

Music Library Association Board of Directors

"SELF-STUDY" REPORT

February 18, 2010

Task Force Membership

Matthew Wise (Chair), Linda Fairtile, Lois Kuyper-Rushing, Amanda Maple, and Philip Vandermeer

Task Force Charge

With the goal of ensuring the effectiveness of MLA's Board of Directors, the Task Force will undertake a review of the structure, duties, and workings of the Executive Board, its Planning Committee, and its Finance Committee. Seeking broad input from MLA members, the Task Force will report to the Board at its June 2010 meeting. The report will include a summary of the evaluation process and any recommendations for change.

Evaluation Methodology

The Task Force began its work by compiling a list of forty (40) of the most recent past and present MLA Board members, with terms ranging from 1997 to 2013, including the five members of the Task Force itself. The names were collected from ten years of the *MLA Newsletter* masthead. A letter of inquiry was then drafted which asked these members for their general observations and opinions about their experience with the structure, duties, and workings of the Board, its Planning Committee, and its Finance Committee. Members were also solicited for any suggestions that they might have for improving the way in which the Board operates. (A copy of the letter is attached as an appendix.)

The forty names were then divided up among the Task Force members, eight people each, and the letter of inquiry was sent as an email message. After an initial period of waiting for responses, reminders were emailed and follow-up phone calls were made. A total of twenty-seven (27) responses were received (a response rate of 67.5%). Those responses were then shared among all of the Task Force members. Early in the process, a small number of recurring themes began to emerge in the responses.

Although the Task Force briefly considered expanding the scope of its inquiry, e.g., to polling the general membership, our corporate sponsors, convention exhibitors, and the staff at A-R Editions, in the end there was agreement that this would entail much additional effort that would most likely generate very little new information. The Task Force also believes that there are other Association officers who have typically provided this type of feedback from these constituencies.

Summary of Responses

PLANNING COMMITTEE

Eighteen of the respondents (two-thirds) expressed resounding approval for the new Planning Committee. They felt that it provides for more efficiency during the full Board meetings, brings important long-range strategic-planning issues to the table, and offers an opportunity for the "non-financial" officers of the Board to be much more involved. Also it relieves the President of much of the responsibility for planning the Board meetings.

REPORTS TO THE BOARD

There was also general praise from four respondents for the recent policy to require reports only when there is "Board Action Required" (BAR). This has allowed the Board to become much more focused upon actionable items, rather than being bogged down in the reading of lengthy informational reports and discussion of all recent committee activities. And one respondent wondered whether annual chapter reports were even necessary,

MEMBER-AT-LARGE ORIENTATION, TERM LENGTHS, and QUALITY OF WORK

Four former Members-at-Large expressed concern about their preparation for the Board, i.e., orientation, training, and general context. Many felt that they lacked background on many of the issues being discussed, would have liked more explanation of the Board processes, and wanted clearer descriptions of what they were actually expected to do. There was also much frustration expressed (10 respondents) about the shortness of the term lengths, particularly in the case of the Fiscal Officer. Most felt that by the time they were just coming into a good understanding of their position and the issues that the Association was facing, they were out of office.

Five respondents had concerns about the quality and timeliness of the work of the various Board members and A-R Editions, as well as the lack of any method for enforcing such quality. Not to point any fingers, but there have been occasional problems with the Administrative Structure appearing in different versions in various places on the website, with the Member Activities Roster being out-of-date and not available in a timely manner for the Nominating Committee, and with some electronic files not being transferred in a readable format from one Board officer to the next. Over the years, most of the elected Members-at-Large have been diligent, attentive, and precise in their duties, while a few have been less dependable.

Regarding the skills and time required of the Fiscal Officer specifically, one respondent wondered whether Member-at-Large candidates should run for specific positions based upon their particular skills (e.g., financial) and genuine interests. It was also felt by one respondent that the perceived need of the Association to have a slate of candidates that is representative of the membership (library type, job type, and geography) is perhaps

getting in the way of actually electing Board members who are knowledgeable about the Association, have broad experience within the profession, and are able to accomplish the assigned tasks.

TREASURER / EXECUTIVE SECRETARY

It has long been known that the Treasurer/Executive Secretary has way too much to do and that the position is a huge commitment to be added on top of anyone's "day job." Although this merger of two previous positions was originally envisioned to have more support from A-R Editions, in order to be one more of oversight and planning, this is currently not the case. Most respondents were unaware of the newly-developed Assistant T/Ex position, which, in conjunction with changes to A-R's services, should provide necessary relief and develop a greater sense of continuity. To follow a model similar to the terms of the Convention Manager and Assistant Convention Manager positions seems the prudent path.

One respondent suggested that the Finance Committee would benefit greatly from an annual face-to-face meeting with an independent financial advisor. Communication only with the T/Ex was not considered to be sufficiently informative.

PRESIDENT, BOARD STRUCTURE, and MANAGEMENT

Four responses noted that the President's job also seems impossibly huge and mired in managerial details. It is amazing that people can be found every other year who are willing and able to make such a commitment to the Association.

Two respondents wondered whether the Board is constituted in a way that makes it the most productive and informed. It was suggested that other models might be explored. Or, perhaps, additional members could be added to the Board or invited to the Board meetings, such as the Development Officer, the Program Committee Chair, and/or a revolving assignment from some or all of the committee chairs. It was noted by a current Board member (and Task Force member) that such a practice of inviting these Special Officers is already in place.

Recognizing the Board's overwhelming responsibilities, particularly those of the President and Treasurer/Executive Secretary, one Past President wondered whether it is now time for MLA to have an Executive Director, one who would take primary responsibility for the day-to-day tasks of the Association, such as routine record-keeping and correspondence, collection of reports, maintenance of the website, and preparation of the initial budget for the Finance Committee. Our sister organization, ARLIS/NA, for example, relies on a fairly complete management services package, one which, in addition to the above-mentioned tasks, covers all of their convention planning needs. By turning over most of its management tasks to an outside entity, the MLA Board should be able to devote more of its time to the making of policy decisions and in medium- and long-range, strategic planning. Of course, care would need to be taken, so that such a position would have a clearly-defined role within a balance of power.

COMMUNICATION and TRANSPARENCY TO THE MEMBERSHIP

Several questions were asked about Board communication (8 respondents). Are the minutes taken at meetings adequately serving the Board, especially down the road (e.g., after five years) in maintaining continuity and understanding? Do the Board members, editors, and committees have access to the most-current technologies and support required, often provided by their home institutions, to accomplish their assigned tasks? Is there sufficient follow-through with and communication of each Board decision? Is MLA's use of communication technologies efficient and extensible? Could there not be better coordination of such technology? Does the membership understand what the Board actually does? Is there enough transparency with regard to the Association's finances? For what exactly do membership dues, charitable contributions, and conference registrations pay? Is the Association communicating its work and positions on issues quickly and effectively to library practitioners outside of MLA? Should there not be more advocacy and outreach to this external audience?.

COMMITTEES

Finally, though not related specifically to the Board, there were concerns expressed by three respondents about the Association's committee structure and workings. A recurring issue seems to be that there is little oversight of the committees, especially when they are no longer fulfilling their charges, have charges which seem to overlap, are unfamiliar with what other committees are doing, and/or are not communicating with or working well with other committees that deal with related issues. Perhaps a Board member needs to be assigned the specific task of regularly reviewing the work of the committees.

Task Force Recommendations

Based upon suggestions from the survey respondents, the Task Force wishes to offer the following recommendations for Board action. The recommendations have not been prioritized, but generally follow the order of the above topics.

- 1) develop a more robust orientation packet for new Board members, to include, but not be limited to, a short summary of the Board's most recent history, activities, and issues that have been discussed, a brief introduction to the Board's annual calendar, a clearer description of the reimbursement process, a list of tips for "what to say and do" at your first Board meeting, and a guide to "insider information" (e.g., whether Board members get together for meals in Middleton, or go out "on the town" together at night)

- 2) develop position-specific handbooks, each to include, but not be limited to, a detailed job description, a list of references to pertinent articles in the Constitution & Bylaws, a statement of expectations for the work to be done while serving in that role, and any tips from previous position-holders

3) explore the possibility of longer terms for Members-at-Large, particularly for the Fiscal Officer

4) explore the costs and benefits of inviting an independent financial advisor to meet directly with the Finance Committee at least once per year

5) continue to re-examine the structure of the Board, looking at other models, perhaps to include additional officers (e.g., Development Officer, Program Committee Chair), a rotation of committee chairs, and/or other representatives from the membership

6) explore the costs and benefits of hiring an Executive Director or purchasing a broader management services package, one which would include complete convention planning and management

7) communicate more with the membership and provide more transparency to the business of the Board, perhaps by offering a recurring "Ask the MLA Board" session, by announcing the availability of Board meeting minutes and other documents on the MLA website as they are posted, by allowing Board meetings to be "open" during the annual conference (as is the case with all of the other committees, with the option, of course, to go into "executive session" when necessary), and/or by establishing a Technology and Communications Officer position

8) establish a mechanism for the regular review of committees, i.e., to determine whether they continue to fulfill their charges, have charges that seem to overlap, and are communicating effectively with other committees that have related issues

In conclusion, we hope that the Board is pleased with the work of the "Self-Study" Task Force. And we extend an invitation to contact any or all of the Task Force members, should you have any questions, comments, and/or concerns.

Respectfully submitted,

Matthew Wise (Chair), New York University
Linda Fairtile, University of Richmond
Lois Kuyper-Rushing, Louisiana State University
Amanda Maple, Penn State University
Philip Vandermeer, University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill

Appendix: Letter of Inquiry

Dear [Past/Present Board Member],

I am serving on the new Music Library Association task force to review the structure, duties, and workings of the Board of Directors, its Planning Committee, and its Finance Committee. Other members of the task force are [edit as appropriate] Linda Fairtile, Lois Kuyper-Rushing, Amanda Maple, Phil Vandermeer, and Matthew Wise (Chair). I am writing to you because you have experience serving on the Board.

Based on your experience as a member of the Board and your general observations about the workings of MLA, do you have any suggestions for improving the way the Board operates, or for improving the general operations of MLA as related to its Board of Directors? Possible considerations include the roles and tasks that are traditionally assigned to specific Board members; the responsibilities of the elected officers; areas of administration or management of our organization that you think have been overlooked during recent changes in our profession (and/or technology or other aspects of our working environment). These are just examples. Any concerns you have or suggestions for improving the functioning of MLA would be helpful to our task force as we deliberate and act upon our charge.

As you think about this, it might interest you to know that the Board recently created its own Planning Committee to function in parallel with its Finance Committee. Members of the Planning Committee are the Planning and Reports Officer (the member-at-large formerly called the Reports Gatherer), the Assistant Planning and Reports Officer, the Parliamentarian, the Assistant Parliamentarian, and the Recording Secretary. During Board meetings, while members of the Board's Finance Committee meet to work on budgets and financial planning, members of the Planning Committee have been meeting to prioritize the agenda for the full Board, as well as continue to work on any long-range planning issues that have carried over from previous meetings. This arrangement has resulted in better planning and prioritizing of issues, and more efficient Board meetings. The hope is to enable the Board to function more proactively.

Please send me your thoughts, or if you prefer a phone conversation, let me know some dates that would be convenient for you, and I'll be glad to give you a call. Thank you for your help!