

Joining Together

Emily Morton-Owens

In writing this column I am looking ahead, as I have been throughout my term as Vice-President and President of LITA, to the possibility of our merger with ALCTS and LLAMA. Recently our discussions have included an exploration on all sides of how a division can support members through their career. This has inspired me to reflect on how LITA has always taken a broad and inclusive view of what library technology work is and can be in the future. I believe the proposed Core division can support and extend that tradition.

One question that I've heard posed from time to time is "Am I technical enough for LITA?" Long-time LITA members like to answer that with a full-throated "yes!" If you're interested enough to ask the question, we want you to join us in using technology as a part of your work. We want you to be supported in doing so at your current skill level, whether or not you want to make technology more a part of your work than it is today. If you want to go deeper into technology, we'll be there with you. While the culture of the for-profit technology industry can promote imposter syndrome, we want LITA to be a haven.

In LITA's events and meetings, we consistently see different facets of library technology work reflected. Some of us are training users in new technologies or creating programs that get young people excited about coding. Others are working to make online resources accessible and easy for our users to benefit from. We have members who are manipulating metadata, creating services to help researchers comply with data management requirements, creating websites that guide users to the information they need, and preserving cultural heritage in digital forms. Some of us manage tech projects or workers. Some of our members work on large tech teams with generous resources and others are spinning magic just from their own skills.

When I started working in libraries, my bosses and mentors were often librarians who had started in technical services or other roles, before "automation." Eager to improve their own workflows, and getting pulled into ILS migrations and catalog development, they had become the technology experts. These accidental systems librarians have always been some of my favorite colleagues because of their sure-footed approach to our data. Recently I've come to work with colleagues who are accidental systems librarians in the opposite sense; tech workers who took jobs in libraries and embraced what we do. One developer on my team, who had no previous library experience, took to our projects and ethical stance like a duck to water. He told me that he now goes to parties and tells people about how librarians are defenders of privacy and protectors of information. LITA embraces growth in any direction because we want to support learning and problem-solving with a foundation of shared principles and resources.

I don't see these developments as time-based or inevitable in any given person's career. There are plenty of library tech workers who prefer being an individual contributor and think they have

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their biggest impact doing direct work on applications. And many of my technical services colleagues prefer to define their work goals in those terms, no matter how adept they become with tech tools. Whether or not they seek out a management position, our members will probably find themselves exhibiting leadership in some context, like developing standards or advocating for standards.

Instead of a rigid path of career development, many librarians today have fluid and multi-faceted careers. For myself, I have held similar positions at quite different types of libraries—public, medical, academic. LITA has always been a part of my experience, though, providing a sort of collegial bedrock through a lot of change. The people are what make LITA, LITA: friendly, principled, and quirky. LITA members are the kind of people who will learn all they can about a technology like the Amazon Alexa—and then unplug the one on the exhibit floor at Annual.

Both as I was thinking about all this, and in this resulting column, leadership, collections, and technical services kept coming up. There is such strong and fruitful cross-pollination among these specialties, and I see that as something that would enhance the member experience—both for current LITA members who want more contact with expert colleagues and for current LLAMA and ALCTS members who want learning opportunities and support for their work with technology.

LITA members love to share their knowledge and hash through challenges together. Sometimes I wish more ALA members would feel comfortable giving us a try, and perhaps Core will be a new, friendly face for that ongoing outreach. If, in the future, someone asked the new question “Am I technical enough for Core?” I’m sure the answer will be the same: “Yes, please join us!”