

WVLS Post-Conference Report

Thank you to the WVLS Board for the opportunity to attend the Back in Circulation 2020 Virtual Conference. Conferences are a lot of information to digest. There is much you really think you have heard before, or you might not use. It was, in the case of this conference, to hear from academic, school, special, and public librarians as well as library consultants quite expansive. While the networking portion of this conference was taken up by an app—Slack, and the in-person portion of this conference was minimized by a productive and affirming small group discussion divided by library size, the limitations of being exclusively online were offset by the ability to review and join additional sessions during and after the conference. It really helped me to soak it all in.

1. Please highlight three sessions from the conference.
What were the session topics? Who presented them? What made these presentations effective and meaningful to you?
2. As a result of attending this conference, what three things do you plan on implementing at your library in the next six months?

Small Group Discussions, Share your successes and challenges: While the general discussion affirmed much of what was happening in all libraries due to the pandemic (a phrase we are seeing all too often), the breakout discussion with four other librarians where we discussed and coached each other on personnel and scheduling, policy implementation, programming, and technology—including lending WiFi hotspots. To hear good and great ideas from all levels of librarianship, as well as frustrations was very affirming. It was good to touch base in-person even in a very focused, somewhat limited way.

(2)At the close of the session, each group created word clouds. The largest word in the cloud was COLLABORATION. Librarians do this as a matter of course, particularly if they are small or rural. But even more so during the pandemic. RDL for example has always worked with the Rhinelander School District, Meals on Wheels, Head Start, UW-Extension, and ArtStart—Rhinelander, just to name a few. But during the pandemic, these ties have strengthened, with them, with the WVLS system, between local county libraries, and with other area institutions such as the YMCA or the local homeless shelter (NATH). And it is good to hear this isn't just happening in a single community, but across the county. It is the right thing to do.

Got Strategy? Collaborative and Inclusive Departmental Strategic Planning. (recorded) Kabel Stanwicks:

This recorded session affirmed some changes occurring at the Rhinelander District Library in the last eighteen months and is an ongoing process. A baseline strategic plan with a stated Mission, Library Roles, and Service Community, updated in 2019, was shared with staff. However, there was a slight disconnect between this set of statements and how and why positions are worked. There was a further disconnect between these statements, affirmed by the Board and how they are translated operationally. This presentation, which I continue to review and add ideas to my list is assisting in incorporating staff organization and position descriptions into the strategic planning statement.

(2) This will help staff create department operational plans, setting goals and objectives. This will further assist individuals in prioritizing their own goals and objectives to work within their department as well as the mechanism to communicate their shared priorities and objectives to the library and community. Hearing from a librarian at the University of Albany go through the execution of a plan, the importance of strategic planning

for departments, and the importance of each department in the process affirmed the need for an extended process, here. It also provided participants with approaches for developing departmental plans for libraries, which I found very helpful.

Closing Keynote: Having Difficult Workplace Conversations with Jamie Matczak (live):

Having been fortunate to have Ms. Matczak as part of the WVLS System staff, I have had the opportunity to hear much of this discussion on difficult conversations before. Staff at RDL regularly have training on working with the community and having difficult conversations with those who are having various issues from mental illness to homelessness, to extreme overdues. These are regular topics which many RDL staff have benefitted by training with the system. With the pandemic, I have found myself coaching staff on a whole new set of conversations with patrons from quarantine practices to enforcing masking policy; some patron reactions have simply been beyond what regular customer services allows. I watched the keynote and comments from libraries from all over with great interest—hoping for a refresher.

(2) How this keynote was immediately applicable, however, and how Ms. Matczak made herself immediately available to coach me was unforeseen. Quite literally, within the week, I had a staff situation that required affirmation in technique. Ms. Matczak reinforced what I knew had to be said and done, helped me find my voice, and gave me confidence in what could have been a confrontation rather than simply a difficult discussion. It was not only great to have a colleague reinforcing my skills but cheering me on when it was over. She is an accessible and talented individual, and I am grateful for her and the entire WVLS team. They have all worked so hard for their system libraries giving us tools and assistance during this pandemic. We could not have done what we do day in and day out alone. And this includes speaking with our staff and the public about the difficult and stressful decisions we make every day to provide library services in as save and open a way as possible.

3. What kind of support is needed for you to implement these three things?

WVLS already provides excellent support. With strategic planning, I was already working with some of the members of WVLS before the pandemic to put together an action plan. This has helped significantly in working through procedures and plans in this ever-changing situation, but the larger comprehensive report is on hold for now.

The Staying Together Discussions have been invaluable in remaining in contact with librarians not only within our system, but throughout Wisconsin, with news of what other systems are doing as procedures change for pandemic reasons.

Finally, as I mentioned, Jamie Matczak is a treasure, and her role as Education Consultant helps my role as a library director easier. Staff continuing education, communications, and even courier services are regular and straightforward. And in the case of backup for those difficult conversations, much appreciated.

4. How might your conference experience been improved to be more beneficial/impactful to you?

As we know, some of the best parts of conferences are the in-person contacts one makes and the networking one does during such events. This was replaced with additional technology, which I simply did not add to my ongoing roster of communications tech. The upside has been that recording sessions and the ability to review them has become commonplace. Given the busy schedule that was worked alongside the conference attendance, this was an advantage. Finally, the synchronous presenters were excellent and open to questions during and after their presentations, many of them giving contact information allowing for contact and questions later. In short, it is a tradeoff. The human requirement for in-person contact and excellent networking opportunities opposing the opportunity to be flexible and review what each session presented.

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