

PLATO BOARD RETREAT MINUTES

May 17, 2013 9:30 a.m.

E. D. Locke Public Library, 5920 Milwaukee St., McFarland, WI

Present: Tim Otis, Chair, Marv Beatty, Patricia Becker, Greg Bell, Sybil Better, Lauren Blough, Mary Boyd, Scott Kolar, Mike Lovejoy, Aleta Murray, Frank Power, Arden Trine.

Guests: Bob Blitzke and Don Reeder as incoming Board members (not voting)

The meeting was called to order at 9:35 a.m. The major issues were identified in the following outline.

I. PLATO as a Membership Organization

A. Policy

1. What does it mean to be a member organization?

Discussion: It was noted that in some organizations members vote for officers; in some they approve the budget; in others they select and approve programs; and in some organizations the members participate in a combination of these ways. However, it's a small percentage of the membership who assumes the administrative responsibility in most organizations. At present PLATO member involvement is limited to election of PLATO Board Officers unless individuals volunteer for committee work.

2. Should members have more decision making authority over policy questions?

Discussion: The question was posed "Should the PLATO membership have the authority to make decisions regarding approval of the budget, a dues increase, adoption and revision of bylaws and other policy issues?" The majority felt that this would be cumbersome. Perhaps it would be productive to invite the membership to nominate At-Large Directors to reflect their choice of representatives on the Board.

Decision: There should be no change to the present operation but transparency is especially important in light of the increasing complexity of the organization.

- B. Action: If PLATO should be more transparent to our members, how?

e.g., Open letters to the membership? Forums on topics of concern? Publicizing budget information? Etc.

Discussion: The consensus was that we need ways to communicate more effectively but the methods used and content are the issues. We think a new independent PLATO website could be a valuable up-to-date resource for members but that will take some time to establish. Suggestions for other ways to broadcast information were: sending welcome letters to new and renewing members; holding open business meetings in addition to the annual luncheon; publishing an annual program and financial report in the *Persimmon*.

Decisions: Welcome letters with information regarding PLATO operations and resources have been sent to new members for a few years. We should adapt that form for renewals if there is a way to combine it with a DCS mailing of membership cards.

The business meetings that have been held in the past were time consuming and not very effective. Mike Lovejoy plans to present a summary of PLATO finances at the Forum planned for May 22nd preceding the Annual Luncheon. The attendees will have time to ask questions. Its success may determine scheduling of future Q& A events.

The President's Annual Report is published in the August *Persimmon*. That issue also includes information about new courses and a Fall Class Schedule. There is a problem with timing for an annual Financial Report. Per negotiations it was agreed that the UW would send data to the PLATO Treasurer every 4 months. Year-end details are not received until mid-July, too late to be incorporated in PLATO documents and included in the August issue of the *Persimmon*. Posting on the website would be a good option for the future but, in the meantime, we need a way to send an Annual Program and Financial Report not necessarily tied to the *Persimmon*. There was a request for brief financial reports at the monthly Board meetings.

II. Managing Complexity

PLATO has become a more complex organization over the past few years. Are we too complex or is this just the future?

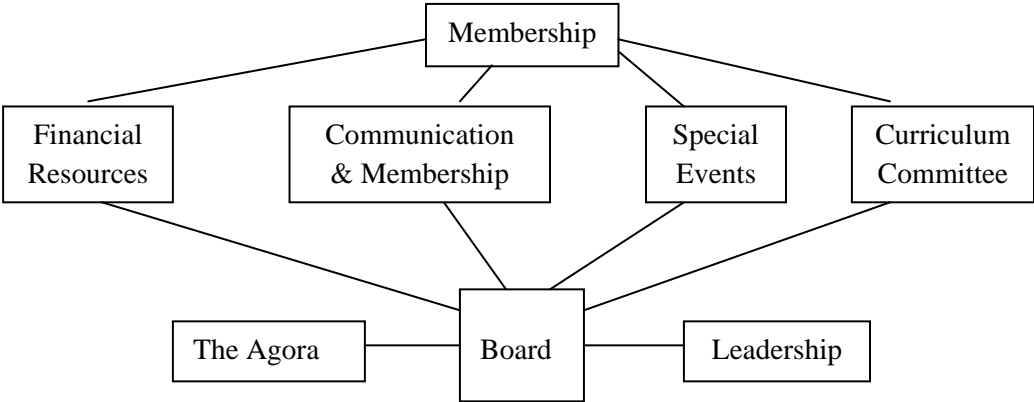
- A. Board: Are we structured as a Board to effectively manage increasing complexity? (terms of office, etc.)

Discussion: There was a suggestion that the terms of office for the Board President, President-Elect, Past President and Treasurer be changed from one to two years. It would allow more time to accomplish initiatives and provide more continuity. It was noted that this would result in a commitment of 6 years as the President-Elect progressed to the end of the Past President's term. What if this was an "expectation" rather than a "mandate" and the parties could accept or reject the extended period?

Decision: No final decision was made to change terms of office.

- B. Committees: PLATO currently has four standing committees and a number of ad hoc committees/task forces. Should we consider restructuring/combining some of them for a more efficient operation?

Discussion: This is the present PLATO structure.



Greg Bell, Chair of Communication & Membership, sent the Leadership Task Force a proposal to separate Communication from Membership responsibilities and to form two committees. This led the Leadership Task Force to consider another configuration. Membership and Leadership tasks could be combined under one committee separate from the role of a Communication Committee. Leadership also proposed the formation of Executive Committee of the Board. Financial Resources encompasses both financial planning and fund development for charitable purposes. It was proposed that Fund Development and Financial Resources roles be divided and that financial resources & planning be assigned to the proposed Executive Committee. Another view was that the Executive Committee is not needed as the President can call on the President-Elect and Treasurer as well as other members deemed appropriate for consultation on planning issues. This was referred to as the less formal President's "kitchen cabinet."

Decisions: **Motion:** Greg Bell made a motion that the Communication and Membership Committee be divided into two committees 1) Communication and 2) Membership with the Leadership Task Force's functions rolled into Membership. Aleta Murray seconded it. The vote passed unanimously. The committees will consult with the Board President and advise the Board of the name of the new committee Chair.

Motion: Sybil Better made a motion that Financial Resources' financial planning tasks be assigned to the President's kitchen cabinet or advisory groups assembled for the purpose, and that the remaining Fund Development Committee's focus be limited to charitable purposes. Don Reeder seconded. The vote passed unanimously.

Motion: Sybil Better moved that Fund Development should not become a Standing Committee but that it should be a special purpose task force of the Board and Aleta Murray seconded it. Scott Kolar proposed withdrawing the proposal pending the provision of additional information on the committees' functions. Sybil Better declined to withdraw the motion and the vote was taken. The result was 6 ayes and 6 nays so the motion failed.

Motion: Scott Kolar moved that the Leadership Committee be dissolved and Marc Beatty seconded it. The vote was unanimous.

There will be 5 Standing Committees:

- Curriculum,
- Special Events
- Membership
- Communication
- Fund Development

The *Agora* is the one remaining Task Force of the Board.

- C. **DCS support:** Going forward what can/should we expect from DCS as support for PLATO?
1. Do/should/can we do more to take responsibility for more of our functions? (registrations, handling payments, direct handling of member questions, etc.)

Discussion: PLATO receives significant administrative and financial support from DCS. This is partially reflected in the change to 40% distribution of membership funds to DCS and to the need for a dues increase.

From the Treasurer's standpoint it is difficult to get timely reports of financial transactions from UW sources. PLATO staff cannot get access to the records as an independent agency. We have to go through Wendy who is the DCS agent and it takes her 3 or 4 days to send a report to the Treasurer. The information is distributed once

every 4 months or 3 times a year. The process on the PLATO end is the manual entry of data to update the spreadsheets that Mike Lovejoy constructed.

It was noted that there is limited to no support for the PLATO pages on the UW-DCS website resulting in the investigation of establishing and maintaining an independent PLATO website.

2. Do we have the need to consider hiring bookkeeping services, office manager, etc.?

Discussion: UW-DCS provides a valuable service by handling payments for memberships and registrations for special events. If PLATO assumed that responsibility the complexity of the operation would increase dramatically. Employing bookkeeping services would entail costs that would have to be investigated.

Tim Otis was recently informed that Wendy Kerr will be getting a full-time student assistant for the summer. This may affect the plan to organize a group of PLATO volunteers to assist with administrative work.

III. Managing Growth

A. Recruiting: How much effort should we put into marketing PLATO to the community? Actively work to increase membership?

Discussion: Membership of about 925 has remained steady for the past few years. There are approximately 130 to 170 new members annually. There are approximately 150 to 190 who drop off annually with about 80 to 100 of those being new members who don't renew. Is there an optimal size for the organization? It was noted that PLATO will have to replenish the supply of members as people age, move or develop new interests and the Dane County area expands. From there the discussion focused on methods of attracting and keeping new members.

- Focus marketing on new retirees.
- Organize a New Member drive/event at Oakwood, for example, and advertise on the radio and in other public spaces that will reach beyond PLATO boundaries.
- Develop a PLATO Power Point presentation for the Speakers' Bureau.
- Maintain the PLATO table at the Institute on Aging Conference.
- Advertise empty seats on bus trips to UW Retirement Association and Madison Opera groups.
- Distribute PLATO information to retirement groups and to employers for their retirement packages. Sybil suggested test marketing of new brochures to a few companies to see results before investing on a large scale.
- Expand course availability, variety, and locations.
- Utilize Tim Otis' investigation of the structure of other Senior Learning organizations.

Tim noted that with aggressive growth we have to be prepared to handle the larger membership and their expectations. Mary Boyd suggested that we develop a short term plan for growth and project into the future. We might strategize for 1100 members in the next three years and make projections beyond that. NOTE: Mary Boyd and Bob Blitzke will bring a proposal to the June Board meeting regarding advertisement of available seats to nonmembers when bus trips fall short of capacity.

Decision: The general consensus was that we will conduct a membership campaign to promote modest growth with support in the form of some limited increase in resources for this effort in the near future. Some of the methods mentioned above are part of normal operations.

B. Growing leadership: If we push growth, how do we maintain our capacity (adequate volunteer involvement) to follow through on our many initiatives and activities, especially with respect to offering courses and events to an increasing number of members?

Discussion: The Special Events Committee does a good job of developing teams who take on the responsibility for organizing events. They attract 3 to 4 new members a year and some have moved on to other leadership roles. Curriculum is working on the organizational aspect of maintaining a smoothly running schedule of courses. Members are involved in improving the Fall and Spring Previews and updating the record of host locations. The continual need for additional coordinators to lead additional sections of popular courses needs to be addressed.

IV. Moving Forward

A. Use of Technology: How should PLATO be moving forward in utilizing technology (interactive web features, MOOC learning opportunities, use of video, etc.)?

Discussion: Tim introduced the exciting possibility of incorporating new learning opportunities into PLATO courses. Perhaps TED Talks could be used like the Teaching Company videos as a tool for discussion of various topics. MOOCs may provide experts in fields that PLATO members would like to learn more about.

Scott Kolar presented the plans and features for the independent PLATO website:

- Replication of present functions but hosted and maintained by PLATO
- Timely updates of PLATO news and events
- No PLATO hardware or software required
- Access permissions geared to needs and prevention of accidental changes
- Courses and Events descriptions and schedules online
- Posting of syllabi and resource links by course coordinators
- Recordings of courses made available online
- Board meeting minutes made available to members
- The Agora made available online
- Availability of social media including Facebook, blogs, all members forum
- Photo gallery

Online membership and special events registration would take more planning and implementation as it involves more cost, but the most important question is the feasibility of PLATO handling the money that currently goes to Wendy. Current plans for the PLATO webpage would have a link that would move the registration processing to UW-DCS if it involved payments or UW associated procedures.

Maintenance of the website will be performed by PLATO volunteers who know how to do word processing, browse the web and use email. They will not have to know html. One person from each committee has been appointed.

A bid of \$5,000.00 was received for the initial one-time setup. Other estimates were for \$100.00 - \$125.00 per hour at approximately 80 to 100 hours for a freelance programmer. Web hosting services would run about \$200.00 a month. There would be additional costs for site updates and new functionality. The URL platomadison.org has been registered. PLATO requirements for the site functionality will have to be well-defined for the developer and it is expected to take six months to a year to complete.

Related to technology - PLATO's electronic equipment is very old. The PC software version is 2003 and not functional in most applications. Most of the Coordinators use personal equipment. Don Reeder suggested that security software is available for free from UW. It was suggested that PLATO should at least purchase a PC and current software for use by the Treasurer.

B. Special Projects: During the past few years PLATO has taken on some new initiatives, namely the AGORA and fund development. Both of these require volunteer time and cost \$\$\$. It can be argued that both provide meaningful benefits to PLATO. Are they worth maintaining our commitment?

Discussion: The first volume of *The Agora* was supported with OLLI funds. That source is no longer available and some members object to the expenditure of \$7,000.00 for the production of a literary journal. There were 35 submitters for Volume 3. \$7000.00 is approximately 20% of PLATO's annual budget. Some options are to charge a fee and to publish on a less frequent schedule. It was also noted that its production has generated more requests for support of other artistic outlets. The Chorus is going to request a subsidy for a piano accompanist. Should the PLATO Jazz course be supplied with updated equipment? Do we need criteria for making these decisions?

This brought up more discussion of expenses. Should \$5,000.00 be expended to produce and mail the PLATO Directory? Should the Persimmon be published two times a year? Greg Bell is going to develop a survey to be distributed to all PLATO members where these questions could be posed. More discussion is needed. The Agora issue will be brought to a future Board meeting as Volume 3 is already scheduled for publication.

The meeting was adjourned at 2:50 p.m.

Note: Next Board meeting Friday, June 21, 2013 at 9:30 a.m. DCS - 21 N. Park, Room 7041.

Respectfully submitted,
Lauren Blough