
We Must Think Strategically

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We always overestimate the change that will occur in the next two years and underestimate the change that will occur in the next ten. Don't let yourself be lulled into inaction.

—Bill Gates, *The Road Ahead*, 1996

Bill Gates could probably have used even more extreme adverbs. That is, we *vastly* underestimate the change that will occur in ten years. Think of 1999 and compare it to *today*.

Think of webinars, going digital, investment bubbles, e-readers, chat reference, handheld computers, cloud computing, Twitter, Facebook, Google Books, Flickr, social networking, and Library 2.0.

This is the second column examining the statements of concerns from 105 candidates who have run for an elected position in RUSA in the past three years (2007–9). The method is described in the following note.¹ In the Winter 2009 *RUSQ*, I examined issues related to association participation. In this column I analyze the candidates' statements to determine implications for our strategic planning process.

I know, strategic planning is not always interesting, but it is necessary and should act as a roadmap for our future. Sometimes it's nice to see where we are headed, and I hope to make it fun, or at the very least educational! I hope you will find this discussion interesting because it is from the membership's perspective (RUSA candidates who have run for office). I must again remind you that when the candidates created their statements for election, they did not write them for the purpose of this analysis. The idea to use them in RUSA's strategic planning process came later.

In September 2009, leaders from ALA's executive board, divisions, round tables, and senior staff met for a strategic planning retreat in Itasca, Illinois. This meeting was the first step in the process of developing ALA's next strategic plan to guide the association over the next five years. To help inform our members, ALA created an environmental scan containing documents on major issues and trends affecting libraries, posting it on ALA Connect (<http://connect.ala.org/2015scan>). The environmental scan includes documents on these topics:

- academic libraries
- cultural environment
- economic environment
- educational environment
- media environment
- nonprofits and associations

- political environment
- public libraries
- school libraries
- societal environment
- special and government libraries
- technological environment
- the American Library Association

The document that came out of the Itasca planning retreat identified five goal areas to guide the planning process:

- advocacy and public policy
- building the profession
- transforming libraries
- member engagement
- organizational excellence

The planning document was reviewed and refined at the 2009 ALA Executive Board Fall Meeting in Chicago. The revised plan was disseminated before the 2010 ALA Midwinter Meeting for further member review. The intent is for the plan to go into effect after ALA Council approval at the Annual Conference in Washington, DC, in June 2010.

Each October, all of ALA's division leadership and the ALA executive board gather in Chicago to discuss both division- and ALA-wide issues. RUSA's executive committee includes the "Three P's" (RUSA's current, past and future presidents), our ALA councilor, and the RUSA board secretary. The 2009 committee was Susan J. Beck, Neal Wyatt, Barry Trott, Kathleen Kern, and Theresa Mudrock. The RUSA committee meets in the morning to discuss RUSA issues, and then all the ALA leaders come together in the afternoon to discuss a common issue. This year we contributed to the development of ALA's next strategic plan.

The following morning, the RUSA executive committee met again to review our current strategic plan and establish new strategies for this year. In preparation for the Fall Leadership Meeting, I analyzed the candidate statements to see if they could help inform our discussions (as well as develop it for this column).

WHAT ARE OUR CHALLENGES?

What do the candidates believe to be the most important issues facing our profession today? What are our concerns? How can we transform our challenges into opportunities and frame them into strategic goals and objectives? One candidate defined his expectations and hopes for RUSA this way:

We depend upon the support of ALA and RUSA to find solutions and make involvement in the profession both essential and possible.

Although there were many issues identified by the candidates, these following were mentioned most often:

- membership
- user services
- professional development
- technology
- networking
- relevancy
- economy

As in the previous article, I will briefly introduce the issue, but the candidates' own language will be used to express each topic via a mixture of direct quotes and synthesized thoughts.

Membership

The most important question for any professional society is how to best serve the needs of its members. Officer candidates expressed a clear desire that RUSA be more responsive to member needs by gathering more user data about how members use RUSA. According to one candidate, "recruiting and inspiring a new generation of enthusiastic technically savvy yet service oriented librarians is also a top priority." Another candidate said the following:

It is time that our professional organization uses new technologies to communicate more broadly and effectively to members; reach out and appeal to new librarians and those we wish to recruit; and give members effective means to voice their concerns, share their ideas, and give feedback to the RUSA board.

Candidates also asked how RUSA should do the following:

- grow a membership that is representative of all stakeholders
- build our membership
- appeal to new librarians
- invite new participation
- get more public librarians involved
- provide value to our members
- increase the visibility of RUSA in the profession and society at large
- help recruit new members to specialize in history librarianship
- explore whether RUSA should have other subject sections

One candidate said that RUSA must "develop an agenda that actively promotes communication of information highlighting innovative practices of our professionals."

Virtual participation is an important topic to both ALA and RUSA members. Our candidates asked how RUSA should do the following:

- Allow for *all* members to participate in the division?
- Involve and connect virtually with members that often cannot attend conferences?

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- Create online opportunities and venues that can be used to highlight successful library programs and avenues for discussion and idea sharing, which is necessary for members that are unable to attend conferences? Perhaps we should even share information about failures and mistakes so that others can avoid making the same ones.

Organizational Communication

Improving communication with and to our members is imperative to the future of RUSA. Just as important is how we seek and facilitate communication from our members. Here are some candidates' thoughts on this issue:

- Identify the best means to communicate and promote our division's activities to reach existing, new, and potential members.
- How can we give members effective means to voice their concerns, share their ideas, and give feedback to the RUSA board?
- What new technologies can we use to communicate more broadly and effectively to members?
- Enhance our efforts to communicate with and beyond our membership.

Technology

How do we librarians use technology? How can technology make our work easier? How do our users adapt to new technologies? How can we help our users adapt? How can we best use technology to facilitate RUSA's work? One candidate said, "We need to continue to find innovative ways to meet the needs of our patrons and potential users. We need to seek out the trends and technologies that advance our profession." Another said "A key issue of professional concern to me is meeting the challenge of technological change while maintaining our traditional core values of library service, including equity of access to information."

Other candidates expressed these opinions:

- Take advantage of new technologies and strategies that allow us to deliver our services and share our resources more effectively.
- Educating public services staff in changes in information technology.
- We in reference and user services know the power of technology to assist us in meeting users' information needs.

User Services

We need more data about our library users. What kinds of services do they need? What kinds of collections? How much instruction and what kind? Are our services and tools too complex? Have we adapted effectively to our users' apparent desire for self-service?

Once we understand our users' needs we, in turn, have to evaluate our services, collections, and programs to determine what changes we need to make to provide the best quality services and collections we can offer.

These were some of the most pressing concerns expressed by the candidates about responding to user's needs.

- How can we improve services? Namely,
 - how do we develop new service models?
 - how can we continue to provide quality services?
- How do we help our users:
 - better navigate the Web?
 - find and evaluate information resources?
 - adapt to changing technology?
- How will we:
 - advocate for our users' needs?
 - adapt to our users' views of information and access?
 - incorporate users' preferences regarding new technology trends?
 - meet our user's expectations?

One candidate wondered how we would "best meet the information needs of a population that is never physically present." Another expressed it like this:

It is time to meet our customers' needs when and where they want them, whether it is remote access to databases, or bookmobile delivery to retirement communities, or home/office delivery to distance learners and businesspeople.

Professional Development

RUSA candidates firmly believed that one of RUSA's primary responsibilities is to provide members with a variety of professional development and continuing education opportunities so that librarians can more effectively meet their users' needs.

Candidates told us they wanted RUSA to continue to provide members with a variety of learning opportunities, including preconferences, conference programs and presentations, workshops, online course offerings, publications, Web-based seminars, and other professional tools. One candidate stated the following:

My primary professional concern is to work with RUSA colleagues to provide meaningful and valuable membership, continuing education, and professional development opportunities for RUSA members. This means not only providing rich programming and face-to-face networking opportunities at conferences but also increasing our venues for virtual participation. With the availability of social networking tools, Web conferencing software, and other technologies, there

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are many areas we can explore in order to bring RUSA activities and learning opportunities to you wherever you are.

Another candidate posited that

[we need to] offer worthwhile programs at conferences to justify attendance while striving to reach members and potential members through online offerings, quality, and practical publications.

Another said this:

Create online opportunities that can be used to highlight successful library programs and avenues for discussion and idea sharing that is necessary for those members who are unable to attend conferences.

And another:

Continue the tradition of bringing quality programs to our members and future members.

Networking

Networking is one of the most highly valued activities among RUSA members. We need to create new networking opportunities for our members to share experiences, identify best practices, and discover new knowledge. One candidate said they “believe in sharing developments and practices. Opportunities to ask questions are important, as one question posed, can assist many people.”

This is how the candidates described the enormous value of networking:

- Networking provides opportunities to:
 - share philosophies and methods, as well as keeping abreast of the trends, issues, and new technologies for reference
 - learn from one another
 - meet and interact with each other
 - share knowledge and expertise
- Networking also provides:
 - mutual support
 - a real-world and online arena for discussion, discovery, learning, and collaboration

Relevancy

Relevancy is a serious concern for our profession. We need to be able to demonstrate our value and benefits to not only our funding organizations, but also to library users. We must identify the means for RUSA to remain relevant to its members. How can RUSA help us best demonstrate our value as librarians and libraries? How can we demonstrate RUSA's

value to librarians? One candidate gave their interpretation of this challenge:

Our profession is facing a time of unprecedented change. Our challenge is to remain relevant while continuing to provide the quality, in-depth services we have always provided, connecting our users to the resources they need in a variety of formats and in many settings and contexts.

Another candidate said that they “now recognize the relevance of RUSA, especially in providing valuable staff development opportunities and model service guidelines.”

We need to be able to do the following:

- Prove to our customers that libraries exist for their needs, now and in the future.
- Affirm the value of their services and resources in an environment where many potential customers perceive that “everything is on the Web.”
- Develop effective marketing tools to ensure that customers are informed about how the library can enrich and simplify their lives.
- Demonstrate to faculty and students that the library is the place where they will find facts that will promote their efforts to be successful in the classroom.

One candidate stated his expectations of RUSA this way:

RUSA is uniquely positioned to assist its members and the library profession in making changes that will sustain the role of librarians and libraries in the future. By carefully looking at what values and skills we bring from past practice and carefully assessing what new technologies offer us, we can ensure that reference services in academic, public, school, and special libraries will continue to have a vital role in serving their communities.

Economy

The current state of the economy will continue to affect the library community. There will be no new money for many of our libraries. This will continue to impact our budgets, collections, staffs, and ability to serve the needs of our users. The question that looms over everything we do is this: How do we continue to do more with less? I described the economic implications on RUSA in my Fall 2009 *RUSQ* President's Column.² Here is one of our candidate's views on the effects of the economy:

With the world in a financial crisis, RUSA can play a larger role than ever. We can help our users find and evaluate resources to make career and investment choices, use resource sharing to expand local holdings, make wise collection development choices with ever

shrinking budgets, and find authoritative sources for both scholarly and personal needs.

THE VALUE OF CANDIDATE STATEMENTS

At the beginning of this column, I questioned if looking at the candidate statements could help inform our strategic planning process. My answer is yes, I believe they were useful as a sampling of our membership values to provide potential strategic directions for RUSA. Now it is our responsibility to examine them and transform them into opportunities so that they become the foundation of our future strategic planning.

When planning for the future, I like to start out by asking “What if?” or I try to fill in this blank: “I would love it if we could do ____.” This shows passion and imagination for what we can do, who we can become, and for what our possibilities are.

The candidates valued building our membership, the commitment to providing quality services to our users, and the smooth integration of technology to facilitate our work. They believed that RUSA has a responsibility to provide professional development and continuing education opportunities. They valued and enjoyed the networking opportunities provided. And they described how we benefit from sharing ideas and expertise. They were concerned about being perceived as relevant in a world where most people think everything can be found using Google or Bing on the Web. And, finally, they worried about an uncertain economy.

RUSA’S STRATEGIES FOR THE FUTURE

At the Executive Board Fall Meeting we reviewed our current strategic plan and created new strategies to guide RUSA into the future. Our revised strategic plan was approved by the RUSA board via ALA Connect in late fall.

Here are the highlights of the new plan. As you can see, many of RUSA’s strategies also align with ALA’s major strategic goals.

- *Establish a clearinghouse to share new ideas and expertise within the profession.* This aligns with the ALA strategic goals of building the profession, transforming libraries, member engagement, and organizational excellence. It is consistent with our members’ desires to network, create content, and participate in professional development, and with RUSA’s desire to increase its visibility.
- *Establish protocols to create more program content on our website.* This conforms to the ALA strategic goals of building the profession, member engagement, and organizational excellence. This enhances RUSA’s visibility and contributes to the professional development of our members. It also increases organizational communication and organizational responsiveness to our members.
- *Create a statement on the definition of equity of access for our members.* This supports the ALA strategic goal of advocacy and public policy and represents one of RUSA’s core professional values: universal access to information.
- *The continuation of the E-Participation Task Force.* This taskforce was charged with the responsibility to examine how members can virtually participate in RUSA and how RUSA can best facilitate that participation. This strategy corresponds to the ALA strategic goals of building the profession, member engagement and organizational excellence. This also corresponds to our members’ desires to attract, recruit, and retain members and provide opportunities for increased RUSA participation. It also demonstrates our facility with technology.
- *Redesign RUSA Update.* This action corresponds to the ALA goals relating to member engagement and organizational excellence. It also relates to RUSA member goals to improve visibility, communication, and networking opportunities while also creating content.
- *Create new online professional development opportunities.* We again support the ALA strategic goals of building the profession, transforming libraries, and member engagement. For RUSA, it fulfills our obligation to provide new professional development opportunities to our members. It will also contribute to increasing our visibility in the profession, provide networking opportunities, use technology and help our members demonstrate relevancy.
- *Ensure RUSA’s effectiveness and responsiveness to members and encourage new participation.* This year RUSA will administer a membership survey to determine member’s needs. We will also continue having big-think discussions and a town hall meeting. These activities will support the ALA strategic goals of building the profession, member engagement and organizational excellence. It will support RUSA’s membership goals, and will help demonstrate RUSA’s relevancy to our members.
- *Increase RUSA’s visibility.* Included among our visibility strategies for this year, we will encourage sections to host online hot topic chats, and we will create a taskforce to investigate webinars and other ways to make our website a valuable resource for our members. This strategy supports the ALA strategic goals of member engagement and organizational excellence. This supports RUSA’s goals to increase membership, provide new networking opportunities, enhance our facility in the use of new technology, and provide professional development opportunities.

Each year we make adjustments to our strategic plan to move RUSA forward. But remember, it takes your active participation and engagement to realize our plans. ALA and RUSA are in a transitional period. Virtual meetings will soon

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become commonplace. Where, when, and how we meet will have a great impact on how we act as an organization and how we respond to member's needs. We hope that virtual meetings will allow—even encourage—more active member participation. They will provide many new opportunities for networking and teamwork. Change will make us a more robust organization.

I have enjoyed looking over all of the candidate statements, but now it is time to take action and prepare for the future direction of RUSA. I will leave you with one final quote:

I believe that RUSA continues to represent the most compelling space in librarianship—the crossroads where user services meet and are energized by thoughtful use of technology and understanding of collections!

Thus ends this important peroration on the most promising and enduring future of RUSA, the heart of ALA—no, of librarianship.

If you have any ideas you would like to share with me—please let me know! If you read this column, please e-mail me and let me know. In the subject line simply put: I read your column. Please send it to me at susan.beck@rutgers.edu.

ERRATUM

“Best Free Reference Websites: Eleventh Annual List” in the Fall 2009 issue (Volume 49, Number 1) contains an error on page 46. The website listed as “FamilyDoctor.com” should be listed as “FamilyDoctor.org.”

The editor apologizes for the error.

References and Notes

Epigraph: Bill Gates, Nathan Myhrvold, and Peter Rinearson, *The Road Ahead* (New York: Penguin Books, 1996): 316.

1. When I decided to analyze three years of data, the RUSA office staff provided me with a complete set of ballots for each RUSA section. I was then able to massage the data, convert them into rich text format files, and upload them into a qualitative content analysis program called ATLAS.ti (www.atlasti.com). After the upload I coded all of the statements, searched on specific codes, and then synthesized the results.
2. Susan J. Beck, “This is Our Time to Shine: Opportunities in a Recession,” *Reference & User Services Quarterly* 49, no. 1 (Fall 2009): 8–12, 17.