

Adding purpose and value to organizational memberships: A case study of Business Librarianship in North Carolina (BLINC)

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Abstract:

BLINC stands for Business Librarianship in North Carolina. Fourteen public, special, and academic librarians created this group in 2003. In that year, BLINC began its tradition of hosting workshops every three months across the state. Each workshop is free and everyone is invited to attend. The workshops feature peer-mentoring and peer-training on business research resources, services, instruction, programming, outreach, and professional development, with occasional guest speakers. Welcoming new members, networking, and socializing remain core to BLINC's culture. This case study concludes with a short interview of the current chair of BLINC regarding how COVID-19 is impacting the organization.

Keywords: associations | networking | organizations | outreach| professional development

Article:

Introduction

The authors have a long history of engagement and service with library professional organizations. But like many other librarians, we have grown concerned with declining memberships in some national and state-level organizations. Why has membership been declining? Or we could ask, why might library organizations be getting less useful and relevant to their members? In the summer of 2019, we surveyed business librarians to ask what they expect from professional associations (Garrison & Cramer, 2020). While the quantitative and qualitative responses were compelling, we were also interested in examining one of the newer business librarianship groups to learn how its origins, successes, and failures might reflect the

results of our study. We chose to write about BLINC: Business Librarianship in North Carolina,¹ with which two of the authors have been involved from its beginning.

Origin

In 2002, Susan Wolf Neilson, who recently moved to North Carolina to serve as Reference Librarian for Management and Economics at North Carolina State University, wanted to network with other local business librarians. She found no existing groups but at the suggestion of Jennifer Boettcher, Business Librarian at Georgetown University, decided to form a local business librarians' interest group. In January 2003, she recruited one of the authors (Steve Cramer, newly hired as business librarian for UNCG: the University of North Carolina at Greensboro). Neilson and Cramer began collecting email addresses of known business librarians across the state and also targeted several local email discussion groups.

First gathering

In early March 2003, Neilson and Cramer emailed this invitation to all the business librarians in the state they knew or could identify:

We welcome all business librarians, whether from public, academic, or corporate libraries, as well as other librarians who have an interest in business information.

- Want to discuss options for company research or international marketing sources?
- Interested in more opportunities to meet with vendors?
- Looking for another business librarian to collaborate with on a project?
- Want to just meet and network with other N.C. business librarians?

If some of these topics interest you, please consider attending the inaugural meeting of BLiNC (Business Librarians in North Carolina) at UNC Greensboro on March 27th from 10am-3pm. We welcome all business librarians, whether from public, academic, or special libraries, as well as other librarians who have an interest in business information.

We would like to meet each other, explore the possibilities of continuing this group, and brainstorm on future meeting topics. There will also be a presentation and discussion of ABI-INFORM v. Business Source Elite v. Infotrac OneFile. We will also have lunch together on campus or at a restaurant on nearby Tate Street.

Fourteen librarians from public, academic, and special libraries gathered at UNC Greensboro late in March 2003 for the first BLINC workshop. One librarian from Georgia State University drove up to Greensboro the night before for the workshop, because there was no such group active in Atlanta, he reported.

After introductions, networking, lunch, and some peer-training, the librarians ended the workshop with a list of goals for this organization and a game plan for its ongoing activities:

¹ <https://nclaonline.org/BLINC>.

- We would have quarterly workshops;
- The first coordinators would be BLINC's founders, plus Jeffrey Hamilton, from Wake County Public Library;
- We would try to meet in convenient locations and vary the locations by library type – public and academic;
- In addition to the meetings, we would also communicate and share information through a Blackboard site created by Elisabeth Leonard of Wake Forest University;
- And we all agreed we wanted BLINC activities free and open to all.

Regarding leadership, the librarians wanted the BLINC coordinators to reflect the nature of BLINC membership: a mix of librarians from different types of libraries. BLINC has not always been able to maintain that level of diversity among its leadership but the goal continues to the present day.

Goals and first survey

Three months after the initial meeting, the second BLINC workshop was held at Wake Forest University. The agenda included:

- Round robin reports on recent conferences and training events, including new vendor products and library service programs.
- Discussion of NC LIVE's database selection process, and how BLINC can suggest databases to increase libraries' role in economic development. [NC LIVE is a package of databases available statewide to all public and academic libraries; supporting economic development is one of its three goals]²
- Vendor presentation on ReferenceUSA.

The librarians also established the first set of goals for BLINC:

- Networking and meeting other business librarians in similar and different workplace settings
- Continuing education and training
- Sharing about information resources such as databases, datasets, and websites
- Professional development
- Being a business information resource for state initiatives

Those goals, like the game plan established at the first workshop, would inform BLINC's activities in the future.

Workshop strategies

The quarterly workshops remain the focus of BLINC. (Brief summaries of all BLINC workshops are listed at its website).³ While BLINC had conducted a few online discussions, BLINC members remain very interested in getting together in person regularly. The group feels that

² <https://nclaonline.org/>.

³ <https://www.nclive.org/>.

gathering in person helps support community building, establishing trust, peer-mentoring, and networking. These outcomes may be harder to achieve in online meetings.

Over the years, the group has identified several best practices regarding its workshops. One is controlling cost. BLINC is able to keep the workshops free by meeting in libraries of members. Occasionally, BLINC is able to meet in other facilities that have library or campus connections, like a shared work space facility or a satellite MBA program campus. To allow travel time, the workshops begin at 10am and end at 3 pm. Another best practice is including dedicated networking time in the schedule. The half-hour before the workshop begins, as librarians arrive at the venue, is devoted to socializing and morning snacks (provided by members). BLINC members have expressed a strong preference for eating lunch in local restaurants (or a campus food court) instead of ordering box lunches. Walking to lunch provides some fresh air and exercise while also encouraging socializing and networking in different combinations of librarians. Going out for lunch also provides more food choices for those with dietary considerations. The workshop attendees return to the meeting room or computer lab refreshed and ready for an afternoon of learning.

BLINC has learned that no day of the week is better than others for a workshop. The group tries to vary the day of the week each time.

All members of the North Carolina Library Association (NCLA) as well as official BLINC members (those who have joined the BLINC section within NCLA) are invited to attend each BLINC workshop. This inclusiveness attracts librarians to BLINC workshops who are not official business librarians. Sometimes a library director sees the workshop announcement and asks someone from their library to attend and report back what they learned.

BLINC members gather for workshops, not meetings. We have defined workshops as events that focus on networking, sharing, discussions, learning, and professional development in general. Public librarians in BLINC have reported that they are much more likely to win approval to attend a professional development workshop than a library organization meeting. When necessary, a BLINC workshop will end with thirty minutes of strategic planning or other BLINC organizational work, but those occasions are rare. Most BLINC planning is done by the BLINC leadership between workshops, sometimes in person but more likely via email, conference call, or Zoom.

BLINC workshops often have a central theme. Recent examples include “supporting social entrepreneurship,” “selling ourselves as librarians and information professionals,” community engagement, including library support of job hunting and economic development”, and “Economic Census and other Census business data.” The central workshop themes usually include a mix of content on services (including instruction and programming), outreach, research skills, and research sources. Since BLINC continues to consist of public, special, and academic librarians, each agenda item in a workshop is meant to be useful for each type of librarian. On rare occasions, the workshop attendees will break up into communities of interest for a 30 minute discussion. Members usually find more value in learning from each other because of, not in spite of, their different work situations.

In addition to business information programming, BLINC workshops often focus on professional development issues. Examples include personal branding as an information professional, best practices in public speaking, assessment techniques, and effective use of LinkedIn. BLINC workshops should support the goals of individual BLINC members as well as the goals of their libraries.

While workshops occasionally feature guest speakers and trainers, most BLINC workshops feature peer-training and peer-mentoring. Members have reported that they usually learn much from each other and gain insights into outreach, programming, and research strategies. For most topics of mutual interest, there is at least one BLINC member present at the workshop with significant experience and expertise.

This emphasis on peer-teaching and peer-mentor contributes to BLINC being considered a community of professional friends, not merely a professional organization. Instead of beginning each workshop with a featured external speaker, BLINC workshops usually begin with the question “What is new with you and/or your library”? Moving around the room to answer this question provides all attendees an opportunity to have the floor early in the workshop, and helps foster a welcoming and inviting environment for early career librarians and first-time attendees of a BLINC workshop. Beginning the workshop with everyone sharing also helps attendees recognize common challenges and frustrations, leading to short discussions of solutions tried. Some of these short discussions in response to sharing become full length agenda items in future workshops. Many first-time attendees have noted the friendly and supportive atmosphere, in contrast, they report, to their experiences with other professional librarian groups.

Visits to BLINC workshops by a variety of database vendors were fairly common in BLINC’s early years, but no longer. The group decided to only host demonstrations and training for databases that all BLINC members have access to. Therefore, NC LIVE vendors occasionally attend BLINC workshops since NC LIVE is a package of databases provided statewide. For example, when NC LIVE signed a contract for 6 years of ProQuest content after many years of contracts with a competitor, BLINC invited the ProQuest business content manager, Jo-Anne Hogan, to come down from her home in Ontario to lead a discussion of ABI/INFORM and other databases. The group has remained in touch with Hogan as ProQuest business products continue to evolve.

Building community

Attracting community college librarians to BLINC has long been a challenge. Most community colleges in North Carolina have business programs and all have career services centers, but no community college library in the state has a dedicated business librarian. Most of these libraries have a small number of librarians, who are often spread out across several campus locations. Therefore it is extremely difficult for most community college librarians to have a day away from work to attend a BLINC workshop. Once, BLINC had a combined workshop with NCLA’s Community & Junior College Libraries section. The most recent BLINC vice-chair was a community college librarian, the only community college librarian officer in BLINC history.

Welcoming new attendees and members remains an emphasis. At each workshop, the BLINC officers ask who is a first-time attendee. Those attendees get a round of applause. Whenever someone asks to be added to the BLINC communication tool (currently a Google Group), one of the BLINC officers sends a message to the group introducing the new member. Without prompting from the officers, usually a number of other members add their own welcome to the new member. After experiencing this welcoming behavior, one newer member remarked “wow this is so different than my experience with [another organization].”

Joining NCLA (North Carolina Library Association)

At its second quarterly workshop (July 2003), BLINC members began to discuss whether the group should become a section of NCLA or remain an independent organization. That discussion continued in our fall 2003 workshop. Several members expressed strong reservations, citing the flexibility and freedom of remaining independent. But other members listed possible benefits of BLINC joining NCLA as a section:

- NCLA has a good conference;
- BLINC would gain a budget (funded by NCLA membership fees, administered by the NCLA Treasurer, and available to BLINC to spend as desired)
- The increased formality of BLINC as a NCLA section would provide more stability and staying power than BLINC would have as an informal group;
- BLINC would gain a promotional channel for our workshops through the NCLA communication tools;
- BLINC might enjoy better name recognition;
- With BLINC as a section of NCLA, it will be easier for some to justify going to the workshops;
- BLINC could better support and influence NC LIVE as an official part of NCLA.

All the BLINC members present felt strongly that if the group did become a section of NCLA, BLINC would continue to have free and open workshops as well as open membership in BLINC’s online communication tool (NCLA did not and continues to not provide communication tools for its sections). Therefore, non-NCLA members could still be involved in BLINC while only BLINC section members would be able to vote in BLINC leadership elections.

After that Fall 2003 discussion, the BLINC members unanimously agreed to petition NCLA to add BLINC as a section. Neilson and Cramer attended a NCLA board meeting in 2004 to ask the question. NCLA had not added any new sections for many years. Several board members questioned if NCLA should ever add more sections, but the NCLA president responded, “the more, the merrier.” In 2005, the NCLA board approved the bylaws BLINC had written and BLINC officially became a section. Inspired by BLINC’s example, two more NCLA sections (Distance Learning and STEM Librarianship in NC) have been created since 2005, although unlike BLINC those sections didn’t exist as independent groups first. With its quarterly workshops and its use of online communication tools, BLINC became the most active section or roundtable of NCLA, and maintains that status. Some BLINC programs at the NCLA conference later became programs at national conferences, such as ACRL, PLA, and the Charleston

Conference. BLINC has also enjoyed vendor-sponsored dinners and happy hours at the NCLA conferences.

Being a section of NCLA has required BLINC to adopt a more formal leadership structure. The BLINC section bylaws require a leadership team consisting of a chair, vice-chair, and secretary/treasurer. Those officers are elected every two years, with the transitions scheduled at the end of the NCLA biennial conferences. Unlike other NCLA sections, BLINC does not have a board of directors nor standing committees. Our leadership structure remains simple and nimble, with the three officers usually working together as a team, not a hierarchy, and utilizing the leadership and creativity of additional BLINC members for specific short-term projects as needed.

The chair serves as a voting member of the NCLA board, providing a networking opportunity for that person. One of the other officers attends board meetings when the chair has a scheduling conflict.

Consulting for NC LIVE

BLINC serves as an unofficial business resource advisory group for NC LIVE, a taxpayer-funded service that provides statewide access to databases and other e-resources. One of the three goals of NC LIVE is economic development, which both NC LIVE and BLINC have interpreted to include supporting job hunting, job creation (entrepreneurship and small business growth), and business education.

NC LIVE formed a few years before BLINC. In its first year, BLINC had a goal to provide suggestions to NC LIVE, on electronic resources to better support economic development. BLINC ranked what it considered to be the most important categories of databases (such as company directories, articles, and investment data) as well as ranking preferred databases within each category. BLINC hoped its suggestions would provide a blueprint for future considerations of database selections that best serve the needs of the state's business community and educators. A few years later, the NC LIVE director began to attend BLINC workshops to get our feedback in person. Making updated recommendations to NC LIVE has become a core BLINC activity and always makes for lively workshops. Since the NC LIVE budget has remained flat, BLINC's work to identify competing products for existing subscription content helps NCLA create negotiation leverage.

Post-recession decline

By the middle of the 2010s, BLINC members had noticed declining attendance at its recent workshops and fewer first-time attendees. It began to discuss the state of staffing in North Carolina libraries after the Great Recession and the future of subject-specific librarianship. Some of BLINC's public librarians noted that their libraries now had smaller staff, making it harder for librarians to travel to all-day workshops. Some libraries were emphasizing reference desk staffing and children's services more than community engagement in economic development. Some academic librarians also no longer had dedicated business librarians. One of the authors (Garrison) and then BLINC chair, Mary Scanlon of Wake Forest University, spoke at a NCLA

conference about these trends. This presentation led to Garrison later recruiting Cramer to pursue the authors' survey of business librarians' perceptions of professional organizations (Scanlon had since retired).

Reviving the group

With a fresh group of officers after that latest NCLA conference, BLINC had a workshop in December 2017 that featured a rare, long strategic planning discussion instead of its usual training topics. The discussion began with this question: "What is the BLINC value proposition; or, how would you describe BLINC to a prospective member?"

Using Post-it Notes carefully arranged on a whiteboard (visible online in a blog post),⁴ workshop attendees came up with this list:

- Professional growth
- Learning
- Getting feedback
- Networking
- Consulting
- Collaborating
- Turning outward – supporting economic development
- Sharing
- Training/teaching/educating
- Mentoring
- Caring (about each other)

(BLINC's official answer, based on this opening discussion, is provided below.)

The next discussion topic was "What are your individual needs as a business librarian or as a librarian who supports business, entrepreneurship, or nonprofits among other roles?" The responses were numerous but included improving skills in teaching, learning new information resources and professional tools, developing outreach and promotional skills, expanding our professional network, getting help with tough questions, and getting inspired by what other librarians are accomplishing.

Then the attendees transitioned to discussing BLINC itself. They created a SWOT analysis of the group (also pictured on the same blog post). Strengths include the group's diverse roles and types of libraries, high energy level and enthusiasm for training, networking, and collaboration, collective professional experience and subject knowledge, and pride in the group.

Weaknesses include that same diversity (finding commonalities and the challenge of making sure the programming is useful for everyone), recent decline in membership and participation, having fewer business librarian positions in the state, not sharing enough BLINC success stories and a general lack of promotion, how busy all librarians are, and also the name of the group, which

⁴ <https://nclaonline.org/BLINC-history>.

may not connote its interest in nonprofits, entrepreneurship, job/career services, and economic development as well as traditional business services and education.

BLINC's opportunities include recruiting new professional librarians in the state, creating a new promotional campaign, providing more online programming, partnering with more local and regional organizations with similar goals, the general increased focus and demand for numeric data (including big data, data analytics, and data visualization), and collaborating with NC LIVE on business research training. Attendees decided that perhaps the biggest opportunity lies with communicating to a broader group of librarians that BLINC programming is relevant to more than just full-time business librarians – instead, that business-related programming is relevant to any librarian or any library involved in economic development, job hunting, nonprofits, and social entrepreneurship.

Threats include competition from other professional organizations, fear of business research, declining time and financial support for librarians to attend workshops, the lack of focus on economic development in some library systems, and an occasional lack of vision among library leaders concerning librarians as partners in economic development.

Three months after creating the SWOT analysis, BLINC had a workshop in Durham. Turnout was strong – 25 people, twice the size of the previous workshop — with half of the librarians present being first-time attendees to a BLINC workshop. Most of those first-timers were not official business, nonprofit, or entrepreneurship librarians: they were general public service and community outreach librarians. The officers tried to put some of BLINC's recent strategic planning ideas into effect. The downtown, central library of the Durham County Public Library system had recently closed for a complete rebuild. The library moved its makerspace to a nearby mall and invited BLINC to hold its spring 2018 workshop there. The workshop's theme was "community engagement, including library support of job hunting and economic development." Four librarians from special, public, and academic libraries led discussions on partnering with local organizations, using a new NC LIVE job-hunting subscription database, and supporting for-profit and nonprofit entrepreneurship. The BLINC officers promoted the workshop through the NCLA email discussion group as well as the BLINC communication tool. The first-time attendees provided many positive comments about the workshop being a friendly and welcoming event with an emphasis on networking and sharing.

Since then BLINC has continued an emphasis on community engagement, entrepreneurship, social entrepreneurship, and economic development. Official membership, accounts in its communication tool, and workshop attendance have been increasing. The BLINC dinner at the NCLA 2019 was the largest dinner yet, with 29 guests. A handful of business librarians in the state have retired in the last few years, but all of their replacement hires have joined BLINC (often at the encouragement of their supervisors) and we continue to attract early career librarians who are involved in community engagement and economic development while not being official business librarians.

Partnerships

BLINC has also been pursuing strategic partnerships. In July 2018, BLINC and CABAL (Capital Area Business Academic Librarians)⁵ held a joint workshop in Richmond, Virginia on instruction and databases. The event included significant time for networking and socializing. The founding members of CABAL told the BLINC officers that BLINC was partly the inspiration for creating CABAL. Jennifer Boettcher, who encouraged Susan Wolf Neilson to pursue creating a business librarians group in North Carolina, was one of the CABAL founding members. CABAL and BLINC are developing their second joint workshop for the summer of 2020.

In January 2019, NJLibsGrowBiz⁶ and BLINC co-hosted an online workshop on embedded community engagement, featuring the outreach and consulting work of public librarians in both states. The two organizations hosted another online workshop in early 2020 and plan on continuing their annual collaboration.

A third ongoing collaboration involves the Carolinas Chapter of the Special Librarians Association (SLA).⁷ The chair of Carolinas SLA is now a member of the BLINC communication tool and therefore is able to share any relevant BLINC information with that group. BLINC and Carolinas SLA collaborated on one workshop that featured both combined and break-out discussions.

In fall of 2019, BLINC accepted an invitation to assume ownership of a conference. A few months earlier, the chairs of the Entrepreneurial Librarians Conference (ELC),⁸ a conference on innovation in libraries that was sponsored by the libraries of Wake Forest University and UNC Greensboro, offered that conference to BLINC. After discussions at two quarterly workshops, BLINC agreed to take that conference over. However, BLINC members also decided that planning the ELC should not disrupt BLINC's traditions of hosting quarterly workshops. Nor would planning the ELC take time from any workshops. While BLINC remains the official host of the ELC (which will now be called the Entrepreneurship & Libraries Conference), the ELC planning group includes public, special, and academic librarians from all over the United States plus one librarian from Toronto. The ELC 2020 conference will take place in the new Durham Public Library, which will open a few months before the conference is held in November 2020. Re-envisioning and planning this conference has been an exciting venture for the many BLINC members and business librarian friends involved.

Conclusion: BLINC in 2020

While the strongly-held tradition of quarterly programming and training continues, and BLINC continues to collaborate on learning opportunities with its partner organizations, networking and friendship continue to define BLINC to its members. In October 2019, BLINC had 30 official members (through NCLA), while its Google Group (our current communication tool) includes over 60 librarians (the official members plus unofficial members). As described above, BLINC members at the December 2017 workshop discussed the question "What is the BLINC value

⁵ <https://liaisonlife.wordpress.com/2017/12/22/blinc2018/>.

⁶ <https://cabalinfo.wordpress.com/>.

⁷ https://www.njstatelib.org/services_for_libraries/consulting_services/business-technology-services/njlibsgrowbiz/.

⁸ <https://connect.sla.org/carolinias/home>.

proposition; or, how would you describe BLINC to a prospective member?” In response, BLINC now defines itself with this statement on its homepage:⁹

“BLINC is a community of public, academic, and special librarians who value networking, supporting each other, and offering frequent and free workshops. We focus on how libraries support community engagement, economic development, entrepreneurship, small business, nonprofits, job hunting, and business education. However, many of our members are not business librarians. We are a welcoming and inviting group. Every year since we formed in 2003, BLINC has met for free, quarterly workshops open to all. We gather in different cities each time. The workshops feature peer-training, peer-mentoring, discussions, resource sharing, and sometimes outside-experts. BLINC uses a Google Group to allow its members to communicate with each other – share news, ask questions, recruit a project partner, etc.”

Epilogue: BLINC under COVID-19

BLINC met at Elon University on February 28, 2020 for its winter quarterly workshop. It was the first workshop led by its newest set of BLINC officers, which includes chair Summer Krstevska of Wake Forest University. Two weeks later, a number of academic librarians from BLINC met up at SOUCABLE 2020 in Athens, Georgia.¹⁰ By the time they got home from Athens, the COVID-19 closures and stay-at-home orders were in effect across North Carolina.

Krstevska and her fellow officers had planned on a normal late May 2020 summer workshop, but of course had to cancel those plans. Instead, in late May, BLINC held its first virtual quarterly workshop, lasting three hours. After the welcomes and introductions, BLINC members discussed two main topics: “Tips, tools & techniques for our virtual work” and “COVID-19 resources: what are you using to provide this type of information to business patrons?”

As part of the former topic, the BLINC officers led a discussion of how BLINC should be providing content during the pandemic. The strong consensus was to meet online more frequently than BLINC usually did in person, but for shorter durations. To facilitate organizing and planning shorter but more frequent events during the pandemic, the three elected BLINC officers recruited three directors-at-large. By the end of summer 2020, BLINC had hosted or co-hosted three more online events: a Census data workshop with NCLA’s Government Resources Section, the BLINC/CABAL 2020 mini-conference, and another regular BLINC quarterly workshop.

Garrison and Cramer interviewed Krstevska about her experiences, thoughts, and plans for BLINC under COVID.

Garrison and Cramer: *Before we get into the COVID “new normal”, could you tell us how being the BLINC chair is going for you as an early career librarian?*

Krstevska: As the chair, I realized that BLINC has a good reputation and already has strong connections with other organizations. I love that. It opens a lot of doors for programming. Also,

⁹ <https://entrelib.org/>.

¹⁰ <http://soucableconference.mozello.com/>.

everyone in BLINC wants to gather in person; it's not like herding cats, which had sometimes been my experience with librarians before. But as chair, I was surprised that it was harder than I thought to get ideas and feedback on workshop topics. So I had to get more used to making decisions without a lot of feedback.

G&C: How is COVID-19 going to change BLINC?

K: Well, of course, the shutdown has given BLINC the push to try some online meetings. This will allow us to reach more of our geographically distant members, as happened with our recent, well-attended academic librarians online discussion. So BLINC will have a mix of online and in-person workshops in the future. Meeting in person is “so BLINC” and therefore we won’t be giving that up.

G&C: What is “so BLINC” about meeting in person?

K. BLINC members really like seeing our workplaces, our libraries and downtowns and campuses, as when we walk to lunch. Socialization is easier in person – it’s harder to have authentic one-on-one and small group discussions online. And BLINC loves its happy hours!

G&C: Any final thoughts?

K: Personally, BLINC has been monumental to my career. I’m a better business librarian and am becoming a better leader. I’m very grateful for BLINC, and I also hear that from so many other business librarians in the group.

Acknowledgments

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