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Repository Citation

Wehmeyer, S. (1995). 3,000 Strong. *Ohio Libraries*, 8 (2), 9-10.

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OhioLIBRARIES

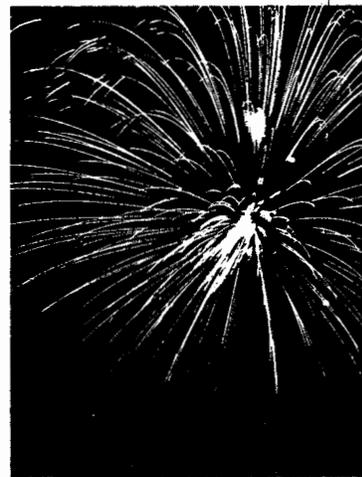
Spring/Summer 1995

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3000 Strong

by Susan Wehmeyer

In its 100th year, the Ohio Library Council boasts nearly 3,000 members. This number is a healthy figure in historical terms, but additional expansion is desirable. Additional members will help meet our need to magnify the voice of the association in public relations and in lobbying with the state government.

Our targeted candidates for expanded membership cannot, however, be drawn from the public library sector, which has long been the backbone of the organization. After all, who stands to gain most from an increased tax distribution to public libraries but the people who work there? The OLC leadership has already recognized that when public librarians and trustees write to the state legislature about library issues, representatives take such opinions with a grain of salt. To add weight to our legislative voice, Ohio Library Council representatives encouraged attendees of the regional spring meetings to enlist the support of their friends and neighbors.

An informal association for friends and neighbors is not enough to significantly improve our clout with the state legislators, however. We must broaden our constituency by tapping into the pool of Ohioans who are interested in public libraries but do not happen to serve in them. In addition, the OLC will have more opportunities to distribute information about state library issues. An increased roster would offer another benefit to all the members of the OLC; members are the equivalent of more cash in the treasury, which in turn is an opportunity to fund more services, programs, and outreach.

One large group of potential members consists of librarians from academic, school, and special library sectors. From a legislator's point of view, these librarians are simply patrons of a public library. From the Ohio Library Council's point of view, through, they are heavy library users with an extremely high interest in library issues. A second large group of avid patrons is those who belong to local Friends of the Library organizations.

Although many Friends of the Library groups are already members of the Ohio Friends of the Library, a division of OLC, few are individual members. Smaller pockets of potential members include educators, library science or media education students, and future teachers. Vendors also have self-interest in maintaining healthy public libraries, but very few sales representatives are members of the OLC.

Membership figures reveal that participation from among those who are neither public librarians nor trustees is limited. Of the 3,000 members of the OLC:

- 72 members are associated with academic institutions
- 39 members are from special libraries
- 27 are students
- 51 are from miscellaneous groups (Source: OLC Administrative Offices, May 7, 1995)
- 2,611 are associated with public libraries

One obvious reason for such low participation from these sectors is that the OLC does not actively solicit members from outside the public library field. There are no membership chairs with yearly goals to meet among the targeted groups. There is no annual invitation to join the Ohio Library Council at all. It is time to question our assumptions. The OLC affirms a public library mission and focuses its energy and attention on public library issues. Does it follow that the annual membership drive should be confined to public librarians? There is no need to be concerned that such an investment of time and energy might dilute the purpose of the OLC. On the contrary, the targeted membership can be solicited primarily to support the interests of the association. It is not necessary for the OLC to provide programming for their special areas of interest. This understanding will be a key component in attracting new members from the targeted groups. With wider canvassing and outreach to other types of libraries, some of the targeted group will become members

with no other incentive than the opportunity to support Ohio public libraries. These supporters will join the association as allies rather than from a professional interest in meetings and publications.

If we recognize a new motivation to join, we can create a new category of membership with an attractively low annual fee. Although an income-based membership fee is appropriate for a professional organization, in our case this kind of fee discourages interest from those who are not public library employees. It sets the expectation that the member will derive value in terms of professional development from the cost of membership. A fee schedule more in scale with a charitable donation would be more attractive to our targeted group.

If a low membership fee does not entice enough of our targeted group, it might be worthwhile to pursue professional marketing options. In addition, we can offer this group some of the same incentives as other members. For example, we could develop a newsletter that combines library news of general interest and legislative updates. Initially, a special edition newsletter might be distributed as part of the membership drive. Friends of the Library groups and other library associations could include the first issue in their regular mailings. A job opportunities column would also be an attraction to many potential members.

The cost of participation in programs and workshops also offers high potential as an avenue of membership incentive. Our prospective new members are library patrons and nonpublic librarians who are already educated about some issues and are interested to learn more. In addition, many members of this group are expected to pursue formal continuing education as part of their job responsibilities. They have the release time and the funding to attend programs that many public librarians lack. Increased levels of enrollment per program will

Continued on next page



ASSOCIATION COLUMN

Only Yesterday...

by Frances Haley, Executive Director, Ohio Library Council

One hundred years! What a long time ago. And, yet, it seems like only yesterday.

Oh, sure, lots has happened in 100 years. When OLA was organized in 1895, it began with 35 members. Only yesterday, OLA had 2,897 members.

One of the first things the new OLA tackled was legislation. They were instrumental in securing passage of the Garfield Library Law, which improved the operations of the State Library. Only yesterday, OLA, working with OLTA and Ohio Friends of the Library, successfully secured an additional \$10 million in operating funds for Ohio's libraries.

In the early 1920s, OLA worked to enact the Governmental and Education Reorganization Act. The library provisions of this law required all libraries to have boards of trustees separate from the organizations which created the library. As a result, there was an increase in the number of Ohio library trustees, and in 1926 a trustees section was organized. OLTA split off as a separate organization in 1930 but continued to work closely with OLA through the years. Only yesterday,

1,596 trustees were members of OLTA and OLC.

In 1923 the State Library of Ohio assisted OLA by producing *Ohio Libraries*, a newsletter and magazine. Only yesterday, OLC was producing a monthly newsletter, *ACCESS*, and a quarterly journal, *Ohio Libraries*.

In 1925 district meetings began in Ohio with continuing education programs at six sites around the state. Only yesterday, more than 2,000 library professionals attended six chapter conferences throughout the state, and the council presented more than 20 professional development workshops for library employees, trustees, and Friends.

The first official employee of OLA was hired in 1941, with the executive office established in 1963. Only yesterday, OLC had nine one part-time and full-time employees, providing service and support to more than 5,000 individual and institutional members.

In 1971 — such a short time ago — Ohio Friends of the Library had its first statewide meeting, and in October 1973 action was taken to form a statewide Friends group. Only yesterday, membership in Ohio Friends of the Library numbered 130 local friends

groups from throughout Ohio.

A lot has happened to OLA in 100 years. But as I look over what's been accomplished, the feeling persists that so much has stayed the same. For example:

- The heart and soul of OLA is its volunteers — individuals who work cheerfully and without tiring to achieve the goals of the organization.
- Service has remained at the core of OLA — service to libraries, to library employees, to trustees, and to Friends of the Libraries. And this service is designed to enable libraries to provide service to Ohio's citizens.

I predict that, 100 years from now, when the executive director of Ohio Library Council (or whatever may succeed it) is asked to write an "anniversary" editorial, the article will focus on the Council's role in assuring funding for libraries, in providing continuing education, and in supporting professionalism in Ohio's libraries. It will mention how important volunteers are to the organization. Oh, yes. It will muse about how similar things are to the way they were in 1995.

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allow the OLC to offer a broader range of programming, which will in turn attract more participants. Topics that are now touched on only briefly as part of a conference could be handled in depth.

While we ponder an educational incentive, we must also consider whether our reciprocal agreements with other groups provide a disincentive to join the OLC. Currently, personal members of the organizations belonging to the Ohio Council of Library and Information Services may register for

conferences and workshops at the member rate, but the annual dues for many of these organizations are much lower than those of the OLC.

In summary, new members can improve our voice with state government, increase our treasury, and expand our ability to offer more services, programs, and outreach. The most attractive group to target in a membership effort includes the untapped population of librarians from other sectors, members of Friends of the Library groups, and educators. The

opportunity to improve the strength of the Ohio Library Council by soliciting members from this targeted groups great, and the risk is low. What are we waiting for?

Susan Wehmeyer is the Head, Information Delivery Services, Fordham Health Sciences Library at Wright State University. She has been a member of the Ohio Library Council since 1985.