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The Boston Marathon (Conference)

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THE BOSTON MARATHON (CONFERENCE)

By Clare Gaynor Willis, IIT Chicago-Kent College of Law Library
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There are a lot of famous and iconic things about Boston: Boston cream pie, the Red Sox, and Paul Revere. Although it's tempting to analogize the AALL Annual Meeting to any of these things (who would be the custard in the Annual Meeting cream pie?), I feel the Boston icon that best represents the Annual Meeting experience must be the Boston Marathon. The Boston Marathon is a 26.2 mile footrace open to only the best competitors from other races. Please allow me to explain myself.

Take the qualifications. To run in the Boston Marathon, runners must qualify by running another marathon in under a certain qualification time. For example, a male runner under 34 years old needs to run a marathon in less than 3 hours and 5 minutes in order to qualify for the Boston Marathon.

In a sense, all law librarians have qualified for the AALL Annual Meeting just by being ourselves. In a much more practical sense, most librarians can only qualify to attend the Annual Meeting by getting it paid for. This year, I was fortunate enough to obtain a grant to attend the Annual Meeting from CALL and from the Research Instruction and Patron Services Special Interest Section (RIPS-SIS). The grants from different organizations within AALL are an excellent leg up that allow for more diversity at the Annual Meeting. Many others "qualified for Boston" by getting the Annual Meeting paid for by their employer. This can be a difficult proposition. For a librarian at a cash-strapped institution, asking for a plane ticket to Boston may be just as challenging as running a marathon in under 3 hours and 5 minutes.

AALL works hard to help its members make their case to employers. This year, I got to hear about novel topics from presenters I wouldn't have met in Chicago. At the "Finding your Inner Nancy Drew: Public Records Resources Online" program, two librarians from the U.S. Department of Justice spoke to a packed crowd about their creative, effective, and inexpensive ways to get public records. For example, they showed how searching websites devoted to gravesite photography can give you someone's dates of birth and death and the name of their spouse. That's the kind of interesting perspective that's

hard to get if you stay back at the office.

The best way AALL can help librarians "qualify" is to offer programming that can't be replicated in an audio recording. For example, I was fortunate to have attended the Guerrilla Usability Testing program (see my review in the AALL Spectrum blog: <http://bit.ly/MugxJa>). Jason Eiseman and Roger Skalbeck conducted a mini-usability test on a member of the audience and used it as an example throughout their talk. They also showed video clips of past usability tests. Interactive and visual presentations both require and enhance the in-person experience.

AALL understands that interactive experiences are an important part of the Annual Meeting. In its recommendations to the AALL Executive Board following a report by an outside consultant, the Annual Meeting Special Committee (AMSC) expressed that it wanted to improve the Annual Meeting by "offering a variety of adult learning techniques including hands-on and interactive experiences." The Annual Meeting is also like the Boston Marathon because it is very long! From the pre-conference workshops to the receptions and outings, the Annual Meeting is not a sprint. Some of the highlights of my marathon, aside from the excellent programming I already mentioned, were the RIPS-SIS Breakfast Business Meeting and the Academic Law Libraries Special Interest Section (ALL-SIS) Faculty Services Roundtable. The breakfast was an excellent opportunity to learn about new volunteer opportunities from the same people with whom I'd be working.

For ALL-SIS, I led a roundtable discussion about services to different kinds of law faculty from adjuncts to visiting professors. In our discussion, we realized that we all offer adjuncts slightly different services even if, officially, we offer the same service to every faculty member in the building. It was thought-provoking to see where other librarians draw those invisible lines.

I find roundtables to be some of the best programming at

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the Annual Meeting and the kind of programming that really makes the most of an in-person experience. I hope AALL recognizes the utility of SIS roundtables as it works toward its stated goal of “incorporat[ing] opportunities for more interpersonal interaction and small group discussion in all AALL programming and activities.” I believe roundtables and other discussion-based learning opportunities also make it easier to “qualify” for the conference because they cannot be replicated by an audio recording or a webinar.

Long as it may be, the Boston Marathon does offer some fun distractions during those 26.2 miles. The women of Wellesley College are famous for forming a “scream tunnel” of cheering (and sometimes kissing) marathon fans. No AALL Annual Meeting participant can make it through the marathon of meetings and programs without

a little bit of fun. For me, the NELLCO dinner cruise of Boston Harbor and the Charles River was a great diversion. Aside from being fun, these diversions are an important part of the Annual Meeting because they give librarians a chance to make connections in a casual setting. It’s amazing what you can come up with on the deck of a boat that you couldn’t come up with in a conference room.

The final reason why the Annual Meeting is like the Boston Marathon is because it hurts your feet! Anyone who saw me wearing moccasins knows what a bad idea it was for me to pack a brand new pair of cute sandals. Lesson learned: a successful race requires the right footwear, whether it’s the Boston Marathon or the AALL Annual Meeting.

Thank you again to CALL and especially the Grants and Chapter Awards committee for helping me “qualify” for this year’s Annual Meeting. It was an excellent experience.

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