

Future Perfect Presidential Task Force

Envisioning ALA's Governance in the 21st Century

Introduction

By the time it approves its next strategic plan, the American Library Association will have addressed the concerns and recommendations described in this report.

Background

Rapid and widespread communication has transformed how institutions throughout our society operate. In recognition of these changes, at its 2008 Midwinter Meeting the American Library Association approved virtual participation in most of its committees and working groups. This proved timely, especially when the downturn in the national economy dramatically affected funding for travel by library staff.

The structure and functioning of ALA's Council, with a culture that reflects its commitment to freedom of speech and inclusiveness, and a broad view of the issues that affect libraries and those who work in them, has been largely unchanged for many years. A presidential Council Effectiveness Task Force, led by former ALA president Jim Rettig, is examining the Council's schedule, the structure of its sessions, and its operation and modes of communication. This task force will recommend ways for Council to be more productive and responsive to the concerns of membership.

ALA President Roberta Stevens asked a separate group, the ALA Future Perfect Presidential Task Force: Envisioning ALA's Governance in the 21st Century, to undertake a "blue sky" approach in recommending a potential governing body of the future.

Charge

The ALA Future Perfect Presidential Task Force includes Brett Bonfield (chair), Kawanna Bright, Margaux DelGuidice, Candice Mack, Ross Singer, and Rachel Van Noord. We began our work with a blank slate, charged only with answering the following question:

If there were no governing body currently in place, what structure would you envision that reflects ALA's goal of an engaged and collaborative membership, the effective use of new technologies, and the changes in outlook and expectations occurring with the new generation of people working in libraries?"

While the Council Effectiveness Task Force was charged with making recommendations for action by Council, the Future Perfect Task Force was charged with issuing an “idea paper” intended to begin the discussion of potential alternatives for the governance of ALA in the 21st century. We were given a spring 2011 deadline so there would be sufficient time for our recommendations to be reviewed by ALA’s Council, divisions, and round tables prior to the Annual Conference in New Orleans.

Recommendations: What and Why, but not How

None of the members of the Future Perfect Task Force have ever served on Council, and none of us were familiar with ALA governance when we joined the Task Force. This was by design, not by accident. The goal for our group was to focus on the possible, not on the realistic, on what changes to ALA’s current governance structure seem likely to result in:

1. A more engaged and collaborative membership;
2. More effective use of current and emerging technologies;
3. An association whose governance reflects the outlook and expectations of younger or newer library workers, and anticipates the needs of future library workers.

We view our limited experience with ALA, the small size of our group, our relatively short time frame, and our lack of authority as advantages. While we have spent some time thinking about *how* the changes we are proposing might be implemented, we have spent most of our time identifying *what* changes to its current governance structure would transform ALA into a more effective organization and explaining *why* these specific changes are important. Our hope is that those who have the power to make these changes will initiate a conversation about our recommendations with everyone whose work in libraries, or on behalf of libraries and library users, would be affected if these changes were instituted. Specifically, we hope that ALA’s elected officials and professional staff, in the course of drafting and prior to approving the association’s next strategic plan, will address each of the concerns and recommendations described in this report.

The Future Perfect Presidential Task Force proposes changes in the following areas

1. Revising requirements and member options associated with **conferences**
2. Merging **council** and the executive board
3. Committing to **diversity** through resource allocation and structural change
4. Integrating ALA with its **state chapters**
5. Increasing **transparency**, accessibility, and open communication
6. Legitimizing governance by increasing **voting** percentages and member engagement

Section 1: The Future of Conferences in Relation to ALA Governance

By the time it approves its next strategic plan, ALA will have investigated alternative means for member participation in conferences on the local, state and national levels.

Recommendations

1. ALA should provide more options for virtual conference attendance by taking advantage of contemporary communications technology.
2. Live video and audio streaming, and archives of all conference sessions, should be provided for free.
3. In order to keep travel costs low, conferences should be hosted in additional cities and sites.

Conference attendance provides professional rejuvenation, increases overall efficiency by helping best practices to proliferate, and fosters increased member participation in professional organizations. Looking towards the future of the American Library Association, it is apparent that conference attendance and participation is a vital component necessary for its survival as a viable source of support for all sectors of librarianship across the country. Unfortunately, given present and foreseeable financial constraints, conference attendance across all sections of ALA is in jeopardy. As budget cuts are now the reality in all libraries, many librarians are faced with deciding whether to pay for conference and travel expenses “out of pocket” or to forgo the conference entirely.

If ALA members are willing to incur conference costs on their own, without financial assistance from their employers, then the option of exploring additional cities to host conference will help to offset travel costs for participants. Additionally, exploring the option of providing free video and audio archives of all conference sessions will help to alleviate the fiscal issues surrounding conference attendance.

Despite ongoing issues with funding, conference attendance is imperative across all levels of membership. Members of ALA that do not normally interact with the governing body of the organization have the chance during conferences to meet their elected leaders and participate in governance processes. This “face time” has the potential to draw both newer and established members into the inner circle of governance, thereby encouraging members to become active participants in ALA —to go beyond the passive membership of simply paying annual dues. The invigorating atmosphere of a highly participatory, empowering conference provides multiple avenues for increased participation: volunteering to serve on committees; increased interest in elections; and the possibility for more members running for office. An example of such a unifying experience is the “All Members Meeting” at the annual conference. The following suggestions would offer financial relief for members looking to participate in conference activities.

1. ALA should provide more options for virtual conference attendance by taking advantage of contemporary communications technology

- Technology can be considered useful and innovative if people actually use it. There are numerous options that can be used to broadcast conference recordings in real-time to participants that are unable to attend ALA Conferences.
- A hybrid model of physical and virtual attendance would be ideal, with approximately equivalent numbers of participants using either mode:
 - The idea of a hybrid model of conference attendance facilitates flexibility, increases option for time management, and has cost saving benefits.
 - If many members took advantage of the virtual attendance option, it would allow for the possibility of coordination with other librarians in their town, state, or region to participate in virtual viewings and activities.
 - The hybrid model also allows for the option of personal, private participation in, and viewing of, the conference, potentially for continuing education credit.

2. Live video and audio streaming, and archives of all conference sessions, should be provided for free

- Currently, most archives of conference sessions at all ALA sponsored sessions need to be purchased on CD after the conference has ended.
- ALA could stream the sessions live and in real-time, enabling participants in the conference to view sessions either individually or alongside their colleagues.

3. In order to keep travel costs low, conferences should be hosted in additional cities and sites

- Conferences that are not as expansive as ALA Annual, such as the Midwinter Conference, provide valuable opportunities for networking and professional advancement.
- The cost of housing and “movement” in major tourist cities can be expensive.
- Exploring alternative cities in the same geographical locations or general areas may provide relief for some members.
- The requirement to spend eight or more days per year in tourist destinations limits the pool of potential Council candidates. Less expensive to attend conferences would enable otherwise qualified candidates to run for ALA’s governing body.

The economy has dealt a serious blow to all sectors of librarianship; due to financial constraints, many librarians are no longer able to participate in ALA conferences. Enabling high conference participation, by offering virtual or lower cost options, is a necessity for ALA governance to remain viable within the library community.

Section 2: Merging Council and the Executive Board

By the time it approves its next strategic plan, ALA will have investigated an alternative governance structure that unifies the Executive Board and Council, consolidating their two separate functions into a single governing body.

Recommendations

1. Eliminate ALA Council and expand the Executive Board, bringing greater efficiency to the organization as a whole.
2. Offer more ballot measures and provide more frequent voting opportunities, facilitating direct participation by ALA members rather than representative participation.

The current governance structure of ALA, made up of both a Council and an Executive Board, seems unnecessarily cumbersome given the technologies currently available to facilitate communication among the membership. It also seems that the size of Council negatively impacts its ability to help ALA act nimbly in the face of the constantly evolving information landscape.

A larger Executive Board, with an expanded charge, could establish a Committee on Policy that approves or rejects minor policy changes, and also facilitates direct voting by the membership on significant policy changes. Given current communications technology, voting on ballot measures could even occur more than once a year.

The proposed Executive Board would include 24 members: the 4 Officers of the Association, 12 representatives from ALA's divisions (one member from each, including the new division on diversity and libraries), 6 members representing the state associations, and 4 at-large members. Such a board would not be intended to function as a proxy for the entire membership; its way of representing member interests would be to go directly to members, using frequent ballot measures to engage the entire membership on important issues pertaining to policy and major operations decisions.

In addition to giving each member an opportunity to be heard on issues of significance to the organization, this action would also streamline the voting process by reducing the number of candidates on the ballot each year. As noted elsewhere in this document, this may have a positive impact on voter participation, further increasing member participation.

Streamlining the governance structure in this way could also encourage additional efficiencies for annual conferences:

- Committed members of ALA that are currently participating as Councilors would be able to direct their efforts to specific projects and committees, moving the 'boots on the ground' work of the Association forward.
- Additional time would be available in the conference program, allowing members to participate in more sessions or meetings, or allowing ALA to reduce the length of the conference.
- The all-ALA meetings could be given new life, and perhaps even expanded to fill the slots of past Council meetings, giving members a chance to make their voice heard in a public forum.

A strong, efficient governance structure is necessary for ALA's continued success. By merging the Council and Executive Board, while utilizing processes for engaging the membership in critical decisions, ALA has an opportunity to increase organizational efficiencies while pursuing additional direct member feedback.

Section 3: Committing to Diversity Through Resource Allocation and Structural Change

By the time it approves its next strategic plan, ALA will have investigated the steps necessary to charter an Association for Diversity and Libraries, a new division of ALA. Membership in this division should be free with ALA membership.

Recommendations

1. ALA should initiate a study, organized and led by all relevant stakeholders, into the possibility of creating a division within ALA that supports diversity and libraries.
2. The structure and goals for this newly established division, as well as its relationship to existing offices, affiliates, conferences, and initiatives should be determined by its member organizations and individual members.
3. The funds for establishing this division, along with the financial and staffing resources necessary for it to succeed and grow, should become one of ALA's central priorities.
4. Membership in this division should be free with ALA membership.

An enormous amount of influence within ALA is concentrated within its divisions. The recommendation for a new Association for Diversity and Libraries recognizes the superb work being done by ALA's Office for Diversity and existing organizations, including AILA, APALA, BCALA, CALA, the Diversity Council, the GLBT Round Table, and Reforma, as well as the Joint Conference of Librarians of Color and the National Diversity in Libraries Conference, and the Spectrum Scholars program. The idea is to make sure these groups and initiatives have the financial means, ALA staff support, and other resources that accompany recognition at the division level.

The volunteers and staff who are already working in behalf of diversity and libraries are accomplishing a great deal with budgets that are sparse even by library association standards. Therefore, two key elements must be present in creating and establishing this division: self-determination and sufficient funding. Forming a division that is greater than the sum of its parts is a difficult task given the success of the different groups that will be working together in its realization. Only by providing sufficient funds and full autonomy will ALA be able to benefit fully from these groups' work.

In addition, ALA's other divisions must be fully committed to diversity and to the new Diversity and Libraries Division. Just as the divisions that are devoted to types of libraries or roles within libraries do not abrogate their responsibilities to offer management opportunities and guidance because ALA has a division devoted to Library Leadership and Management, so must ALA's other division be prepared to work harder and do more in collaboration with the members of this new division.

While this report focuses more on what we recommend and why, in discussions with colleagues we have repeatedly been drawn into discussions on how to fund this recommendation. Some possibilities include seed funding from foundations, other ALA divisions committing a portion of their dues to supporting this new division, fundraising events, and optional or sliding scale dues after an appropriate period of time has elapsed.

Section 4: Integrating ALA with its State Chapters

By the time it approves its next strategic plan, ALA will have investigated ways in which ALA and state library associations can present a seamless user experience for their members.

Recommendations

1. Enable members to join ALA and their state library association at the same time.
2. Ensure that ALA and state library associations are working together, providing a unified voice in pursuing advocacy and in providing services to their members.
3. Collaborative efforts by ALA and state library associations should always strengthen both parties in the partnership.

While much of this recommendation is not within ALA's direct control, it is a recommendation that ALA can influence and seek to implement. However, we believe looking at it from an institutional perspective can be a distraction. Instead, we believe the most important perspective in evaluating this recommendation is the user perspective. If we had the power to reconfigure ALA—if there were no governing body currently in place—we would create a structure that seamlessly integrated with state library chapters.

In the current fiscal environment, resource constraints are a reality for all library institutions, including individual libraries, cooperatives, state libraries, state chapters, and national membership associations. Each is under pressure to provide financial justification

for its activities and the ways in which its funding allocations serve its constituents. The ability to collaborate, to deliver a clear advocacy message and a coordinated portfolio of services, has never been more important. This is not to suggest that creativity, innovation, and even dissent should be stifled, only that these activities can be conducted in an environment in which public and member convenience is prioritized: how membership dues are divided is an active concern for a relatively small percentage of members; the ease with which we can join and learn about our professional associations affects all of us.

Local identification is also a way to increase loyalty by decreasing mental, emotional, and even geographic distance. Communication technologies effectively eliminate boundaries as we establish our professional peer groups, but the attention they require—the time we spend on email, social networks, and other communication platforms—can also reduce the time we spend forming local allegiances, putting a premium on using the time we devote to face-to-face interaction and encouraging us to limit ourselves to activities that promise a high return on the time we invest in them.

Having to navigate multiple hierarchies and organizational structures in order to spend time collaborating with people who work nearby can feel wasteful and increasingly frustrating.

Just as library-as-place can become even more important in a digital age, library association (as a verb) can become more important as well. How can ALA help us find each other? The Special Libraries Association model suggests a possibility; adapting this for ALA would mean including one state chapter membership free with membership in its national organization. This is just one of many possibilities, but identifying the steps necessary to provide an option like this one to ALA members seems like a useful place to start.

Section 5: Increasing Transparency, Accessibility, and Open Communication

By the time it approves its next strategic plan, ALA will have documented ways in which to expand on its commitment to transparency, accessibility, and open communication.

Recommendations

1. Provide streaming access to meetings.
2. Streamline processes related to committee participation.
3. Prioritize a culture of transparency and candor.

Throughout its history, ALA has done much to increase access to important information of the organization, making key documents, meeting minutes, and voting records available to the public via ALA.org. The recommendations in this section push ALA farther, to strive toward “the free flow of information within an organization and between the organization and its stakeholders.”¹ In other words, transparency is about ensuring that the right information is accessible to the right person at the right time. In this context, open communication is key to the long-term success and strength of the Association.

1. Provide streaming access to meetings

For a variety of reasons, it is simply not feasible to expect all members to attend all of the major ALA conferences. Travel budgets are shrinking for most members, a trend unlikely to change in the near future. Yet, unless a member is able to appear in person, they will be excluded from the decision-making processes of the organization (or even the opportunity to participate in question and answer sessions), resulting in a further sense of alienation and a de facto split between “haves” and “have nots.”

Instead, if division, committee, round table, and council/board meetings were streamed (whether video, audio or even scribed text), this would enable far greater democratic participation in the work of the Association and allow for more open communication between members regardless of their location. Members unable to attend conferences, for reasons outside of their control, would not have their voices, ideas, and opinions go unheard.

The technical requirements that would be necessary to provide this service are well within ALA’s reach: a webconferencing/streaming service, broadband access available at every meeting, and basic training on the technology for meeting organizers and participants. Additional, non-technical requirements include moderators to guide and focus the discussion, scribes to provide a real-time transcript to offset any potential audio/video streaming difficulties, and an archival preservation strategy.

It is important that the streaming policy enacted be consistent across ALA, but the ensuing policy must be flexible enough that individual groups can provide tailored strategies and solutions.

2. Streamline processes related to committee participation

Members encounter several challenges when they volunteer to participate on ALA committees, including getting approved to serve on a committee, raising issues to the rest of the membership in a timely way, and determining which committees have already served their useful life. These challenges decrease access to committees and have a negative impact on member participation in ALA.

¹ Definition of transparency from *Transparency: how leaders create a culture of candor*, (2008)

These issues are interrelated and could be solved if ALA took a marketplace approach to establishing and maintaining committees. A standard process to appoint committee members and committee chairs would also greatly improve the committee experience. For example, if a committee can't find members, it should be weeded out of existence. If it is not, ALA members are likely to become resentful as they find themselves compelled to participate in committees they had no interest in joining in the first place. Additionally, there should be a standard point at which committees with too much work are allowed to grow and split when necessary, especially when there are members who have been waiting for years for an opportunity to contribute to the committee's work.

Finally, the process by which committees can bring resolutions to the general membership should be streamlined. Currently, after a recommendation has been formulated, committee members must find a Council member to introduce the resolution, nominating it to the executive council. If passed, the resolution is then forwarded on to the executive council for further action. We believe that at least one step in this process should be eliminated, increasing communication between the membership and the organization's top decision-makers.

3. Prioritize a culture of transparency and candor

The emergence of new technologies means that more information is available than ever before—even when it's not meant to be. With this in mind, it is important for ALA, an association that emphasizes free and open access to information, to further develop its culture of transparency, modeling the culture of openness that's needed to navigate the technological availability of any and all information, regardless of whether it is intended for a public audience or not. The development of this culture should be a core value at ALA's highest levels, and all members should be given opportunities to articulate and rectify situations in which ALA is *not* acting transparently by making the information of the organization more accessible. Some of this can be accomplished through additional structural changes, but without commitment from ALA's leaders and members, a truly transparent culture will not be attainable. While it is impossible to mandate culture, the Association can emphasize the importance of transparency as a key leadership quality and put mechanisms in place that enable ALA members to publicly alert others when impediments to transparency, accessibility and open communication are identified.

ALA has done impressive work in the area of transparency, but more can be done to reduce barriers for members who wish to participate in meetings and as committee members; additionally, ALA has an opportunity to establish itself as an organization with a culture of transparency and candor that goes beyond making information available. ALA can and should serve as a model organization in which any and all information is available to anyone at any time.

Section 6: Legitimizing Governance by Increasing Voting Percentages and Member Engagement

By the time it approves its next strategic plan, ALA will have investigated alternative protocols, procedures, and incentives to increase active member participation that goes beyond the basic dues payment.

Recommendations

1. Reconfigure and divide the ballot to increase the percentage of members who are engaged in the voting process and registering their votes.
2. Merge Council and the Executive Board, enabling members to research and connect with candidates and their platforms.
3. Increase the amount of publicity devoted to “getting the word out” about voting and its importance in relation to the future of the organization.

Despite its rich history and many successes, ALA has a dismal history when it comes to its members exercising their right to vote, potentially calling into question the legitimacy of ALA’s governing bodies and its elected representatives. How viable is ALA if an overwhelming majority of its members do not vote for the governing body that is supposed to be representative of all ALA members?

In 2010, 20.10% of 55,330 eligible voters cast ballots in the election. In 2011, that percentage decreased to 18.18% of 52,901 eligible voters. Despite publicity efforts, including email and social networking alerts, voter participation remains extremely low.² In addition, there are always a large number of members who login to vote but never cast a ballot: this year, 10,990 people logged in but only 9,613 ballots were cast.

With a ballot that includes over 200 candidates, voting in an ALA election is a lengthy and time-consuming process. The physical act of casting a full ballot of votes can take multiple hours, not including the time that many members must reserve to educate themselves about each candidate’s qualifications and platform. When polled on why they are not taking the time to register their votes, many ALA members report a disconnect between knowing the candidates and understanding what the candidates propose to do, if elected.³ If most Council members are elected with 2,000–3,000 votes,⁴ approximately 3% of eligible votes, are they truly representing the voice of all ALA Members?

1. Streamline and Divide The Ballot

² <http://americanlibrariesmagazine.org/news/ala/make-your-mark-ala-vote-2011-election>

³ <http://lifeinoleg.com/librarianship/nonvoterssurvey-result>

⁴

http://www.ala.org/ala/aboutala/governance/alaelection/2011/2011%20council__large_.pdf

- Reorganize the voting ballot so members have the opportunity to quickly locate candidates whose qualifications or interests match those of the voter, such as geographical area and division. Initial work in this area was piloted by the Young Librarian’s Task Force, who created a list of candidates, their qualifications, and their platform that was sortable and more easily scanned than the official ALA ballot.
- Provide a separate ballot, at a different time of the year or at the beginning of voting cycle, that is to be used only for electing the President and other officers.
- Require that each candidate record a short video that clearly outlines the candidate’s background and voting platform. Post these videos on *ALACONnect* well in advance of the election and publicize the presence of these videos.

2. Reorganize Governance

- Merging Council and the Executive Board will streamline the voting process, allowing for a reduction in the amount of candidates on the ballot, perhaps through a more formal or decentralized nominating process. This would reduce the amount of time that it takes to register votes, allowing members to focus more on researching candidates and casting educated, informed ballots.

3. Public Relations, Outreach, and Incentives

- Beginning at least two months before the election, ALA should sponsor “Meet the Candidates” webinars, focused on geographical locations and divisions. This would allow members to electronically ask questions in real-time and associate a face, qualifications, and ideas with a name on the ballot.
- ALA should sponsor public service announcements about the importance of voting, which could be posted on social media sites and the ALA home page. Potential partners include the New Members Round Table, ALA officers, and division leaders.
- ALA should offer rewards for members with regular voting records, perhaps in the form of recognition or a small portion of dues relief. ALA might also investigate potential incentives for staff or elected representatives if target voting percentages are reached.

Increasing voter turnout is crucial for the continuing existence of ALA as a powerful, stable library advocacy organization. By providing members with better tools to express themselves and make informed choices, ALA has the opportunity to increase member participation and loyalty.