

From the Chair

Hallie Pritchett



Although I have worked in libraries since I was in high school (which was much longer ago than I care to admit), I did not become a librarian until 2007. Why I chose to wait so long before going to library school is a story for another time. But there are some

advantages to working as a student employee and then as a full-time paraprofessional in a large academic library—in my case, the University of Minnesota Libraries—before going to library school. One is that over the years I have done just about everything there is to do in a library. I have shelved books, worked in circulation, answered reference questions, done collection development, worked in technical services, shifted collections, done preservation work . . . the list goes on. As first a branch manager and now as a library administrator, the depth and breadth of my work experience in libraries has been invaluable; my work as a paraprofessional in particular has had a profound impact on how I approach librarianship in general.

Another advantage to having spent so many years as a library paraprofessional is that I got to work with a wide variety of academic librarians and observe how they approached the profession. Some of their activities and attitudes were truly inspiring, while others made me roll my eyes or scratch my head; again, stories for another time. But the one thing that really stood out for me is that regardless of their specialty, all of the librarians I worked with belonged to library associations and were professionally active; everyone regularly attended conferences, published articles, and did presentations. So many of my librarian colleagues belonged to ALA that the libraries on campus were virtually deserted for a week or so every January and June. Granted, such professional development activities were and remain a requirement for continuous appointment there; those who did not meet the requirements for continuous appointment in the allotted time period were let go. Regardless, the message was clear: being a librarian meant that you were committed to remaining professionally active throughout your career. Although my career as a librarian ultimately took me elsewhere, the ideal of being an active professional both within and outside the library in which I work has continued to resonate with me.

I joined ALA while I was in library school and joined MAGIRT when I became the map librarian at the University of Georgia in 2007. When I became UGA's regional depository

coordinator a year later, one of the first things I did was join GODORT. No one told me to do so, nor did GODORT extend me an invitation of any kind. I joined GODORT because in my experience that is what government documents librarians—of which I was now one—were supposed to do. While UGA does not have continuous appointment, they do have a promotions process and as someone who started their professional career a bit later in life, I was anxious to make up for what I viewed as lost time. Also, as Georgia's regional depository coordinator, I felt a certain obligation to be active professionally at the national level. And so I joined GODORT.

As mentioned in my previous From the Chair column, I was not active in GODORT until quite recently. Initially, that did not seem to matter, either to me or to GODORT. I attended a few meetings here and there when I could fit them in around my MAGIRT activities, but because I was also attending the semiannual Depository Library Council meetings, I never felt like I was missing anything. After all, between ALA conferences and DLC meetings (where GODORT also met), I was seeing more or less the same people four times a year. And while calls for volunteers to serve on various committees went out annually, I never felt the urge to sign up; for that matter, no one ever asked me to. In fact, the one time I did decide to volunteer for a GODORT committee in those early years, I was told by a Steering Committee member who shall remain nameless that I was “too busy” with other obligations they thought I had. So much for volunteering! Then again, at the time GODORT had over a thousand members; they could afford to turn away “busy” volunteers like me.

And then the economy tanked and everything changed. Suddenly, travel budgets were being cut and fewer and fewer librarians were able to attend conferences regularly. By 2011, so few people were attending the Spring DLC meetings that GPO decided to cancel them entirely in favor of an extended annual meeting in the fall, a plan that quickly fell by the wayside due to the 2013 federal government shutdown. GPO eventually went back to a semiannual DLC meeting schedule, with a virtual meeting in the spring and an in-person meeting in the fall that is also broadcast live so as many people as possible can attend. When I became chair of MAGIRT in 2011, I pushed to adopt a mostly virtual meeting schedule to allow those people who could not attend in-person meetings the opportunity to participate in the activities of the round table. GODORT was a bit late to the virtual meeting trend, making its first forays in 2014

or 2015, but as of this writing most if not all of GODORT's committees hold virtual meetings between conferences and some even hold virtual meetings in lieu of meeting in person.

Yet as essential and ubiquitous as virtual meetings and conferences have become, the fact remains that they are not the same as in-person meetings and conferences. They do not offer the networking opportunities that happen between meetings; unless you are attending the same virtual meeting as a colleague in your library, you do not get the chance to chat someone up in the hallway during a break. It makes recruiting committee members that much harder; it is much easier to say no via email than it is to say no to someone in person. Even worse: many librarians, especially in the years immediately after the economy crashed, felt that if they could not afford to attend a conference in person they could not be professionally active in a national library association. Why join ALA—and by extension GODORT—if you cannot afford to attend any of its conferences?

The key is to demonstrate value and to reach out to potential members; if they cannot come to us, we need to find a way to go to them. In my opinion, this is where GODORT has dropped the ball. Since 2007, while ALA's membership has declined by 8.3 percent, GODORT's has dropped by a whopping 59.3 percent. As of August, 2018, GODORT's membership is less than 1 percent of ALA's membership, which means we will lose our councilor position after the 2019 ALA Annual Conference. In a time where interest in government information and the need for advocacy is at an all-time high, it is simply mind-boggling that GODORT is struggling to attract and retain members.

The halcyon days where new government documents librarians happily joined GODORT because they thought they were supposed to be long gone. So too are the days where most if not all government documents librarians were free to specialize in government information; more often than not, government information is just one of any number of a librarian's duties and responsibilities. That is not necessarily a bad thing; in theory, having more librarians that work with government information means more potential members for GODORT. We just need to find a way to put that theory into practice.

In the coming months, the Steering Committee will be taking action on a number of fronts to address our declining membership. These include restructuring how we handle our online presence, planning our in-person conference schedules around meetings, programs, and activities designed to demonstrate GODORT's value and attract new members, and starting a membership drive. But Steering cannot do this alone; we need the advice and support of *all* of our current members to help strengthen and rejuvenate our round table. Working together, we can ensure that GODORT remains a vital and vibrant organization for all current and future information professionals that work with government information.

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