User Centered Conferencing for the Future of the Archival Profession

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Introduction

- Virtual conferencing rapidly deployed in 2020
- Although professional opportunities burgeoned for underfunded workers and some previously excluded voices were amplified, virtual conferencing does not address the digital divide
- Professional engagement opportunities for all could be achieved by addressing the digital divide and other barriers to access
- Universal access could be optimized with User Centered Design, which simplifies technological engagement by centering the needs of users in a collaborative process of development

User Centered Design

Involve users in each stage:

- Plan

- Analyze

- Design

- Test and refine

See https://www.usability.gov/how-to-and-tools/resources/ucd-map.html

Engaging users throughout conference planning is essential because:

- Barriers to access are as diverse as users
  - Funding
  - Disabilities
  - Technology
  - Lack of leisure

- Ensuring accessibility for those facing challenges benefits everyone

How can we learn more about access needs from those who do not currently have access?

- Conference organizers balance services with costs, generally aided by feedback from conference attendees and organization members
- Feedback from members misses information from workers who cannot afford membership
- Inclusion begins with an invitation and a commitment to listening

Survey of conference attendance preferences

- Conducted in July and August 2022
- Investigated in-person, virtual, and hybrid attendance preferences of more than 430 library and archives workers and others in related fields before and during the pandemic and looking ahead to the future
- Aimed to help envision the future role, reach, benefits, and viability of online, in-person, and hybrid conference models

The survey gathered information about:

- Professional background
- Funding availability
- Registration cost opinions
- Past, present, and planned conference attendance
- Preferences for virtual conference delivery modes
- Hopes for future conference options

Survey limitation

Since the survey was distributed via national and regional organization listservs, those without access are underrepresented.

While assessment of the conference target population is practical, the survey does not comprehensively represent the value of professional engagement to all workers.
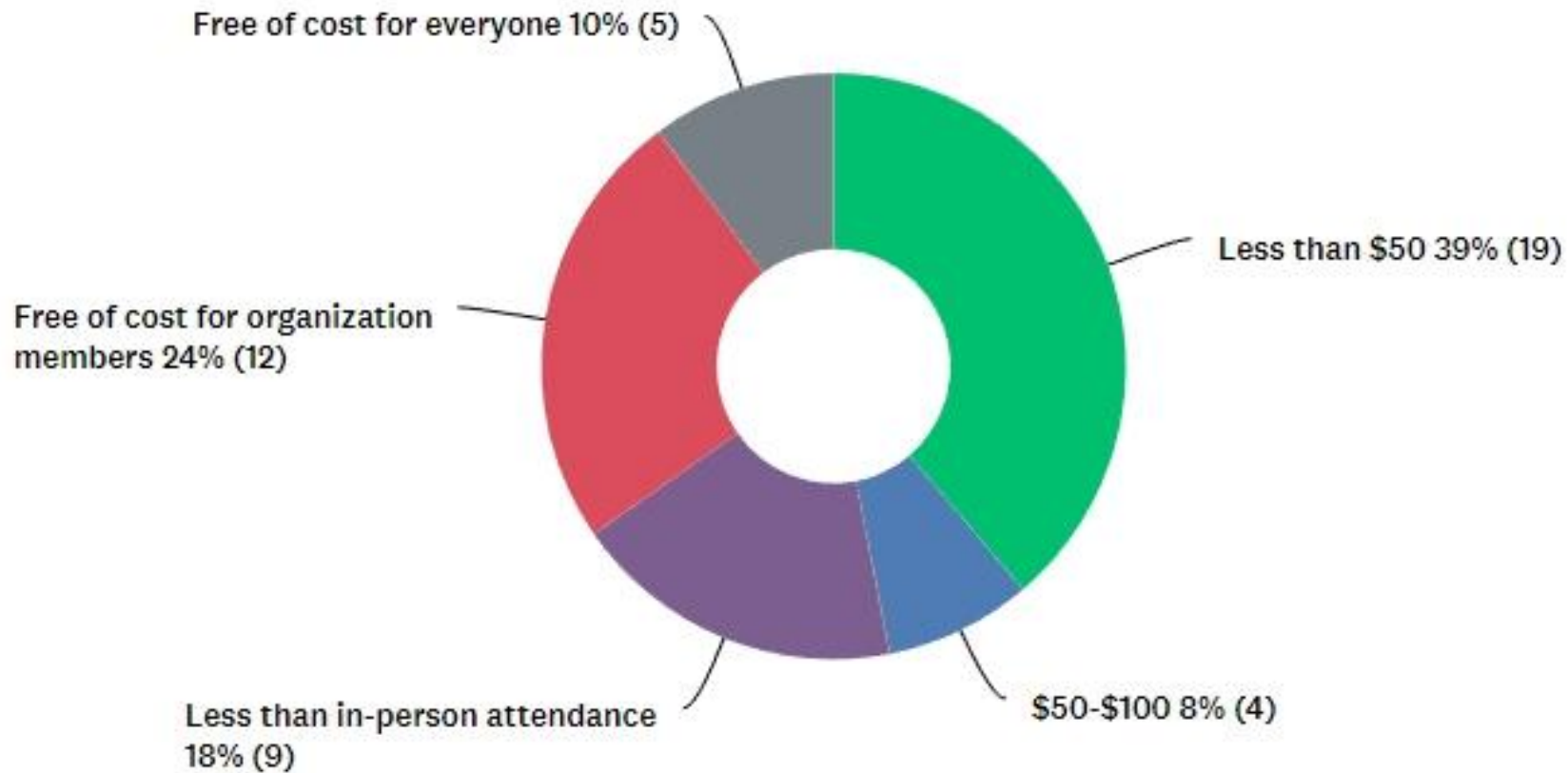
Reflection on survey respondents

Although those without means to belong to professional organizations are underrepresented, the survey did collect some responses from students, precariously employed workers, and volunteers. Their participation speaks not only to the potential value of broad professional engagement afforded by equitable access to conferences, but also to the genuine desire of all workers to join in professional discourse.

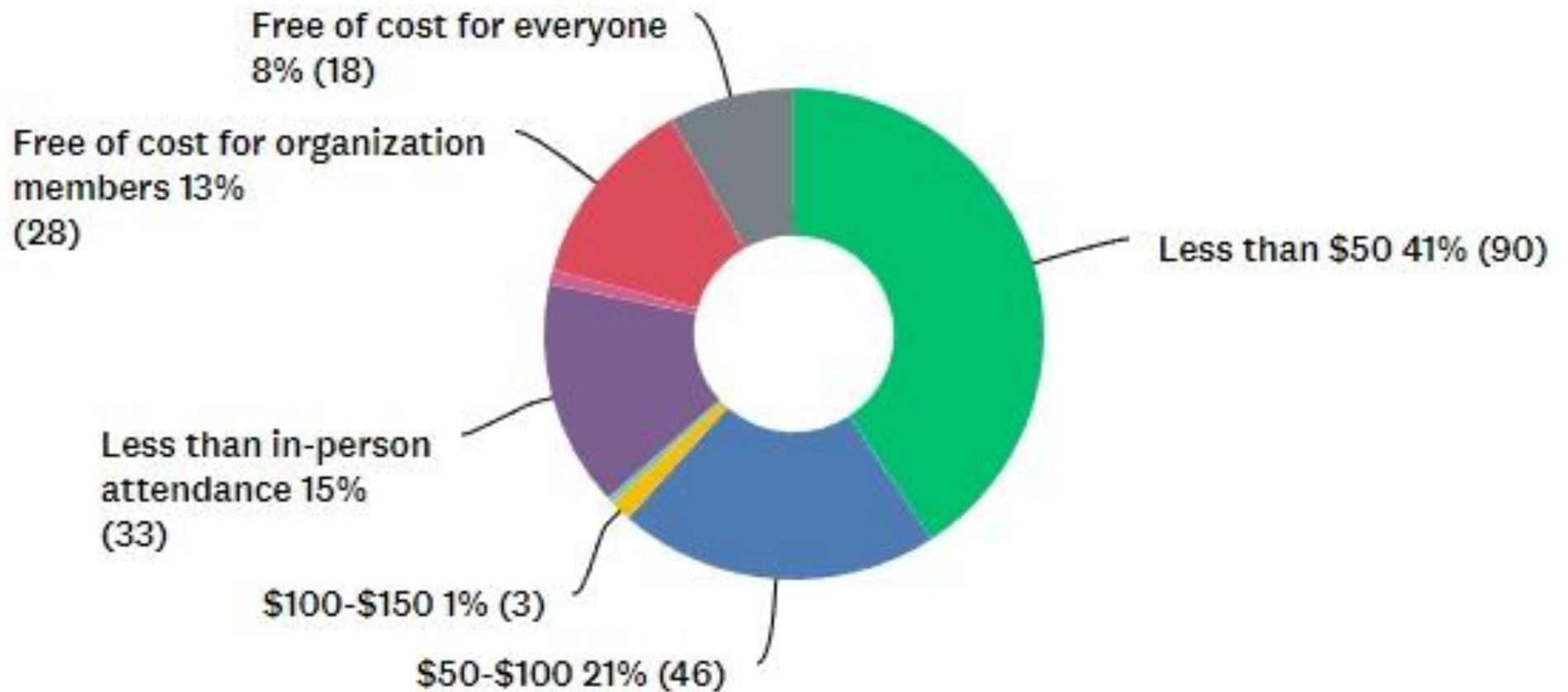# Results related to early career archival workers of limited means

Results filtered to those with less than 6 years in the profession who would attend conferences such as SAA, RBMS, DLF, and SLA if funded (n=49):

- Less than 12% of total survey respondents
- All need funding assistance
- More than 60% work for academic libraries
- 86% would attend SAA if they could afford to

Reasonable registration price for partially or under-employed professionals to attend a virtual national conference or major section conference (early career workers who would like to attend SAA, RBMS, DLF, or SLA, n=49):

Free of cost for everyone 10% (5)

Free of cost for organization members 24% (12)

Less than $50 39% (19)

Less than in-person attendance 18% (9)

$50-$100 8% (4)

Reasonable registration price for partially or under-employed professionals to attend a virtual national conference or major section conference (all who attend SAA, RBMS, DLF, and SLA, n=221):

Free of cost for everyone 8% (18)

Free of cost for organization members 13% (28)

Less than in-person attendance 15% (33)

$100-$150 1% (3)

$50-$100 21% (46)

Less than $50 41% (90)

Comparison of limited means early career workers with those who already attend conferences like SAA, RBMS, DLF, and SLA:

- Around 40% in both groups recommend registration of less than $50 for virtual attendance
- Around 9% in both groups recommend making virtual attendance free to all
- A greater percentage of early career workers think virtual attendance should be free to organization members
- A greater percentage of conference attenders think underfunded workers should pay more than $50 for virtual

Conference registration cost affects everyone:

- Survey respondents noted that cost savings were an incentive to virtual attendance where possible even before the pandemic, when many conferences were suddenly offered for free

- While most administrators and directors responded they are satisfied with conference funding, some of them also lack sufficient funds to attend conferences, and half of them work at colleges and universities

Other challenges to universal engagement (virtual or in-person):

- Continuing concern about public health
- Lack or accuracy of captioning
- Unrecorded sessions
- Audio quality
- Reliable online access
- Difficulty traveling
- Employer support for attendance (time/space)
- Evolving technology and assumptions about ease of use

Survey results: Early career hopes for the future

- Many expressed enthusiasm for the return of in-person conferencing with the availability of recorded sessions for later viewing
- However, some are concerned that a hybrid option would keep employers from funding in-person attendance
- Larger conferences should be hybrid to be more equitable and accessible
- Virtual options open possibilities to many without means
- Virtual can accommodate physical and social disabilities and the immunocompromised
- Many favor hybrid conferences for the greater options they provide

Expanding universal access and engagement with professional discourse

- Find ways to increase engagement and development for library and archives workers, including equitable access to professional discourse in regional and national organizations
- Find ways to survey and include the voices of students and precariously employed workers in conference design
- **Early career and underemployed archival workers are diverse and intensely engaged with collections and the public – welcoming them to professional discourse will build and strengthen service**

Thank you for attending!