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For Your Information/ ALCTS Reorganization

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You ask for further discussion about the reorganization itself. I would now like to make some general clarification's and observations that might be useful to readers. I hasten to add that these are personal observations, and do not represent any official position of ALCTS.

I will try to answer four different questions:
1. Why should we reorganize now?
2. What is the future of collections and technical services in libraries?
3. How should we create an empowered organization?
4. Why is ALA important to ALCTS?

1. WHY SHOULD WE RE ORGANIZE NOW?

There were at least two major reasons why ALCTS needed to undertake a reorganization now. First, the information world is changing. For libraries to survive they will need to adapt to these changes. Our professional associations must also adapt to change. If we waited five more years to undergo this exercise, rapidly changing events would overtake us. We should be planning for and shaping what we want our professional organization to be rather than simply reacting to events as they occur. Given the time required for a reorganization (originally projected at three-to-four years!), we must act now if we are going to develop an organizational structure relevant to the already emerging “electronic library,” the “library without walls,” or whatever other term one uses.

The other major reason for the reorganization was to develop a structure flexible enough to accommodate future changes. Our current structure is flexible in the way that a card catalog was—i.e., when you needed more space, you added another cabinet. But eventually the size of the catalog made it unwieldy, and just as the card catalog gave way to the automated catalog, we needed a new more flexible structure built for today’s information environment. In our current system when a new area of interest emerges, we just add to the bureaucracy with more sections or committees. While a flattened organization does not necessarily improve efficiency, a bloated bureaucracy or a bureaucracy tightly held in the hands of a few doesn’t necessarily improve efficiency either. Recently some sections of ALCTS have found it extremely difficult to identify someone willing to run for elected office, and other sections “recycled” people who either had been on the ballot in previous years or who had already been an officer in another section of ALCTS. These are not signs of an open system that is encouraging fresh involvement.

Another problem with adding new sections is that we generally failed to take on the political ramifications of eliminating or merging existing sections. Each section has its own bureaucracy, and each bureaucracy has a strong tendency toward self-preservation. As a result, it was easier to add one more section than to deal politically with the reality that it is time for another section to go. Yet it is the people who are currently in power who have tended to be the one who have spoken up about the reorganization. However, those who are controlling the power often cannot see that there are others who are clamoring to come aboard. And so I am glad that you are among those asking everyone—not just the enfranchised, but also the quiet members and the non-members—to speak up and say what ALCTS needs to do to move ahead.

2. WHAT IS THE FUTURE OF COLLECTIONS AND TECHNICAL SERVICES IN LIBRARIES?

The reactions thus far about the Organizational Restructuring Task Force report are preliminary reports mostly have focused on the question of whether to organize by section or by interest group. I would suggest that this issue is really quite secondary. As long as there is an ALCTS, the good and interested membership will find a way to be active and to make a contribution to the profession. However, what I have seen little of thus far in the debate is “in what direction will library collections and technical services move during the next five-to-ten years, and how can ALCTS position itself to be a leader in those developments?” A few years ago, I posited during a speech at Resources Section Acquisitions Committee meeting that over the past few millennia, librarian ship (and collections and technical services librarian ship in particular) has been based upon a model where the information source (e.g., the book) was separate from the access source (e.g., the acquisitions order or the library catalog record). Therefore, our job was a secondary one: to procure materials and create our own catalog to provide access. However, today the information source and the access mechanisms are becoming virtually one. Client-servers on the Internet (with access mechanisms such as Gopher, WAIS, and Archie) are the first embodiment of this paradigm shift. Unfortunately, I see in our profession not only a lack of recognition that this is occurring, but that we are trying to embalm our present system so that we don’t have to cope with the future. The present ALCTS organization chart, with its tightly defined sections and pre-defined specializations, was relevant in its day. But if left as is in the emerging information world, it will over time become so constricted that we will choke on our past success.

The current organizational debate has become stagnant because too many responses are focusing first HOW will we get things done rather than WHAT we need to do. Here are but a few sample questions that we ought to be asking (and answering!) for ourselves:

- Should our concern be with the “reproduction of LIBRARY MATERIALS” or with new methods to provide “information DELIVERY on demand?”
If future information sources are more likely to be accessed than acquired will the need for "cataloging" be for material contained in static physical FORMATS (books, tapes, etc.) or will it be to control INFORMATION in electronic form over networks?

Will we be more concerned about the INFLATION of printed serials or the ECONOMICS of electronic information? If the latter, what are the organizational implications?

If the future of preservation of library materials is tightly aligned with access, how can we best bring together in ALCTS the individuals who preserve with those who will provide the access?

If libraries are becoming less concerned with OWNERSHIP than with ACCESS, what should ALCTS role be in developing the access mechanisms?

3. HOW SHOULD WE CREATE AN EMPOWERED ORGANIZATION?

I agree with your statement that we need a more "empowered" membership organization. I also believe that this is what the Task Force is after. Some have imagined that the Task Force recommendations would leave us with a tightly run Board where only a few people control all of the power. On the contrary, I believe the Task Force envisions a loose "coordinating" committee that keeps the work of the membership flowing at a healthy pace. I therefore have to disagree with your comment that "it's not necessarily the structure that needs changing, but the decision-making process." Decision-making occurs within a structure, and the two are inseparable. I do not see how we could change on without affecting the other.

4. WHY IS ALA IMPORTANT TO ALCTS?

I could write another long essay on the direct benefits that accrue to ALCTS as a division of ALA, but I will leave that discussion to another day. As with the "ALCTS is a cataloger's division" misconception, I think that there are many benefits of ALCTS alignment with ALA that may not be fully understood by many (most?) of the membership. To cite just a few, ALA has been instrumental in publishing ALCTS monographs, in securing changes in legislation that ALCTS desires, in helping us secure a grant for programs on preservation, and in providing many forms of indirect support.

CONCLUSION

The proposal the Task Force floated at Annual Conference may not necessarily be the best one. I do believe that they have set forth a very workable and flexible plan that will be adaptable to the changes that our profession is about to undergo. I am also sure that whether one agrees or disagrees with the report, the Task Force had some us all a great service by generating as much discussion and interest in the future of the division as they have. We must remember that a road map is of little use if we don't know our destination.

For now I hope we can encourage as much discussion on the where we are going as we have had on which road to take.