



TESOL Connections

Keeping English language professionals connected

TESOL Board Connect: From Crab Hats to the TESOL Board

by [Tamara Jones](#)



If you were to travel back 20 years in time and happened to be wandering the halls of the 2002 TESOL Convention at the Salt Lake City convention center, you would see a younger version of me sitting at a table in the exhibit hall smiling gamely and wearing...a crab on my head. How did I end up in such a strange state? Well, I was serving as a volunteer team leader for the next TESOL Convention in Baltimore in 2003, and one of my duties was to help create some buzz about it. I had no idea at the time, as I sat behind the Baltimore 2003 desk wearing a crustacean hat and feeling slightly foolish, that I was contributing to TESOL in an essential and valued way.

While it's true that TESOL has a core group of fantastically competent and enthusiastic staff members who attend to the day-to-day business of running the association, a significant amount of work also gets done by volunteers. Volunteers serve on committees, they read proposals and articles, they write reports, they edit newsletters, they monitor social media posts, they recruit other volunteers, they plan professional development...the list of different ways that members support TESOL is seemingly endless. Simply put, TESOL could not exist without such a large, energetic, committed group of volunteers.

In fact, though I only had to wear the crab hat once, I went on to volunteer for TESOL in a variety of forms. From my very first interest section open meeting in 2001 where I expressed a casual interest in being a part of the action to yesterday evening when I joined a Zoom meeting of the Membership Professional Council, I've had the good fortune to be involved in many aspects of the organization. I wish could say that my motivation for devoting so much of my precious free time to TESOL has been entirely altruistic. It's certainly true that I believe strongly in the mission of the organization and have a desire to help keep TESOL alive and healthy through my own small efforts. However, if I had to really boil down *why* I have leaned into the volunteer opportunities that have presented themselves, it's been because it has been good for my career. I met my future boss as I was wearing that crab hat in Salt Lake City. She wandered by, asked if I lived in Maryland, and encouraged me to apply as an adjunct. Twenty years later, I am the associate director of the program, and I have that crab hat to thank! Through volunteering, I've also made professional connections that have led to publishing opportunities.

For example, I was introducing an academic session I had organized in my capacity as an interest section chair, and the sight of me reminded a representative from Oxford University Press that I had submitted a proposal to do some writing for them. She emailed me after the conference and invited me aboard the [Q: Skills for Success](#) team. Simply put, so many of the good things that have happened to me professionally have been directly or indirectly related to the volunteering I've done for TESOL.

When I was at the Leadership Luncheon at TESOL in Pittsburgh this past spring, I was surrounded by fellow volunteers. I took the opportunity to ask a few of them why they were so generous with their time, and the answers really varied. Some people talked about wanting to “give back” to an organization which they felt had provided opportunities and professional development for them. They also talked about the value of supporting a group that supports the people doing the work in our field. Others mentioned a desire to shape the future direction of the association. They described feeling passionately about wanting to make sure that TESOL continued to serve specific populations or ensuring specific topics are given attention in presentations and publications. And many of them said they volunteer so they can make connections with other professionals in the field. These connections can happen locally, at the affiliate level, or internationally, through interest sections and professional councils.

All of these reasons resonate with me, too. I love the feeling of satisfaction I get from knowing that I am a part of an association that is actively doing something to support teachers all over the world. I also have enjoyed being able to put my stamp on the conference schedule by being a proposal reader and strand coordinator for the convention. As well, I have made so many wonderful friends through my various volunteer roles, many of whom I have been in touch with for many years. There are just so many upsides to serving as a TESOL volunteer.

It's true that volunteering can be time-consuming and decidedly unglamorous. Attending meetings on Saturdays, crawling around on my floor physically piecing together a conference schedule (in the old days), and finding time to read submissions to TESOL publications has occasionally involved some personal sacrifice. However, I can honestly say that I have gotten more out of volunteering for TESOL than I have contributed.

If you are reading this and thinking, “I have some time and I could wear a crab hat,” then volunteering for TESOL might be for you. If you are interested but hesitant, I encourage you to start small. Serve as an [award reviewer](#) or submit an article to an [interest section newsletter](#) or [affiliate newsletter](#). You can find out about some of the different opportunities [here](#). There are so many ways to get your feet wet, and almost none of them involve fishy headwear.

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