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State of the Association

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State of the Association

Abstract

As part of the business meeting at the VRA 2012 conference, the president provided a summary of the accomplishments and challenges facing the field in a state of the association presentation. This article provides the transcript.

Keywords

visual resources, state of the association, digital images, information professionals, roles, tools, services, membership

Author Bio & Acknowledgements

Maureen Burns is an information professional with over 25 years of experience developing and managing teaching resources of analog and digital images at UC Irvine, the Getty Villa, and CSULB. Presently working on a consulting basis, through IMAGinED and the Image Consulting Cooperative, Burns has been handling sales for Archivision, partnering on the Local History Digital Resources Project, and participating in other image-focused work. With a doctorate in Educational Administration from the UCI/UCLA joint Leadership program, Burns provides managerial and research support for UCI's Center for Learning in the Arts, Sciences and Sustainability, which includes production editor work for the electronic Journal for Learning through the Arts. On the professional activities front, she is currently serving as the Past President of the Visual Resources Association.

It's time for us to consider the state of the Visual Resources Association, which is celebrating its thirtieth anniversary.¹ Much has changed in the three decades since VRA started providing professional support for image media professionals and much has been accomplished. The last year (2011-2012) has been successful and rewarding, not that VRA doesn't have challenges ahead. All information professionals are trying to make their way in a difficult economy, one that is rocking the foundations of the institutions where we have traditionally worked. As we struggle to stay relevant, we have to reframe what visual resources collections are and can be, while making informed choices about how new technology might get us where we want to go.

Having successfully transitioned from a focus on analog materials to digital operations, we still need to consider how best to handle the responsible disposition of 35mm slides while at the same time attending to the newest formats of media and looking to current and future trends, like the linked open data we heard about from Todd Carter at the opening plenary.² We need to call attention to our online presence and increase awareness that our image collections are now accessible to our entire institutions through cloud-based technology, and even creeping beyond institutional borders through sharing initiatives. Virtual space is expanding while physical space is being repurposed or used for other purposes. Transforming physical facilities into functional work and collaborative learning spaces is a practical reality. Some visual resources collections have been merged with libraries, instructional technology, or other institutional units as the world of work becomes increasingly collaborative. One of the key challenges is communicating these changes to the highest administrative levels and obtaining the acknowledgement and support for such expanded operations during challenging economic times.

Building upon traditional functions, visual resources curators have expanded their institutional roles and the services provided to their growing clientele. But, since many of these users may never walk in the door of the facility, now preferring to access image collections primarily online, increasing their awareness of our new services and making sure they take full advantage of the resources we are building is crucial. This includes documenting and evaluating the use of our digital image collections, but also getting out into the field and involving ourselves in education about digital media and visual literacy.

We have realized the necessity of diversifying our skill sets, but new educational opportunities for ongoing professional development and topping-up existing skill sets are needed. Technology will continue to change the skills required to do our jobs and the services we will need to provide to our clientele.

We have much to be proud of in terms of what this Association has accomplished in this changing environment, but there is little room for complacency. We need to be attentive to both the positive and negative factors that are our reality in 2012.

¹ The 2012 VRA annual business meeting was held in Albuquerque, NM and the conference website can be found at: <http://www.vraweb.org/conferences/vra30/>

² To learn more about Carter's Tagasauris project, see <https://photo.tagasauris.com/>

Our membership base has declined over the past five years from 814 members in 2007 to the 576 members who have renewed so far this year. In this tough economy, we have seen layoffs, closures, retirements, and valued colleagues choosing to leave the field, all inevitably affecting our membership base. Some of the loss of individual members can also be attributed to more people taking advantage of our institutional membership, which allows three members of a given institution full VRA member benefits. There was some initial confusion and it took a little time to communicate this change, but our institutional memberships are up from 81 last year to 104 this year, nonetheless we had 187 five years ago. The Membership Committee has been planning for expanded outreach and is following up with non-renewals since there were 180 non-renewals last year. Most Chapters reported that they are going to focus on increasing the regional membership base this year. The Board plans to focus on these membership issues on the coming year too in the hope of improving this situation.

The Association's main sources of operating revenue are membership dues, conference profits, and donations. I'm pleased to report that we have broken the recent cycle of deficit budgets and have a surplus this year. But, our current income from membership dues is lower than our target.

Hopefully, reconciliation after the conference will show a better return. Much of this largesse came from the very successful joint conference with ARLIS/NA last year in Minneapolis.³ VRA's portion of the profits came to \$27,000, which has provided us with some breathing room. Because of this, a subset of the VRA Board worked for over six months to come up with a new and improved financial agreement with ARLIS/NA, so we can consider moving forward and planning future joint conferences together. We are looking at 2015 or 2016 as possibilities and because of the enthusiasm of the Pacific Rim Chapter, we are suggesting Seattle as a possible venue, but don't hold us to it as there is still much to work out and consider. Because we were waiting to see how this collaborative work would all pan out, we do not yet have a city chosen for 2014, but will keep you posted. We received a generous donation from an anonymous donor to extend the New Horizons travel awards, for which we are most grateful. The economy must be getting better since our investments are on an upward trend. The Treasurer will be providing more details, but essentially our total assets at fiscal closing were up from about \$400,000 in 2010 to almost \$440,000 in 2011 and so things are looking promising for 2012.

There are a number of administrative costs associated with running this organization. The Board added to these costs by outsourcing bookkeeping duties to assist the Treasurer with an extremely heavy workload and to make this position more attractive to future candidates. The amount of funds needed to license multiple electronic tools and services to manage projects has increased, but it seems worth the expenditure to maximize organizational efficiencies. Services such as Basecamp, Memberclicks, Survey Monkey, and SlideShare, are terrific tools. And, we are very excited about adding GoToMeeting and Webinars so that Chapters and Committees will have a much easier time communicating and collaborating across large geographical areas. We have dramatically cut the costs of publishing the VRA Bulletin by ending the print run and transitioning to an electronic

³ The 2011 annual conference was held in Minneapolis, MN as a joint conference with the Art Libraries Society of North America (ARLIS/NA). Although the conference website is no longer available, information about this past conference can be found on the VRA website at: <http://vraweb.org/conferences/past.html>

journal (from about \$30,000 per year to \$6,000). The Editors encourage you to consider publishing in this dynamic new interface and hope you won't hesitate to contact them with any questions.⁴ Involving ourselves in such new modes of scholarship can help expand our skill sets. Despite this rosier financial picture, we live very close to the edge with our income and expenses being a balancing act. VRA's savings and investments provide reserves, but we don't want to draw upon them unless we have to since they are a terrific safety net. The Board has been and will continue to examine the costs of doing business and try to consider new ways to generate income. Speaking of, thank you for starting at My VRA when you do your Amazon shopping, this fundraising mechanism is starting to generate helpful income.⁵

Economic pressures and state budgetary challenges are changing traditional models of doing business, we must try not to lose momentum on the progress we have made in recent years and focus on our core purpose. Such changes provide opportunities to be creative, to make adjustments, and to take on new challenges. We have a terrific Strategic Plan, which sets a dynamic and positive course for this Association.⁶ We have implemented three new communications positions as recommended in the plan. It envisions an organization offering many new opportunities for involvement and engagement, so I encourage you to consider ways that you can contribute to the future of this organization.

We are working with ARLIS/NA to revise and update the standards document "Criteria for Hiring and Retention of Visual Resources Professionals" to insure that current information about the value of our profession is made readily available and as a way to continue our advocacy efforts.⁷ The VRA White Paper, "Advocating for Visual Resources Management," should help your clientele and administrators to understand the value of what you do and why you are doing it.⁸ Contact the VRA Board if there is more that we can do to support you. At this conference, you are surely learning more about the great work of VRA Committees, Advisory Groups, Task Forces, and Chapters.⁹ You will soon hear more from those who chose to report today. VRA is a participatory endeavor and we welcome your talent, energy, and ideas.

⁴ The submission guidelines can be found at:
<http://online.vraweb.org/vrab/submguide.html>

⁵ The direct link is at: <http://www.vraweb.org/members/myvra.html>

⁶ Member only access to the 2009 Strategic Plan can be found in Memberclicks at:
<http://vra.memberclicks.net/assets/documents/2009VRAStrategicPlan.pdf>

⁷ The 2002 Criteria can be found at
<http://www.vraweb.org/resources/general/criteria.html> and information about the task force at <http://www.vraweb.org/organization/appointees.html>

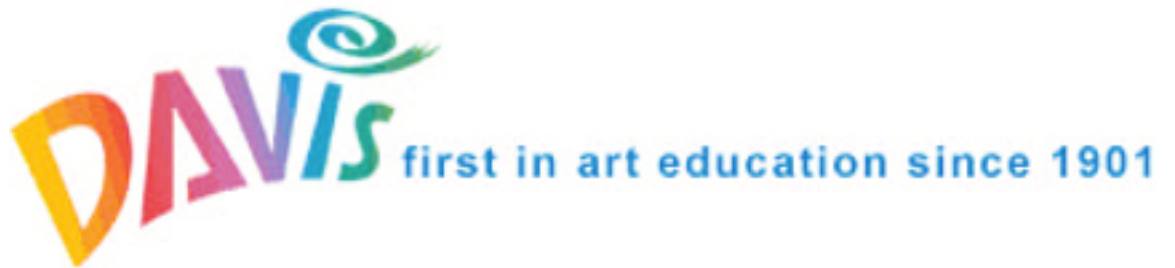
⁸ The VRA White Paper can be found at:
http://www.vraweb.org/resources/general/vra_white_paper.pdf

⁹ Information about these working groups can be found on the VRA website at:
<http://www.vraweb.org/organization/index.html>

When you are asked to accept a position of leadership or responsibility, know that it will be challenging and time-consuming, but you will learn so much. Your participation in this organization is greatly valued by your peers as well as crucial to the continuance of our profession. There are three Board positions to fill this year—President Elect, Vice President for Conference Program, and Secretary. The current Board is a fantastic group of professionals who are dedicated to this organization, and happen to be a lot of fun to work with too. They are bright and capable as well as ready to ask tough questions and take on new challenges. I would like to take this opportunity to thank them—past, present, and future—for their efforts and support. It has been an honor and a privilege to serve with them and for this organization as VRA president for the last three years.

Last but not least, please join me in thanking our gracious hosts and local planning committee members, who managed to bring VRA to beautiful Albuquerque. Cindy Abel Morris is the local planning chairperson who led a terrific team including Kathleen Keating, Heather Kline, Kevin Comerford, and many more. We are grateful to the University of New Mexico, especially Bill Gilbert, Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences, for opening their doors with open houses and invitations to visit their impressive collections, allowing access to computer labs and workshop spaces, and helping us to make our 30th anniversary extra special by providing the fun photo booth last night as we celebrated 30 years of VRA. We would also like to sincerely thank our commercial and non-profit partners for the conference and other support they provide throughout the year and encourage you to avail yourselves of their products, services, and generously shared expertise (please see below and <http://www.vraweb.org/conferences/vra30/vendors/vendors.html>). Here's to at least 30 more years of VRA, may they be as rich and fulfilling as the first 30. As I step down as President, here's an Irish blessing for you wonderful colleagues:

May you have the hindsight to know where you've been.
The foresight to know where you're going.
And the insight to know when you're going too far!



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