CO-4

Recommendations of the Electronic Community Working Group

July 21, 2007

Members:

Scott Childers
Mickey Coalwell
Sharon Moreland
David Oberhelman (Chair)
Michele Seikel

I.   Background

In July 2005 the MPLA Reorganization Task Force recommended to the Board of
Directors that the Sections which had previously formed the basis of MPLA's
organizational structure be replaced with Electronic Communities (ECs). The Sections
offered few opportunities for members to interact with each other or communicate on
common issues, and the chairs' main function had become program planning for
conferences. The ECs were designed to increase communication opportunities among the
MPLA members and to continue the program-planning function. Thirteen ECs were
organized based on a survey (some were based on types of libraries similar to the former
Sections, and some were based on topics) and members were to sign up for the ECs
through Memberclicks. Moderators for the ECs were charged with encouraging
discussion either through discussion boards set up in Memberclicks or e-lists created in
Memberclicks and with serving on the "Program Council."

After two years, however, the activity in the various ECs has been very low, and most
have ceased to function. The difficulty of accessing profile information and services in
Memberclicks, confusion over EC membership, the small size of some of the ECs, and
inactivity from the moderators have all been mentioned as potential reasons for the
inactivity. This Working Group was formed in 2007 to investigate the problems we have
had with the ECs and to propose changes to the organization to allow more interaction
among the membership.

II.   Working Group Charge and Process

The Working Group had the following charges:

- Review the concept of the ECs and develop guidelines. The intent was to generate
  greater communication among members of the ECs and, by extension, within the
  larger MPLA Community.
- Look at the technological issues affecting the ECs and make some
  recommendations.

In the course of our discussions, the Working Group decided that having 13 separate ECs with their own discussion forums buried in Memberclicks (or separate email lists) did not foster the kind of interactive community that MPLA wanted to create. Many of the ECs are too small, and the specialized nature of the ECs prevents members from discussing issues across different library types or in other areas. Contact with other MPLA members revealed that many found the system of ECs confusing and cumbersome to use, or were unsure how to communicate with their community or with the larger MPLA Community.

The Working Group therefore felt that rather than try to implement a "quick fix" of the existing system, we would recommend replacing the 13 ECs with a single MPLA electronic community that would be easily accessed from the MPLA homepage via a "Community Portal" page. This approach would have the advantage of encouraging members to come to MPLA's website as a place to interact, and it would build a grassroots community in which members could discuss issues and share ideas. This would achieve MPLA's goal of building bridges across the distances, and would achieve the ultimate goal the Reorganization Task Force had of replacing the Sections with a vehicle for getting members more involved with MPLA outside conference.

The Working Group conducted its business via e-list, conference call, and face-to-face meetings at the conference in Albuquerque. A demo site to show what the Communications Portal site might resemble was created with the help of Roy Degler and Dan Chaney, MPLA Webmaster.

III.   Recommendations
   o   Community Portal to Replace the ECS
       ▪   Create a Community Portal page liked directly from the MPLA homepage. This would be a place on the website to which members could to interact, get organizational news, and share resources. There would be a number of different communications services offered through this Portal. RSS feeds could be incorporated in the different components of the Portal to give updates on issues and to draw members to the different communication services being offered.
       ▪   The Portal would contain a Discussion Forum which would have a team of administrators/moderators (5 or so). The forum would have sections for discussing issues relevant to library type (public, academic, government documents, etc.) as well as issues such as IF, hot topics, MPLA issues, etc. All members would be able to post and share ideas across all levels of MPLA, and though it would require logging on, it would not be buried in Memberclicks. The administrators/moderators would assist with registration problems, and watch the boards for spam, any policing, etc.; many members are familiar with such online communities, and have the knowledge of message boards to be able to do handle these tasks without much difficulty. There are numerous free PHP bulletin board applications that could be used for this component.
       ▪   A Blog that would be for the MPLA Board to use in sharing news and updates with members. This would be a vehicle for the Executive

Secretary, President, State Representatives, etc., to share news with the members is a more informal forum than the Newsletter, and would be good for late-breaking news such as conference hotel changes, etc. There would be a blog administrator—the Working Group suggests that the Recording Secretary be placed in charge of the Blog—and members of board would be able to post news items. All members could add comments, though those may need to be moderated first (as is the practice with other library organization blogs). Free software such as WordPress could be installed on the server so that we "own" the blog (i.e., don't have to use a commercial service).

- A Wiki for the members along with a "Share your Resources" section. This would be a section in which MPLA members can discuss best practices, share/upload policy and procedure documents (such as Internet filtering policies or strategic plans, etc.) with other members. We would need a moderator for this component. There could also be a separate Wiki, not linked to the Community Portal, for the MPLA Board which would contain documents (the Board Report repository, Manual of Procedure, Long Range Plan, etc.) and editable "how to" sections with duties and tips for State Representatives, etc. PBWiki or some other free Wiki service could be used, or software put on our server.
- Links to other components currently on the MPLA Website could be added to the Portal page: the online newsletter, the "MPLA Stories," MPLA faces, the Jobline, etc. These would help humanize the Portal page and make it the place to go for the (virtual) face-to-face aspect of the organization.
- We would continue to have an MPLA email list (mpla-l), but it would not be a suitable replacement for the Portal, and would be a supplementary way of keeping members informed (and drawing them to the Portal).

o Restructure the Program Council and decouple it from the Communications Portal.
- The moderators and administrators for the Communications Portal should not be asked to develop programming ideas for conference (that task for the EC moderators was a holdover from the Sections).
- The MPLA Board will need to decide how the programming function should be administered. The Working Group has these suggestions to offer for the Board's consideration:
  1. The Board itself serve as the Program Council, and the Vice President delegate responsibility for different program plans among the members.
  2. A Program Council of 10 or so members be appointed by the President for a one or two year term to work with the state organizations. The members would reflect different constituencies and would be assigned programming responsibility for different areas. The Vice President could serve as the chair of this Council.
  3. Any Program Council would need to work with the members, and can use the Discussion Forum or the Blog to solicit ideas. This

          process would also enable the average member to suggest programming ideas and become more empowered in the organization.

- o An Implementation Group will be needed to create the Communications Portal and integrate it into the MPLA Website. The MPLA Webmaster needs to be an ex-officio member of that group. This group will work on choosing the specific services and applications, and will decide on the structure of the Community Portal. They will have a timeline for rolling out the new design. The MPLA President and Board can work with this group to choose moderators/administrators for the different services, and would decide on the best mechanism to introduce the changes to the membership. Bylaws changes may need to be discussed with the appropriate committee and the Board in order to take matters to the membership for a vote.
- o The Working Group recommends that if approved and then implemented, this proposal be give a two year period to assess how well it meets the needs of MPLA. At the end of that period, the Board can determine whether to continue with this structure, or to revise it (take advantage of new technologies, or work with different Website configurations, etc.).