LITA President's Message

Updates from the
2019 ALA Midwinter Meeting

Bohyun Kim

In this President's message, I would like to provide some updates from the 2019 ALA Midwinter Meeting held in Seattle, Washington.

First, as many of you know, the potential merger of LITA with ALCTS and LLAMA has been temporarily put on hold, due to an initial timeline that was rather ambitious and the lack of time required to deliberate on and resolve some issues in the transition plan to meet that timeline.[1] These updates were also shared at the LITA Town Hall during the Midwinter Meeting, where many LITA members spent time discussing topics such as the draft mission and vision statements for the new division, what makes people feel at home in a division, in which areas LITA should re-double its focus, and which activities LITA may be able to set aside without losing its identity. Valuable feedback and thoughts were provided by Town Hall participants. Many emphasized the importance of building and retaining a community of library technologists around LITA values, programming, resources, advocacy, service activities, and networking opportunities in those feedback. The merger-related discussion is to resume this Spring, and the leadership of LITA, ALCTS, and LLAMA will make every effort to ensure the best future for three divisions at this time of great flux and change.

Second, LITA is looking into introducing some changes to the LITA Forum. In the feedback and thoughts gathered at the LITA Town Hall, the LITA Forum was also mentioned as one of the valuable LITA offerings to its members. The origin of the LITA Forum goes back to LITA's first national conference held in Baltimore in 1983.[2] Since then, the LITA Forum has become a cherished venue for many library technologists, a place where they meet other like-minded people in the field, learn from one another, share ideas and experience, and look for more ways in which technology can be utilized to better serve libraries and library patrons.

Initially, the Steering Committee hoped that all three divisions would participate in putting together the LITA Forum with a wider range of content that encompasses the interests of not only LITA members but also of those in ALCTS and LLAMA, in a virtual format in order to engage more members who cannot easily travel, to be held some time in Spring 2020. At the time this idea was conceived more than a year ago, it was assumed that all preparations for the member vote regarding the merger would have been nearly completed by the time of the Midwinter Meeting. However, the Steering Committee unfortunately ran out of time for that preparation. Merger planning also took up almost the entirety of the time that the leadership and the staff of the three divisions had available. This resulted in an unfortunate delay in proper Forum planning. With the merger conversation on hold at this point and the new timeline for the merger being likely to be set back at least by a year, the changed circumstances for the Forum planning had to be reviewed.

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After a lively and thoughtful discussion at the Midwinter Meeting, the LITA Board decided that, considering how much work remains to be done regarding merger planning, it may not be practical or feasible to have the next LITA Forum be the first virtual and joint one. However, there was a lot of interest in and excitement about trying a virtual format since it will allow LITA to reach and serve the needs of more LITA members than the traditional in-person meeting. It was also pointed out that the virtual format may provide an opportunity for LITA to experiment with different and more unconventional conference program formats, which could be a welcoming change to LITA members. The LITA Board, however, also acknowledged the value of a physical conference where people get to meet one another in person, which cannot be easily transferred to a virtual conference. If the virtual conference experiment takes place and is successful, LITA may hold its Forum alternating every year between two different formats – virtual and physical.

Planning for and running a fully virtual conference at the scale of a multi-day national forum will require additional time and careful consideration since it will be the first time the LITA Forum Planning Committee and the LITA Office attempt this. Logistics management is likely to be quite different in a virtual conference. The attendee expectations and the user experience will also significantly differ in a virtual conference than in a physical conference.

As the first step of this investigation, the LITA Forum Planning Committee will explore what the ideal LITA virtual forum may look like in terms of programming formats and participant experience. The LITA Office and the Finance Advisory Committee will also look into the financial side of running the LITA Forum in a virtual format. At this time, it is not yet determined when the next LITA Forum will be held and whether it will be a virtual or a physical one. Once these investigations are completed, however, the LITA Board should be able to decide on the most appropriate path towards the next LITA Forum. Stay tuned for what exciting changes may be coming to the LITA Forum.

Third, I would like to mention that LITA issued a statement regarding the incidents of aggressive behavior, racism, and harassment reported at the 2019 ALA Midwinter Meeting.[3] Along with the statement, the LITA Board has decided to commit funds to provide an online bystander / allyship training, which we hope will equip LITA members with tools that empower active and effective allyship, recognize and undo oppressive behaviors and systems, and promote the practice of cultural humility, thereby collectively increasing our collaborative capacity. The LITA statement and the Board decision were received positively by many LITA members. Other ALA divisions such as ALCTS, ALSC, ASGCLA, LLAMA, UNITED, and YALSA have already expressed interest in working together with LITA on this, and the LITA Board is looking into a few options to choose from. More information about the training will be soon provided.

Lastly, I am thrilled to announce that the LITA President's Program at the upcoming ALA Annual Conference at Washington D.C in June will feature Meredith Broussard, a data journalist and the author of *Artificial Unintelligence: How Computers Misunderstand the World*, as the speaker. In her book, Broussard delves into many problems surrounding techno-chauvinism, which displays blind optimism about technology and an abundant lack of caution about how new technologies will be used. She further details how this simplistic worldview that prioritizes building new things and efficient code above social conventions and human interactions often misinterprets a complex social issue as a technical problem and results in a reckless disregard for public safety and the public good.

Reviewing the early history of computing and digital technology, Broussard observes: "We have a small, elite group of men who tend to overestimate their mathematical abilities, who have systematically excluded women and people of color in favor of machines for centuries, who tend to want to make science fiction real, who have little regard for social convention, who don't believe that social norms or rules apply to them, who have unused piles of government money sitting around, and who have adopted the ideological rhetoric of far-right libertarian anarcho-capitalists. What could possibly go wrong?"[4]

I invite all of you to come to this program for more insight and a deeper understanding about what the recent technology innovation involving artificial intelligence (AI) and big data means to our everyday life and where it may be headed. The program information is available in the ALA 2019 Annual Conference Scheduler at https://www.eventscribe.com/2019/ALA-Annual/fsPopup.asp?Mode=presInfo&PresentationID=519109.

ENDNOTES

[1] The official announcement can be found at the LITA Blog. See Bohyun Kim, "Update on New Division Discussions," *LITA Blog*, January 26, 2019, https://litablog.org/2019/01/update-on-new-division-discussions/.

[2] Stephen R. Salmon, "LITA's First Twenty-Five Years: A Brief History," Library Information Technology Association (LITA), September 28, 2006, http://www.ala.org/lita/about/history/1st25years.

[3] "LITA's Statement in Response to Incidents at ALA Midwinter 2019," *LITA Blog*, February 4, 2019, https://litablog.org/2019/02/litas-statement-in-response-to-incidents-at-ala-midwinter-2019/.

[4] Meredith Broussard, *Artificial Unintelligence: How Computers Misunderstand the World* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 2018), p. 85.