SAC message August 19

I am sorry it has taken me so long to get back to you. I have been in and out of town quite a bit this summer. In the last few days, I have taken some time to determine exactly what is going on with SAC and the Non-English Steering TF Recommendation #11, and I now have a better handle on the situation.

From my research (reading the minutes from past meetings, reviewing my own notes from Denver, contacting two former chairs, contacting CCS leaders, etc.), it appears there may have been some miscommunication or misunderstanding between you and SAC. From what I have discovered, SAC has never agreed to form a task force to address Recommendation #11. It has, in fact, declined that request on more than one occasion. Below, I have outlined the timeline as I understand it.

January 2008- At Midwinter in Philadelphia, Recommendation 11 was first discussed at SAC. There was no agreement on creating a task force or any particular action on SAC's part. According to the minutes, a SAC task force wasn't even requested. The committee simply discussed the issue and made suggestions on where the Non-English Steering Committee could seek further information. The committee did express concern that the issues were very broad. Below are the relevant minutes from MW08:

Michelle Robertson from the Steering Committee to Oversee the Implementation of the ALCTS Taskforce on Non-English Access Recommendations came and spoke on recommendation 11 – The needs of Non-English Speakers. There is a link on agenda to the recommendations. One is very specific to SAC : study the need for multi-lingual access in multiple scripts. There is no specific timeline. John Mitchell asked if there is outreach to vendors. Michelle answered that they haven't done that yet, but it is an excellent idea. Qiang stated that this is a very broad issue and wide cooperation is needed. Did she have any specific ideas to carry out this charge? Michelle answered that they will consider what needs aren't being met currently. A question was asked if this was about non-English access. Michelle answered that this was about non-roman access. Linda Gabel stated that we already have a model for bilingual access in North America, and that is Library and Archives Canada. It would be best to link up with our sister organization to see their best practices. John Mitchell wondered if we are moving toward virtual authority file for subjects. Can search in any language for materials in any language? Sounds pie in the sky- is for searchability or retrieval? Which databases are you searching? Michelle answered that the authority records are being addressed separately by MARBI, and Linda added that this topic is coming up in April. David Miller mentioned Access Canada and the Queens Public Library Project as projects that could be drawn on for examples. Also, within CCS, there will be a program at Annual that focuses on multilingual users' needs in public libraries. Topics will include developing a needs survey to be administered to technical services about local populations and services they provide, what they're not able to provide, etc. Michelle said this would be a good place to start for information gathering.

June 2008-- At Annual in Anaheim, the issue came up once more. This time you (Magda) addressed the committee. Despite your request to have SAC create a task force to address Recommendation #11 and some insistence that this was a SAC issue, the committee was not willing to commit itself to working on this recommendation. SAC did not agree to a task force or to any other particular action. In fact, the chair and the committee stated that forming a task force was not the way to proceed.

The committee again expressed concerns that goals were broad, as well as somewhat unclear and conflicting. Particular concern was raise about the difference between understanding users' needs and understanding the actions of libraries. Recommendation #11 was about the needs of users for multi-lingual access, but the task force being requested was to explore the actions of libraries. Some members pointed out that these are not the same things. The request for a "survey of libraries in ALA" was also beyond the scope of anything SAC could hope to accomplish. There is no real infrastructure or support for a work of that magnitude.

While willing to discuss the problem and to make suggestions, SAC did not create a task force, nor did it offer to take responsibility for addressing Recommendation 11. The only action that was mentioned was that perhaps a survey (that was to be conducted by David Miller and Sally Smith) might be relevant to the concerns of the Non-English Steering Committee. That survey, I have since learned, has not been and will not be designed or conducted. That survey was not under the auspices of SAC and so the committee had nothing to do with its actualization or lack thereof.

The relevant section of the Annual 2008 minutes are below:

Magda offered a clarification on what the Non-English Steering Committee asked for at Midwinter regarding Recommendation 11 on subject access. Magda asked that a task force be created to assess the need of library users for multilingual subject access. What is actually going on in libraries-- academic, public, and special libraries-- related to subject analysis? How are we using records from overseas? Are these records translated or left in original script? Magda asked for a survey of libraries in ALA. Could SAC charge a committee or task force to do this? The Steering Committee would be willing to give comment and input, but thinks SAC would be better on contacting user groups.

John Mitchell asked about answers to questions SAC gave Michelle Robertson at Midwinter. Magda replied that their charge is to investigate this in American libraries, and oversee implementation of the recommendation. John Mitchell asked whether the steering committee is asking SAC to modify the charge, and Magda responded no, they are asking for a task force. Asked whether there were any vendor issues, Magda responded that it has not been addressed. Michelle said the wording of Recommendation 11 is about users and their needs, not about what libraries are doing now. Linda Gabel asked whether the steering committee was asking SAC to address the subject access part of a larger question, and Magda answered yes. Michelle said there are already other task forces working on other recommendations, but this part is only about subject access. SAC is the appropriate body concerning subject access, and the steering committee doesn't want to pull people from other groups to do this. David Miller mentioned that he and Sally Smith organized a recent program on multilingual access that didn't focus on subject access, and they are planning a survey. He said perhaps some of the work could be shared, and also suggested reviewing the SAC document on semantic interoperability to find non-U.S. projects. John Mitchell said SAC expected insight from Canada on bilingual access from the steering committee. Magda responded that this should come from a task force. Chris Cronin asked how the steering committee views the charge. Michelle responded that the recommendations were written by a task force that no longer exists. This is the reason for the problem, because the steering committee doesn't know what that group had in mind. Magda said the important thing is to write a clear charge, and strongly believes this is SAC's area. She asked SAC to look at the original report, not the summary. John Mitchell said the recommendation seems to focus on users (non-English speakers), and Magda agreed, but said there is a need to

know what libraries are doing to give us insight about user needs. Linda Gabel brought up David and Sally's draft survey. David is working with someone who has expertise in surveys, and is happy to share the survey. Magda said the steering committee would help work on the survey. Linda asked if David and Sally could finalize the survey, and rather than forming a task force, to look at public libraries first, then see if it can go to other areas. Qiang agreed that this would be the best way to proceed. Joseph Mitchell added that school libraries need this as well.

January 2009 - The topic came up again at Midwinter 09 in Denver. At this point I was on the committee, so I have first hand knowledge of this discussion. At the meeting, the chair stated that you could not attend, but indicated that these issues (see below) needed to be discussed by SAC again. The MW09 minutes related to this are below:

Magda El-Sherbini could not attend, but sent the following items for discussion:

  2.2.1 Task force "to investigate the needs of library users for multilingual subject access in the appropriate script(s), and to propose steps to address those needs.

2.2.2 Investigate how libraries are using records from overseas with subject access in the scripts of those languages.

2.2.3 Comments or questions from the program "Serving the whole community: providing multilingual access in public libraries"

2.2.4 Survey of American libraries providing non-English language subject access

2.2.5 Update on the OCLC terminologies project

Sherman Clarke said he would use the records if he could read the script, but was not sure if scripts in OCLC are used for subject headings. Linda Gabel replied that yes, parallel records from Israel, Germany, etc. are in OCLC. Daniel Joudrey said that these points are unwieldy and broad and seem beyond the scope of what a committee or task force could do. Shannon Hoffman asked whether the issue was 880 fields or parallel records. Linda replied probably both. Shannon Hoffman said her library was using a lot of 880 fields in various languages (non-Latin access to non-name subject headings). Linda did not sense urgency on the part of the committee to follow through on this. SAC supports non-English access, but we don't see how we can further this now. Ed O'Neill added that the VIAF project now includes geographic names, so there's some impact on subjects. David Miller agreed that there aren't well-defined research questions in this list, and suggested that SAC may want to go back to this committee and ask for narrower questions. Linda will communicate with Magda about this. Stephen Hearn said this issue may need to go back to ALCTS.

The issues seemed little changed from the last discussion at Annual in Anaheim. As you can see, SAC for the third time looked at these issues and chose notto form a task force. The committee came to the same conclusion as it had the year before, the questions were far too broad for any reasonable project to be conceived and implemented. The SAC committee did not see how it could contribute to exploring this recommendation further other than making suggestions to the Non-English Steering Committee as to where more information could be gathered and being a sounding board for your actions regarding this recommendation.

July 2009 - The issue was not discussed at the SAC meeting.

From my research into this issue, it appears that SAC has had no plan of action for Recommendation #11. At this point, I am unclear what you want or expect from SAC. SAC has discussed the issue multiple times and has declined your request for a task force at both the Annual 08 and Midwinter 09 meetings. You implied in your email (or I inferred from it) that

SAC had committed to working on this recommendation back in Anaheim, but the minutes and the SAC chair at that time have indicated otherwise.

If your steering committee has narrowed the research questions as suggested by SAC in Denver (and also in Anaheim and Philadelphia), then I could take these narrowed, revised questions back to the committee for discussion. I don't know whether SAC would agree to a creating a TF even then (especially since you've now indicated there is a December 2009 deadline), but I could present them to see if there is willingness to get involved.

If the questions have not changed, then I don't see what else SAC can do, other than to continue to support your steering committee by providing feedback on any documents or plans your steering committee creates. Other than that, I don't foresee any further SAC action.

If you would like to request SAC to create a task force again, you may certainly do so, but until the scope of the project is defined in a manageable and practical way, it is unlikely that SAC will be able to do little more than consult.

Sincerely,
Daniel N Joudrey
Chair, Subject Analysis Committee