



Program Steering Committee

Response to Government Documents Initiative Planning and Advisory Group Report and Recommendations to the Board of Governors

6 February 2015

Government Documents Working Group report:

The Program Steering Committee charged a Government Documents Initiative Planning and Advisory Working Group in February 2014 in response to Ballot Proposal 4 approved at the 2011 Constitutional Convention, to “expand and enhance access to US federal publications.” The Working Group produced its final report in October 2014. The PSC discussed the report at its meeting in Washington, DC in October, and held a phone call with Mark Sandler, the Working Group chair, in December, to clarify some of the report’s findings and recommendations, and to discuss next steps. The PSC now forwards the report to the HathiTrust Board with its own reactions and recommendations.

The Committee first wishes to commend the Working Group for a thorough and thoughtful analysis. The Working Group’s recommendations are substantive and describe a detailed course of action with an ambitious but not unrealistic timetable. Rather than discussing the recommendations in detail, the Committee endorses the general outline, and will comment only on certain important aspects and recommendations that may be controversial. Most importantly, the PSC endorses the recommendation that HathiTrust act promptly to staff a position to advance the agenda for this programmatic area; much of our discussion concerns the nature of this position, and more generally issues that arise as we work to move forward on several programmatic fronts.

The Working Group proposes a set of detailed near-term and longer-term actions. Except where otherwise noted, the PSC accepts this outline as a guide for program staff to follow, but recognizes that details and timing may change, especially as time progresses and new initiatives are integrated with work already under way both within HathiTrust (such as work on the government documents registry) and externally, by other groups. The Working Group recommends that several subsidiary groups be formed to advise and assist in implementing aspects of the program. Rather than form these groups now, PSC recommends that HathiTrust staff determine when such assistance would be most useful, consulting with current members of the Working Group and with PSC as needed.

Three aspects of the Working Group recommendations deserve special attention:

Although the ballot proposal addressed both digitized and born-digital documents, the Working Group recommends that action focus on digitized print documents for the present, deferring action on born-digital documents. PSC endorses this recommendation, with the further recommendation that the issue of born-digital documents be revisited in 2016.

As the Working Group notes, a comprehensive collection of government documents would need to embrace several formats beyond digitized print books and journals, raising a number of the issues

associated with expanding HathiTrust's scope to include new formats. The PSC believes that the government documents initiative may provide a useful forum for considering these issues in greater detail, but also recommends that until the direction and pace of HathiTrust's expansion to new formats is clarified, priority and scope of the initial development of the HathiTrust government documents corpus focus on material distributed in a print format by the Government Printing Office as part of the Federal Depository Library Program..

The Working Group recommends hiring of a full-time program officer to oversee the government documents initiative. The PSC has discussed this recommendation with Mark Sandler and Mike Furlough at some length. We all believe that prompt, substantive, and sustained action on a program of this scale and complexity, as well as the cultivation and sustaining of key relationships with collaborators beyond the HathiTrust membership, will require a significant portion of a program officer's time over several years. The PSC also recognizes the Working Group's forecasting of considerable investments of effort and funding needing to address the issue of uncataloged documents collections. That, if not addressed, "the problem will plague libraries in perpetuity."

We also recognize that there are staff already working on related activities, that the program is not likely to require an even and steady amount of time as it ramps up, and that it is difficult to hire qualified staff for term appointments who would be able to assume these duties quickly and act independently with minimal direction. We expect that other task forces and working groups will recommend actions needing central staffing support, and it would be premature to expect that each programmatic area will need a full-time, dedicated program officer. We therefore recommend that the decision of how to staff the government documents program be left to the Executive Director, to consider in relation to other staffing needs for new and existing programs, with advice as needed from the PSC and the Board.

The Advisory Group members bring a wealth of expertise and knowledge of the problems they highlight in their report. Although some of the staffing issues may take a few months to address, in the immediate short term, we suggest that the Advisory Group not be discharged but instead continue to advise HathiTrust staff and potentially assist them in carrying out recommendations that already align with current work.