A response to:

A Better ALA: A Modern Association for a Modern Profession

By Dr. John Sandstrom, MLIS, MPA

Introduction

I want to begin this response by stating I have nothing but the highest respect for the members of the Steering Committee. They accepted a challenge that would be difficult at any time and is more difficult now with the transitional nature of current ALA leadership. They have my deepest gratitude for the work they have done. However, they asked for feedback, so I am sharing.

At ALA Annual Meeting 2019, the Steering Committee on Organizational Effectiveness (SCOE) released their preliminary recommendations making a “better” ALA. This is in response to the charge they were given by Jim Neal when he created this steering committee during his tenure as President, 2017-2018. The charge of SCOE is:

The Steering Committee on Organizational Effectiveness (SCOE) will provide advice and support to the Executive Board on priority improvements. The work of the Steering Committee will focus on membership development and engagement, and on encompassing the diversity of voices that enrich ALA through incorporating the perspectives, interests and contributions of a wide variety of stakeholders and affiliated groups. Its work will be mission driven and embrace the Association's core values.  
  
Through input and feedback from across the Association, the Steering Committee will explore alternative models and reorganization possibilities. It will work with the Executive Team and a consultant to formulate and present its findings and recommendations to the Executive Board. (Preliminary Recommendations, Slide 3)

The Project charge is:

…to develop and recommend strategies and tactics to create an ALA with the agility to respond to current challenges and opportunities, and to focus energy and resources on its mission and members in the decades to come. Ultimately, it is to design a modern association for a modern profession. (Preliminary Recommendations, Slide 2)

I will be addressing several concerns and issues I have with the Preliminary Recommendations as they are currently (July 1, 2019) being promulgated. Depending on how much change is made in each iteration of these recommendations, SCOE may get several more of these responses. I am the first to acknowledge that these are just preliminary recommendations and I am sure they will change quite a bit between now and when votes are taken on them in both ALA Council and later by the membership.

In this response, I will first address some process concerns I have, both in the entire process of developing these recommendations and in the process for soliciting feedback. I will then address my concerns with each recommendation. It is the unfortunate nature of this type of response that the positives will only show up by what I don’t make comments on.

General Concerns and Issues

I have several concerns that deal primarily with the assumptions that appear to have been made by SCOE or the consultants they are working with. First, in the project charge this whole process and these recommendations are to, “…develop and recommend strategies and tactics to create an ALA with the agility to respond to current challenges and opportunities, and to focus energy and resources on its mission and members in the decades to come.” Yet what these challenges and opportunities are is not clearly expressed in this documents. How are we to comment intelligently on these recommendations when we do not know what “challenges and opportunities” they are referring to?

Secondly, at the SCOE session I attended at Annual 2019, the presenters were asked to estimate how many members of the organization had taken part in the feedback processes (numerous surveys, countless hours of conversation, discussions of ideas and models, examination of effective practices by other associations and a consolidation of ideas.) that were being used? The response was that of May 2019 they estimated 300 members and non-members had taken part. Please excuse me if I find this number, or even the number as of the end of Annual 2019 to be woefully inadequate for developing an understanding of the thoughts and needs of our 57,866 members (ALA.org figure for 2018).

Third, I am very concerned about the format of the live feedback sessions held at both the Midwinter and Annual meetings held in 2019. Calling for feedback and them spending over half of each session telling everyone what you’ve done is not, in my opinion, a feedback session. To follow this by table talks, which does not allow the people in the room to see and hear the concerns and issues that others have smacks of trying to keep those with concerns and issues isolated from each other. I do not believe this is what was planned, but in what is basically a political campaign you need to remember that perceptions can have more power to help or hurt your cause than any truth.

Fourth, while I have no problem with description of what the “Successful Organization Effectiveness Projects do” statement, it includes some statements that I find far too vague. When addressing the need to “balance reliability, speed, and quality” or “effectiveness and efficiency” what person or which group determines this? The President? The Board? SCOE? The Executive Director and Headquarters staff? What is “continuous improvement”? How will we recognize it when we see it? Or is this just a good buzzword? I’m even uncomfortable including “equity, diversity, and inclusion” since I don’t think those have been defined well enough, in terms of our organization, that they can be used as an achievable metric.

Fifth, I hope you will share the data that you are working from. Asking for input on recommendations when the people you are asking do not have the data used to develop the recommendations seems, to me, to be a waste of both yours and my time. If you want really effective input, we need to know what you are working from.

**Preliminary Recommendations**

*Elected Positions*

First, it would be nice if there was something actually labeled “Recommendations” that were then related back to the goals that they are intended to implement. I am assuming that the “recommendation” is to reorganize the governance structure of ALA and the following diagrams represent the structure SCOE is recommending.

Second, the arrows in your primary graphic really needs work. I figured out from the narrative and the discussion that this should be more of a string diagram rather the having everything just feeding into the executive board.

Third, could you please provide a table showing the difference in number of members directly elected by various membership communities to Association leadership between our current system and your proposed system? By my counts, this is the results:

|  |  |  |
| --- | --- | --- |
| Group/person elected | Current system | Proposed system |
| President | 1 | 1 |
| VP/President Elect | 1 | 1 |
| Immediate Past President | 1 | 1 |
| Treasurer | 1 – every three years | 1 – every three years |
|  |  |  |
| At-Large Councilors | 100 | 0 |
| Roundtables | 10 | 0 |
| Chapter Councilors | 52 | 0 |
| Divisions | 12 | 0 |
| At Large Board Members | 0 | 8 |
| Policy Committee | 0 | 15 |
| Finance & Audit Committee | 0 | 12 |
|  |  |  |
| Total | 178 | 39 |

This does not look like greater or more efficient representation to me. Indeed it looks to me like it takes the top level of ALA “elite” and reduces it by over 75%.

*Planning and Leadership Assemblies*

While I do not abject to this concept per se, the implementation of it appears to be creating additional silos that will hamper communications. These areas are part of the current council where we have to work together. I do not see any advantage to splitting them up into more “assemblies”. Instead of giving the Executive Board a single recommendations on critical issues, the Executive Board will be getting three, each one focused one the needs of their one constituency.

This plan also asks the Planning and Leadership Assemblies to serve as forums for integrated planning and prioritization, without addressing who works to combine the planning and priorities set by each group into a single plan for the entire Association. Finally, by removing any direct input into policy making and enforcement, these groups are just advisory and can be ignored if their planning and priorities are not supported by the Executive Board.

Finally, there is a huge inequity of representation in the Chapter Leadership Assembly. In the Bylaws V.1.d, “No more than one chapter of the American Library Association shall exist in any state, province, or territory.” Yet in many, if not most states, the group presenting a single type of library is the ALA Chapter and therefore control that Chapter’s representation. This is true under the current system, but I see no indication that it will be changed in the new system as proposed.

**Volunteer Engagement Groups**

*Advisory Communities*

Who appoints them?

*Working Groups*

Who appoints them? Who do they report to? Who writes the charge, defines the timeframe, and determines the deliverables?

*Communities of Practice/Engagement/Interest*

What are the differences between these and Membership Initiative Groups? Where do they fit into the Association? These look a lot like Round Tables, but we already have those.

**Member Engagement**

*Divisions*

The Divisions are in many way separate organizations with their own priorities and needs. I do not believe that asking them to change their strategic plans to align with ALA’s is a reasonable demand. For several of them, ALA provides services in excess of what the Division pays, so ALA can “dictate” their strategic plan. But, at least for the two largest, ACRL and PLA, They actually lose money by being part of the ALA umbrella. What will happen if they react badly to being told to align their strategic plans and pull out?

As separate organizations, demanding that they be mini-ALAs regarding their leadership and volunteer structures is again an unreasonable position to take. The concern about what happens if the strongest Divisions leave is repeated here. Are we really in a positions to make these kinds of demands on them?

If you are going to look at Division membership models, we should also examine being able to join a Division without joining ALA. I have heard from many people who would like to join ACRL but who cannot afford to join ALA first. Since offering a Division membership with your ALA membership will probably result in an increase in the cost of dues, we really need to open the Division membership door as far as possible.

*Round Tables*

The sentence, “Round Tables are a growing percentage of ALA members” makes no sense. Do you mean, “A growing percentage of ALA members are also members of Round Tables.” or something else?

Saying that “We will increase the minimum number of members required for ALA staff support.” and not saying what the proposed minimum will be guarantees that we do not have critical information needed to make reasonable comments about this proposal.

Throughout this document you assume universal adoption of Connect, when ALA is already looking for a replacement. This doesn’t seem reasonable to me.

Is moving elections to Connect new? Is this an improvement over the old system? What issue is this addressing?

Round Tables have historically been historically fairly organic and allowed to design their own ways of doing things. Some Round Tables have a lot invested in how they do things. How are you going to address requiring them to change when they don’t want to and you don’t explain the need? Do you really want to force the Social Responsibilities Round Table into another mold? They will fight you tooth and nail.

Dues have always been the source of operating funds for Round Tables. Some need more than others. How will it be decided what the dues structure is? Will it be set by the Round Tables that need more funds, or, will they be set lower so people can afford to join more, but force the one with higher dues into restructuring? Or will it go into one pot that the Round Tables will then need to split up? Again, how can we give good comments when so many questions are left on the table? It may increase administrative efficiency for ALA but this could destroy some Round Tables.

*Membership Initiative Groups*

Will this type of engagement be publicized more? Will the process for starting, reporting, and dissolving be the same? Will these still be considered temporary groups or will they become permanent?

**A few more comments**

*Ethnic Affiliates*

I say this as a member of two Ethnic Affiliates. They are NOT part of ALA. ALA membership is not required to join them. They are separate organizations, with separate budgets, separate membership, separate articles of incorporation and bylaws, etc. Unless ALA haves operating agreements with them as ALA does with the Divisions, we should not be providing any services, not should then have any input or influence in the governance or elections of ALA. ALA needs to maintain a hard barrier in some areas between ourselves and the Affiliates.

*Standing Committees*

Where in all this do the Committees of the Association and the Committees of Council fit? These committees perform a huge amount of the day-to-day administration of the Association in their spheres of responsibility. Are they all going away? Will they continue to exist and function as always? Will you try to fill all 16 Council committees from the Policy Development Committee and the F&A Committee? I don’t see where these groups will fit into the “new” governance structure, but they are doing critical work for the association.