of students' academic achievement on standardized tests, particularly in reading and language arts (Achterman 2008, 62–65). Debra E. Kachel et al. (2011) summarized the research findings of the School Library Impact Studies published by Library Research Service <<http://lrs.org/impact.php>>. In fifteen out of the twenty-one studies reviewed, Kachel and her team identified a positive correlation between classroom-library collaboration for instruction and increased student achievement. With the instructional partner role represented by only 6.69 percent of all conference sessions, support for developing this role was lacking at 2010–2011 state conferences.

## Limitations of this Study and Suggestions for Further Research

This study has several limitations. Conference program publications are not uniform. Not all conference programs in this random sample included the presenters' positions in education so that information was not a determining factor in categorizing any sessions. The researchers relied solely on the conference sessions' titles and descriptions to categorize sessions on the domain matrix. Of course, attending the presentation sessions would have provided the researchers with a definitive domain matrix category determination. Since attending all sessions was not feasible, the researchers did not apply any firsthand information they may have had about any sessions, even if they had attended them. Relying solely on the published titles and descriptions limited the data at the disposal of the researchers.

Professional development via library conferences is limited by program offerings. If conference planners do not perceive that certain types of keynote addresses, workshops, or session topics will draw participants, planners may reject proposals that fail to align with their perceptions about what is needed to attract an audience. The researchers had access to only the program sessions that were selected by the conference program committees and published in the conference programs. Late additions to the offerings may not have been included. Some program committees could have included few or no school librarians and, therefore, when selecting

proposals, may not have considered AASL's roles. Reviewing all submitted program proposals would have expanded the scope of this study and would have assisted in establishing a broader view of potential professional development opportunities at state-level conferences.

While this study categorized sessions by role domain, the researchers made no attempt to determine the quality of sessions or their impact on participants' learning. Without session exit interviews, there is no way to determine if participants considered the session a pathway to mastery in one or more of the four roles and if they thought they could apply their new knowledge to develop their leader roles in their school communities. As a result, the researchers did not attempt to evaluate sessions for their potential to help participants achieve mastery in any of the five roles.

This study focused on only preconference sessions, keynote addresses, concurrent sessions, and workshops and did not address the other professional development avenues conferences offer participants. State-level conferences offer other leadership opportunities. Networking, participating on the conference-planning committee, introducing speakers, and serving in association leadership positions that facilitate business meetings or other aspects of a library association's annual conference were beyond the scope of this study.

Further research in the area of professional development provided at state-level conferences could include interviews to ask what types of professional development attendees seek through their conference experiences. In addition, studies that include interviews with conference-program committees and organizers, presenters, and attendees could provide access to their insiders' perspectives on the quality of sessions offered and on the types of professional development provided by networking and serving in leadership positions.

Field-testing the domain matrix with program committees, conference presenters, and participants could further validate this instrument and determine its usefulness to those groups. It might be useful to apply the domain matrix developed for this study to previous years' conference programs to see how support for the various roles has changed longitudinally.

Finally, a comparison between state-level and national conference offerings would also be fruitful.

## Conclusion

The researchers, who are current and future educators of school librarians, studied these conferences to understand the kinds of learning experiences school librarian candidates could access through state conferences. In the past, the researchers have provided candidates with university course assignment "credit" for attending and reporting on their state conference participation. After conducting this study, the researchers will provide candidates with more guidance in thoughtfully selecting conference sessions to meet specific professional development needs.

The domain matrix created to analyze the conference program sessions provided an effective tool for the researchers. Before preservice school librarians attend a state conference in the future, the researchers/educators of school librarians will ask them to use the matrix as they study their state conference programs and determine a focus for their assignment of reporting on their conference attendance. Candidates will be asked to think specifically in terms of the roles for school librarians as defined in *Empowering Learners: Guidelines for School Library Programs* and set

professional development goals for themselves related to the subtopics in each role where they feel they could use the most growth.

The researchers hope that the domain matrix developed for this study will prove to be a useful tool for planning committees of state-level conferences. Committees can analyze the content of their previous conferences and select or solicit specific types of conference programs to address all roles. Planners can also determine a strategy for considering how the “leader” role is addressed through their conference offerings.

Conference presenters can also use this matrix to categorize their own proposals and include relevant keywords in their session descriptions to clarify the alignment of their proposals with national guidelines.

It is useful for all readers of this study to think about which of the roles have the most potential to strengthen the work of preservice librarians as well as practitioners in the field. Which role or roles are most critical to preserving the profession? Which role or roles have the greatest potential to enlist advocates for the work of school librarians? If we emphasize one or more roles over the others, why do we do so and how does that emphasis affect learning in the field? If we neglect one or more of the roles, are we doing the profession a service or a disservice? While library-conference sessions do not present the sum total of formal professional development available to school librarians, conference sessions indicate the exemplars we showcase and the opportunities we provide to improve our profession. They may also be important indicators of the values we hold.

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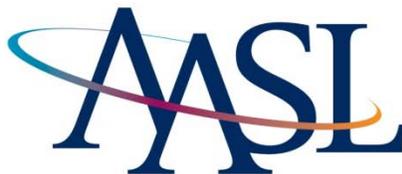
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