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A Miracle for the Millenium:
How the Alabama Virtual Library Governance Succeeds

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The Alabama Legislature, meeting in its 1999 session, created a miracle for the new millennium. Its FY2000 appropriation included $3,000,000 for an "Alabama Virtual Library." This simple line item in the education budget conveyed adoption by the State of Alabama of three principles for the provision of information to its students and citizens. These principles remain the foundation of the Alabama Virtual Library:

- **Equity**: every student, teacher, and citizen will have online access to core information needed for instruction, research, and life-long learning
- **Excellence**: information will be accurate, scholarly, and current
- **Economy**: Alabama will realize significant savings by providing information on a statewide basis

The budget bill was passed by the Legislature on June 9, 1999, and was signed by the Governor a few days later. One hallmark achievement of the AVL was that databases were available online by the time school systems reconvened in late August 1999, two months before the AVL funds would become available in October. This happened because of the extraordinary cooperation of the people who had worked so hard to advocate a virtual library for Alabamians.

The AVL could not have happened without a pledge of unity by the state agencies and the entire educational and library community. Reality for Alabama is an ongoing struggle to adequately fund a host of services, including the information needs of its citizens and students. No one can foresee that Alabama will ever be able correct historical deficiencies in information resources. The proposal for an AVL was an ideal merger of the aspirations of the education community to improve information resources supporting education, the reality of the State's funding, and the emergence of online information products. It represented an appropriate solution for years of underfunding for education and libraries.

Another hallmark of the AVL is the high level of trust that was established among the legislators and the education communities. The legislators individually and collectively asked many questions about the AVL: who would select the databases, who would provide technical support, how would it be governed, who would manage it?

The effort to obtain funding for the AVL was initiated by the Network of Alabama Academic Libraries and was based on the academic libraries' successful experience sharing online database licenses. In August 1998, its parent organization, the Alabama Commission on Higher Education (ACHE) invited a group of educators to meet and discuss the feasibility of seeking state funds for an "Alabama virtual library" in the 1999 legislative session. For this meeting, ACHE invited directors of the Alabama Department of Education, Alabama Department of Postsecondary Education, Alabama Finance Department, Alabama Public Library Service, and the Alabama Supercomputer Authority. They were joined by others representing the:

- Alabama Classroom Teachers Association
- Alabama Education Association
- Alabama Health Librarians Association
- Alabama Instructional Media Association
- Alabama Library Association
- Network of Alabama Academic Libraries
- Parent-Teachers Organization
- Public Library Administrators
- Two-Year College Association

At the initial meeting, participants formed a "Steering Committee for the Alabama Virtual Library" charged to develop a strategy that would create an Alabama Virtual Library. For Alabama, this meeting was truly historic. These representatives of educational communities, so often in competition for limited State funding, united with a common vision to improve library and information services for all Alabamians. Today, this vision is truly a miracle, delivering the equity, excellence, and economy promised to the Legislature in 1999.

The Steering Committee carefully considered the challenges of operating this new statewide entity and thoughtfully responded to the many questions asked about governance and management.

The single most important issue before the Steering Committee was how to govern an Alabama Virtual Library. The choice of a governance structure would determine its long-term success or failure. Alabama's traditional strategy for successful funding from the legislature has been to advocate funding for your program, without regard for any other entity. The state agencies representing K-12 schools, community colleges, four-year colleges and universities, and public libraries annually present independent budgets to the legislature. The legislature has few opportunities in the budgeting process to fund a shared program without designating it as part of one of the existing state agencies.

The Steering Committee used the Fall of 1998 to evaluate virtual libraries in other states and assess what did or did not work. The Committee met in December, 1998, and after much discussion, agreed that the most successful statewide ventures were those with a governance structure that adequately represented the many "communities of interest" for both libraries and education. Those governed by a single entity, even if they provided access to other sectors, reported more conflict among the "communities of interest" because those communities often perceived (rightly or wrongly) that their users' information and service needs were unrecognized, unmet or ignored.

The Steering Committee agreed conceptually to these principles for governance:
- One state agency could manage the AVL on behalf of all constituents.
- This state agency would receive state funds for the AVL and become the fiscal authority for the AVL.
- The fiscal authority would be responsible for complying with all legal requirements for the expenditure of the state funds.
- An advisory group (which became the AVL Council) would be established to govern the AVL and would be broadly representative of the library and education community.
- The AVL Council would advise and guide

the fiscal authority on all decisions related to the AVL, including management, database selection, and technology.
- The fiscal authority would not make decisions unilaterally but would work closely with the AVL Council.
- Recommendations of the AVL Council would be binding on the fiscal authority as long as they did not conflict with state law and fiscal policies.

The AVL Council would include voting representatives of the state-level education agencies (Alabama Commission on Higher Education, Alabama Department of Education, Alabama Department of Postsecondary Education, and Alabama Supercomputer Authority), and the Alabama Public Library Service, as well as voting representatives of the agencies' constituents.

When it became apparent that the 1999 Legislature would fund the AVL, Dr. Lamar Veatch (then director of the Alabama Public Library Service) and Dr. Sue Medina, director of the Network of Alabama Academic Libraries, participated in many discussions about AVL governance and management with members of the House Ways and Means Committee (especially its chairman Representative Howard Hawks), the Senate Finance and Taxation Committee (especially its chairman Senator Hank Sanders), and representatives of the Legislative Budget Office, the State Finance Office, and the Office of the Attorney General.

As a result of these discussion and the principles approved by the Steering Committee, Dr. Veatch proposed to the Legislators, the Finance Office, the Attorney General, and the library/education community that:
- The Alabama Public Library Service (APLS) become the fiscal authority for the AVL.
- The APLS Board of Trustees would be responsible for expending AVL funds in accordance with state law and fiscal policies.
- The APLS Board of Trustees would not act unilaterally to manage the AVL but would make decisions about the AVL only with the advice of the broadly representative governing council.
- This council (which became the AVL Council) would include representatives

appointed by the Alabama Commission on Higher Education, Alabama Department of Postsecondary Education, Alabama Department of Education, Alabama Public Library Service, and the Alabama

An exemplary AVL service is the AVL HelpDesk managed by the Alabama Supercomputer Authority (ASA). The Authority is a critical partner because ASA operates the Alabama Research and Education Network, the state-supported telecommunications network for education and research. As Alabama's Internet Service Provider for education, it manages K-12 and higher education Internet authorizations, domain names, and Internet servers.

The state-supported ASA contracts for technical support of its supercomputer center and the statewide telecommunication lines. The ASA contractor, located in Huntsville (Alabama's high-tech community and home of the U. S. Army Redstone Arsenal and the Marshall Space Flight Center), recruits its employees from people with a high level (world-class) of technical knowledge and skills.

Advantages for contracting with the AVL for the AVL HelpDesk:

- ASA, the state Internet service provider for education, operates the Alabama Research and Education Network for the higher education community and most local school systems. In this capacity, it is already providing the support needed for Internet access and the technology required for a successful AVL.
- ASA supports the state's research communities, including highly advanced research using the ASA supercomputer. ASA contractual staff are highly skilled computer scientists and technicians. Their knowledge base for technology applications is unequaled in Alabama.
- ASA maintains a support service that is customer-oriented and extremely responsive. No problem or service disruption is unattended or unresolved for more than a matter of minutes.

Folding the AVL HelpDesk into the excellent services already provided by the ASA for education resulted in a bargain. This exceptional service is worth many times the amount that AVL reimburses the Authority for its efficiency in keeping the AVL online 24/7.

Supercomputer Authority, and these representatives would represent the agency as well as its constituents.
- Each state agency would determine its own representatives and make three appointments to the AVL Council. The initial terms would be staggered, but subsequent appointments would be for three years.
- Any representative who left the position occupied at the time of appointment would automatically vacate the appointment to the AVL.

The legislators, the Finance Office, the Attorney General, and the "communities of interest" in the Steering Committee all agreed to this governance structure. (1) Further decisions with the Legislators focused on who would provide the management and technical services needed for the AVL. The state agencies agreed that they would provide management support using their existing staff. The only contracted service was for the AVL HelpDesk for technology support.

The AVL proposal for governance and management assured legislators that:
- All constituents would be represented in the governance.
- All students and the public would benefit from AVL resources and services.
- AVL funds would be used for information content and essential technical support by the Alabama Supercomputer Authority.
- The AVL implementation would uphold the "equity, excellence, economy" promises made during the 1999 legislative session.

The Finance Office and the Office of the Attorney General reviewed the structure of the Network of Alabama Academic Libraries (NAAL) and its relationship to ACHE, and both Offices agreed that this very successful model of a constituent-based consortium advising a state agency would be an appropriate governance structure for the AVL Council and the Alabama Public Library Service.(2) The Finance Office, concerned primarily with meeting legal accounting requirements, was comfortable that a state agency would be responsible for the state funds and would comply with all legal requirements for expenditures.

Throughout the legislative session, Dr. Veatch reviewed all of these various meetings with the AVL Steering Committee. Everyone involved in these discussions agreed to implement the AVL governance based on the model used for NAAL. Dr. Veatch pledged on behalf of the APLS Board of Trustees that APLS would oversee its responsibility for the AVL only with the guidance of the AVL Council.

In June, 1999, as soon as the budget bill was passed by the Alabama Legislature, Dr. Veatch again conferred with the Office of the Attorney General about the governance structure and the responsibilities of APLS as fiscal manager. He was advised that the proposed AVL Council would provide sufficient oversight for the AVL, as long as everyone involved understood that the responsibility for the legal expenditure of state funds would rest with the APLS Board.

Dr. Veatch contacted the other four department heads and invited them to appoint their three representatives to the first AVL Council.(3) At the first AVL Council meeting, Dr. Veatch explained the governance structure and reviewed the various promises made to the Legislators, Finance Office, and the Attorney General.(4) He clearly informed the appointed representatives that the Council would be advisory to the APLS Board. He stressed that he had discussed the AVL governance with the APLS Board and that the Board confirmed it would not act unilaterally nor independent of the Council's advice, so long as the Council acted in the best interest of the entire state. He reiterated the pledge of APLS to work closely with the Council to implement the AVL for the benefit of all Alabamians.

Since its first meeting in 1999, the AVL Council has sustained the vision of an integrated AVL serving all constituents. Council chairmanship rotates annually among the representatives by "community of interest." Occasionally, the council elects a chairman to a second term, but the rotation continues with the next election. The Council has created several standing committees; and all include representatives from the "communities of interest." The library and education communities are well served by the existing AVL governance structure. It has been responsive to requests for additional content and has effectively managed with minimal conflict the cuts in content mandated by proration. The databases selected by the AVL Council truly provide the broadest possible range of content to serve the information needs of elementary school students through college, as well as the life-long learning interests of the public.

Any review of the Alabama Virtual Library must credit the 1999 legislators for grasping the concept of a statewide "virtual library," an information resource that would belong to everyone but not be limited by physical location. They saw the potential that a very small funding request offered the citizens of Alabama. Alabama's legislators, in every session since 1999, have renewed their strong support for the AVL. They see that

The "communities of interest" provide additional support services needed for the AVL, mainly through committees. All AVL committees are staffed by volunteers. The Training Committee, first chaired by a public library is now is chaired by an academic librarian. This chairman coordinates AVL training in-state, including vendor-provided training. Other librarians throughout the state serve as trainers; and any library or school system can request on-site training for any or all of the AVL databases. One of the hardest working committees, the Database Review Committee, first chaired by a public librarian and now chaired by a school librarian, continually reviews online products and reports about them to the AVL Council. Its members include two public librarians, two K-12 school librarians, two community college librarians, and two four-year college/university librarians. If funds permit the addition of content, a Database Negotiating Team is activated to negotiate licensing terms and favorable pricing for databases the AVL Council would like to add to the AVL. Its chairman is a school librarian who is also a member of the AVL Council. The Publicity Committee has worked especially hard in FY2004-2005 to promote the AVL to end users. This committee is developing exhibit materials to use at conferences such as the Chamber of Commerce Association of Alabama (an early supporter of AVL funding) and professional groups such as the Alabama Association of Teachers of English. A Long-Range Planning Committee, made up of members of the AVL Council, is working on a plan for the growth and further enhancement of the AVL resources and services.

the visionaries who worked so hard to advocate funding for an AVL have delivered on the promises of equity, excellence, and economy. Most important, they receive a heartfelt "thank you" from their constituents for their support of the wonderful AVL. It is truly a miracle.

NOTES

1   Once this proposal was accepted by the participants in these discussions, the Alabama Legislature funded the Alabama Virtual Library as a line item in the APLS appropriation.

2   The Network of Alabama Academic Libraries was created in 1984 as a consortium of public and privately-supported colleges and universities offering graduate education. NAAL is funded as a line item in the Alabama Commission on Higher Education appropriation. As NAAL's fiscal agent, ACHE has effectively and efficiently managed both state funds and several federal grants for NAAL. In the years since the first state appropriation and the implementation of this governance structure for NAAL, there have been no conflicts between ACHE and the NAAL Advisory Council over the mission, goals, and program direction of NAAL or the use of state funds appropriated to ACHE for NAAL. NAAL expenditures are routinely audited by the Examiners of Public Accounts as part of ACHE's regular state audit.

3   Three representatives from each agency resulted in an uneven number of members on the Council and avoided the possibility of deadlocked votes. In making appointments, the state agency directors chose to appoint one representative from the agency administrative staff and two representatives from their constituents. For example, APLS appointed its director, a public librarian, and a public library trustee. The Department of Postsecondary Education appointed its Data systems coordinator who had served on the Steering Committee, a librarian from a community college, and a librarian from a technical school. ACHE appointed a staff member, the NAAL chairman, and a director of another academic library. The Department of Education appointed its school media coordinator, a school-based school media specialist, and a county library media coordinator. ASA appointed its chief operating officer for the supercomputer center, a budget analyst, and the HelpDesk coordinator.

4   These promises were not codified by the Legislature, but the AVL advocates promised to uphold them in the absence of specific legislation. The promises made to the Legislature include provisions that the AVL would not hire staff other than the AVL HelpDesk support, would not permit any means for minors to provide personal identification information, and would not include advertising. The Legislators sought assurances from the AVL advocates that K-12 and college students would have access to content appropriate for their instruction and research and that the K-12 and higher education communities would have a voice in how AVL content was selected and made available.