

From the Chair



Who Do We Think We Are?

Stephen Woods

Who do you think you are? Maybe someone has asked you this question before or you have the type of personality where you continually ask yourself this question. It's a question that any

honest leader faces when taking over the reigns of an organization with a long and storied tradition like GODORT. However, I think the question taken at face value is an excellent place to start our conversation.

So, who am I? I will confess that when I started out as a government documents librarian in 1995, I felt like a counterfeiter. I had no academic training in government information, only practical experience working in the University of Iowa's Government Documents Department. However, I was a voracious reader and supplemented formal course work by enrolling in the "virtual school" of Joe Morehead, Judith Robinson, and *DttP*.

Scholarship and teaching helped me to fully overcome my inability to self identify as a government information specialist. Lily Wai and others in the profession encouraged me to share with others at state and national conferences the things that I was working on in my everyday activities as a librarian. GODORT actually sponsored my first national presentation at ALA's Annual Conference in Atlanta in 2002. I still remember the anxiety I felt discussing my library's involvement in Idaho's redistricting in front of all of you—my peers. That faded, when I discovered there were others who were just as passionate about the topic.

I'll admit that scholarship through writing was not my chosen form of communication. That was forced on me as a necessity of tenure. Those same feelings of being found out as a fraud constantly entered my thought process while writing. However, I took the plunge in 2002 and started writing a column in *DttP* that I founded called *By the Numbers*. Looking over ten years' worth of columns, there are few literary masterpieces, but I discovered a valuable and pragmatic insight in the process of publishing. Writing forced me to really think deeply about what I do and to communicate it in a coherent fashion. Furthermore, it gave me confidence in my growing understanding of the profession.

The final step in my evolution as a self proclaimed government information specialist involved teaching a credit course in government and legal information. Teaching has a way of exposing the weakest links in our knowledge. Often as I would sit down to develop fresh ways of presenting the curriculum, I

would discover holes in my own understanding and would have to do some research or have a conversation with a colleague. That fear of appearing foolish before my students provided plenty of incentive to stretch my appreciation for government information and to stay engaged.

Now I don't want you to think that being a government information specialist is the sum of who I am. For those who don't know me, I'm a father of three beginning to embark on that poverty-stricken road of paying college tuition. I have an amazing wife who works with web accessibility in online courses. I love sports, but will also confess to being a closet Jane Austin fan as well as a voracious reader of other classics.

So, who are we? Many of you have similar stories to the one I've told, but others may have embraced their identity as information specialists right way. Others are still in that process of finding their place in the profession and looking for ways to grow in confidence. I truly believe that GODORT can be an organization that inspires all of us regardless of how confident we are in our professional journey.

Our Ad Hoc Committee on Reorganization has been working hard to examine the structure and effectiveness of our community. Many of you generously responded to the survey that was jointly sponsored by the Ad Hoc Committee on Virtual Meetings. However, I would argue that in order for these committees to accomplish their work our community must agree upon a clear mission statement and vision.

Let me first state what I mean by a mission statement. So that we can all be on the same page, I've asked each of the chairs of each of the committees and taskforces to read the document: "Proclaiming Your Dream: Developing Vision and Mission Statements."¹ It states, "An organization's mission statement describes what the group is going to do and why it's going to do that." Our mission is something we can control and it is what we do in our professional capacity.

For the last five years our mission has been to ensure that all government information is freely distributed by the government. That can be one of our values, but it can never be our mission. To develop a meaningful mission statement we need to identify the things we do and particularly those activities that help us become more confident in the value of our profession.

The much quoted advice of Alexander Pope "Know then thyself . . ." is a wonderful challenge to the individual, but a community is more complicated than the mere sum of individuals and what they do. This is exactly why we need something less tangible than a mission statement—something more along

the lines of a common vision. The KU Work Group states that, “Your vision is your dream. It’s what your organization believes are the ideal conditions for your community; that is, how things would look if the issue important to you were completely, perfectly addressed.”

Our community will and must have some conversations along the lines that I have alluded to in this column. Shari Laster has just sent out a reminder with the agenda for the Rare & Endangered Government Publication Committee (REGP) virtual meeting in July. It includes a discussion of goals for the REGP identified in our organization Policy and Procedures Manual (PPM). That’s a fantastic start. However, how do we capture those activities that are a priority for our community that are not reflected in our legacy documents?

I’ll close with this. At the final steering meeting in San Francisco as the baton was passed forward, I read the first draft of a mission statement. This was it: “GODORT’s mission is to

inspire government information specialists to develop services for government information.” It took approximately ten minutes for someone to suggest a revision by simply adding the words “and collections” after services. That’s the whole point of the exercise. Mission statements are one of those things that we as a community need consensus on. Once we get that right, we can answer with confidence the question: “Who do we think we are?”

Reference

1. KU Work Group for Community Health and Development, Chapter 8, Section 2: Proclaiming Your Dream: Developing Vision and Mission Statements (Lawrence, KS: University of Kansas, 2014). Retrieved January 2, 2014, from the Community Tool Box: <http://ctb.ku.edu/en/table-of-contents/structure/strategic-planning/vision-mission-statements/main>.