

Guide to RAILS Member Engagement for All Types of Libraries

March 2021

As the Service of the Month for March 2021, this document is designed as an introduction to RAILS member engagement. As a large, multitype system, RAILS has to use many different approaches to engaging members.

Suspended Approaches

As of 2021, there are two tactics that are currently suspended due to the pandemic.

- **In-person site visits** – In the past, the Illinois State Library has required systems to visit 20% of their members in-person. This has been relaxed to allow online efforts.
- **In-person networking** – Over the last three years, RAILS has offered in-person networking sessions typically called Member Meetups. These have generally been replaced by RAILS Online Roundtables (see below). Due to the popularity of online networking, Member Meetups might not return.

Current Approaches

Online site visits

RAILS hosts frequent online site visits. These 30-60 minute sessions take place via Zoom and typically involve the director or main contact for the library. These are tailored to the individual needs of the library. Below is a breakdown of online site visits for FY 2019 and FY 2020.

Type	FY 2019	FY 2020	FY 2021
Academic	4	2	2
Public	19	16	9
School	22	11	16
Special	0	1	2
Total	45	30	29

Figure 3. Online site visits FY 2019-F 20Y21.

Online networking

Over the past three years, we've shifted almost 100% of our networking online. We typically offer this under the heading of RAILS Online Roundtables. These take place on Zoom. Topics are chosen to in order to attract a wide variety of staff from library types. Recent topics include promoting titles virtually for schools, diverse programming, and genrefication.

Category	FY 2019	FY 2020	FY 2021	Total
Events	2	16	10	28
Registrants	125	789	972	1886
Attendees	53	534	604	1191

Figure 4. Online networking events for FY19-FY21.

Outreach to networking groups and professional collaborations

RAILS has around 80 active networking groups. As part of our engagement efforts, we offer these groups benefits such as conference calling info, email lists, Zoom licenses. RAILS staff are also currently engaged in a [program to visit networking groups online](#). There are groups represents all different library types.

As part our engagement RAILS works closely with professional organizations like ILA, IACRL, SLA Illinois, and AISLE. In the past, we have co-sponsored events, cross-promoted opportunities, and offered these groups RAILS resources.

Email lists

RAILS hosts over 80 job/topic/region specific email lists. These are one of the main communication channels for our members and one of the best ways for us to engage them. RAILS increased subscribers for all lists in 2020 by around 25%. For more statistics, please see [RAILS Email List Usage 2017-2020](#).

RAILS also uses other external email lists – such as the AISLE, SLA Illinois, and IACRL email lists – for engaging libraries.

Social media

Another way that we engage our individual staff at member libraries is through social media efforts. Over the past year, we've launched new efforts including our Thursday morning 10 Question/This or That survey and Friday morning Show & Tell activity. The RAILS Minute is another engagement feature that allows us to speak directly to a wider audience.

Future Approaches

More direct outreach to non-directors

In conversations with library staff, it is apparent that many non-director staff are unfamiliar with the system or what it can offer. In the future, we'd like to offer more department level training and more onboarding resources that members can print or share with their new staff.

More short video

As more of our member libraries have become adept at creating short videos for their patrons, RAILS would also like to offer more video options for members. These could be in the form of instructional videos or possibly aimed at engaging members in more entertaining ways.

More coordination of networking groups

With so many networking groups meeting online, it makes sense that RAILS would coordinate more events and programs with networking groups. We would also like to offer them more outlets to share and talk about what is happening in their libraries.