

## 2020 PLATO ANNUAL MEETING PRESIDENT'S REPORT

*The following report from PLATO president Michael Stevens  
is in place of the 2020 annual meeting report*

Normally, the annual meeting is an opportunity for PLATO to celebrate and recognize all the great work that its members have accomplished over the past year. But as with so many other events, the Covid-19 crisis led to its cancellation. This written report must suffice to recognize all that PLATO has done during this momentous year.

The annual meeting was not the only PLATO activity that was upended by the pandemic. Courses enjoyed by members were abruptly halted in March, well-planned theater and field trips, lectures, and social gatherings were cancelled, the PLATO office on Park Street was closed, and PLATO staff worked from home. PLATO's board and committee members soon had to learn the ins and outs of video conferencing to hold meetings.

More than ever, PLATO's volunteer-run organization has shown that "Participatory" is more than just a word in our name. Committees quickly acted to take actions to protect members' safety and have followed social distancing orders and recommendations. The members of the Curriculum, Social Events, and Technology committees have been logging in more hours than ever as they devised plans, experimented with alternative ways to present programs, and evaluated technology. Seven of our spring courses devised different ways to continue meeting remotely through digital technology. Their experiments prove helpful as we look forward to offering on-line experiences in the coming months.

The PLATO board has recognized the many ways that the Covid-19 has affected our members' lives. For some, it was adjusting to social distancing or seeing family and friends who became ill. Others have seen retirement savings diminished, and all active members have and will experience different ways to use PLATO's programs. In light of this disruption, the PLATO board agreed to renew all memberships for the 2020-21 year without a fee. The Board did not make this decision lightly, since PLATO's has a substantial amount of fixed costs.

During the current fiscal year, revenues have covered expenses and we move into fiscal year 20-21 with just over \$100,000 cash on hand. In a typical year, PLATO spends about \$230,000. With anticipated lower costs due to restricted programming, by using cash on hand, and with the contributions of donors, we have the capability to cover our fixed costs without member dues this coming year. The greatest of these fixed costs is the pay and benefits of our two office assistants, Edie Urness-Pondillo and Louise Fowler. They are employees of our UW sponsor, the Division of Continuing Studies (DCS). We pay DCS a percentage of our member dues for their support. Our good financial condition has allowed the board to commit to continuing those payments to DCS even though we will not be collecting member dues. To help PLATO through this difficult time, we have asked members who are in the position to donate to contribute what they can to keep PLATO's operations going. As of the end of May, 140 members donated more than \$10,000 to these efforts.

Many of us have commented that the last two months seem like two years, but we shouldn't forget all that has been accomplished during the BC era (before Covid-19). This year, the Curriculum Committee offered 105 courses at 20 locations around greater Madison. Of these, 46 courses were suspended although seven continued to meet virtually. In addition, ten planned summer courses were in place when the spring semester had to be cancelled.

Members enjoyed inspiring lectures, invigorating and educational walks, lively social gatherings, and informative field trips thanks to the work of Special Events Committee. More than 15 social events, 4 walks, 11 lectures, and 10 trips have taken place this year. The virus also resulted in the cancellation of 6 trips, 4 lectures, 3 social events, 2 walks. In their place, several virtual social breakfasts were held and a real-time online field trip was held at Horicon Marsh.

The website has been increasingly crucial to our communications during the time of social distancing. The website is managed entirely by volunteers on the Technology Committee. This year we saw not only regular updates of vital information that led to tens of thousands of visits, but also a new design and mobile friendly format.

The Membership and Communications Committee members represented PLATO at various forums, including the Colloquium on Aging, the Attic Angel Community, the Delta Kappa Gamma Society of Educators, Thrivent Financial's Economic

Update Workshops, and Sports for Seniors. The presentations feature an updated and refreshed PLATO Power Point slide show, which helps maintain visibility and good will with the organizations that request them. It also developed and launched a PLATO Facebook page in November. The committee conducted our annual survey and the results told us that members value PLATO, with consistently high scores. One respondent put it succinctly: "Learn something new every day. Meet interesting people." Even more important, we saw a 40% increase in members asking for information on how they could volunteer to help PLATO.

The *Agora*, our biennial literary magazine, received about 100 submissions and published Volume 6 this summer, which was celebrated at a successful Arts Café. It has begun posting online enhanced version of the content with written and audio commentary on artwork and poetry.

Behind-the-scenes effort that makes PLATO a more effective and efficient organization are easy to overlook, yet they are the result of hard work of volunteers. Improved financial processes help us ensure that our funds are properly accounted for and prudently used. The Special Events Committee developed a comprehensive handbook documenting field trip procedures. The Membership and Communications worked with the Russell Group to develop a tracking report for the annual survey, showing trends in key performance indicators. It also has begun work in redesigning the open house as a Showcase for PLATO aimed at current and prospective members. Codifying board policies and cleaning up anomalies in our bylaws have taken place this year.

Thanks to generous donations from members, the PLATO Fund awarded four scholarships for UW-Madison Returning Adult Students Scholarships as well as support for the UW's Odyssey program. Youth education was supported by grants to One City Early Learning Center, DANenet, Kidlinks World, Maydm, and Lussier Community Education Center.

In addition to the uncertainty about PLATO programming, the coming fiscal year will be a year of change in another ways. We have been fortunate in having Edie Urness-Pondillo staffing PLATO's office. Edie announced that she will be retiring in September. Recruitment has started for her successor. Even though the university has a hiring freeze, recruitment for Edie's position can proceed thanks to our ability to continue funding it. We thank her for the great work she has

done during her two years at PLATO. And although Louise Fowler stepped down from her post two years ago, we also owe her thanks for her continuing work on our finances.

As we come to the end of the fiscal year, it's important to recognize the work of our committees and course coordinators. More than 100 PLATO members participate in the following committees. Thank you for all of your hard work.

Curriculum Committee  
Finance Committee  
Fund Development Committee  
Membership & Communication Committee  
Special Events Committee  
Technology Committee  
The Agora Editorial Board  
Diversity Committee  
Nomination Committee  
Annual Meeting Planning Committee

In addition, thank you to board members and officers who have completed service during this fiscal year:

Board members completing service this year

Patricia Eaton	Director at Large
Barb Friberg	Curriculum Committee Co-Chair
Suzy Griffiths	Director at Large
Aleta Murray	Special Events Committee Co-Chair
Tim Otis	Fund Development Committee Chair
Therese Stevens	Curriculum Committee Co-Chair

Officers completing terms this year

Michael Stevens	President
Kathy Brown	Vice President
Scott Kolar	Past President

## Election Results

Officers and board members elected for the 2020-21 membership year are:

Kathy Brown	President, 2020-21
Rod McKenzie	Vice President, 2020-21
Patricia Herrling	Secretary, 2020-21
Scott Kolar	Treasurer, 2020-21
Alan Capelle	Director-at-Large, 2020-23
Jatinder Cheema	Director-at-Large, 2020-23

### **PLATO Board 2019-20**

Michael Stevens, President  
Patricia Herrling, Secretary  
Scott Kolar, Treasurer, Technology Committee Chair, Past President  
Kathy Brown, Vice President  
Therese Stevens, Curriculum Committee Co-Chair  
Barb Friberg, Curriculum Committee Co-chair  
Rod McKenzie, Fund Development Committee Chair  
Hedy Lukas, Membership & Communication Committee Chair  
Janet Cabot, Special Events Committee Co-chair  
Sue Dentinger, Special Events Committee Co-chair  
Suzy Griffiths, Director-at-Large (July 2017 – June 2020)  
Patricia Eaton, Director-at-Large (July 2018 – January 2020)  
Bill Eisinger, Director-at-Large (February 2020 – June 2021)  
Paul Thompson, Director-at-Large (July 2019 – June 2020)  
Sharon Scratish, Director-at-Large (July 2019 – June 2022)  
Meg Taylor, Director-at-Large (July 2019 – June 2022)

### **University of Wisconsin-Madison Continuing Studies Staff**

Hope Simon, Assistant Dean-Administration & PLATO Liaison  
Louise Fowler, PLATO Office Operations Coordinator  
Edie Urness-Pondillo, PLATO Office Operations Coordinator