Special Committee on Hospitality for Overseas Participants

Report and Recommendations to the AALL Executive Board

Purpose of the Special Committee

With the purpose of enriching the educational and social experience of overseas attendees at the AALL Annual Meeting and fostering closer cooperative relationships with law librarians worldwide, President Barbara Bintliff in July 2001 appointed the Special Committee on Hospitality for Overseas Participants. It was charged with proposing a plan to coordinate existing efforts and to launch new activities aimed at accomplishing this goal.

Need for a plan

President Bintliff and other recent AALL presidents, who have been graciously received at the meetings of sister associations abroad, have recognized that foreign visitors may feel uncertain and puzzled by the different customs observed at various conferences. The size and complexity of the AALL Annual Meeting can be especially intimidating to a first-time attendee from overseas. Finding a way to meet American and Canadian colleagues who work in libraries with similar purposes may be difficult. Personal observations of the two overseas members of our committee and comments solicited by them from their BIAALL and IALL colleagues from abroad provide further evidence--cited throughout this report--that our hospitality needs improvement. Non-AALL members, who do not receive preliminary meeting information via special mailings or Spectrum, may not be aware of what is available on AALLNET. Because registration forms from overseas participants may not be received by the company that processes them until shortly before the meeting, AALL does not have an advance list to use for contacting those who are coming.

Hospitality efforts already in place

For a number of years the Foreign, Comparative and International Law (FCIL) SIS has made a special effort to welcome registrants and speakers from overseas and to include them in both their educational programs and social events. Their SIS members have offered themselves as hosts and mentors to visitors whom they knew in advance would be attending the Annual Meeting. However, the SIS has usually not been able to learn the names of foreign registrants until shortly before the meeting, making it difficult, if not impossible, to contact them beforehand to offer assistance. Via law library listservs, the convention newspaper, and announcements at their educational programs FCIL has invited overseas registrants to their evening reception.

The International Association of Law Libraries, which has many AALL members among its ranks, has also been sponsoring a reception in recent years, including their own members, foreign attendees, and FCIL members.

At the 2001 meeting in Minneapolis President Bob Oakley hosted an AALL-sponsored luncheon for overseas registrants, to which twenty guests (including Executive Board members and the FCIL chair) were invited. President Bintliff has informed our special committee that she plans to hold a similar event.
Joint Study Institutes

This coming May the third in the series of Joint Study Institutes, a cooperative venture of AALL, BIALL, and CALL, will be held in Victoria, B.C. The first JSI, planned and carried out by BIALL, convened at Cambridge University in September 1998, and the second, the responsibility of AALL, took place at Yale in July 2000. There are no plans underway for future Joint Study Institutes. The concept was conceived in 1995 when then President Carol Billings convened a meeting of current and incoming BIALL, CALL, and AALL presidents/chairs at the Pittsburgh convention. The original idea conceived by the group was for the three associations to collaborate in the planning of the institute programs and publicity, with the host country taking charge of local arrangements. The AALL Executive Board at that time, expressing concerns about the association’s partial financial liability for an event over which it would not have complete decision-making power, chose to support a plan whereby each SJI would be totally planned and managed by the host organization. The Cambridge and Yale JSI’s received excellent reviews from those who attended. However, there were suggestions by both the planners and attendees that better shared publicity, lower registration costs, and more cooperative planning could have resulted in higher attendance and greater benefits for members of all three associations.

The make-up of the Special Committee

All members of the committee have had experience as guests or hosts at meetings of AALL, BIALL, CALL, and in most cases IALL as well. Two are past presidents of AALL as well as members of BIALL; two are past chairs (one currently president) of BIALL as well as members of AALL; and two are past chairs and continuing leaders in the FCIL-SIS. Several are also leaders or members of IALL. All have attended at least one JSI. President Bintiff, also an experienced guest and host at national meetings, serves as Executive Board liaison to the committee.

Information collection by the committee

The two English BIALL members on the committee, Barbara Tearle and Jules Winterton, used both their personal contacts and their association listserv to ask fellow British and Irish members about their experiences at past AALL meetings. They inquired what the visitors would have benefitted from knowing in advance and how might their experiences have been improved. The respondents reported feeling overwhelmed by the size of AALL compared to the much smaller and more intimate BIALL meetings. Some mentioned that they tended to stick with friends from BIALL since it was difficult to meet Americans, who had their own SIS’s and groups and were invited to particular gatherings. The hospitality of FCIL and IALL was praised, but there was a desire for opportunities to meet and talk with more Americans, particularly those from the same type of library.

Our overseas committee members observed that first-time AALL attendees want to know practical information—such things as how to choose an affordable hotel, what clothes will be appropriate for particular events, where can inexpensive breakfast food be found, what social events are they welcome to attend, what is acceptable etiquette about leaving a program in midstream, and how can they visit local law libraries. “Social aspects of the conference are much more difficult for newcomers,” one British committee member emphasizes. Overseas visitors wonder
whether they may attend various evening parties and are reluctant to go alone if they are not part of a group. The closing banquet, where reserving tables has become the custom, can be an especially awkward experience for visitors who have not been taken under someone’s wing.

Committee Recommendations

I. Establish an entity responsible for assisting the President with ongoing hospitality

The committee recommends that the President establish a Working Group on Hospitality for Overseas Annual Meeting Participants to coordinate information dissemination, mentoring, and the scheduling of hospitality events. The group shall consist of a representative from the FCIL SIS, who shall serve as chair, a representative from each of the “Big Three” SIS’s (Academic, PLL, and SCCLL), and an AALL member active in BIALL, all to serve for two-year terms.

II. Assure good pre-Annual Meeting communication with overseas participants

A. Charge the Working Group with assuring that information about all aspects of the Annual Meeting--educational programs, business meetings, SIS events, social functions, and local arrangements--be made accessible to prospective overseas attendees by submitting notices to the websites, listservs, and newsletters of sister associations abroad as well as international law library associations, calling attention to the information posted on AALLNET. These notices should also include instructions for contacting the Working Group in order to ask questions.

B. Enhance the Annual Meeting Information on AALLNET by adding a letter of welcome from the President, which will direct overseas registrants to a form for submission to the Working Group on Hospitality. The form should include space for the overseas registrant’s contact information and check-offs for indicating if he/she would like to be assigned mentors and/or language assistance and receive further details about the educational programs, meals, and social events being sponsored by particular SIS’s. Space for miscellaneous questions should also be included. Our committee also suggests that additional enhancements to AALLNET which would be helpful to anyone attending our Annual Meeting for the first time--new AALL members, Chapter VIPs, non-member speakers--would be “snapshot” descriptions of both our association and our Annual Meeting. The committee member who contributed this idea referred to the additions as “AALL at a Glance” and “The AALL Annual Meeting at a Glance.” The latter would include brief information about the schedule, social events, SIS activities, exhibit hall, etc. aimed at someone who had never experienced the meeting.

C. When the President of AALL attends the BIALL, CALL, and IALL conferences, he or she should take the opportunity to announce that detailed information about the next AALL Annual Meeting is available on AALLNET. The president should convey as much information as possible about all aspects of hospitality for overseas attendees (to be described in this report) and encourage potential registrants both to ask questions and to submit the form provided on AALLNET to the Working Group.
D. Contact the presidents/chairs of sister national and international law library associations to invite them to participate in the AALL Annual Meeting. This would be a joint effort of the AALL President and Executive Director. In addition to registration details, information should be included about any specific events that the guests will be expected to attend, remarks that they may be called upon to make, etc. The visiting officers should also be asked to inform the AALL Working Group on Hospitality of any grant or bursary recipients from their association coming to the meeting.

III. Enhance opportunities for overseas registrants to meet and interact with American and Canadian participants.

A. Ask the “Big Three” SIS’s to recruit from among their members mentors for overseas registrants from the visitor’s type of library. These SIS’s will submit their volunteers’ names to the Hospitality Working Group for assignment to visitors who request them. Volunteer mentors will be given their mentee’s name and contact information and will be expected to correspond with them to offer assistance and information. Ideally two mentors should be assigned each visitor to divide the responsibility and time commitment. If foreign language assistance is needed by the visitor, mentors with the appropriate skills should be sought. Mentors will be apprised by the Working Group of the kinds of questions and concerns that past overseas participants have expressed so that they will know what information to offer. Our overseas committee members have emphasized that visitors appreciate being included in social events where they can meet AALL members. Therefore, mentors should either invite their mentees to accompany them to events like the opening reception, the opening luncheon, various evening parties, and the closing banquet or make sure that they are included in a group of others who will make them feel welcome.

B. Institutionalize a welcome event, most likely a Sunday luncheon hosted by the AALL President, to which all overseas attendees—sister association officers, speakers, and registrants—would be invited. Ideally, if financial support from either the Annual Meeting budget or from a sponsor will permit, each foreign visitor’s mentors (or in the case of speakers, their program coordinator) should also be included. It would be good for the Hospitality Working Group to be present as well so that the visitors will recognize them as helpful contact persons.

C. Ask the “Big Three” SIS’s, who will each have a representative on the Hospitality Working Group, to invite to their educational, social, and business events the overseas registrants from similar types of libraries. Hopefully these individuals will have submitted a form to the Working Group indicating their interest in attending. Each SIS should make sure that the visitors are made aware of their websites and electronic newsletters, where their educational programs, meetings, and events will be publicized.

D. Recognizing that the FCIL-SIS is due AALL’s thanks for graciously assuming much of the responsibility for hospitality to overseas registrants in the past, give them special consideration in the scheduling of their annual reception. The Working Group will consult with FCIL and the Big Three SIS’s to coordinate scheduling so that overseas visitors will have an opportunity to spend
time at both the FCIL reception and one of the Big Three receptions.

E. The Hospitality Working Group will consult with leaders of IALL and FCIL, who have many members in common, about the possibility of the two groups co-sponsoring a joint reception, rather than two separate events, for their members and other overseas registrants. Since a great many of the same people attend both events, and scheduling conflicts have sometimes been a problem, this arrangement might be satisfactory to all. The vice-president of IALL, a British member of our committee, has already raised the matter with some of his fellow board members, and they have agreed to consider it. Since both groups have traditionally conducted some business or presented reports in conjunction with their separate receptions, these concerns would need to be accommodated.

IV. Financial implications of these recommendations

A. Hospitality Working Group Expenses
   Most communication among group members and with overseas registrants should be conducted via e-mail. For the modest amount of postage, photocopying, and other expenses that might be incurred, the group should be allotted $100.

B. SIS Expenses
   FCIL has already been sponsoring its evening reception, and the cost would either remain about the same or be reduced if shared with IALL. The Big Three SIS’s might have small postage expenses if they chose to mail informational materials to overseas visitors working in their type of library. Very likely this information could instead be made accessible on each SIS’s website. The Big Three would also incur modest expenses if they chose to cover the cost of breakfasts or lunches on Sunday for overseas guests. Since the numbers are likely to be small, this would be a gracious gesture. Alternatively, corporate donations could be sought to defray expenses. This type of sponsorship might be particularly attractive to small companies or those new to the Annual Meeting as a nice opportunity to be recognized for contributing.

C. Annual Meeting Budget Expenses
   The only definite cost to AALL, which could possibly be covered by a contribution from a corporate sponsor, would be for the President’s welcome luncheon. In Minneapolis approximately twenty guests attended at a total cost of $866. The only AALL staff involvement would be making arrangements and issuing invitations for the welcome luncheon and posting enhancements to AALLNET.

V. Recommendation on Future Joint Study Institutes

Background information
   Law Librarians from a number of countries who attended the 1998 and 2000 Joint Study Institutes, as well as those who participated in the 1986 AALL Institute at Oxford University, have reported enthusiastically on both the educational and collegial benefits of their experiences. The relatively small size of those institutes--between about 30 and 70 people--and the opportunity
for in-depth educational programming, field trips, and special social events gave participants more time for meaningful discussion and interaction with colleagues and speakers than can usually be enjoyed at large conferences.

Recommendation

For these reasons our committee feels strongly that the JSI concept should be continued and improved. Closer cooperation and enhanced learning opportunities should be fostered by establishing a mechanism for joint planning of the educational components of future institutes. The committee recommends that the President of AALL approach the presidents/chairs of BIALL, CALL, the Australian Law Librarians Group, and IALL with a proposal to form a multi-association advisory board to consider joint cooperative planning of future educational institutes. Among the subjects to be discussed by the advisory board would be programming, scheduling, information dissemination, potential venues, and affordable registration fees. Since IALL annually sponsors its own institute in some part of the world, it might choose not to be directly involved in arrangements for future JSIs. Nevertheless, the advisory board would benefit from IALL leaders' ideas on matters such as scheduling, site selection, and institute program themes. At this early stage in the consideration of such a plan while options are being explored, we urge the AALL Executive Board to remain open to the possibility of supporting an extraordinary type of educational experience for its members outside of the usual guidelines prescribed for other AALL educational programming.