

What is the Value of Associations, or Is It Safe to Row Alone?

You are probably tired of my rowing analogies by now. I might agree with you, but just a few days ago, an older man went rowing alone just south of where I live, and his empty boat was found a few hours later. They still have not found his body.

Okay—this is an extreme example, but rowing alone is not safe (especially this time of year) and neither is rowing alone as a professional. It may be because I am an association president, but I am more aware than ever before of all the associations that exist. Indeed, the American Society of Association Executives (ASAE) says there were 90,908 trade and professional associations in 2009. If there are that many associations, just think of the numbers of members nationally. We are in excellent company. We all understand the value of being an association member.

ASAE is the father—or should I say mother?—of associations. Several of AALL's headquarters staff are members of ASAE. The ASAE website is a font of information regarding association value and benefit to members. It begins by defining the term “value proposition” as an offer (by an association) to an entity (an association member) where the member perceives that he or she receives, in relationship to alternatives, more than he or she gives up. The value proposition is generally a clear and succinct statement by the association that outlines its unique value-creating features. Thus, it is a marketing statement for the association that sells its members on membership. It is also the sum of all the benefits members receive.

Until recently, association membership was taken for granted. Individuals entered a profession, paid their dues, and signed up for their professional or trade association. Those associations were established to advance the particular profession or trade, and individual members did not question the value of association membership. Today, however, simple advancement of a profession by an association is not enough to entice people to join. Members are looking for more tangible benefits for their membership dollars. They want to know exactly what they are receiving in return for their dues spent.

So, what is the AALL value proposition? What sells us on AALL membership? If you go to AALLNET and click on “Join or Renew Today!” you

are taken to a screen with information about AALL and why you should join. The first paragraph has what I would call the AALL value proposition. It states that AALL is “the only professional association dedicated solely to legal information professionals. AALL offers programs and services to help you succeed in your career.” That first paragraph is followed by others with the headings Community, Knowledge, Leadership, and Support. Each is followed by a brief explanation of the heading and how it will help the potential member.



Community. This word has immediate power. Didn't we first join AALL to enter a community of others like us? And haven't we all benefited for many years (some of us for more years than we are willing to admit) from a lifetime of substantial professional relationships? These are not just professional relationships but, in many cases, life-long friendships. Indeed, it is often difficult for me to remember how a relationship began because it feels more like a friendship with a professional gloss rather than the other way around. And, with the advent of AALL's new website, there are now many opportunities to collaborate professionally, communicate socially, or just “lurk” on multiple community sites. AALL also partners with other related associations, allowing members access to an even broader network of education, information, and relationships.

Knowledge. We also joined AALL to improve, enhance, and advance our knowledge of the skills needed to be a law librarian. Whether those are teaching legal research, researching business law, or managing a law library, we have been offered the educational programming to improve those skills. Indeed, education is one of the pillars of our strategic plan, and it will probably never leave our mission statement. As librarians, we are already educators, so it is natural that we would demand ongoing professional development, as well as opportunities to share what we know with others.

Leadership. This is another pillar of our strategic plan. As new law librarians, we join AALL to become leaders in our workplace as well as our profession. But what may not be as obvious to some of us is that through leadership in AALL, we develop the skills to be leaders in other areas—including our workplace and community.

Support. Finally, AALL provides us with the support we need to accomplish what is necessary in order to be successful as law librarians. That support includes the advocacy work done by our Government Relations Office in Washington, D.C., where AALL promotes the information policy issues that are important to our profession.

Once we become members, we use the tabs across the top of AALLNET: Member Resources, Education and Events, Careers, Member Communities, Advocacy, Publications, and Leadership and Governance. The first tab, Member Resources, lists many value-laden benefits of membership, especially for newer members. Those include CALI lessons, links to chapters, information about the partnership with Drexel University's library program, and grants. All of these will pay back many times the dollar value of membership dues. The other tabs provide access to additional member benefits, including *Law Library Journal* and *Spectrum*, job placement information, educational opportunities, and leadership plans.

Ultimately, however, I firmly believe association membership value is directly related to an individual member's level of involvement. Personally, my relationships, education, career, and understanding of information policy have all been greatly enhanced by my active involvement in AALL. I could simply have sat back and accepted the numerous benefits I just discussed, but my personal benefit would have been greatly diminished. Indeed, associations have survived for centuries. If they had not provided value, they would not have survived. In the end, the real reason for their survival is the personal connection. The personal involvement is what sustains associations and helps them thrive. That is the value that matters and lasts.

So, in closing, the next time you are thinking about rowing alone, remember there is truly safety and value in numbers—especially as an association member and particularly as a member of AALL. See you down river. ■

Darcy Kirk (darcy.kirk@law.uconn.edu) is associate dean for library and technology and professor of law at the University of Connecticut School of Law Library in Hartford.