

**OWLSnet Governance and Decision-Making Background Paper**  
Prepared for OWLSnet Planning Committee  
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**Background**

The proposal for the OWLSnet planning process contained a number of possible activities including “a review of the relevance, efficiency, and effectiveness of our governance and decision-making structure, resulting in the identification of issues that should be addressed and recommendations for addressing any identified issues.”

The current governance and decision-making structure is described in the *OWLSnet Shared Automation Network Bylaws*, particularly in Article VI, which is reproduced below.

Article VI: Administration

The shared automation network, and all associated policies enacted by the Board of Trustees, shall be administered by OWLS director and staff. An Administrative Advisory Committee, including representation from all OWLSnet participants, shall make recommendations to the OWLS Board or staff regarding the administration of OWLSnet.

- (1) The Administrative Advisory Committee shall hold at least four regularly scheduled meetings per year.
  - (a) Any OWLSnet participant may submit items for inclusion in meeting agendas.
  - (b) Additional meetings will be called upon the request of the majority of participating libraries, and such meetings will be held within two weeks of the request.
  - (c) OWLS director or his designee shall preside over meetings of the Administrative Advisory Committee, and OWLS automation staff shall provide staff functions for the committee.
- (2) The Administrative Advisory Committee shall approve the establishment and constitution of ad hoc technical advisory committees for the purpose of considering technical operational issues and making recommendations to the Administrative Advisory Committee.
  - (a) An OWLS designated staff member shall be an ex officio member of all ad hoc technical advisory committees.
  - (b) OWLS automation staff shall provide staff functions for all ad hoc technical advisory committees.
- (3) The Administrative Advisory Committee shall attempt to arrive at its recommendations by consensus. When consensus cannot be achieved, action will be taken by vote.
  - (a) A roll call vote may be taken at any meeting of the Administrative Advisory Committee.

- (b) Any participating library unable to be present for a scheduled vote may submit its vote in writing prior to the meeting.
- (c) All actions shall require the affirmative vote of a two-thirds majority of participating libraries and a two-thirds majority of annual membership fee shares for approval. Each library's annual membership fee share is calculated by dividing its last annual membership fee payment by 1,000 and rounding up to the next whole number.
- (d) No action shall be approved if more than one-third of participating libraries or more than one-third of annual membership fee shares cast a negative vote.
- (e) When less than two-thirds of participating libraries and annual membership fee shares vote affirmative and less than one-third of participating libraries or annual membership fee shares vote negative, the vote shall be deemed inconclusive.
- (f) Whenever a vote is inconclusive, all participating libraries not in attendance when the vote is taken will be polled for their votes. The vote count will become final after all participating libraries have been polled.

In addition, other sections of the *Bylaws* specify that participants in OWLSnet shall:

- Abide by the policies of OWLSnet established by the Board of Trustees and the procedures of OWLSnet established by the Administrative Advisory Committee.
- Designate a single contact person for OWLSnet participation to work with OWLS and NFLS staff and to serve on the Administrative Advisory Committee.

## **Issues and Concerns**

In the current governance structure, AAC meetings are the primary forum for decision-making. It is the consensus of the OWLS staff who regularly attend AAC meetings that these meetings are not an effective forum for decision-making. What follows is a discussion of some of the issues and concerns identified by staff regarding AAC meetings, decision-making, and governance. This listing is not intended to be comprehensive, nor is it intended to imply that all of these issues occur with great frequency. This is simply an attempt to provide a context for discussions about governance by the Planning Committee.

1. While AAC meetings are the primary forum for governance and decision-making, they also are used for a variety of other functions, e.g., information sharing, distribution of reports and materials, instructional demonstrations, solicitation of input, user support.

AAC meetings currently serve a variety of purposes. Would they be more effective if we only focused on items requiring a group decision? Should we split the day into a formal business meeting and then adjourn into a less formal users' group meeting? If we narrow the scope of AAC meetings, what forums could be used for the solicitation of input and the dissemination of information? The advantage of AAC meetings is that they have the largest attendance and the most libraries are usually represented. It is also possible that the multipurpose nature of AAC meetings leads to confusion about decisions and confusion about the roles of staff and attendees.

2. Meetings are often held in rooms that are too small for the group, which is not conducive to orderly or productive meetings.

The size of the group is too large for some of the rooms where meetings are held. Overcrowding often makes it difficult for people to see or hear other people who are speaking. Overcrowding can make it nearly impossible for the chair to conduct an orderly meeting. Poor seating arrangements can make it impossible for everyone to see demonstrations, especially when computer images cannot be projected in sufficient size. People getting refreshments or leaving for the restroom are much more disruptive in a room that is overcrowded. It is also likely that overcrowding contributes to the abundance of side conversations that occur at meetings, and side conversations make it impossible to hear and are generally disruptive to meetings.

There are two possible remedies to this situation. Either all meetings could be held in rooms large enough to accommodate the group, or the governance structure could be changed so that fewer people would need to attend meetings. In either case, a better match between group and room size is likely to yield more productive meetings.

Overcrowding may also contribute to the negative tone of some meetings. Research done for churches has shown that facilities no longer feel welcoming to visitors or members when they reach 80% of their seating capacity. In fact, growing churches often stop growing when they are more than 80% full each week. It is possible that some library representatives don't feel particularly welcome or comfortable when meetings are overcrowded, and this discomfort may have a negative impact on meeting effectiveness or behaviors.

3. The level of discourse is not always professional or appropriate.

While it is difficult to determine whether this problem has really increased in recent times, there is a sense among staff and library representatives that the discussion at meetings has become less professional. It is not unusual for negative or non-constructive comments to be made. People interrupt others who are speaking rather than seek to be recognized. A few people often dominate the conversation. Off the cuff remarks are made, i.e., talking without thinking, and some comments seem to be more personal than productive.

Some meeting attendees find this negative discourse intimidating, and, clearly, there are library representatives who are afraid to talk at meetings. It is not uncommon for staff to get questions from attendees after meetings about topics that were discussed because the attendees weren't comfortable asking their questions during the discussion. In a structure that relies on consensus decision-making, it is a serious problem when people don't feel free to share their opinions or concerns.

Informality has been a hallmark of AAC meetings since the beginning of OWLSnet. However, informality is not a positive attribute if it allows discussion to deteriorate to an inappropriate level. It will be a challenge to achieve a level of discourse that remains positive and professional.

4. At times there seems to be a lack of willingness to compromise on issues, and libraries sometimes focus on their autonomy and differences rather than on the consortium as a whole.

OWLSnet has made more progress than many library consortia at adopting policies and procedures that result in member libraries doing more things alike. Following similar practices benefits library patrons because it makes it easier for them to use multiple libraries, benefits systems because it makes operation of the network more efficient, and benefits local libraries because staff has fewer differences or exceptions to remember.

However, there remains a significant tension between the autonomy of local library practices and conformity to OWLSnet procedures. From a system perspective, it appears that some libraries think of themselves as operating in isolation. They find it hard to look beyond their own doors, and they are not conscious of the fact that every library's practices have an impact on other libraries. It also appears that compromising to achieve conformity is sometimes viewed as a loss of local control, and in these situations the benefits that may accrue to the library are rarely acknowledged. Unwillingness to compromise can lead to weak decisions about OWLSnet procedures. It seems that decisions are sometimes "watered down" in response to the objections of only one or two libraries. Procedures that are adopted to meet the lowest common denominator are often inefficient to implement at the system and local library levels because they involve more steps or more variations.

Yet, at the January Planning Committee meeting several members stated that the goal of increasing standardization to reduce variations was not particularly a desired value for OWLSnet. It is unclear how widely the values of independence or conformity are held within OWLSnet, but lack of a clearly articulated consensus on this issue is problematic for the consortium. It sometimes results in contentious discussions and interferes with effective decision-making. Lack of an understood position on this issue can also result in decisions that make it difficult to administer the consortia. For example, libraries complain to system staff about other libraries' practices, but the same libraries that complain may be unwilling to adopt procedures that would enable system staff to enforce other libraries' compliance with procedures.

5. There appears to be some lack of understanding of decision-making processes, especially consensus decision-making.

Some library representatives may not have significant expertise with decision-making nor group decision-making processes. In OWLSnet, decisions sometimes seem to be made on the spur of the moment, and at other times decisions seem to be based more on emotion than rationale. Meeting attendees may not agree on the scope of a particular problem, and the group is not particularly adroit at prioritizing issues.

Regardless of AAC members' levels of expertise at decision-making, it's clear that consensus decision-making isn't completely understood. Decisions made by consensus are valid decisions that must be followed. However, there seems to be a perception among some members that consensus decisions are "soft decisions," i.e., they don't have as much

weight as a decision resulting from a vote. Consequently, it is not unusual to discover that a library isn't abiding by a decision because it doesn't believe that it really applies. There is a sense that consensus decisions are discretionary.

Of course, OWLSnet doesn't actually follow a pure consensus decision-making model. There is a tendency to declare a consensus whenever there are no more objections, but a true consensus would mean that everyone agrees to agree on something specific. This may be one reason why libraries sometimes regard OWLSnet consensus decisions as discretionary. While it would be possible to implement a true consensus decision-making model, it is likely that the membership would not have patience for the amount of time required to arrive at consensus in such a large group.

6. The participation of some libraries and some library representatives is not sufficient for optimal decision-making or governance.

Some libraries are rarely represented at AAC meetings, and some libraries are regularly represented by different people. Lack of participation and lack of continuity in representation can make effective participation in governance difficult. For libraries that send a number of representatives to AAC meetings, it is sometimes not clear who is the official representative or who, if anyone, can speak for the library.

It's not surprising that, for a variety of different reasons, some attendees don't seem to be prepared for meetings. Some attendees don't read minutes. Some don't ask affected staff about issues before meetings, and others don't have much knowledge of what happened in previous meetings. It is unfortunate that lack of preparation can result in an individual being persuaded to support positions that may not be in their library's best interest.

A bigger problem than lack of attendance or lack of preparation is that some attendees do not convey decisions or information from meetings to library staff.

7. Discussion at meetings is sometimes negatively affected by misconceptions or biases held by some attendees.

While this may not be an issue that can be addressed by the Planning Committee, some of the misconceptions that exist probably have a negative impact on meeting discussions. What's most interesting to staff is 1) the number of misconceptions held by libraries that are the opposite of those held by other libraries and 2) the degree to which perception is believed to be reality. For example, when system staff reports that they have received complaints about an issue, some libraries always believe that the complaints must have come from a specific library, and usually they identify the complainant incorrectly. Another misconception is that system staff always has a hidden agenda, and this is rarely true.

There also seems to be a perception that it's "us vs. them" on various issues. Discussion at meetings often centers on how my library is different because we're big, we're small, we're consolidated, we're independent, we're in OWLS, we're in NFLS, etc. While there

may or may not be real differences on a given issues between “us and them,” with many issues this is a “red herring” that is divisive at worst and non-productive at best.

### **Preliminary Recommendations**

On several occasions in the past, particularly when the membership began to grow significantly, the staff has asked the AAC whether there was any interest in exploring changes to the OWLSnet governance structure. The response from AAC members has always been satisfaction with the current structure and a lack of interest in making structural changes. Concern was also expressed that with a smaller, representative governing committee not all libraries would be able to participate in any final decision-making. Because of the past lack of interest in changing the governance structure, the position of the systems in recent years has been that any changes to the governance structure would need to be initiated by the membership. Consequently, there are no staff recommendations for structural changes contained in this paper. In the context of the current planning process, it would be appropriate that the Planning Committee determine whether any structural changes should be proposed to the AAC and OWLS Board.

The staff recommendations that follow assume that there is no change in the governance structure. They are intended to improve the operational effectiveness of the current governance structure.

1. It is recommended that meetings only be held in venues large enough to make it possible to hold orderly, comfortable meetings. In addition, attendees should be able to see and hear any discussion or presentations. (Staff does not believe that the NFLS office meets these criteria.)
2. It is recommended that meetings be conducted using more formal parliamentary procedures. It is also recommended that the Planning Committee develop guidelines or ground rules for meeting behavior that can be recommended for adoption to the AAC.
3. It is recommended that meeting agendas and all materials related to discussion or decision items on meeting agendas be distributed at least 4 days (1 week?) prior to meetings. Materials related to informational announcements may be distributed at meetings.
4. It is recommended that votes be held on all decision items at AAC meetings, e.g., any agenda items to adopt or modify OWLSnet procedures or to recommend policy to the OWLS Board. Furthermore, it is recommended that the Bylaws be amended to require that all business requiring votes be announced as such on meeting agendas.