

ACRL Instruction Section Building Virtual Community Task Force

First Annual Report, 2018

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Charge:

The Task Force will engage in the following activities including but not limited to: Explore a wide range of virtual tools for professional development including consulting with the Distance Learning Section; examine the current leadership and committee structure to look for opportunities to better serve the membership; search for new avenues for in-person and virtual social connections; update the Instruction Section website and policy language to reflect the work of an all virtual section; promote transparency and aid the decision-making process by consulting IS members as well as leaders within and outside the field to solicit ideas and feedback; communicate updates via the ILI-L listserv; write a two-part report: recommendations for re-envisioning the section (year one) and a final report including implementation and assessment plans (year two) shared widely with ACRL so others may benefit from the work of the Task Force.

Summary of Year's Work:

In preparation for this report and for its second year's work of developing plans for the section's transition to virtual, the ACRL Instruction Section (IS) Building Virtual Community Task Force (BVCTF) gathered perspectives from members primarily in two ways: a feedback form and a series of two webinars.

Section Chair Merinda Kaye Hensley shared the feedback form with section members through the ILI-L listserv with her message announcing the Task Force and its charge on 29 March 2018, and a short link (<https://bit.ly/2LtkvCk>) was persistently shared in later messaging. The feedback form is intended to be a place for members to share perspectives on the topics they find especially relevant, as often as needed. As such, it should not be considered a survey. While the form is anonymous, users have the choice of entering an email address to receive a response. The feedback form gives an opportunity for an open-ended response, then asks more

specific questions on the main areas of the charge: (1) virtual tools for professional development, (2) the structure of IS leadership and committees, (3) new avenues for in-person and virtual social connections, (4) the IS website and policy language, and (5) promoting transparency, communication, and collaboration in the task force process. To date, ten IS members have participated in the Feedback Form.

The webinar series, called IS BVCTF Brainstorming Sessions, were promoted to membership through ILI, ALA Connect, and IS website postings. The sessions were held on the Zoom platform on May 25 and 29, 2018 at 11:00 AM CST and lasted fifty minutes each. They were attended by fourteen and twelve people, respectively, including committee members. The sessions' goal was to moderate and record live discussions of key issues facing the section in our transition to virtual.

The May 25 session's topic was "Virtual Tools and Social Connections". After presenting background and context for the transition to virtual, the presenter asked the audience questions. The following are examples:

- What virtual tools would be most useful for carrying on events previously held at conferences?
- What virtual tools should be avoided?
- What new services can IS provide as a virtual section?
- How can we keep up social connections with our IS colleagues without required ALA attendance?
- What in-person events should IS sponsor, and in what venues?

The May 29 session's topic was "IS Policy, Leadership and Committee Structure, and Website." This session presented a history of IS' moves towards becoming all-virtual, starting with virtual committee members and proceeding through removal of attendance requirements for ALA Midwinter and Annual conferences, culminating in the end of IS programming at ALA Annual. The session also discussed IS' committee and reporting structure and surplus of volunteers for available committee positions. Participants were asked the following questions:

- What are some specific ways we can provide more opportunities for IS member participation through and outside of formal committee appointments?
- How could IS' governance and reporting structure be adapted to support IS member participation through and outside of formal committee appointments?
- What functionality or content would you like to see on the IS website as beneficial to an all-virtual section?

These sessions were recorded along with their chat transcripts and are available online:

- May 25 session:
https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/1Roam3bz4kEiVnIbNF6Z_P3C1mrGxix14?usp=sharing
- May 29 session:
https://drive.google.com/drive/folders/16QKP_p2hThidiBLu2TAJdRfEaDfc_ZM-?usp=sharing

Findings

The Task Force formed four subgroups on the main topical areas of our charge-- to explore a wide range of virtual tools for professional development, to search for new avenues for in-person and virtual social connections, to examine the IS leadership and committee structure, and to review the IS website and policy language. This section will summarize the results of our research and the feedback we received from members through the feedback form, webinars, and informal discussions.

Explore a Wide Range of Virtual Tools for Professional Development

In discussing professional development as a virtual activity distinct from networking and meeting socially, IS members brought up a number of challenges and opportunities. An important criterion is to utilize virtual tools that will fulfill the functions previously associated with conferences. The following are examples:

- Holding meetings for the various IS committees
- Presenting awards
- Presenting formal programs and panels
- Holding more informal poster sessions and lightning talks
- Holding discussion groups

In addition to utilizing the best choices of software and tools for midwinter and annual committee meetings, IS members are interested in virtual tools that can be used for professional development and connecting with colleagues throughout the year.

An all-virtual section presents new opportunities for collaboration. The ILI-L listserv is a popular resource for IS members, but it has some limiting factors. With virtual workspaces, IS members could have more opportunities to collaborate with colleagues at other colleges and universities. For instance, instruction librarians could have a forum that is less restrictive than the listserv to discuss initiatives such as writing papers and book chapters, or developing instructional tools.

Less formal collaboration and discussions are another opportunity that IS members in brainstorming groups suggested. For instance, IS members could host virtual brown bag

lunches to discuss certain themes, instructional methods, or tools. These could provide the flexibility to have general discussions with librarians from different types of institutions. Some brown bags could be targeted to specific groups of librarians, such as those at small community colleges or at large universities, so they could have informal discussions on issues relevant to their institutions. Organizing and facilitating brown bags could also create volunteer opportunities for more IS members who would like to become involved in the section.

As a section, we do not want to become overly dependent on any particular tool or company, as tools can become obsolete and companies can go out of business. Another challenge is that people have personal preferences about the types of software they use for collaboration. We want to have user-friendly options that will encourage members to participate, but we do not want to overcomplicate the section by having too many available tools.

The Task Force received a number of software suggestions through the feedback form and brainstorming sessions. Below are some of the software suggestions we received (in alphabetical order):

- ACRL LibGuides
- BaseCamp
- Domain of One's Own
- Google Hangouts
- GotoMeeting
- Slack
- Twitter
- Virtually Connecting
- TRU Writer
- Zoom

These tools would allow for various formats of communication and networking. Here are some suggestions for these formats:

- Virtual discussions (through Zoom, Google Hangouts, GoToMeeting, or other software)
- Blogs (possibly a blog that any member can contribute to)
- Discussion boards

Because the section in its fully virtual form will utilize a number of tools and communication formats, they should all be easy for members to find and navigate. IS members suggested having the tools and formats linked and explained in a central hub on the IS website. Another suggestion is to have a public calendar for members to easily see when various virtual events are taking place.

Over the next year, the Task Force will research and gather more feedback to reach more conclusive recommendations. Comparison tables for software tools and their

functionalities would aid members in giving informed feedback. Another possible initiative is to gather specific ideas for projects using the various online formats discussed this year, or possibly others. Focus groups could discuss ideas such as brown bag lunches, learning communities, and discussion boards. Finally, the Task Force intends to collaborate with the Distance Learning Section in determining where to focus our research.

Search for New Avenues for In-person and Virtual Social Connections

Several challenges and opportunities were identified in this area. The first was strategies for addressing the absence of social events at conferences. In the past, the Instruction Section held the IS Soiree at Annual, and farther in the past, at Midwinter ALA conferences. These social events, which faced declining attendance in recent years, were an opportunity for IS members to get together in person and were always publicized widely, pre-conference, by the section.

Feedback indicated that members want social options that could appeal to different preferences, including virtual social options. There was the concern, however, that multiple virtual options already exist, and adding more could become overwhelming. Additionally, while some IS members may rely on IS for in-person social connections, others felt that they might “not need” it for virtual connections.

Proposals offered with member and stakeholder input included the option of having in-person events at different conferences around the country that typically are attended by high numbers of IS members, such as LOEX, ACRL, etc. These events would be supported by IS and would be identified and selected via research by the Information Gathering and Exchange Committee.

Members and stakeholders also suggested using a variety of different tools for virtual connection, with the idea that a diverse selection might attract different members with varying levels of comfort with different virtual communication tools. Tools recommended include Virtually Connecting, Facebook, Instagram, and Zoom. In a similar vein, a range of different virtual social event types were suggested, such as lunchtime hangouts, learning communities, and reading groups, with an IS Committee organizing and supporting these activities. These events could attract a range of IS members interested in different types of virtual socialization and connection.

During the coming year, the Task Force will continue their work in this area. We will develop proposals for IS groups to research further and initially organize some in-person and online social gatherings. The 2018-19 IS Chair, Meghan Sitar, is holding online office hours in July and August for Advisory members, and feedback from these sessions may be useful in planning broader online initiatives. Task Force members will also research, test, and compare various online tools for social gatherings.

Examine the IS Leadership and Committee Structure

The Instruction Section's transition to virtual has been gradual, consisting of the removal over time of in-person attendance requirements at committee meetings and conferences, culminating in the 2018 absence of any section programming at ALA Annual. However, this removal of requirements has not been accompanied by a reform of the section's structure from the ground up. Cutting formal ties to any in-person conference presents an opportunity to address ongoing structural issues with our committees and governance. At the same time, section leadership may need to look for new ways to communicate in the absence of in-person gatherings.

Instruction Section members are eager to contribute to the work of the organization, to advance the profession, and develop their own careers. Heretofore, the main opportunity for members to contribute has been through volunteering on a formal committee, but there are many more willing volunteers than open volunteer opportunities: of the more than 3700 section members in 2018, 185 volunteered for a new committee appointment, and for these volunteers only 81 new appointments were available. Based on these numbers alone, the model of formal committee work is not taking full advantage of members' desires to contribute to the section.

Our respondents and webinar participants offered multiple ideas for ways members could contribute to the section's work beyond one- to two-year committee appointments. Short-term task forces with specific projects, learning communities meeting online for brown-bag lunches, unconferences, and webinar discussions could all help members to develop professionally and form a larger sense of community for the section. The Emerging Leaders in their report, "Building a Virtual Home," recommended periodic shared themes to stimulate and give direction to new informal groupings. Looking at model peer organizations, such as LLAMA with their New Professionals Section "Teams" and "The Collective," an unconference group, can guide us through these changes.

A new formal committee could coordinate and facilitate groupings, perhaps using information from volunteer forms to direct applicants to groups that fit their interests. The committee could also direct applicants to volunteering opportunities in other, less populous sections across ALA. While committee appointments may continue to hold special value for members building their professional portfolio, informal awards such as badges and web publications like the "Featured Teaching Librarian" series could provide recognition for a broader group of participants. In addition, the section could explore adjusting the workload for formal committees, and making sure committee meetings are accessible for all members who would like to participate.

As a goal, increased broad participation is a natural fit with going virtual, but the Instruction Section also requires effective and in-depth communication among its leaders and committee chairs. When committee chairs previously attended ALA Annual, they would report and respond to each other as members of the IS Advisory Committee in a meeting shared with

the Executive Committee, which offered a ready means of cross-committee communication. While the Advisory Committee still exists, it functions essentially as a listserv in the current virtual environment and does not offer a substitute for the old in-person model of sharing and response.

While discussing this issue in the context of the section's governance structure, webinar participants suggested that Executive Committee liaisons could help moderate groups of several committees connected by subject. These committee clusters could share a listserv and even commit to reviewing each other's work in a spirit of support and collaboration. Sorting committees by theme may also serve to organize and chunk the daunting list of committees in current use, for the ease of new members.

Review the IS website and Policy Language

The Instruction Section website frequently serves as a valuable reference for active members and a resource to explore volunteering opportunities for those new to the section. In its new design, it also posts announcements for committee accomplishments and links to social media. In an all-virtual section, however, our respondents have expressed that they would expect the website to play a larger role in the day-to-day online activities of members, serving as a central hub for keeping up with events and connecting to other networks and platforms where the section's work is taking place.

We have received several proposals for the website:

- Add an events calendar to the website
- Highlight ways to get involved in IS beyond committees
- Provide links and context for the section's online activities and forums

We have also noted examples of outdated policy language regarding in-person attendance; clearly, these will need to be updated. The Task Force will explore what policies are called for to ensure accessible, welcoming, and safe virtual environments.

Going forward, the Task Force should examine examples of online structures that facilitate broader participation, e.g. neighborhood and school online communities. Wireframe alternatives for website structure would be a useful means of gathering feedback from members. For all other changes to the section that we consider, the role of the website in facilitating involvement in new groups and activities will be an important factor. In our second annual report, we will recommend specific changes to the website informed by our other proposals and further research.

Chairs' Conclusion: Summary and Task Force Outlook for Next Year

Over the next year, we plan to continue gathering feedback from Instruction Section members, but with increased focus on specific questions and ideas. While participation in our project so far has been limited, we are hopeful that more members will weigh in when it comes to more concrete choices and questions.

For its second year, the Task Force will focus on several high-impact recommendations that have come out of our original charge. First, we will concentrate on ways of working together beyond official IS committees, in activities such as virtual brown bags, reading and learning groups, etc. The selection of software, Instruction Section website revisions, and member recognition projects mentioned above can all fit under the main goal of developing these less formal groups and activities.

Second, the task of organizing in-person activities beyond ALA Annual has emerged as an important aspect of re-envisioning an all-virtual section. The transition to virtual offers increased points of contact for many members, but in-person interaction still offers important opportunities for networking and developing strong professional collaborations.

Third, creating and maintaining good communication channels within the section will be especially important in the absence of in-person gatherings. We would like to explore ideas such as clustering committees under a shared liaison for maintaining clear and useful communication lines between IS committees and look at communication alternatives for the section as a whole.