A Framework for Member Success

Emily Morton-Owens

This column represents my final venue to reflect on our potential merger with ALCTS and LLAMA before the vote. After a busy Midwinter Meeting with lots of intense discussions about the Steering Committee on Organizational Effectiveness (SCOE)'s recommendations, the divisions, the merger, ALA finances, and more, my thoughts keep turning in a particularly wonkish direction: towards our organization. So many of the challenges before us hinge on one particular dilemma. For those of us who are most involved in ALA and LITA, the organization (our committees, offices, processes, bylaws, etc.) may be familiar and supportive. But for new members looking for a foothold, or library workers who don't see themselves in our association, our organization may look like a barrier. Moreover, many of our financial challenges are connected to our organization. The organization must evolve, but we must achieve this without losing what makes us loyal members.

While ALA and LITA have specific audiences of library workers and technologists, we have a lot in common with other membership organizations. One of the responsibilities for the LITA vice-president is attendance at a workshop put on by the American Society of Association Executives, where we learn how to steward an organization. Representatives from many different groups attended this workshop, where I had a chance to discuss challenges with leaders from medical and manufacturing associations, and I learned that these challenges are often orthogonal to the subject matter at hand. *Everyone* was dealing with the need to balance membership cost and value, how to give members a voice while allowing for agile decision-making, and how to put on events that are great for attendees without becoming the only way to get value from membership.

Hearkening back even further, I worked as a library-school intern at a library with a long run of German and French-language serials that I retrospectively cataloged. One batch that has always stuck in my mind is the planning materials for international congresses that were held in the early 20th century by the international societies for horticulture and botany. These events were massive undertakings held at multi-year intervals, gradually planned by international mail. Interested parties would receive a lavish printed prospectus, with registration and travel arrangements starting several years in advance. The most interesting documents pertained to the events planned for the mid to late 1930s in Europe. These events were cancelled or fell short of intentions because of pre-World War II political pressures. The congress schedules did not resume until 1950 or later, with some radical changes—for example, German was no longer used as the language of science, and the geographic distribution of events increased significantly in the later 20th century. When I first encountered this material, I was intrigued by how the war affected science. Looking back now, I see a dual case study in organizations weathering a crisis whose magnitude we can only imagine, and then reinventing themselves on the other side. Both of these organizations still exist and continue to meet, by the way—and I can't help but feel that reinvention is the key to survival.

Emily Morton-Owens (egmowens.lita@gmail.com) is LITA President 2019-20 and the Assistant University Librarian for Digital Library Development & Systems at the University of Pennsylvania Libraries.

Our organizational framework is a key part of the challenge for both ALA and LITA. I have no doubt that members remain excited about our key issues for advocacy, our subjects for continuing education, and our opportunities for networking. But we have concerns about *how* we make those things happen. In LITA, for example, continuing education requires a massive effort on the part of both member volunteers and staff to organize. We need to brainstorm relevant topics, recruit qualified instructors, schedule and promote the events, and finally run the sessions, collect feedback, and arrange payment for the instructors. This takes the time of the same people we'd like to have creating newsletters and booking conference speakers. Meanwhile, right across the hall at ALA headquarters, we have staff from ALCTS and LLAMA doing the same things. These inefficiencies hit at the heart of our financial problems. At the ALA level, SCOE has proposed ideas like a single set of dues structures for divisions, and a single set of policies and procedures for all round tables. These changes would reduce the overhead required to operate these groups as unique entities, a financial benefit, while also making it easier for members to afford, join, and move between them, a membership benefit.

That framework also offers us an opportunity to *improve* our associations. Members have been asking how the association can act more responsively on issues of diversity, equity, and inclusion—for example, how can we have incident response that is proactive and sensitive to member needs while recognizing the complexities of navigating that space as a member-based organization. This is a chance to live up to our aspirations as a community. The actions LITA has taken to extend all forms of participation to members who can only participate remotely/online are a way to make us more accessible to library workers regardless of finances or home circumstances. Bylaws and policies may not be the most glamorous part of associations but they are the levers we can employ to change the character of our community.

Coming back to Core, we can observe elements of the plan that are responding to both threats and opportunities. Members of ALCTS, LLAMA, and LITA know that financial pressures are a major impetus for the merger effort. But, in the hope of achieving a positive reinvention, the merger planning steering committee put most of its emphasis on the opportunity side. The diagram of intersecting interests for Core's six proposed sections (https://core.ala.org/core-overlap/) is a demonstration of the new frontiers of collaboration that Core will offer members. The proposed structure of Core retains committees while also offering a more nimble way to instantiate interest groups.

Moreover, the process of creating Core reflects the kind of transparent process we want to see in the future. The steering committee and the communications sub-committee crossed not just the three divisions but also different levels of experience and types of prior participation in the divisions. The communications group answered freeform questions, held Twitter AMA's, and held numerous forums to collect ideas and feelings about the project. Zoom meetings and Twitter are not new media, but the sustained effort that went into soliciting and responding to feedback through these channels is a new mode for our divisions.

The LITA Board recently issued a statement (https://litablog.org/2020/02/news-regarding-the-future-of-lita-after-the-core-vote/) explaining that if the Core vote does not succeed, we don't see a viable financial path forward and will be spending the latter half of 2020 and the beginning of 2021 working toward an orderly dissolution of LITA. It is tempting to approach this crossroads from a place of disappointment or fear. We cannot yet say precisely what it will be like to be a

member of Core. But when I look at the organizational structure Core offers us, I feel hopeful about it being a framework in which members will find their home and flourish. The new division includes what we need for a rich member experience coupled with a streamlined structure that makes it easier to be involved in the ways and extent that make sense for you. In fifty years, perhaps a future member of Core will be writing a letter to their members: looking back at this moment of technological and organizational disruption and reflecting on how we reinvented our organization at the moment it needed it most.