

ALA Connect Roadmap

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1. Introduction

Objective: To provide members with one centralized place to do their ALA work and connect with other members around issues and interests relevant to the profession.

ALA Connect is a new service from the American Library Association that provides a virtual, collaborative space where members can engage in the work of the Association while also receiving additional benefits from professional networking features. In the first phase of the project, we focus on providing tools for working together online in a centralized place. Although phase one includes basic profiles for members, this roadmap includes an outline for future phases that provide enhanced member benefits based on extending user profiles.

Official ALA Working Groups

When *ALA Connect* launches in spring 2009, it will be pre-populated with a working area for every formal, active ALA group. This includes:

- 1,050 committees
- 11 divisions
- 3 events (Annual, Midwinter, AASL Conference)
- 17 round tables
- 46 sections

When a member logs in to *Connect* using her regular ALA website username and password, her record is automatically synchronized with ALA's membership database within one minute in order to accurately display her affiliations with ALA's committees, divisions, events, round tables, and sections.

Access to a user's workspaces for these formal ALA groups is provided from every page, allowing members to quickly and easily contribute to group discussions and work. By default, every ALA group has the following tools available in its group space.

- Posts (which are like blog posts)
- Online docs (which are like collaborative, wiki-like pages or Google Docs)
- Group calendar (for listing meetings, deadlines, etc.)
- Surveys (for asking multiple questions at once)
- Polls (for asking a single question)
- Chat room (text-based, including the ability to save a transcript of the discussion)
- Discussion forums (also known as "bulletin boards")

Each group's home page automatically displays the latest content posted, upcoming events, and the five most popular items from that group. Members of the group can post new content using any of the tools noted above or comment on items already published by others in the group. Members can also browse past content or search for something just within that group.

In order to comply with the Open Meetings Act and promote transparency in organizational work, every item posted to a group can be designated as "public" so that non-group members can also view the content. This makes it easy for a group to announce a meeting date or make a finished document available to the world. It is ALA's hope that groups will make liberal use of this feature to share their work openly. Once an item is publicly open for viewing, anyone logged into *ALA Connect* can then comment on it, thereby facilitating discussions that bridge beyond just group membership.

In order to stay current with their groups' activities, members can choose to receive email notifications on a group-by-group basis when new content is posted. This means a user can choose to receive email notices from her award jury committee but not from a discussion group.

Informal *Connect* Communities

In addition to these formal working groups, phase one of *ALA Connect* also gives members the ability to create their own communities for whatever purposes they desire. ALA encourages members to make use of this feature to create personal learning networks and communities of practice that cross geographical boundaries and traditional "type of library" restraints. By default, every member-generated community also includes the same tools listed previously for formal ALA groups. ALA puts no restrictions on usage of this feature, as long as the group's members adhere to the site's user guidelines.

Member Profiles

A nascent service in *Connect* allows member to create basic profiles that showcase their professional history and expertise. ALA will pre-populate a member's profile with his formal ALA group affiliations, as well as with any informal *Connect* Communities he has joined. Basic profiles available to the public and to other members include the following information.

- Name
- Organization
- ALA formal groups
- Informal *Connect* Communities

- A list of recent posts the person has made within *ALA Connect*

Once logged in, members can add the following types of information to their profiles.

- A profile picture
- A list of interests
- A list of areas of expertise
- A short biographical paragraph
- Educational institution information
- A list of publications
- Current work information such as job title, description, and length of employment
- Links for external sites such as Twitter and Flickr

These extended profiles are opt-in and the information must be manually entered, so members who do not wish to display this information about themselves to others cannot accidentally share information with the public or with other members.

However, for those members who do complete their profiles, phase two will offer professional networking features that will help them connect with other members and groups based on these expressed interests, as well as the ability to create a centralized curriculum vitae of their contributions to their professional association. Section 5c of this roadmap provides more details about planned development in this area.

Creating Networks

Members have the ability to search *Connect* for other members and then add them to their “network” as friends, co-workers, and/or collaborators in order to merge their online and offline professional networks in one convenient place. This service is not designed to be “Facebook for librarians” and provide social networking updates. Instead, phase one includes a basic “add to my network” feature that will expand greatly in phase two to help members connect to those pieces of the Association to which their “friends” are actively contributing.

In addition, new event planning services will help members coordinate conference attendance, roommate requests, and other offline activities. Section 5d provides more details about these planned features.

Timeline

Phase one of *ALA Connect* will launch in spring 2009 followed by a monitoring period to track how the site scales and meets member needs. ALA will train its staff liaisons to work with their formal ALA groups to begin using *Connect* leading up to the 2009 ALA Annual Conference. Work on phase two will also begin during this time, with the intent of completing implementation by 2010. *ALA Connect* will never be a “finished” product, with enhancements and new features released on a regular basis. Phase three developments will be pursued and implemented as resources allow.

Section 5 of this roadmap covers specific phase two enhancements, as well as proposed phase three development and beyond.

2. Unique Value to Members (Phase One)

Phase one of *ALA Connect* offers new features that are unavailable via other ALA web-based services.

1. Members can see all of their current ALA affiliations in one place.
2. Members can search for other members and add them to their online network.
3. Users can view the roster for ALA committees, divisions, groups, round tables, and sections.
4. Members can condense all of their Association work in one convenient location.
5. Members can work together on a document online, rather than passing around versions of documents via email.
6. Members can work together on a document privately while it is in draft form and then make it public when it's finished.
7. Members can download a calendar file of upcoming events tailored to their groups.
8. Users can track the public content of an ALA working group via email or RSS feed.
9. Members can create their own communities independently without any help from ALA staff.
10. Users can browse formal ALA groups and member-created communities of practice by subject or parent unit to find interesting and relevant groups to join.

Future development, as described in Section 5, will build on this foundation to provide even greater connections and benefits for members.

3. Barriers to Adoption

There are three main barriers to the widespread adoption of *ALA Connect* within the Association.

1. Technical Issues
2. Learning Curve
3. Resources for Continued Development

Technical Issues

ALA's ITTS unit has taken specific measures to ensure smooth performance of the site. *ALA Connect* runs on its own dedicated server, outside of ALA's network, in a robust hosting environment. The databases and Drupal software running the site have been optimized by our consultants, and full back-up procedures are in place.

Alpha and beta testing by a range of users has shown no appreciable technical or scaling issues to date. ITTS will continue to monitor the site as it moves into the launch phase for load times and responsiveness. At this time, we are unaware of any technical issues that will prevent adoption of the service throughout the organization, although it is possible that heavy usage will require additional resources devoted to server improvements.

We would also like to note that ADA accessibility issues have been at the forefront of decisions made about *ALA Connect*. It is our intent to make all features of the site available and functional for all ALA members and as a result, great care has been taken to assure compliance with Section 508 Guidelines (<http://section508.gov>). The *ALA Connect* home page passed an initial accessibility test in December 2008, and further testing is being conducted leading up to the launch of the site. One of the metrics for evaluating the success of the site (see Section 4) includes a positive accessibility review from ALA's Association of Specialized and Cooperative Library Agencies (ASCLA).

Learning Curve

For many ALA members, *ALA Connect* will represent a new way of working together throughout the year. Use of this new service will mean a learning curve that involves new tools, new routines, and new terminology. We recognize that many members will be unfamiliar with this type of online environment, both for work and for networking with their colleagues. The same will also be true for some ALA staff, as well.

In an attempt to provide as much help as possible for the full range of users, ALA will provide the following types of help during and after the site's launch.

- Online help documentation on the *ALA Connect* site

- Screencasts and online tutorials
- Online training sessions
- Online chat Q&A sessions
- Special training materials for staff liaisons and member admins/chairs
- In-person training at ALA conferences
- Email help

Feedback regarding additional channels for providing help is both welcome and appreciated.

While ALA cannot - and does not want to - force official working groups to use *Connect*, we will do our best to facilitate a smooth path to entry and use of the site. It is our belief that providing an easy-to-use, attractive, and feature-rich site that offers personal value to members will provide incentive for members to centralize their association work and professional network in one convenient place. Given the timeline for implementation of future phases and the learning curve for a large segment of members, we fully expect usage of *Connect* to begin modestly and grow over time.

Resources for Continued Development

The roadmap outlined in Section 5 of this document is extensive, and full implementation will require dedicated resources within ALA, both in terms of staff time and money. As previously noted, phase one will provide new value not previously available to members, but it will take additional resources to build on that value and fulfill the potential this roadmap offers.

To date, ALA administration and the membership have been very supportive of and enthusiastic about this project, a fact ALA ITTS acknowledges and appreciates. Although we know ALA faces even increasingly difficult economic times, ALA ITTS looks forward to working further to provide even more enhanced member services through *ALA Connect*.

4. Initial Metrics for Success

The following success metrics for evaluating phase one of *ALA Connect* have been updated from page 28 of the Project Requirements Document, produced jointly by ALA ITTS staff and Urban Insight (the developer hired to implement the software), which can be found on the ITTS Update blog at <http://itts.ala.org/update/2008/05/08/online-communities-update-with-documents/>.

1. **User adoption:** Achieve user adoption of 5% of members within 6 months. Adoption is defined for this purpose as having logged in within the last 30 days. (5% x 65,000 members = 3,250 members logged in within the last 30 days.)
2. **Community creation:** Achieve a 5% quarterly increase in the creation of new interest group communities.
3. **User activity:** Achieve a 5% quarterly increase in user logins.
4. **Content activity:** Achieve a 5% quarterly increase in the creation of content in the form of nodes.
5. **Community activity:** Measure the growth in number of communities per month with new content.
6. **ASCLA Validation:** Achieve a positive report from ASCLA that validates that *ALA Connect* meets Section 508 Accessibility Guidelines.
7. **Analytics:** Achieve a 5% quarterly growth in overall web traffic to *ALA Connect*, as measured by Google Analytics and Urchin statistics.
8. **.Net Nuke vs. Drupal:** Compare the web traffic of the old *Online Communities* service implemented in .Net Nuke software to the new Drupal-based *ALA Connect* for a six-month period.
9. **Browser Compatibility:** Document that the system and templates work in current browsers. As of February 1, 2009, current browsers were identified as: Firefox 3 on Win/Mac, Internet Explorer 6 and 7 on Win.

These criteria will be tracked during the first nine months after *ALA Connect* launches and measured for results at the end of 2009.

5. Roadmap for Future Development

This section provides a detailed outline for adding specific features in phase two of *ALA Connect*, with proposed enhancements during phase three and beyond.

Phase 2 (2009)

1. Advanced Search for Members

A new search module will allow for a more granular presentation of search results, as well as improved functionality for finding specific people or groups of people. For example, a member will be able to search for other members from public libraries who are interested in graphic novels and live in Kansas and are members of YALSA.

2. Craig's List-like Exchange

This module will allow for a free marketplace exchange of services, physical items, and event notification (with the exception of job listings, which will remain on ALA's existing JobList site). Examples of items members could post to the site include hardware they no longer need (microform machines, book giveaways), requests for assistance with freelance help (designing a logo, creating a Facebook application), requests for volunteer help (running a gaming event, covering a reference shift), and more. Requests could be made on behalf of individuals, libraries, or groups within ALA.

3. Find Interesting People and Groups within ALA

Once a member has proactively filled out his profile with his areas of interest, the system will surface content based on those interests. This will include an "Expand My Network" feature to help members find others in the Association who share their interests, and we'll highlight what your friends are contributing in *ALA Connect* in order to expose new, possibly relevant pieces of ALA that person might not otherwise see.

In addition, the system will highlight new groups matching a member's interests as they form and offer links to existing groups (committees, discussion groups, etc.) where that person could connect with relevant groups within ALA and get involved at a more personal level. Statistics from ALA's membership database show that as of December 2008, there are 21,821 members who have no affiliations with individual ALA committees and groups beyond their general membership. Hopefully *ALA Connect* will help these members connect to the organization at a more granular level, especially through their friends' activities in the system.

Based on a member's profile, *ALA Connect* could also highlight news from ALA's Public Information Office, new books from ALA Editions, new articles from *American Libraries*, grant opportunities, and more.

4. Grassroots Advocacy Tools

Beyond announcements and notifications of important issues to the library community, this module will help members connect with each other around issues and engage members to organize and take action on a local, regional, national, or international level.

In addition, a separate module will offer the ability to create volunteer rosters for managing events such as Library Legislative Day or participation in initiatives such as National Gaming Day @ your library.

5. Mentoring Network

This module will let members indicate areas of expertise where they feel comfortable offering mentoring assistance to other members, as well as to list areas in which they would like to be mentored. We hope to have the software match up mentors and mentees by type of library or allow members to form their own mentoring networks without assistance. While we won't provide the ability to "rate" a mentor, mentees will be able to write a signed testimonial for their mentors, which will display on the mentor's profile.

Because any member can create an online community at any time, we envision mentors working with mentees in private or public communities they can create as necessary. For example, a mentor might create a community for working with all of her mentees at once or she might decide to create a community for working with each person individually. Actively participating in the mentoring network will increase a member's "score" and help them "level up" in their membership.

This style of service can be extended to include the New Member Round Table's resume review service. NMRT reviewers will have their own closed community in *Connect* that participants can join to submit their resumes for review year-round.

6. Online Curriculum Vitae

Members who are active in the Association will be able to publicly show all of the valuable contributions they've made by using the data we already have in our membership database to pre-populate a curriculum vitae. Using information from ALA's membership database, a Gantt chart-like timeline can be created of a member's historical affiliations within ALA, including membership in divisions/round tables/sections, committee work, task force work, etc. A member will be able to see

past ALA groups she was part of, click on the name of the group, see who else was on the committee with her, and click through to see the person's profile to re-connect with them. In addition, members will be able to add their own external milestones (awards, regional volunteer work, etc.) in order to create a comprehensive professional history that they could display publicly should they want to expose this information to potential employers, grantors, or others. Exposing this information publicly would be an opt-in feature that would be activated by the individual.

Specific groups might want to examine publicly-displayed profiles of long-time, active members as case studies of paths to leadership within ALA, analyze how these paths are changing, and explore how the Association can facilitate leadership development.

Phase 3 (2010)

7. Acknowledging Active Members

This module will reward active members by publicly highlighting their work on behalf of ALA. Members will be able to "level up" based on their contributions and number of years of membership, similar to the way Amazon highlights "star reviewers," with status appearing on their profiles.

8. Continuing Education Clearinghouse

The CE Clearinghouse will be brought into *Connect* to highlight specific continuing education events and sessions that match member interests as expressed in their profiles. In addition, participants in a specific continuing education event would be able to create their own personal learning communities if needed, and the course instructors and/or mentors could join to provide assistance or monitor progress.

9. Event Planner

Since major ALA events such as the Midwinter Meeting, Annual Conference, and National Institutes will have their own communities in *Connect* where announcements are posted and discussions are hosted, it makes sense to move the event planner into *Connect* and attach it to event communities. Once a member is registered for an event in the membership database, he will automatically be added to the community in *Connect*. As sessions and meetings are added to the community, they will become available on the event planner.

In addition, if the person has signed up for housing through ALA, *Connect* will know when he will be at the event, so he could choose to display that information to the

friends in his network to make it easier to meet in person while there. The system will also include the ability to arrange roommates and rideshares with others who are registered for the same event.

Building further on a member's network, a feature could be implemented that allows a user to view her friends' event planners to coordinate attendance at sessions ("you go to this one and I'll go to that one" or "let's meet at this one").

10. Meeting Reports

Since some ALA groups (such as division committees) already have a process in place for working groups to report out from meetings, it would be valuable to standardize this process within *Connect* and automate it in order to streamline efforts to post them afterwards. A module could be added that would prompt the group to fill out a form after a certain type of event in the group calendar ends. The results could then be posted and members could make edits to or leave comments on the report, which would then be archived with past forms in the group's workspace in order to provide a historical record.

11. Meeting RVSPs

This module will allow members of a group to respond to specific events added to the group calendar to note attendance. This feature will apply to group meetings only, not official registration for ALA conferences and events, but it will allow members of working groups to indicate when they will be able to attend a physical or virtual group meeting. This feature could also be used by informal communities to plan meetups at ALA events or elsewhere.

6. Further Information

Further information about *ALA Connect*, including progress reports and news about future development, will be posted to the ITTS Update blog (<http://itts.ala.org/update>). Specific questions can be directed to Jenny Levine, Internet Development Specialist and Strategy Guide, at jlevine@ala.org or 312-280-2461.