AALL Delays Open Membership

by Charles R. Dyer

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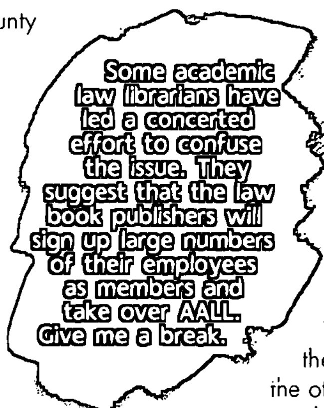
A small group of academic law librarians convinced the members of AALL present at the second business meeting in Baltimore to delay passage of the "open membership" Bylaws amendment, which would have enabled anyone to become a full-fledged member of AALL (with the right to hold office restricted to those employed as law librarians). They found several nitpicky points that convinced a majority to send the amendment back to committee. Correcting those points would require a much more elaborate wording and probably lead to more confusion, not less. Nevertheless, they accomplished their objective—to delay as long as possible the opening of membership in AALL.

Having served as chair of the Trustee Development Committee of the State, Court, and County Law Libraries SIS in previous years (and once again as co-chair this year), I have had a special interest in seeing membership opened up. Presently, our trustees can only be associate members of AALL, without voting rights. Several trustees from California county law libraries have attended AALL meetings over the last few years, and Associate Justice George Nicholson of Sacramento (a former Sacramento County Law Library Trustee) was awarded honorary membership in AALL this very year for his significant work and concern on behalf of law libraries. The irony was astounding.

The American Library Association allows trustees to be members. The Special Library Association allows anyone to be a member. Why do law librarians hold back?



Some academic law librarians have led a concerted effort to confuse the issue. They suggest that the law book publishers will sign up large numbers of their employees as members and take over AALL. Give me a break.

Those publishers who have a few associate members do so entirely for public relations purposes, and to try to "take over" would be the ultimate PR faux pas. The publishers have nothing to gain from "owning" AALL. They already have their own lobbying organizations, which are usually more influential than AALL is anyway. They won't get any more money, as it is their contributions that keep a significant portion of AALL afloat already.

Can Thomson cause us to renege on our strong stance for vendor-neutral citations? Of course not. And, if they somehow did, everyone would know it, and most state governments would consider that simply further proof that vendor-neutral citations are necessary for a level playing field. It would backfire dramatically.

Unfortunately, many private law librarians buy these confusing arguments. They generally are too busy to look into the matter closely and do not see the harm they cause by helping those academic law librarians continue this obfuscation. They think the amendment is unclear and that delay will help, when it is precisely delay that is the most dangerous thing of all.

What we are talking about is the heart and soul of what AALL is all about. If we are, as some suggest, primarily interested in the health and well-being of law librarians, then we are really a trade union. If we are an association of libraries—as distinct from an association of librarians—then we should make libraries and access to legal information primary, not job security or status.

An association of libraries would want input from library customers, from those who govern libraries, from those who sell to libraries, and especially from those who conduct business similar to our own and sometimes in place of us, such as computer specialists. We need the interaction. Then we will know better how to do our jobs. And those who do library work but do not call themselves law librarians, as often happens with MIS people in law firms and elsewhere, can learn from us how better to serve their legal-information-needy customers.

There will always be a need for librarians so long as people seek information, but, if we stick our collective head in the sand, we may find that a different breed of librarian has come to take our place. These new librarians may well be trained at Berkeley or some other place where they now look askance at the name of "librarian," but they are information gatherers and organizers, nevertheless. This situation doesn't scare me, as I will either hire those who can do the work or learn to do it myself if I have to. I suspect that that is the attitude of most county law librarians.

It is my belief that what these few obfuscating academics are truly scared of is the loss of status, since that is all that is really important in academia. They think: If any Joe Blow can be a member of AALL, then what value is there to being a member? (Hell, even the other faculty members could go to meetings, and, egad, vote on things!) For those of us who have to watch our travel budgets, we judge our associations on what they can provide for us, not what status they might give us. AALL needs to be ready to serve those who do law library work but do not call themselves law librarians, and we need their input and fresh perspective to stay up with things.

Upon my return to San Diego, I have advised my board that I will be seeking a change in our rule regarding professional memberships for our librarians. No longer will AALL be the preferred national organization. We have recently sent people to meetings of the Special Library Association, the Public Library Association (a division of ALA), and the Library Information Technology Association (a division of ALA). We will begin to look more closely at the American Society for Information Science and some computer associations as well. We can't stop growing just because our old association does. We need to congregate with people who are looking ahead.

We won't abandon AALL, as there are many who are still up with the times, even some academics. Two task forces recently suggested open membership; SCCLL-SIS suggested it several years ago. But we can no longer put all our eggs in one basket.

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