From the Chair

Benjamin Aldred

As I write this, GODORT is in the midst of change, a shift in the structure of service that should hopefully make it easier to fill our volunteer slots and improve the overall functioning of the round table. So why does it matter to shift from 60 people in 80 available volunteer positions to 60 people in 60 available volunteer positions? There are a few reasons, and being mindful of them may help us chart our way forward.

First, the role of the round table has changed as ALA has changed. When GODORT was founded, ALA revolved entirely around two annual conferences, and GODORT primarily organized itself around meeting at those conferences. GODORT planned events for knowledge exchange, social connection, and even political organizing within the bounds of the ALA conference. At present, ALA no longer has two governance conferences, and with LibLearnX concluding after 2025, there may only be one conference each year. But as this has happened, GODORT has shifted to meet more frequently outside the bounds of these conferences. The focus has changed between Friday chats, virtual conferences, virtual committee meetings, and the increased availability of communication platforms like ALA Connect.

Second, the round table size has changed as the size of ALA has changed. ALA membership dropped precipitously in the early 2010s as the ongoing effects of the financial crisis were felt in library staffing models. Fewer employed librarians meant fewer members, and round tables shrunk accordingly. There were significant losses, especially of dedicated government documents librarians in many institutions, with the responsibility being combined with other tasks. This shrinkage has meant that GODORTs numbers have shifted the percentage of volunteers needed in the organization. GODORT committees and task forces are places to learn and lead, a chance for those with the interest and expertise to share what they know and develop their skills. But we shouldn't need everyone in those roles. A good metaphor for this from the world of government information is the calculation of the civilian labor force; just as the Bureau of Labor Statistics accounts for retirees, children, and people unable to work in the short or long term, GODORT needs to account for people who are new to the profession, retired members, and members who may not be currently available for volunteering. These are all valuable members of the GODORT community, but in considering how we structure volunteering, we need to have realistic expectations of the size of our workforce.

Third, what GODORT does has changed. Over the last few decades, GODORT has continually expanded what we do to support multiple populations. We've developed innovative ongoing projects, like the Voting and Election Toolkits and the upcoming History Day LibGuide. We've supported new services, like taking over the Help! I'm an Accidental GovDocs Librarian series and ramping up GODORT's social media presence. We've also developed new ongoing partnerships, like the Kenya Flash Memorial Lecture Series. These new projects need a dedicated group of people to keep them going, and some benefit from more focused collaboration, especially when the tasks overlap.

So, with these things in mind, GODORT will undergo some changes. Hopefully, in the end, we'll still have plenty of room for people to share their expertise and get more involved in the community, and GODORT will be prepared for the next half-century of change.

Benjamin Aldred (baldred2@uic.edu), Assistant Professor, Reference and Liaison Librarian, University of Illinois Chicago.