

Sustaining LITA

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Recently, at the 2019 Midwinter Meeting in Seattle, ALA decided to adopt sustainability as one of the [core values of librarianship](#). The resolution includes the idea of a triple bottom line: “To be truly sustainable, an organization or community must embody practices that are environmentally sound AND economically feasible AND socially equitable.”

If you had thought of sustainability mainly in terms of the environment, you have plenty of company. I originally pictured it as an umbrella term for a variety of environmental efforts: clean air, waste reduction, energy efficiency. But in fact the idea encompasses human development in a broader sense. One definition of sustainability involves making decisions in the present that take into account the needs of the future. Of course our current environmental threats demand our attention, and libraries have found creative ways to promote environmental consciousness (myriad examples include Books on Bikes, seeking LEED or passive house certification for library buildings, providing resources on xeriscaping, and many more).

Even if you're not presently working in a position that allows you to engage directly on the environment, though, the concept of sustainability turns out to permeate our work and values. The ideas of solving problems in a way that doesn't create new challenges for future people, developing society in a way that allows all people to flourish, and fostering strong institutions: these concepts all resonate with the work we do daily, not only in what we offer our users but also in how we work with each other.

As a profession, we have a history of designing future-proof systems (or at least attempting to). Whenever I've been involved in planning a digital library project, one of the first questions on the table is “How do we get our data back out of this, when the time comes?” No matter how enamored we are of the current exciting new solution, we remember that things will look different in the future. Library metadata schemas are all about designing for interoperability and reusability, including in new ways that we can't picture yet. Someone who is unaccustomed to this kind of planning may see a high project overhead for these concerns, but we have consistently incorporated long-term thinking into our professional values due to the importance we place on free access, data preservation, and interoperability.

The triple-bottom line approach, considering economic, social, and environmental factors, also influences the LITA leadership. I recently announced the LITA Board's decision to reduce our in-person participation at ALA Midwinter for 2020, which is partly in response to ALA's deliberations about reinventing the event starting in 2021. With all the useful collaboration technologies now at our fingertips, it is harder to justify requiring our members to meet in person more than once per year. It is possible for us to do great work, on a continuous and rolling basis, throughout the year. More importantly, we want to offer committee and leadership positions to members who may not

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be able to travel extensively, for personal or work reasons. (Especially when many do not receive financial support from their employers. And, to come back around to environmental concerns for a moment, think of all the flights our in-person meetings require.) By being more flexible about what participation looks like, we sustain the effort that our members put into LITA through a world of work that is changing.

Financial sustainability is also a factor in our pursuit of a merger with ALCTS and LLAMA. We are three smaller divisions based on professional role, not library type, who share interests and members. We also have similar needs and processes for running our respective associations. Unfortunately, LITA has been on an unsustainable course with our budget for some time—we spend more than we take in annually, due to overhead costs and working within ALA’s processes and infrastructure. The LITA Board has engaged for many years on the question of how to balance our financial future with the fact that our programs require full-time staff, instructors, technology, printing, meeting rooms, etc. Core, as the new merged division will be known, will allow us to correct that balance by combining our operations, streamlining workflows, and containing our costs. The staff will also be freed up to invest more effort in member engagement. We can’t predict all the services that associations will offer in the future, but we know that, for example, online professional development is always needed, so we’re ensuring that the plan allows it to continue. It is inspiring to talk about the new collaborations and subject-matter synergies that the merger will bring with it, but Core will also achieve something important for sustaining a level of service to our membership.

At the ALA level, the Steering Committee on Organizational Effectiveness (SCOE) is also looking at ways to streamline the association’s structure and make it more approachable and welcoming to new members. I would add that a simplified structure should make ALA more accountable to members as well, which is crucial for positioning it as an organization worth devoting yourself to. These shifts are essential because member volunteers are what make ALA happen, and we need a structure that invites participation from future generations of library workers.

Taken together, these may look like a confusing flurry of changes. But librarians have evolved to be excellent at long-term thinking about our goals and values and how to pursue an exciting future vision based on what we know now and what tools (technology, people, ideas) we have at hand. We care about helping our users thrive and are able to take a broad view of what that encompasses. In particular, with the new resolution about sustainability, we’re including the health of our communities and the security of our environment as a part of that mission. Due to their innovative spirit and principled sense of commitment, our members are well-placed to lead transformations in their home institutions and to participate in the development of LITA. As we weigh all these changes, we value the achievements of our association and its past leaders and members, and seek to honor them by making sure those successes carry on for our future colleagues.