



## GODORT: Looking Under the Hood

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Old Blue was a used minivan that my wife and I bought in 2001 in response to the growing demands of a family of five. The center seat had two built-in child seats that could be tucked away neatly when not in use, and the seat could be folded down to create a table for picnics in the car on rainy days. It was a well-loved vehicle with many memories of cross-country trips, camping, kayaking, and moving large furniture.

Our family's last trip in Old Blue was from Pittsburgh International Airport to State College after returning from the 2015 American Library Association meeting in San Francisco. Fifteen years and close to 200,000 miles had finally taken its toll. We heard a pinging sound from under the hood that got louder and louder as we went. A mechanic in Altoona gave us a 50/50 chance of making it home. That sound created much anxiety followed by relief when we finally pulled into our driveway. Now lest you think that I'm a complete pessimist by using this metaphor to discuss our organization, there is actually more to this story, so read on.

### Looking Under the Hood

I assume that you are reading this column, because you care about government information or you may even have some interest in the future of the Government Documents Roundtable (GODORT). If you are not interested in the latter, I would still like to encourage you to continue reading and possibly find ways to engage in this discussion.

I am convinced that the library profession needs an organization that champions government information. As I stated in the close of my last column, our profession needs to have an organization whose singular mission is to inspire government information specialists to develop services and collections. If this is indeed our focus, then we need to develop a *strategy* that will enable us to build a *structure* that we can *support* with our available resources.

### What Is the Best Structure?

For many years I thought that GODORT should be organized around the classic themes of librarianship such as: reference, cataloging, instruction, and collection development. This idea was not unheard of and was actually suggested in 1993.<sup>1</sup> Others have suggested that we organize ourselves around types of government information.

GODORT as it currently stands is a complex hybrid of both of these approaches. For the sake of clarity, I have grouped our organization into five functional categories (see figure 1):

- *Taskforces*: international, federal, state, and local
- *Topical standing committees*: education, cataloging, rare and endangered government documents, and government information for children.
- *Scholarly communication and advocacy*: program, publications, and legislation
- *Internal standing committees*: awards, bylaws, conference, development, membership, and nomination
- *Executive committees*: executive board and steering committee

Why these categories? I hope as you continue to read this column that it will become clearer, but to summarize, I would argue that this framework is based on the complex working relationships of the groups from our documentation. More importantly, it is also based on how leadership and membership of these groups are formed for specific purposes.

### Strategy: Action or Forum

An important consideration as we work toward developing a strategic focus and nimble organization is the tension between seeing ourselves as an action-oriented group and/or a venue to discuss and inform. Our current organizational documentation clearly indicates that both of these are values, but the complexity of our structure, and changes over time have made it difficult to see how these are carried out.

For example, the Policy and Procedures Manual states that the purpose of the taskforce was to provide a “venue to discuss and inform.” However, our bylaws indicate that taskforces were intended to be “action-oriented groups.” So which is it? The answer lies in this complex system of liaisons and committee appointments, as well as some historical background.

Taskforce coordinators, as elected officials, are given the responsibility of assigning liaisons to the standing committees responsible for topics, scholarship, and advocacy. For many years the main focus of taskforce meetings was an update that highlighted the issues relevant to the specific types of government information.

From these taskforce meetings “action-oriented” issues were identified and it was the responsibility of the liaison to



Figure 1. GODORT Organizational Structure

communicate these to the standing committee. I would infer that it was the expectation of those who designed the organization that the liaisons to the committees would also be actively involved in the work of the committee, providing context as they address the specific task identified by the taskforce.

So what happened? Well in short, the awareness mechanism—taskforce updates—were eliminated, making it difficult to find a forum where these issues were discussed. The awareness and action-oriented model that existed was short-circuited and the liaisons became merely communicators.

So am I suggesting that we restart the updates as the solution? Or that we simply eliminate the liaisons, thus creating fewer appointments and demands on our limited resources. Certainly not. Those are only patchwork solutions. This is our opportunity to look afresh at our purpose to see what roles we want to play as an organization. I submit that this will fall on a continuum of awareness and action.

### Structure: Permanence and Flexibility

We currently have an extremely flat organization with many permanent parts. The real question we need to answer is: What parts of our organization need to be permanent and what parts should be flexible? What do I mean by permanence and flexibility?

Permanent structures have common characteristics, including

- a general purpose for existing;
- mechanisms for creating groups to address specific tasks, typically; and
- a complex organizational structure with well-defined roles.

Flexible structures on the other hand have very different features. Often they

- are created for a specific purpose or task;
- have a well-defined duration; and
- are a simple task-oriented group with little organizational structure.

Quite simply, we need to identify what parts of our organization are essential and what can be set up on as-needed basis. So what should be permanent? It all depends on how flat we want our organization, which in turn is dependent upon how involved our members want to be.

## Support

As I stated earlier, our structure and strategies need to match our available resources. GODORT's current structure each year requires us to fill 72 appointed and 29 elected positions from a membership of about 500. We recognize that appointments and elections are important considerations for involvement from our member's institutions; however, I would submit that this is not a sustainable model.

We have talked about virtual meetings as a way to address the challenges of participation. It certainly would provide us with greater flexibility for those who cannot afford to attend Midwinter Meetings. However, I have some concerns about this being seen as the panacea of our organization. We need to be very honest about what we want our purpose to be.

Government information is what makes our brand unique. Our profession already has rich, historical associations that deal with the classic themes of librarianship, often surpassing our own efforts. This is why past leaders in our organization have encouraged us to develop stronger ties with groups like RUSA and ALCTS. What we want to do with this brand is up to our membership.

## Conclusion

My wife and I recently completed the process of replacing Old Blue. Our first thought was to get another minivan, but we began to think about the changes that were occurring in our family. One of our daughters is now in college and two of our teenagers are learning to drive. Given all that, it made more sense to replace the van with a less expensive sedan.

The point of this metaphor is that we still need a structure, but we may need to consider how we have changed as an organization and what role GODORT needs to play in the library profession to determine what our structure should be.

## Reference

1. History of the Government Documents Roundtable (GODORT) of the American Library Association 1972–2002, [http://wikis.ala.org/godort/images/9/98/GODORT\\_history\\_final.pdf](http://wikis.ala.org/godort/images/9/98/GODORT_history_final.pdf); GODORT Policies and Procedures Manual, <http://wikis.ala.org/godort/index.php/PPM>; Oral Histories, [http://wikis.ala.org/godort/index.php/Oral\\_Histories](http://wikis.ala.org/godort/index.php/Oral_Histories). It also included a strong commitment to advocacy for information policy. I confess that advocacy has played a dominant role in GODORT sometimes to the exclusion of those classic librarian themes.

## STATEMENT OF OWNERSHIP, MANAGEMENT, AND CIRCULATION

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