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AAAS and JSTOR: Anatomy of a Successful Initiative

In July, 2007, the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS) announced that it would discontinue future contributions of its premier journal, *Science*, to the JSTOR database, thereby ending AAAS participation in the Mellon-funded journal storage archive initiative. The library community mobilized to oppose this move and in January, 2008, AAAS announced a reversal of its decision. This article tells the story of how this came about and the strategies that convinced AAAS to go back to the table with JSTOR and rethink its policy.

I was privileged to be a primary advocate of the advocacy initiative, but the results came with a great deal of help from library groups, consortia and individuals. Rather than provide a detailed calendar of events with a list of the actions and steps taken, I will describe the elements and characteristics of the advocacy effort that were critical to its success. These are:

- Shared mission and values,
- Personal commitment and advocacy,
- A membership-based organization,
- A little luck, and
- Courageous leadership.

Shared Mission and Values

One of the most critical elements of the advocacy effort was the recognition that AAAS is a non-profit organization whose values and mission are shared by libraries, the academy, and the research community. On nearly every page of the AAAS web site is this "mission slogan:" *Advancing Science, Serving Society*. Substitute "campus" for "science" and this could be the mission slogan for a science library at any American university. Thus, one of the central tenets of the argument presented to AAAS was that the decision to stop contributing new content to JSTOR contradicted these values.

The opening paragraph of my initial letter to AAAS Board Chair John Holdren established the argument: "(The withdrawal of *Science* from JSTOR) is a mistaken and regrettable decision that, in my judgment, is counter to the mission and values of AAAS." In its conclusion, the letter re-states and re-affirms the criticality of mission and the discontinuity of the organization's mission-based values with the decision to withdraw from JSTOR:

The AAAS decision to end the participation of *Science* in JSTOR is in contradiction with your mission and values: to advance science and serve society. Moreover, I believe that the reasons given for the decision can be effectively achieved through your continuation with JSTOR. I hope you and the AAAS Board reconsider the withdrawal decision.

I cannot say for certain whether this position was persuasive to AAAS, but it was central to my motivation and actions. Moreover, a meeting with Alan Leshner, Chief Executive

Officer for AAAS, indicated that this argument was, if not a compelling one with AAAS, a very sensitive one.

The meeting with Mr. Leshner came about in the midst of the advocacy effort with AAAS. It happened that ARL (The Association of Research Libraries) had its annual fall meeting in Washington, DC, where AAAS has its national headquarters. Prior to the meeting, I contacted Mr. Leshner and he agreed to meet and talk about the JSTOR decision. I invited Shirley Baker (Vice Chancellor for Scholarly Resources and Dean of University Libraries at Washington University) to join me as a partner from the Greater Western Library Alliance, and we took a break from the ARL meeting to meet with Mr. Leshner.

We had a cordial, but frank conversation in Mr. Leshner's office. The mission- and values-based argument was the one element of our conversation at which Mr. Leshner became particularly animated and engaged. The contention that the AAAS decision contradicted the organization's mission and values disturbed Mr. Leshner more than any other aspect of our position. Later in our discussion I had an opportunity to tell Mr. Leshner that while I appreciated his disagreement, I affirmed my position. It was the most difficult moment of our meeting.

This prompts another aspect of the dimension of shared mission and values to the process. Obviously, the advocacy initiative was based on a disagreement. However, because we shared key values it was vitally important to keep all communications and language respectful, professional, and whenever possible, non-confrontational while still being clear about the scope of our disagreement on this particular issue. Such an approach ought to be part of any professional discussion but in the desire to persuade and convince, it is easy to use language that is aggressive and confrontational. Throughout this process, I felt it was critical to remember that AAAS was an organizational friend whose members were our colleagues and shared our basic values for knowledge, communication, and learning.

Personal Commitment and Advocacy

Throughout the advocacy initiative I had invaluable assistance from other library consortia. The leadership committees of GWLA (Greater Western Library Alliance) and CARLI (Consortium of Academic and Research Libraries in Illinois) began the effort with unanimous endorsements of identical resolutions within days of each other. As a result of the GWLA and CARLI resolutions, ICOLC (International Coalition of Library Consortia) became involved and initiated a process which, after several weeks, resulted in the endorsement of a resolution by sixty-six national and international library consortia. Finally, I know that a number of colleagues wrote individual and separate letters of concern to AAAS. These multiple efforts by the library community, both corporate and individual, led to the success of the effort with AAAS. At the same time, I believe it is also true that personal commitment to champion the cause, move it forward, and give it voice was critical to a successful outcome.

My time and commitment to the issue was important but I also believe it was vital that the messages received by AAAS had an individual and personal voice with a similar

style, language, and consistency. This personal identification and involvement was especially important in this age of corporate, faceless persuasion and anonymous email spam. It gave my arguments and my position a deeper, personal resonance.

A Membership-based Organization

A third important factor was that AAAS is a membership-based organization. The decision to cease contributions of *Science* to JSTOR was made and recommended by full-time AAAS executive staff but if the mission-based argument was to be effective, I decided that my message had to reach the membership.

To its credit, the AAAS web site was transparent in its explanation and description of the organization's Board of Directors and Membership Council and proved invaluable for researching the governance structure of AAAS. Two critical bodies within AAAS have important roles in the policy and decision-making process of the organization: a small and select Board of Directors of some half-dozen members and the larger Membership Council composed of approximately fifty AAAS members. This organizational structure and the names of the individuals in these groups were plainly available, indeed, proudly displayed, on their web site. Since AAAS did not provide the emails of these individuals or an easy means of communication, it took time and effort to search, identify, store, and compose appropriate and compelling emails at the various stages of my campaign.

A cursory examination of the individuals who were members of the Board of Directors and Membership Council revealed that libraries not only shared the values of these members but nearly all of them were our colleagues on campus. Practically, I could not reach the entire AAAS membership but I could communicate with and, hopefully, persuade the representative governing bodies, the Board of Directors and Membership Council.

Thus, my initial letter was addressed not to Mr. Leshner, AAAS CEO, but to John Holdren, Chair of the Board of Directors (with a copy to Mr. Leshner). After a few weeks, when my letter received no response, I sent the letter to the other members of the Board. After a couple more weeks, when my communications continued to get no response, I sent the same letter to the approximately fifty members of the Membership Council.

During the advocacy effort, I received responses from several members of the Board and Council. In all cases but one, reactions were supportive of my concerns and expressed surprise at the decision by AAAS with, in several cases, a promise to pursue the matter within AAAS. I estimate that I communicated with some sixty members of the Board and Council and I received supportive comments from perhaps one-third of these. One-third may not seem significant, but I was encouraged by this level of support to an individual from outside the organization who was clearly lobbying them for support against an announced decision. It is interesting and perhaps more telling that after AAAS announced the reversal of its decision, I received more emails from several members which revealed various details of their efforts within the organization to change the decision and thanking me for coordinating the effort.

The decision always came back around to Mr. Leshner and the AAAS executive staff – appropriately so, in my judgment – but the emphasis on communication to the membership-based governance bodies was an essential and effective strategy in the effort to persuade AAAS to reconsider its decision.

A Little Luck

Good research, effective communications, personal commitment and a sound, convincing argument are vital but they are improved immeasurably by a little luck. Throughout this effort, I had some things “just go right”, especially in regard to the timing of events for which I had no grand plan and deserve no credit whatsoever. Previously scheduled events or meetings occurred that were near-perfectly timed to provide an additional level of advocacy, publicity, or visibility to the effort.

It went a little bit like this: after a couple of weeks, my initial letters to the Board and Council were followed by the GWLA Steering Committee meeting that resulted in the first consortial resolution. A few days later, the CARLI Board met and, like GWLA, endorsed the resolution unanimously. These endorsements gave the resolution immediate weight and impact to my efforts. As one result of these resolutions, the story gained the interest of *Chronicle of Higher Education*, which followed with a front-page story a few weeks later. About the same time, ARL had its mid-year meeting in Washington, DC, and led to the meeting with Mr. Leshner, as discussed above. Finally, a week or two after the Leshner meeting, ICOLC concluded its deliberations with the endorsement of the resolution by sixty-two library consortia. These cascading events, nicely interspersed by two to four weeks, were critical in building advocacy and visibility, but the timing was unplanned and just plain lucky.

Courageous Leadership

I want to offer sincere and genuine recognition of the courageous leadership shown by Alan Leshner, AAAS Chief Executive Officer, in this process. It is to Mr. Leshner’s great credit that he was willing to reconsider a decision that he had supported and endorsed. As an administrator and leader, it is easy to become personally invested in decisions. However, upon hearing the voices and concerns of the Library community (and, I believe, some of his membership representatives) it is a measure of Mr. Leshner’s leadership and administrative courage that he did not react stubbornly and defensively. Rather, he reconsidered, initiated a reopening of discussions with JSTOR, and after renegotiations, reversed the original decision. He deserves recognition as well as our admiration and thanks.

Conclusion

On the basis my experience, the successful advocacy effort with AAAS depended on commonality of values, personal commitment to the issue, reaching the membership of AAAS, luck, and leadership. These factors led to the reversal of the decision to cease contributing new content from its premier journal, *Science*, to the JSTOR platform. Clearly, some of these characteristics are unique to the AAAS/JSTOR issue. It is interesting to think which factors could be applied – and which factors would be new –

in a similar effort with a different non-profit organization, such as the American Psychological Association, or even a for-profit publisher. The lessons of this initiative are useful and worth the careful consideration of the library community.

But in conclusion the final word must be this: after years of outrageous pricing schemes, intractable usage policies, inflexible licensing schemes, and Machiavellian mergers and consolidations, it was good to win one.