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2020 VRA State of the Association Address

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2020 VRA State of the Association Address

Abstract

During the remote 2020 Annual Business Meeting of the Visual Resources Association the president highlighted the accomplishments and challenges of the Association in a state of the association presentation. This article provides the transcript and additional details.

Keywords

Strategic Plan, Coronavirus (COVID-19), Baltimore, Maryland, annual conference

Author Bio & Acknowledgements

Stephen Patton is the Chair of the Library Systems Department at Indiana State University and served as President of the Visual Resources Association from 2018-2020. He received a graduate degree in Library and Information Science from Florida State University and a graduate degree in Computer Science from Columbus State University. His experience and interests include technology management, curation of digital collections, digital preservation, information security and privacy rights.

The VRA Los Angeles 2019 conference was a financial success. Jacob Esselstrom, Vice President for Conference Program (2017-2019), assembled an engaging conference schedule that included keynote speaker Dan Goods, the Visual Strategist at NASA's Jet Propulsion Laboratory. The Local Planning Committee helped reduce costs through scouting out conference venues and providing considerable on-the-ground support. Lael Ensor-Bennett, Vice President for Conference Arrangements (2018-2020), rigorously managed the hotel relationship and preempted possible cost overruns. Meeting our room block commitment is stressful for the VRA Executive Board members, but they had steady faith in the membership. The whole Association is responsible for the successfully profitable conference.

The VRA Executive Board continued with similar operational cost-saving measures during the planning for VRA Baltimore 2020. Lael and Ann Woodward graciously hosted the midyear VRA Executive Board meeting for a second time in a row at Johns Hopkins University. Board members stayed at the local campus hotel. We were able to quickly walk to our free meeting space on campus. Lael arranged diverse dining choices during our midyear meetings, including dinner at Gertrude's restaurant in the Baltimore Museum of Art adjacent to Johns Hopkins University's campus. Lael is a fabulous ambassador for Johns Hopkins University and the greater Baltimore area.

Baltimore's BWI airport, like Los Angeles's LAX, is one of the busiest airports in the United States. VRA conferences generally have strong regional registration numbers. Therefore, the Executive Board considered a strategy of alternating coasts. VRA conference destination consultant Tom Costello helped analyze locational lift for the 2020 conference, taking into consideration many factors, including public transit, airports, and hotel cost. Given the success of the 2006 Baltimore conference and the strong local support, that site was selected again for 2020. As Vice President for Conference Arrangements, Lael was able to personally tour each of the possible conference hotels, providing the Executive Board with detailed photos. The onsite reviews of the space and discussions with hotel staff were invaluable for the decision-making process. The Royal Sonesta Harbor Court Baltimore was selected. Its proximity to restaurants and local attractions was influential in the decision. One of the main points was the intimacy of the location, as the VRA would control much of the hotel space. The hotel includes rooftop garden space, an indoor pool, and a restaurant. This would provide members with a calm space of fellowship, but ample access to the city life.

In late February of 2020, with the conference only a month away, the VRA Executive Board was extremely optimistic about the upcoming VRA 2020 Baltimore Conference. Sara Schumacher, Vice President for Conference Program (2019-2021), had organized a phenomenal group of presenters and workshops. The conference registrations were soaring: we had already hit 190 and our room pickup was 434 out of 405. The VRA Executive Board was discussing what to do with the new comped rooms and how we should handle a sold-out venue. However, by the next week, the Executive Board was beginning to consider disaster planning due to the Coronavirus (COVID-19) outbreak.

Our international attendees were in a state of emergency. Italy was in lockdown. The Board reached out to ARLIS/NA and they were planning to continue with their conference at that time. Slowly we received more and more reports that universities and other organizations were banning travel. A majority of the VRA Executive Board members were then banned from attending. The

Executive Board took action to protect the membership and cancelled the conference. The Governor of Maryland declared a state of emergency. This, along with other travel restrictions, allowed the Association to not face large scale cancellation penalties with the Royal Sonesta Hotel. The VRA Executive Board put in vast amounts of last-minute work in arranging the conference cancellation.

This was an extraordinary event, with circumstances beyond the Association's control. The membership responded with kindness and reassurance. In the future, the Association may want to think back not on the emergency that occurred, but on the success of the VRA L.A. 2019 conference and the high registration count for the VRA Baltimore 2020 conference. The VRA Chicago 2021 conference has great potential. Chicago O'Hare is the third largest airport in the United States. The public transportation in the city is easy and convenient. The conference hotel is in a prime location for visiting local arts venues and access to restaurants.

The VRA Executive Board was also energetically addressing Association business other than conference planning over the last year. The VRA Strategic Plan Task Force laid out a detailed plan and a suggested timeline of milestones. The VRA Identity Task Force and its final report addressed several priorities of Strategic Direction 1: Organization and Governance. The VRA Identity Task Force and Co-Chairs Carolyn Lucarelli and Betha Whitlow deserve the gratitude of the Association for their work to help guide our mission. The Equitable Action Committee was created to address some of the priorities outlined in Strategic Direction 3: Membership.

Each Chapter, Committee, Appointee, and Task Force submitted Annual Reports and Mid-Year Reports. Marsha Taichman and Jasmine Burns contributed a great deal of effort to organize Association reports and transcribe Executive Board meeting minutes. President Elect Jeannine Keefer strengthened our coordination with the VRAF and advanced Strategic Direction 2: Financial Structure. VRA Treasurer Andreas Knab identified several areas where the Association could save money, but his passion was to migrate the *VRA Bulletin* from bepress to Open Journal Systems. The VRA Executive Board approved the additional funds for migrating the platform. The work was carried out by the *VRA Bulletin* Production Editor, Amy Lazet. This will result in future annual operational savings of thousands of dollars each year. Our Public Relations and Communications Officer Amy McKenna led an effort to modernize the VRA website. She became an expert at handling IT security issues, from email spoofing to addressing website hackers during Thanksgiving dinner. The entire VRA Executive Board worked diligently to save organization funds and provide quality service to the membership. I feel confident in the Association's mission and financial future.

Having served as Communications Technology Advisor and on the Online Learning Task Force prior to my presidential term, I was full of energy and passion. I recall attending the Nominating Committee meeting in Seattle where I was requested to run for a VRA Board position. Today, I better understand those asking me questions at the table that day. Their advice can only be understood after experience. I would like to thank past Presidents Elaine Paul, Jennifer Green, and Allan Kohl. Allan specifically was invaluablely supportive while working together on the Constitution and Bylaws Committee. Finally, I want to thank the membership for the opportunity to serve as the Association's President.