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Letter from the SCLA 2020 Conference Chair

Megan Palmer

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When I started planning the 2020 SCLA conference, I was excited to create an incredible in-person experience. Then COVID-19 hit. At that time, we were still seven months away from our planned conference, so I started to move to a hybrid model due to not knowing where things would be that far in the future. I struggled with working from home and supporting three elementary-age children with their e-learning. Once it felt like we were in a groove, a tornado hit the Seneca area. Thankfully I had no damage to my home, but I was without power for one week and without internet for three weeks. These stressful events made planning even more difficult.

By the end of May, we had polled our membership and library deans and directors about the possibility of continuing to have a face-to-face conference. We received feedback that nearly 90% would not attend in person due to travel restrictions, budget freezes, and/or anxiety about COVID-19. We took this information to the Marriot, who held our in-person conference contract. Initially, we were told that we could not change our contract to the following year. Thankfully, by the end of July, they relented and allowed us to move to a date in 2021.

At the same time, I was investigating online conference platforms and slowly starting to receive conference proposals. I only had a few exhibitors signed up for an in-person conference, so I needed to figure out quickly how to make a virtual space appealing to our vendors. After hearing from members that they did not have professional development funds for the upcoming year, I decided to base the conference on the webinar format that the Continuing Education Committee had used for its webinar series. This structure allowed me to charge only $10 for members and $25 for nonmembers.

I tried my best to mimic a "normal conference" by having two concurrent sessions running simultaneously. Session links were embedded into a spreadsheet to let attendees find the correct virtual room. I created a video to show attendees how to navigate the conference website and Google Drive folder. I built the exhibitors' and sponsors' webpages for virtual information.

In the end, we had 122 registered participants, five sponsors, and four exhibitors. The total cost of the conference was under $200, and we brought in over $5,000. On average years, we can pay our expenses based on what we earn from the conference. While we did bring in more than what we spent on the conference, our budget is not in the clear. We will have another virtual conference this coming fall. We will gladly listen to your suggestions on what worked and didn't work. I would suggest that we have a conference platform to cut down on our volunteer committee members' time commitments. This change may cause the price to attend to go up, but I feel that it will be a better experience for our attendees and exhibitors.

Megan Palmer
2020 Conference Chair
South Carolina Library Association