FAQ: E-Participation in ALA committees and similar bodies
16 June 2010

1. **Are ALA committees (and other groups) required by ALA policy to meet face-to-face twice annually?**
    <u>No</u>. A thorough search of current ALA policy reveals no such requirement. This is widespread assumption, based on many decades of actual practice, established in a time where there were few other viable options.

2. **Do the ALA Constitution and Bylaws address committees?**
    - The <u>ALA Bylaws, Article VIII</u> establish a general framework for ALA/Council and Joint committees – including their authorization by Council, the role of the Committee on Organization, the appointment process and other aspects.
    - It authorizes the ALA Executive Board, as well as committees, to take votes *"by mail, electronic system, or conference call, provided that all members are canvassed simultaneously.…"*
    - It also places a limitation on the authority of committees: *"No committee shall incur expense on behalf of the Association except as authorized, nor shall any committee commit the Association by any declaration of policy."*
    - It establishes ALA Council as the appointing authority for [ALA] standing and special committees, but authorizes the ALA Executive Board to establish "interim committees."

3. **Does the ALA Policy Manual provide any rules for committees?**
    - **Policy 6.6** defines various types of committees – standing, special, ad hoc – and various kinds of committees – advisory, coordinating, interdivisional, joint.
    - **Policy 6.6.3** establishes a Leadership Development Program for ALA Committees through the authorization of interns.
    - **Policy 6.7** authorizes the formation of subcommittees by the parent committees *"…to carry out specific duties related to the charge of the parent group."* Subcommittees are appointed by the chair of the parent group (committee) but *"are not limited to members of the parent committee."* Subcommittees do <u>not</u> have a separate life but must report to the parent committee and may be abolished by the parent committee.
    - **Policy 6.5 Units** also includes language about committees, explicitly excluding them from the definition of "unit" but noting that, like Divisions and Round Tables, they are bound by the Association's Constitution, Bylaws and Policies.   Policy 6.5 also notes the body that creates a subcommittee is responsible for ensuring that that subcommittee works within the framework provided by the ALA Constitution, Bylaws and Policies.

4. **Does ALA have an "open meetings" policy?**
    <u>Yes</u> – for meetings at conferences <u>and</u> for meetings and activities taking place – face-to-face <u>or</u> virtually – outside of conference.
    - **Policy 6.17 Open Activities** reads: *"All activities of the committees, boards, etc. of the American Library Association and its units should be conducted as openly as feasible. Therefore, it shall be the policy of the American Library Association that all governance related activities, sponsored by the ALA or one of its units, taking place outside of official meetings should be accessible to the*

membership of the sponsoring body." Note that "activities" such as discussion lists and blogs, which do not meet the definition of "meeting" [**Policy 7.4.1**] are covered under the "open activities" policy.

- **Policy 7.4.2** reads: *"Notice of meetings held outside of Annual Conference and Midwinter Meeting must be announced ten days prior to the meeting and the results of the meeting must be made public no fewer than 30 days after the meeting's conclusion. Reports of meetings held outside of Annual Conference and Midwinter Meeting should convey a summary of the discussion of each item considered by the assembly and the decision made."* The ten-day notice policy is waived for a meeting necessitated by an emergency. [**Policy 7.4.3**]
- **Policy 7.4.4** reads: *"All meetings of the American Library Association and its units are open to all members and to members of the press. Registration requirements apply. Closed meetings may be held only for the discussion of matters affecting the privacy of individuals or institutions."*

5. **Does the ALA Policy Manual provide rules for participation on ALA committees by individual members?**
   - **Policy 4.5.1** requires that, except where exceptions are specifically authorized, you must be a member of the "parent body" (ALA, Division, Round Table) which appoints the committee.
   - **Policy 4.5.2** defines participation: *"Members of all ALA and unit [Division, Round Table] committees, task forces, and similar bodies are expected to participate in the work of the group. Participation includes both attendance at synchronous meetings scheduled in conjunction with the Midwinter Meeting or Annual Conference or at other times during the year, as well as contributions through asynchronous communication methods that may be utilized by the group outside of formal meetings. Attendance at meetings may be in person, or through other means that enable synchronous communication."* Note that no distinction is made between members participating physically in synchronous meetings and members participating virtually in synchronous meetings.
   - **Policy 4.5.3** requires a member of a committee or similar body to provide an explanation to "the committee chair or unit secretary" if they cannot participate and states that non-participation without explanation may constitute grounds for removal from the group.

6. **How does ALA policy define a "meeting?"**
   "Meetings" are defined and differentiated from other types in activities (e.g. discussion lists) in **Policy 7.4.1**: *"A meeting is an official assembly, for any length of time following a designated starting time, of the members of any board, committee, task force, commission, etc., during which the members do not separate except for a recess and in which the assembly has the capacity to formalize decisions. Conference calls, Internet chat sessions (and their equivalents), and in-person meetings are recognized as meetings subject to the open meetings policy (ALA Policy 7.4.4)...."*

7. **Is a quorum required in order for official business to be transacted at a "meeting" (see definition above)?**
   Yes. In the absence of specific Bylaws provisions, parliamentary procedure (Sturgis) defines a quorum as a majority of members. *"If a quorum is not present, the presiding officer may call the meeting to order, but the organization may not transact business in the absence of a quorum. However, agenda items that do not require action may be dealt with, such as hearing reports and programs...."* (Sturgis, Chapter 13, Quorum) The ALA Constitution defines the quorum for ALA Council and ALA Bylaws define the quorum for the ALA Membership Meeting.

8. **Are there other policies affecting committees?**
   While not technically a "policy," each body created by ALA or an ALA Division and Round Table has a specific charge. The committee, task force or other body is charged or formally instructed by the body that authorizes it – and is responsible to the creating/authorizing body for the fulfillment of its charge. It may be charged to take specific actions, to study specific issues and recommend actions, etc.

Note that committees and other similar bodies authorized by ALA Divisions or Round Tables may also be affected by the Bylaws of the Division or Round Table of which they are a part. Those Bylaws are available on individual Division or Round Table sections of the ALA website.

9. **What does all this mean for committees and their members?**
   - Transparency is an important Association value. A draft interpretation of the "open meetings/open activities" policies from the Task Force on Electronic Member Participation (2008-2009) said, in part: *"…No member should ever feel that there are Association-related decisions made where he or she was prevented from finding information, raising concerns or expressing opinions.…"*
   - No ALA policy requires all committees, task forces or other similar bodies to meet at ALA Annual Conference and/or the ALA Midwinter Meeting. The decision to do so relates to (a) the specific nature of a particular group and its work, (b) available alternatives.
   - Committees and similar bodies have members. Period. There are not separate "classes" or categories of members – "real" and "virtual." All members of a group are required to participate in the work of the group.

10. **Does that mean a committee can, based on the nature of its work and available tools, choose not to meet at ALA Annual Conference and/or the ALA Midwinter Meeting?**
    Yes. It is possible for a committee to decide that it needs to meet synchronously and face-to-face once annually and conduct all other work "virtually," or to decide that all its work may be accomplished virtually – using both synchronous and asynchronous methods, or to decide that the nature of its work is such that face-to-face meetings are required twice annually, with or without significant work accomplished electronically between meetings.

11. **Do problems arise when a committee makes that decision on its own?**
    Potentially, yes. (a) All committees and similar bodies are responsible to the creating body – and that creating body may have a different understanding of the nature of the work to be done. (b) If a committee decides to meet virtually this year – but face-to-face next year, and so forth, that potentially creates confusion for both the appointing officer or body and the individual being appointed. A member might volunteer for a particular committee on the understanding that the committee would complete all work virtually – only to find that the committee strongly believed that its work should be done face-to-face at conferences.

    In order for both the committee volunteer and the appointing officer to have clarity around expectations, it might be better if the committee and authorizing body agreed on the "terms and conditions" for the work of that committee and provided that information to both potential volunteers and appointing officers.

    - Committee Δ, for instance, might decide that its work was highly consultative, likely to require frequent negotiation of intensely felt differences, and that it often reported at a Council or Executive Board level. Committee A might well determine that its work required face-to-face participation twice annually, as well as frequent electronic participation between conferences.
    - Committee Γ, on the other hand, is focused largely on coordinating the gathering of information. Committee Γ , therefore, might decide that its meetings could effectively be held virtually, in a web-based environment that supported the sharing of documents and desktops, and that face-to-face time could be scheduled, as needed, for discussions with other stakeholders across the Association and for presentation of results. Committee Γ would reserve the ability to hold a meeting (vs. a discussion or program) infrequently, as-needed, at Midwinter or Annual Conference, as determined by its members and the requirements of a specific task.

- Finally, Committee Ω may examine its charge and the nature of its work and determine that one face-to-face meeting/year, at either the Midwinter Meeting or Annual Conference, was required. Other meetings, and work between meetings, would be accomplished using appropriate electronic resources.

12. **What types of tools or structures does ALA make available to committees and other groups to conduct their work?**
    - **ALA Connect** (connect.ala.org) provides both asynchronous (posts, threaded discussion, online documents) and synchronous (group chat) available to all "official" ALA groups – defined as groups to which you must be elected or appointed. ALA Connect member groups <u>also</u> allows any ALA member to start a group in Connect – with access to the same "tools" as "official" groups; these groups may also exist in the formal ALA structure (e.g. discussion groups, interest groups) or may exist only in ALA Connect.
    - ALA has a current license with **iLINC**, an online conferencing service, for four concurrent sessions. iLINC supports VoIP, providing a potentially low-cost option for synchronous meetings. iLINC sessions may be recorded and made available to members.
    - ALA continues to support **OPAL**, another online conferencing service which utilizes VoIP.
    - ALA groups have independently experimented with a wide range of tools to accomplish their work.

    Within the broad framework of ALA policy, there is significant flexibility. As groups move, increasingly, to meeting in virtual space, there is a learning curve. Both members and staff are learning new ways of working collaboratively, of sharing information, and of encouraging and recognizing participation.

13. **Is it <u>routinely</u> possible for groups meeting face-to-face at the ALA Annual Conference or the ALA Midwinter Meeting to include both participants who are physically present and participants who are participating virtually?**
    In the short term, it is not. While ALA routinely "buys out" wireless access at conference centers, the cost of similarly "buying out" wireless access in hotels may be prohibitive – and certainly the combined cost would be very substantial. Even where wireless access is available, <u>full</u> participation by remote participants may require the use of mics and other equipment, adding to the cost. This is, however, an area of rapid change and progress – so what is possible in the future may be substantially better and more cost-effective.

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