

Professional Library Associations

PROFESSIONAL library associations have undergone an almost unprecedented growth in membership during the twentieth century. The American Library Association in less than seventy-five years has achieved a membership of over fifteen thousand. The Special Libraries Association founded in 1909 now has a membership of nearly four thousand. Other library groups have been formed as units within the A.L.A. or as separate national associations. The history of all, however, has been a history of rapid growth, speedy expansion, and complicated organization. It is not unfair to say that the growth has been of mushroom character rather than along planned and logical courses.

Perhaps this has been exhibited more completely in the A.L.A. and its constituent groups than anywhere else. The size of the Association in recent years has made for organizational steps which in the main have been opportunistic rather than according to a well-conceived philosophy. Periodic reviews have resulted in the elimination of obvious difficulties rather than in a re-thinking of ultimate goals.

An excellent illustration of this fact is the story of the Association of College and Reference Libraries. A.C.R.L. began in 1889 as an informal group of those interested in college and reference library service. Its first membership was small and it operated under a very loose organizational framework. Partly because of the inadequacy of the College and Reference Section, as it was then called, a College Library Advisory Board was established in 1931 to

serve as the A.L.A.'s major group for recommendations and action in the college library field. Following the report of the Third Activities Committee in 1940, A.C.R.L. became the first A.L.A. division and its board of directors replaced the College Library Advisory Board as A.L.A.'s chief agency for college and reference library matters.

The Third Activities Committee report (of which more later) did not solve all the problems. Chief among those remaining was the belief on the part of many that college and reference library interests were not adequately represented among the activities of the A.L.A. Requests for a college library specialist had been advanced for more than fifteen years, first by the College and Reference Section, then by the College Library Advisory Board, and finally by the Board of Directors of A.C.R.L. Action by the Executive Board of A.L.A. in October 1946 resulted in the annual appropriation of ten thousand dollars for the office of executive secretary of A.C.R.L. Hence, this particular issue appears well on the way to solution. Others, however, remain—among them the following:

1. How much autonomy should subject interest groups have over affairs which concern their own fields primarily?
2. Should an over-all professional organization such as A.L.A. have final authority of its own, or only authority delegated by independent and autonomous groups?
3. What is the best type of professional organization for librarians, a strong national association of all librarians or a strong national association of different types of li-

brarians loosely joined for some matters in a national library federation?

These issues fundamental to the welfare of librarians and librarianship are now under study by the Fourth Activities Committee of A.L.A. If they are to be solved to the satisfaction of all librarians and to the best interests of librarianship, they must have the best thought and study of the entire profession.

To many, the report of the Third Activities Committee under the chairmanship of Charles H. Brown offers the best blueprint to date for the future growth of library professional organizations. Certainly much of its report is directly pertinent to the problems of today.

The report of the Third Activities Committee was divided into two major sections: Part I. Aims and Functions of a National Library Organization, and Part II. The A.L.A., Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow. Most of the attention of the profession has been focused on Part II with its specific proposals for change in the structure of the A.L.A.; and yet, Part I is, to the writer's mind, by far the more significant part of the report and the portion which has had least attention from the profession.

In discussing the aims and functions of a national professional organization for librarians, the Third Activities Committee recommended two major lines of development.

A. The importance of a national professional organization and the need for unity in the profession

B. The importance of recognizing the autonomy and authority of special groups.

The history of the reorganization of A.L.A. is almost entirely a record of steps taken to implement the latter.

Authority and autonomy for special groups were to be achieved chiefly through three measures:

1. Establishment of strong and autonomous subject divisions of the Association
2. Allotment of dues of members to the division of their choice
3. Elections or nominations of committee members by the divisions concerned with their activities.

Perhaps the focus of reorganization of A.L.A. was on a revision of plans for the organization of subject groups within the Association. Sections were to become "divisions," they were to have full autonomy over their own affairs, and a share of the dues of each of their members was to be returned to them in the form of allotments. As a consequence, there are today eight divisions each operating in a special field and each having full control over the expenditure of its allotted funds.

While this in itself was a distinct gain, it has not solved all the organizational problems. Despite the constitutional guarantee of full autonomy and control over their own affairs, some divisions have felt that they were not given in practice the autonomy that was theirs in principle. The report of the A.C.R.L. Committee on Relations with A.L.A. is one example.¹ In answer to the proposals of that committee, the Executive Board and Council of A.L.A. reaffirmed their determination to see that autonomy and responsibility were actually given to the divisions. The establishment of the office of executive secretary of A.C.R.L. is tangible proof of this determination.²

Financing

Development of strong divisions would of course be impossible without some financial support for them. This is perhaps where the Third Activities Committee report has been carried out least. Twenty per cent of the dues of most individual members was to be and has been returned to the divisions. But, without additional funds,

¹ *Library Journal* 71:1008-09, August 1946.

² *A.L.A. Bulletin* 40:458, November 1946.

this has resulted in only meager budgets for divisions. Thus, the necessity of additional funds granted to A.C.R.L. for its executive secretary.

But another recommendation of the Third Activities Committee was that when funds of A.L.A. became adequate to care for the increased costs provided by the reorganization, allotments of dues of institutional members of divisions were to be made.

Unfortunately, perhaps for the success of the reorganization, costs (chiefly allotments of dues of individual members) were substantial. Furthermore, income of the Association as anticipated through the new dues scale has not gone up as rapidly as expected. With the coming of the war, many dues-paying members were lost to the armed forces. Furthermore, all costs of the Association increased and instead of expanding its activities, the Association has actually had to retrench. Thus, little money has been available to give to the reorganized divisions. With the end of the war, with the increase in library salaries, and with continued growth in membership of the Association, more money may well become available both for the A.L.A. and for its divisions. Furthermore, the new scale for institutional dues adopted by Council in December 1946 may well bring in additional funds and enable further allotments to the divisions.

The reorganization of committee appointments has proceeded smoothly. The boards of directors of the various divisions have become the responsible A.L.A. committees in certain fields. For several committees, members are nominated by one or more divisions. Other A.L.A. committees have divisional subcommittees which work with the over-all committee. In addition, the presidents of the various divisions have served as unofficial representatives of their divisions on the committee on committee

appointments. This has led to a considerable use of talent from all A.L.A. divisions on A.L.A. committees, and, while some rough spots need removing, committee organization seems to have proceeded smoothly.

Strengthened Divisions

The foregoing should indicate that A.L.A. reorganization during the past six years has concentrated heavily on strengthening divisional organization and much has been accomplished in this respect. There are questions here: Are there too many divisions? Are the present divisions logical and efficient for the best interests of librarianship? Is the present subject basis for divisions adequate? These and other questions must be answered in order to have the most satisfactory library organization and will of course be an important item in the agenda of the Fourth Activities Committee. In spite of some unsolved problems and many imperfections in its present organization, the A.L.A. has taken a long step forward in the organization of strong, autonomous subject divisions.

Further developments in strengthening the divisions could come regularly; whether they will or not depends on two factors. First, there must be vigorous, effective, and imaginative leadership in the divisions. If divisional officers are alert and forward looking, they will develop programs which will catch the fancy, not only of their own membership, but also of the officers, boards, and committees of A.L.A.

Second, officers, boards, and committees of A.L.A. must make a conscious effort to stimulate the activities of divisions and must learn to think in terms of divisional activities. Instead of a special group or committee to accomplish a given purpose, there should be every effort made to utilize a division or divisional committee. Special committees should be a last resort used only

when efforts to interest divisional groups have failed. The time must come when divisions are offered funds for certain purposes instead of having in every case to request them.

The second major recommendation of the Third Activities Committee was for the importance of a national professional organization and the need for unity in the profession. Unfortunately, this important aspect of A.L.A. reorganization has not been implemented. We are as far from unity in the library profession now as we were in 1939, and yet the need is greater now than perhaps ever before.

A.L.A. Must Promote Unity

Perhaps the major responsibility for achieving unity in the library profession rests with the American Library Association. As the oldest, largest, and strongest of library associations it should rightfully assume leadership in this important problem. Its major agency for the consideration of the problem is of course the Fourth Activities Committee. This, however, does not release other groups from their rightful responsibility, for one group or committee working alone will not be successful. The best thought of all will be required to arrive at the best solution. A special responsibility rests upon the divisions of A.L.A. Theirs is the task of planning and directing activities in their special subject fields. They are by virtue of that fact in a strategic position to draw up a program for united professional activity—to decide the issues upon which they would like to unite with all other divisions for the common cause. So far the divisions have shown little recognition of this obligation—their interests have, in the main, been in their limited subject fields. With control and autonomy in those fields, they must now give some serious thought to the areas for united activity.

Other national library associations must make an important contribution to this problem, for perhaps in lesser degree, but nonetheless great, is their responsibility for unity in librarianship. Again there is little evidence to date of the recognition of this responsibility. The popular attitude is to await action by A.L.A., see if it is satisfactory, and then decide whether or not there is a common ground for unity. Under such a policy it is highly unlikely that any substantial steps will be taken toward unity. Anything that is done is likely to reflect one viewpoint primarily and neglect others.

Finally, the responsibility of the individual librarian is great. First, he should begin to think more in terms of the broad fundamental goals of librarianship than in terms of what he gets from membership in his professional association. Second, he must inform himself and be critical of the means by which his association accomplishes its aims. Third, he must constitute himself a committee of one to make known to his representatives, his group officers, and the leaders of the association what he considers to be the goals and activities upon which the profession should unite.

In its tentative report, the Third Activities Committee phrased the problem as follows:

The support which a national organization can give is so essential to a realization of the aims of the profession that the strongest possible national organization is necessary. Unity is necessary because the profession is composed of librarians from widely different types of libraries, not sharply differentiated, but overlapping in fields covered, and because numerous techniques are common to various groups.³

This is the task that faces all librarians today—to create out of many special groups a strong, united library profession.

³ "Tentative Report of the Third A.L.A. Activities Committee." *A.L.A. Bulletin* 33:376, June 1939.