

The Texas Library Association: What, How, & Why

BY GRETCHEN MCCORD HOFFMANN

We are all familiar with the often-heard statement that the Texas Library Association is second in size only to the American Library Association amongst professional associations serving the library community. But what exactly is TLA? How is it governed? How is it structured? Who defines TLA and makes it what it is?

Doubtless, you've also heard from a variety of sources how important it is to become involved in TLA. But, has anyone really explained to you why? And once members who have not previously been involved in the Association make the decision to become involved, how do they make that happen?

The purpose of this article is to make TLA as an organization more accessible and "user-friendly" to its members. I will attempt to do that by explaining the structure and organization of TLA, the value of becoming involved with TLA, and how to go about becoming involved.

What?

As the Texas Library Association's membership has grown from approximately 30 people in 1902 to over 7,000 members today, its complexity has necessarily grown as well. Although TLA continues to be an unusually open, welcoming, and flexible organization, it is, nonetheless, a very large organization. The increase in complexity of its structure is a result of both the need to effectively manage such a large organization and the increasing diversity of its members' interests.

The size and complexity can confuse and/or intimidate some members. Understanding the structure of the Association will help you to feel more comfortable moving within TLA, identify areas of interest, and to learn how to make a difference.

TLA comprises the following:

A. Executive Board: The Board is composed of 11 positions: president, past-president, president-elect, treasurer, ALA councilor, five representatives-at-large,

and the executive director (who serves in an *ex officio* role). Each member serves a term of three years.

B. Membership Units

1. **Divisions:** Four divisions represent the various library types: College and University Libraries Division; Public Libraries Division; Special Libraries Division; and the Texas Association of School Librarians.
2. **Round Tables and Interest Groups:** These units are created by TLA members to address particular interests, *e.g.*, Acquisitions and Collection Development Round Table, Digital Libraries Interest Group, and Library Friends, Trustees, and Advocates Round Table. Each Round Table (or Interest Group) must develop its own Bylaws, elect its own officers (which are defined in the TLA Bylaws), and establish any internal committees or working groups that it desires.

The steps to forming a Round Table are as follows:

- a. A petition signed by 60 TLA members and certified by the executive director results in creation of an interest group.
 - b. When the interest group has maintained a membership of at least 50 members for a period of three consecutive years, it may petition TLA Council to become a round table.
 - c. Upon majority vote of Council, the interest group becomes a round table.
3. **TLA Standing Committees:** Members of TLA standing (*i.e.*, permanent) committees are appointed by the president-elect to begin serving when that person's presidential term begins. Committees address specific needs of TLA, usually needs that cut across library types, such as the Professional Rights & Responsibilities Committee; or perform specific activities, such as the Texas Bluebonnet Award Committees. Committee members serve three-year, overlapping terms (with one or two exceptions), so that one-third of the committee is replaced every three years. A TLA member may serve on no more than one standing committee at a time (with the exception of the Legislative Committee).
 4. **TLA Task Forces:** Each president may appoint as many task forces as are necessary to achieve her or his particular goals for the presidential year. Task forces for the 2005-06 year include the Task Force on Library Professionalism, Task Force on External

Relationships, and Task Force on Media Relationships. Task forces terminate when their charge is achieved, usually around the end of the presidential year of appointment.

5. **Conference Committees:** Two committees oversee the planning of annual conference: the Conference Program Committee and the Local Arrangements Committee. The Program Committee is appointed and begins work approximately 18 months before its conference. The Local Arrangements Committee begins work approximately nine to 12 months before its conference. Both dissolve at the end of the relevant conference.

6. **Districts:** TLA is divided into 10 regional districts. Every member of TLA is automatically a member of her or his district. All members within the designated region belong to that district; thus, districts cross library types and job types. All districts have an annual meeting in the fall, most in October. District meetings vary in their scope and content: some have a full day of programs, like a mini-TLA conference, some have a reduced version of the same, and some have one or two major speakers or programs for everyone. Districts conduct other activities throughout the year as well.

C. **Council:** Each TLA unit has a representative on TLA Council (a "councilor"), selected by that unit. Councilors from divisions, round tables, and standing committees are voting members of Council; councilors of interest groups and task forces are non-voting members. Other voting members are TLA Executive Board members, and other non-voting members are the executive director, *Texas Library Journal* editor, chairs of statewide organizations associated with TLA, and the TLA legal counsel. Council meets twice at annual assembly and twice at annual conference.

How?

Governance

Who governs TLA? Unfortunately, many members do not know the answer to this question. It is easy to assume, when one walks into a Council meeting, that the Executive Board governs the Association. After all, the almost 50 members of Council sit on the Council floor, while the president, executive director, parliamentarian, and perhaps others sit on a dais above. The president runs the Council meeting, which usually flows by rather quickly.

The truth is, however, that Council governs TLA. The TLA Bylaws state that the duties of Council include "Determine policy and serve as the governing body of TLA." The duties of the Executive Board, on the other hand, include "Make recommendations to Council with respect to matters of policy and operations." Thus, Council is the decision-maker for the Association as a whole, while the Executive Board acts in an advisory capacity.

This structure is in place to assure that the TLA membership has its say in the governance of the Association. Keep in mind that each voting member of Council is elected by the membership, whether by the entire membership (Executive Board members) or via individual units. The only members of Council who are not elected are also non-voting members. Currently, Council has 48 voting members, only 10 of which are Executive Board members. The entire purpose of this structure is to ensure that all members of the Association have a true voice in running the Association.

The Executive Board meets twice at annual conference and twice at annual assembly, plus two additional times during the year. The TLA Bylaws state that all meetings within the Association are open to all members, with the exception of those that discuss matters affecting the privacy of individuals or institutions. So, if you want to see the Executive Board in action, you are always welcome to sit in on a meeting.

The Executive Board discusses policy matters concerning the Association and makes recommendations to Council or other appropriate units for any suggested action. For example, the agenda of the last Executive Board meeting included clarifying the qualifications requirements for TALL Texans participants; getting TLA units and members involved in the association-wide strategic planning process; and a discussion about the need, or lack thereof, for TLA to have a treasurer position.

The primary lesson to keep in mind from this section of the article is: TLA is YOUR organization. Each member is in a position to affect the current and future goals, activities, and focus of TLA. In the words of Gandhi, "you must be the change you wish to see in the world." If you would like to see TLA take a certain action or engage in a certain type of activity, you can work to make that happen.

Getting Involved

Now you know how TLA works. And, you know you want to get involved. But how? You're a new member, or you've been a member for years but have just now decided to make a commitment to the profession and become an active member. You go to some meetings at conference – the rooms are filled with people who all look like they know each other and know exactly what they're doing. You have no clue about either. What now?!

I will repeat until you get tired of hearing it: No matter how large an organization TLA becomes, it is the most open, friendly, encouraging, and supportive organization imaginable. Having been involved with both state and local professional organizations in three different professions, I know of what I speak. I like to warn members trying to become active for the first time to be careful: like an auction, if you scratch your nose at the wrong time, you might find that you've just volunteered yourself for something or the other.

Let's talk about a strategy for getting involved. Now that you understand how the Association is structured, you can begin to look for avenues to address your

interests. Begin by reviewing a list of all the TLA units at www.txla.org/html/org.html. When you join TLA, you automatically become a member of your district, and your dues include membership in one round table or interest group and one division, each of your choice. You may choose to join additional units, as well, and may do so at any time during the year in the Members Only section of the TLA website (choose "Modify Membership Information/Choices").

You know that round tables and interest groups target particular interests of members. They may be about a particular job function (*e.g.*, Cataloging Round Table), a certain job skill (*e.g.*, Library Instruction Round Table), or user type (*e.g.*, Children's Round Table). So, this is a good place to start. Most round tables and interest groups have websites that will give you a better idea of what they do. The best way to learn, though, is to attend their business meetings at conference or annual assembly or to simply get in touch with the officers and ask. Once you've found a unit that interests you, talk to the officers about your interests and ideas, and volunteer to help with a project or conference program.

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Committee duties are listed in Chapter 9 of the TLA Standing Rules, located online at www.txla.org/html/docs/rules.html. If you find a committee whose charge particularly interests you and to which you would like to contribute, contact the president-elect and let him or her know you are interested. You should also complete and submit a volunteer interest form, available at www.txla.org/html/volunteer.html. Don't be intimidated by the fact that you have not served in such a position before. Aside from the truism that everyone starts from scratch, presidents make a strong effort each year to appoint to committees a mix of experienced members and "new blood." It is easier to identify the experienced members, because they are better known within the organization, but it can be a challenge to identify newly active members who are interested in serving. And, if you aren't appointed the first year you volunteer, try again! The fact that you weren't appointed the first time likely is more a reflection of timing or the number of people who've expressed an interest than a reflection on you.

Some members find that becoming involved at the district level is an excellent way to start. Many members in very small libraries, where it's hard to get away for a week of conference and two days of assembly, also like to contribute at this level because it involves less, if any travel. To find out what your district is doing and how to play a role, contact your district chair.

Like the other standing committees, the conference planning committees like to have a mix of experienced and less experienced members. The Local Arrangements Committee is always selected from the conference host city. The Program Planning Committee, however, shifts from city to city, depending on various factors. Serving on either committee is a huge time commitment. The Program Planning Committee begins meeting 18 months prior to the conference it plans and meets almost monthly during that time. The Local Arrangements Committee begins meeting almost monthly roughly nine months before conference, and the joke about LAC is that its members do not have to pay conference registration, because they'll be working so hard during conference, they won't actually get to attend much of it in a non-working role! Members of both committees do a lot of work between meetings, too, of course. Not only are these two committees extremely important to TLA, they are both extremely fun (especially in a year with a theme like *Libraries: Igniting the Passion!*).

A final, but no less important, strategy for getting involved, if you are a relatively new member, is to take advantage of the New Members' Round Table programs. Not only does NMRT generally focus on the needs of new members, but it offers programs such as an introduction to conference on the first morning of each conference and, in most years, a mentoring program.

Why?

So now you know what TLA is as an organization, and you have some strategies for how to go about becoming an active member. Some of you are rarin' to go, but other are still asking, "So? Why should I invest the not incidental amount of time, energy, and other resources required to become active in TLA?" Let me give you the Top 10 reasons (there are more):

- 10 Eligibility for various scholarships to promote library careers, stipends to attend conference, and grants to nurture quality library programming.
- 9 Access to the TLA Jobline (online) and Placement Center at annual conference.
- 8 Subscriptions to TLA publications and unit-based distribution lists.
- 7 Opportunities to learn about your colleagues – TLA members are the most fascinating people!
- 6 Networking opportunities. Think of all the new and lifelong friends you'll make!
- 5 Making a difference for your users and the values of our profession, like defending intellectual freedom and the right to read.
- 4 Professional development opportunities.
- 3 It's fun!!
- 2 Your responsibility as a professional – after all, being a professional means giving back to the profession.

And the Number One reason to get involved in TLA:

- 1 Only you can give to your profession, your colleagues, and your Association your unique contributions. Each one of us has a unique set of skills, ideas, opinions, and experience that shape what we can contribute to the profession. Only you can offer what you do! ☺

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