

Forward Together
Responses, Questions, and Concerns
ALA Past Presidents

The following notes are synthesized responses of past presidents of ALA who have read and thoughtfully considered the recommendations for ALA reorganization presented in the *Forward Together* document. These comments are meant to build on the important work done by the Steering Committee on Organizational Effectiveness (SCOE) and to offer our insights into aspects that might need reconsideration or revision.

Board of Directors

- The effect of moving policy decisions to a 17-member board will be to concentrate policy-making authority and decision making into the hands of very few people
- Direct election by members presents a high danger of the election's becoming a popularity contest, perhaps largely based on name recognition from social media use. Members will really have no opportunity to see how the nominees perform in a governance situation or how well the nominees demonstrate that they have a broad perspective on the Association and library issues.
- Appointing people to fill in gaps in diversity that emerged from the election is well-intended, but there are serious questions about that approach:
 - Decisions must be made about categories of diversity. Who is determining the categories? Based on what criteria?
 - Who is making these appointments? Isn't that too much influence wielded by a small group? I assume that the existing Board is not appointing new Board members to fill the diversity slots – that's dangerous.
 - If the categories represent visible diversity (e.g., ethnicity, gender, type of library), how will the appointers know about invisible diversity, like diversity of thought or philosophy?
 - Just because someone visibly fits into a category, that does not mean that that person thinks like everyone in that category or everyone in that category thinks the same.
 - If people are appointed based on a perceived gap in diversity, would they feel pressure to make decisions with a focus on that point of view, rather than approaching Board membership as a member of the whole with a responsibility for the whole association, not just one niche?
 - If the nominating committee takes diversity and representation into account in finding candidates and building a slate, isn't it undercutting the nominating committee's work and general membership's wishes to then appoint people to

the Board and committees who were not elected? Isn't that saying the nominating committee did not do a good enough job or the membership at large didn't take diversity into account in their votes?

- Direct election of the Board further marginalizes chapters from having a say in the Board membership. Right now, chapter representatives on Council are explicitly named as candidates for Executive Board and every chapter representative has an equal vote in electing the EB members. With direct election, there is not a guarantee of chapter representation and states with large librarian membership populations have a much better (and unequal) chance to elect their candidates of choice.

Committees

- Five of the six standing committees are all about operations (the one exception is Social Justice). Gaps leap out, because values have largely been left out. Our goal is to be a mission-driven organization, but the mission is not just about operations; it is about libraries and librarianship and the values that they contribute to society – intellectual freedom, ethics, policy, advocacy, international relations, diversity. We also need committees to foster the continuing work of librarians in all types of libraries – awards, literacy, education, accreditation. With the exception of social justice, the heart and soul of the profession have been reduced to an advisory role in this plan.
- The direct election of 2/3 of the members of these committees and the appointment of the other members poses the same problems as direct election of the board of directors (e.g., popularity contest, undue influence of use of social media, problems with appointing for diversity). These topics require extensive knowledge and experience. Some topical areas have round tables that are open to anyone wishing to participate (IRRT, IFRT), others, like Legislation and Literacy, have an Assembly, which is appointed. Most others have no membership bodies, although some coordinating bodies exist across the association. Beyond expertise, actions taken by these core value committees require extensive deliberation across the association. How will that work?
- Since the membership of each committee is 15 members and there's one committee for each area (one committee on Association policy, for example), the result will be a very small pool of decision makers on every new policy or Association priority/action (15 committee members, then probably approval by 17 board members). That's 32 members deciding policy, rather than the large (probably too large) membership of Council. That seems like an unwise concentration of influence and authority.
- ALA Council is important for ALA's democratic process. Certainly Council can be restructured and its agenda can be more deliberative and substantive, but Council is important for a number of reasons:

- Leadership development – Several of ALA’s past presidents would be happy to share their leadership development stories made possible by their membership on Council.
- Involvement of chapter representatives in decision making, rather than simply advising (as they would do in the chapter leadership assembly).
- Opportunities for deliberative discussion of library issues involving a diverse and broad spectrum of the Association, not divided into affinity groups like the leadership assemblies would be.
- The assemblies as proposed would give clear voice to roundtables, chapters, and divisions. The way Council is currently structured, though, is with more than half the membership constituted by at-large representatives. These “generalists” play an essential role weighing the pros/cons/costs/consequences/tradeoffs (deliberative actions) of common concerns across the association. The new structure appears to elevate the role of the differentiated components (divisions, roundtables, chapters, affiliates) of the association and to diminish the role of the integrated aspects (core value areas like Intellectual Freedom, International Relations, Ethics, Policy, Diversity, Literacy, Public Programs, etc). Yet, the strength of our organization is its ability to find common ground on broader issues, like democracy, free expression, equity, etc.—the core values that attract membership and drive national and international leadership as an important voice for libraries and library users in the broader policy discourse.
- The two-year term and allowance of only two terms in a lifetime may present real problems. It takes years to build expertise (in public policy, for example). Such a limitation on participation may result in an ad hoc approach to library and Association issues.

Leadership Assemblies

- Will these be conducted in person? Online? How can they foster ongoing and substantive discussions, especially if online?
- Who really leads, beyond the conveners? How are leaders developed? How will members know enough to be able to select a convener every year?
- Do we really expect widespread participation beyond core members? How will noncore members feel that they have a voice?
- How will leadership assemblies do real work, beyond just gathering input?
- Are the assemblies designed to enable chapters, round tables, divisions, and affiliates to do deeper work about their area? They seem to drive members to focus on one perspective (e.g., a division), rather than bringing the different perspectives to bear on association-wide issues. For example, chapter assemblies would focus on chapter issues

rather than intellectual freedom issues that might be occurring in every chapter and how that issue plays out differently in every state.

- Would it work to have additional assemblies on values and issues (e.g., privacy) and the membership would be made of representatives from chapters, round tables, divisions, and affiliates? This might be an additional structure that would bring us all together to think about and address our values and larger issues.
- How will the work of the assemblies be sustained from year to year so that they offer more than ad hoc conversations?
- How will the recommendations of the assemblies be finalized and the substance of the debate as well as the final decisions be communicated to the Board? What is the timing on this? Will the recommendations go directly to the Board, rather than an appropriate standing committee (if there is one)? Is there a danger of bypassing and undercutting the committees? Will the recommendations have to be prepared before Board face-to-face meetings to allow them to be considered, which means that the assemblies will have to do their work largely online? How is it possible to conduct deep and useful discussions that result in recommended actions/policy in the online environment?
- How will the assemblies be supported by the staff?
- How will average members participate in assemblies? How will they know when they are happening or what the agenda is? How can they offer input, especially if a large number of members are online for the assembly?
- If the affiliate assembly includes AASL affiliates, will AASL still be allowed to have its own Affiliate Assembly?

Divisions

- It's certainly okay to have consolidation of divisions if that's the choice of the members of those divisions.
- It's good to have alignment of dues and structure, but is the division structure limited to advisory groups, working groups, communities of interest, and sections? What about division boards of directors?
- How will a strong central ALA organization relate to the divisions? Will they continue to have separate boards, conferences, etc?

Round Tables

- It is okay to have shared policies and procedures document.
- It's good to have aligned dues structures.
- The round tables are very important for member engagement, because members can find and work with other members in the Association who share their specialized interests and passions. Round tables are the most personal connection that many

members find to ALA, and they are the greatest opportunity for many members to engage in collaborative professional work and learning around specific issues. Setting a minimum number of members to maintain a round table undercuts the value of round tables and devalues the diversity of ALA's membership.

- How will round tables be supported, given minimal involvement now by staff?

Communities of Interest/Practice and Membership Initiative Groups

- How will these work in a new structure?

Advisory Groups

- These are a problem. They seem to be a replacement for committees, but with no clout. The Intellectual Freedom Committee seems to have been reduced to an intellectual freedom advisory group.
- This plan conveys the assumption that interest in intellectual freedom and professional ethics may go away over time, so they don't need a permanent committee. The larger values of the field are the reason that many librarians join the Association. Some librarians may get passionate about finances or advocacy, but others are equally passionate about literacy and intellectual freedom.

ALA Committee on Accreditation

- A lot of work has already been done to make recommendations for restructuring ALA's accreditation program. Please see the recommendations submitted to the Executive Board in July 2016.

Member Engagement and Influencing Policy

- It is quite valuable to seek opportunities for members to get engaged in ALA, to submit ideas and suggested edits to proposed recommendations. However, some cautions need to be considered:
 - Do the members have enough deep involvement in the issue to be able to understand its complexity and offer useful suggestions?
 - Who will follow up with their requests – someone from the group that heard their idea? Who will have time to do that?
 - Members will have a hard time understanding that not every suggestion will be appropriate or acted upon. If the result is different from what the member suggested, that member might think, "They didn't listen to me." To counter that, we need to be very transparent with communication and build trust among members in our representative democracy.

- Many members only get funding if they are on official committees. How will reorganization affect this important incentive for participation?
- What will participation look like in a redesigned organization? What does it mean to increase engagement of members?