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2017 State of the Visual Resources Association

Jen W. Green

Dartmouth College, jennifer.w.green@dartmouth.edu

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2017 State of the Visual Resources Association

Abstract

During the 2017 Annual Business Meeting of the Visual Resources Association in Louisville, Kentucky, the president highlighted the accomplishments and challenges of the Association in a state of the association presentation. This article provides the transcript.

Author Bio & Acknowledgements

Jen Green is the Digital Scholarship Librarian within the Scholarly Communication, Copyright, and Publishing Program at Dartmouth College in New Hampshire. She received her graduate degree in Library and Information Science from Dominican University at the College of Saint Catherine. Her experience and interests include open access implementation, copyright, publishing, data management, public access, curation of digital collections, as well as education and outreach covering these interests for a variety of disciplines.

VRA's Annual Business Meeting offers us a time to step back and reflect on our accomplishments over the past year, envision how to leverage our professional strengths in support of each other, and identify areas where we face challenges and adversity. As I read the annual reports of our committees, task forces, affiliates, chapters, and appointees, I was struck by the amazing projects and initiatives with which many of you are engaged. The annual reports are a true testament to the importance of your work and the value that you place on it. While there isn't nearly enough time this morning to share all the Association's accomplishments within the past year, I will highlight a couple of them for you now.

The Online Learning Task Force (OLTF) completed their pilot initiative to produce and test various ways to deliver webinars and online professional development content to members and beyond. The task force developed two pre-recorded webinars on the topics of makerspaces and embedded metadata featuring instruction by two VRA members, Chris Strasbaugh and Greg Reser respectively. The task force's final report will help the Board determine how we can meet members at their point of information need, and we are eager to use the recommendations to help us design quality online content for our members.

The VRA Bulletin is now up-to-date with the release of Volume 43. This has been no small task, and we'd like to congratulate and express our appreciation to Maureen Burns and Hannah Marshall for seeing this through. Members can now expect to have access to new issues twice per year. In addition to this, we've incorporated a hybrid peer review process into the bepress system, which authors can opt into with the publication of Volume 44, Issue 1. You will be hearing more about this in the coming weeks, but if you are interested, Maureen and Hannah will be available to talk with you more about this at the Volunteer Studio later today.

The list of accomplishments stretching across our committees, task forces, appointees, liaisons, and you, our individual members, is astounding, overwhelming, and too much to cover in this speech. So, I apologize for not taking the time to mention each of you by name, but please know that the work you do does not go unnoticed. I am continuously amazed by your brilliant minds and productive approaches. But, today I need to use this time to present some serious topics and ideas that I'd like us all to consider together.

The annual reports outline our goals and achievements, but they are also evidence of our members' ever expanding knowledge-base and areas of expertise. When I joined the VRA more than ten years ago, we were assessing 35mm slide collections to prepare our transition from analog to digital collection management, and we were helping faculty build digital presentations while easing them gently away from slide carousels. Don't get me wrong, some of us may still be doing this, and the VRA continues, as it should, to address these needs. But, increasingly, our members are saying that they support digital collections more broadly in terms of content and format, and they are asked to reach audiences across the entire institution and beyond. This means that some of our members are doing less image scanning and cataloging and more consultation within the areas of copyright, educational technology, data visualization, digital humanities, open access, scholarly communication, publishing, and web design--to name some. So, here's the elephant in the room: Does this make the VRA irrelevant to members or potential members whose roles are shifting? It could. Unfortunately, we often hear about our colleagues' scope shift after they've decided to end their VRA membership. But, I feel strongly that we don't have to let changes within the profession decide our relevance. We have the power to assert our value to current and prospective members, but this is going to require work that involves self-reflection, open minds, creativity, and a willingness to meet our current and prospective members where they are. I think we are up for these challenges.

One major challenge that we've faced through our professional transitions is our ability to clearly articulate who we are and what we can do. This has been a topic of conversation at all levels of the Association for multiple years. It's been discussed at chapter meetings, on task forces, at leadership breakfasts and Board meetings, over coffee, over lunch, over cocktails, at red lights, waiting in line for security at the airport. This process of thinking and talking is natural and important when approaching transition. It helps us make sense of it and facilitates exploration of new pathways. But, on the other side of contemplation and conversation is action, and if we hope to ensure our relevance and our survival as an Association, the time to act is now.

We have acted already in some ways. One important step was the release of the Professional Status report this past year. The results of the survey helped us better understand our diverse communities of practice as well as the needs of those communities. We now have evidence that our colleagues have taken on new roles in areas such as scholarly communication, visual literacy, and educational technology. The report also helped facilitate focused conversations at the Board's mid-year meeting. We know that, as an Association, we are prepared to support these new areas of expertise through conference content, publication, and professional development. But the question remains, how can we communicate that clearly before current members leave and prospective members look elsewhere.

Visualizations can be powerful instruments in conveying clear messages, and one of our goals this year was to design one such powerful visualization for the VRA. As it happened, Board conversations about infographics were occurring while we were reviewing this year's conference session and workshop proposals. We'd approved the workshop "Visual Communication, organization, and notetaking" proposed by Rebecca Moss and John Trendler and then realized that we'd just identified experts who might be willing to create a visualization or infographic to help us better articulate the VRA. By the way, their workshop is on Saturday; there are still spots open. Rebecca and John graciously agreed to take some of the Board's bullet points about the VRA today and turn that into a visualization or infographic which we could use on our website and marketing materials. These are the bullet points that we gave them:

- Digital Media - capture, metadata, delivery
- Collection Management - organize, share, preserve
- Network - standards, interoperability, collaboration
- Educate - visual literacy, pedagogy support
- Scholarly Communication - publishing, intellectual property, digital humanities

And, this is what Rebecca and John have come up with:

<https://public.3.basecamp.com/p/xiHg9LsqPX91pmMDYAW6B4QN>. The Board is extremely excited about this product and we feel strongly that this lays the foundation for clear communication (with ourselves first and prospective members next) about the areas of expertise addressed within the VRA and by our members.

Membership numbers is another one of our challenges, and it's no secret that fluctuation in membership is of critical concern for the VRA. Member dues make up most of our operating budget, so the financial viability of the Association depends on member retention and growth. We can try to cut costs on conference expenses to make up for dwindling member numbers and conference registrations, but our contracts with hotels often minimize or eliminate that option. This year, with lower attendance numbers, we struggled to meet our food and beverage minimum, which has financial consequences. Treasurer Jeannine [Keefer] is better at explaining this, so I will let her do that shortly. Re-imagining how we present ourselves and engage with

current and prospective members could help us increase member numbers, but if we hope for a long and sustainable future, the VRA also needs to rethink our conference model.

Our annual conference is the largest expense we face and it's unsustainable. Previous Boards have laid this out for us in the past. We know that our conference profits and losses fluctuate from year to year. Providence in 2013 was profitable by about \$11,000, but in Milwaukee the next year, we lost about \$10,000. If we combined profits from the following two conferences (Denver and Seattle), we picked up about \$10,000 again, bringing us back to even. Registration numbers obviously influence our profit margins. This year, there are 148 (50-100 less than the previous four years, not counting Seattle) of you registered and attending, and we expect to lose about \$10,000 again. This yo-yo profit/loss model is not sustainable. We have a hole in our vessel and our attempts to slightly modify the conference model each year to break even is not the size bucket we need to keep the vessel from slowly sinking.

Please know that I am thrilled to see you here this morning, but this year's conference attendance concerns me. We all understand the factors that impact conference attendance (location, time of year, competing conferences). But, this year's conference is part of a downward trend that we've been watching for several years. This Board and those before us have discussed a variety of conference model options: biennial conferences, conferences at universities instead of hotels, conferences in the same city every year, conferences at a different time of year, etc. These options pose risks and challenges, but I would argue that they all offer new opportunities as well. As I mentioned earlier, there is a time for discussion and then there is a time for action. With action in mind, the Board and I would like to throw something at the wall and see how it sticks. Let's begin a biennial conference cycle starting in 2020. Take a moment to absorb that.

If we did this, we would meet again next year in Philadelphia and then 2019 would be our first off year. There are some opportunities and risks about this that we can identify right away: Some opportunities:

- The Board and our Committees would spend less time on conference planning and more time discussing and acting upon building a healthy future for the Association.
- There would be space to re-envision conference programming, locations, venues, sponsorship, and travel awards.
- We could use VRA off-years to explore conferences held by our affiliated Associations.
- Members may find it easier to advocate biennially for professional funds from their institutions.

Some risks:

- Members might not like this and leave.
- The Association loses a sense of continuity.
- Members have reduced networking opportunities that annual face-to-face meetings provide.

No decisions have been made, and moving to a biennial format would require changes in our by-laws that you, our members, would need to vote on. I'm bringing it up today, because if we want to act, we need to do so quickly. Based on our current conference planning timelines, the Board has determined that if members are interested in attempting the biennial format for 2020, a decision needs to be made by July 2017. That is when the Board's process for selecting a 2019 conference city begins, and we would need to halt that process. So, what I'm asking is this: Take some time to think about it. Attend the VRA Volunteer studio after this meeting. We will have real-time polling for you to weigh in on what you think about this idea and other big picture

ideas. Talk with each other, complain to each other, do what you need to do to flesh this out in your minds. After the conference, I will send a message out to VRA-L announcing the idea and invite discussion in that environment. I hope that we **do** debate and discuss this because it would be a major change, but one that the Board feels may be in the Association's best interest. Your discussion will be critical in motivating reasonable action. In the meantime, the Board will review the by-laws in the coming weeks and identify the changes that would need to be made to allow us to hold a biennial conference. If your feedback and discussions result in a decision to act, we will plan for a by-law vote in May 2017.

Treasurer Jeannine Keefer will speak next with more details about the VRA's financial matters, which should help frame and facilitate conversations about conference models. I should also mention that the 2017 Strategic Plan Task Force has been working to develop a strategic plan that will shepherd us into 2018 and guide the Association's effort through 2022, and your discussions of the Association's financial health and conference model are timely and will certainly inform their work.

To conclude, I want you to know that my critical statements today come from the deep love and respect that I have for the Visual Resources Association. My first VRA conference was Kansas City in 2007. Although I was certain that I wouldn't get it, I applied for a travel award and was shocked when I received the first annual Kathe Hicks Albrecht travel award (thank you, Kathe!). The VRA was my first professional conference and I was scared out of my mind and as introverted as they come. But, I was determined not to waste a penny of that travel funding, so I participated in every session, meeting, and social gathering that I could possibly manage. I made so many connections during that conference, and I joined the Intellectual Property Rights Committee, which is where I started to develop an understanding of copyright law (a key component of my work today as a Digital Scholarship Librarian). This first conference was the beginning of a relationship with VRA members that made a tremendous impact on my work, my ability to move up the professional ladder, my ability to transition through a variety of job roles, and my ability to stand before you today. I don't think my story is much different than many of your stories, and that is what makes the Visual Resources Association great. Since 2007, my job has changed so drastically that I've wondered at times if the VRA is still relevant to me. But, despite my work transitions, nothing has changed so much that I can't still identify with all of you and the various ways that we interact with digital content. The VRA is a supportive and adaptable community. This is what makes us strong, and the most that I would hope for is that we now take what action is needed to support the community and a healthy future.