

Pacific Northwest Chapter Seminar on Simplification
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(prepared from notes taken by Dana Bostrom)

The Pacific Northwest Chapter of Special Libraries Association held a one-hour session on Simplification of SLA structure, at the chapter's annual holiday gathering on Dec. 7, 2000. The crowd of about 25 people reviewed a sample scenario developed by Wilda Newman, as described by yours truly. The conversation occasionally digressed from the scenario, as brainstorming sessions will tend to do.

The following is a general recap of the flow of conversation.

First of all, the people who have served as Chapter President felt strongly that Headquarters should send as much material as possible by electronic means. They still get way too many materials in the mail. Some of it may be necessary to send by mail, but certainly there could be a greater effort to use electronic distribution. This includes newsletters, as many (if not most) of the Chapters have moved to electronic publication of their newsletters, even if they haven't phased out the mailed copies yet. Some Chapters and Divisions have gone entirely virtual, phasing out mailed copies altogether.

The group warmly received the idea of having a column in *Information Outlook* dedicated to Chapter news. This way they could keep up with the most important activities throughout SLA without having to wade through reams of paper.

The number #1 aid to Chapters, however, seemed to be logistical support to free us from what can bluntly be referred to as drudge work. Assembling mailings, fundraising (more on this later), and any other time-consuming grunt work is a killer of volunteer spirit. If paid staff could do any of this, since they control the labels anyhow, it would be great. Even if we have to outsource this, it's better than having our volunteer members do it.

What would they like to spend their time on instead? Probably programming, and other activities where they use their knowledge to help Chapter members. The students were asked what they really value with their membership, and they uniformly mentioned personal networking, library tours, that kind of thing. So members would probably be better served to spend their volunteer time on activities like mentoring, rather than sticking labels on newsletters and brochures.

When it was suggested that paid staff could take a stronger hand in local programming, the group was initially interested but wary of staff's ability to program accurately to meet the Chapter's needs. It was felt that the members knew their needs best and should retain ultimate control of programming decisions. But staff assistance could be very useful when the chapter members ask for it.

The group was very wary of requiring the Divisions to recharter every few years. The feeling was that they didn't want a laborious process every few years, although they

recognized the current difficulty of folding a division into another one (e.g., Aerospace into Engineering).

The idea of simply having a convener was received coolly. They could see the need for an election, especially for larger divisions. They saw merit in the nomination process of screening potential officers and explaining the nature of the job (rather than letting anyone volunteer for it whether he/she is prepared and capable, or not). They recognized, however, that it is pointless to hold an election if there is only one candidate for office. The process should allow for a non-contested person to simply assume office. Elections could be optional, and held if there was more than one candidate.

The group emphasized the need for flexibility, and in structuring the bylaws to allow for as much flexibility as possible. I didn't actually get to mention the idea of an Association-wide template of Chapter bylaws, but I think it would have been well received.

The group saw merit in saving the caucus structure (which is very simple already) as a "staging ground" for potential divisions. Solo was cited as an example. However, there are caucuses that will probably never become divisions, and just serve as an easy forum for like-minded people. Retired members, gay/lesbian, etc.

The money thing: We discussed the allocation of money. Not surprisingly, they favored the idea of more money being distributed directly to the Chapters. Local fundraising is a big pain, nobody likes to do it and it is incredibly time-consuming. However, they realized that achieving a fair distribution would be problematical. For instance, suppose the allotment per member goes up \$10. But the cost of putting on a program (with food) is much greater in San Francisco than in Omaha. So do you use an adjusted cost index, so San Francisco gets \$12 and Omaha gets \$8? There is the prospect for serious regional differences here.

While they liked the idea of vendors giving money to the Association which would then be distributed to the units, they wouldn't entirely divest themselves of the idea that they could still approach vendors for extra funding, which sort of defeats the purpose.

They wondered what the vendors would think of this. Would they want to just cut a single check each year for SLA? That saves them time, but how do they get credit for their dollars? Most vendor dollars are tied to specific events or products for which they get advertising.

The group recognized the aging demographics of SLA (although we have a growing Information School in Seattle which may allow us to beat that curve for awhile), and liked the idea of loosening rules for membership. There was some caution expressed about the dissolution of our identity if we became too thinly spread, and whether the name should be changed to reflect the wider scope. We are no longer defined by the "place" called the library. Perhaps the programming would broaden if we broaden our

membership - is this a good thing, or a bad thing? We used to be closer to ASIS, but tended to drift away over time.

They liked the idea of a no-cost or low-cost initial membership, although they were uncertain what was meant by the term "virtual membership". It was pointed out that we would still have to charge for meetings, since we have costs to cover. But the basic membership can be subsidized. We heavily discount student memberships already, but they are restricted to students of library and information schools, not (for instance) management or computer science. If we loosen the requirements, we might get people to share our interests, but not our credentials. Again, is this a good thing or a bad thing?

Someone asked if we can offer free/discounted memberships for people in difficult economic circumstances, such as Moms with kids? I mentioned the one-time unemployment waiver (which not everyone knew about), but expressed caution about expanding the criteria for a waiver of membership for existing members. It puts us in a "rob Peter to pay Paul" situation, and we would have difficulty drawing a line.

The talk came around to the role of paid staff again. Some services seem to be of value (e.g., job assistance), but others are not well understood. Who decides what services staff provides? We seem to be on an escalating spiral of services, without knowing if they are what we really need. While the Board of Directors may be following this more closely, it doesn't seem to be as well conveyed to the members at large. Perhaps we need a "service audit" periodically to make sure that our services are in line with our changing needs and roles.

While I touched on how the Board of Directors might be revamped as per Wilda's plan, I didn't bring it up for discussion. Nobody present has been on the Board, and very few of us on Association-wide committees, so I wanted to get more feedback on issues of local interest. I described the dis-establishment of existing committees and revamping them, and it was understood and accepted. No strong opinion here, except for a quizzical expression of what all those committees do, anyhow. They were quite amused to learn that there was a Committee on Committees, which apparently very few of them knew about.

Finally, some people expressed a desire to "get rid of Robert's Rules of Order" at our level. They saw the rules as creating walls, rather than building bridges. While Roberts' is applied somewhat loosely at our level, it is seen as more of a barrier than an aid, perhaps because so few of us feel comfortable with it.

And an end note: The group wanted to know how these Simplification proposals were being shared and discussed with the other SLA units. I replied that the officers received information from us, and we had time allocated at Winter Meeting for all the task forces to describe their efforts and solicit input from all 57 chapters and 25 divisions. It would be an excellent opportunity to get a good cross-section of SLA constituents who would react quickly to our direction. They acknowledged that that seemed like a good idea. I also mentioned that we will be using listservs and other venues.

