



**Digital Library Federation
Program Review Report
May 2020**

Prologue

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The DLF Review report is an affirming, encouraging summary of the achievements of the Digital Library Federation over the past 25 years, with an engaging set of recommendations that can help evolve the Federation for the next quarter century. Key words woven throughout the report reflect the methodology that has sustained DLF: sharing, aggregation, partnerships, affiliations, collaborative projects, programmatic arcs, and coherence are indicative of the work of a strong, dedicated community of practice diligently working for the public good.

As noted in the report, CLIR is privileged to be the home of DLF and takes pride in the professional connection and responsibilities it entails. Several sections in the report note the desire for greater programmatic integration of DLF with CLIR, a process that was initiated last year as Joanne Kossuth began to report on her interviews and conversations with the DLF community. DLF is anchored by a set of principles and traditions that should be preserved and that can be augmented by a thoughtful reimagining of our relationship. In response to the new potential of a more logical, cooperative working composition, CLIR has undergone a complete reorganization, with DLF situated in our program focused on knowledge systems and cultural networks. New DLF staff have been hired, and DLF staff all have greater access to other programs in CLIR, including communications, outreach, and engagement. This integration provides support and guidance for the 25th anniversary and will help identify new technical aggregations, program affiliates, and collaborative opportunities in the years ahead. The prospect of a new leader for DLF with an enhanced strategic role within CLIR is cause for excitement.

With a sound and intuitive internal structure, we can together address the challenges of the world around us. The circumstances today are unprecedented in our lifetime, disruptive and at times horrific, requiring leadership that is precisely grounded in the collaborative partnerships that DLF has always fostered. CLIR and DLF have spoken out for years about the redundancy, high costs, and intellectual occlusion that siloed projects have engendered across higher education. In years past, that argument was acknowledged, with only intermittent action to bring the scattered pieces of knowledge organization, discovery, and reuse together as a functional, coherent whole. As we gradually emerge from this crisis, the recommendations in the DLF Review will be enacted; DLF will continue to flourish; the DLF community will be sustained, all in the hope that from a present global sorrow we can design a new ecology of creative interdependence, not as an overlay to inherited norms and routines but as a new model of working together that is now explicitly an existential imperative.

Program History and Context

Founded by 16 institutions in 1995 as a project of the Council on Library and Information Resources (CLIR), DLF's original mission was "to enable new research and scholarship of its members, students, scholars, lifelong learners, and the general public by developing an international network of digital libraries." In 2005 DLF became an independent organization but continued to work closely with CLIR and remained physically housed with it, with staff from the organizations working closely together.

By 2009, membership had grown to 42, including several international institutions. In March 2009, a recommendation was made by a DLF Review Committee to merge the two organizations: "While we do not believe an independent, governance-based organizational model is still viable, our assessment has underscored the continued value in the [DLF] Forum and the potential for catalyzing our community. Dissolving the Digital Library Federation and re-conceiving the program agenda within CLIR offers considerable promise." The recommendation received unanimous consent from the DLF Board in April 2009, with DLF once again becoming a CLIR program in July of that year.

In May 2010, Rachel Frick was hired as CLIR's new DLF Senior Program Officer. Frick oversaw the reintegration of the program into CLIR and the dramatic expansion of the DLF membership until joining the Digital Public Library of America in 2014. Bethany Nowviskie joined CLIR to lead the DLF in 2015 and continued to expand the program's membership and reach, significantly growing the number and scope of the program's grass-roots volunteer-driven Working Groups,¹ and under her direction the DLF program's mission statement evolved into its current strong declaration:

The Digital Library Federation is a community of practitioners who advance research, learning, social justice, and the public good through the creative design and wise application of digital library technologies.

In spring 2019, Nowviskie accepted a new role as Dean of Libraries and Professor of English at James Madison University. CLIR then retained MountainRoad principal Joanne Kossuth to conduct a thorough review of its Digital Library Federation (DLF) program.

In 2020, as the DLF celebrates its 25th anniversary, the program receives support from over 190 institutional members and regularly brings together over 500 participants at its annual Forums. It provides support for 12 community-based Working Groups and is allied with 11 affiliate organizations.² It is within this vibrant context and with an eye to the next 25 years that CLIR has commissioned this program review.

Review Methodology

Kossuth's approach was qualitative. Throughout 2019 she sought out and interviewed people connected to DLF in all its various aspects. Those approached included CLIR staff, member institutional representatives, DLF's Advisory Committee and Working Group members, and Forum

¹ See <https://www.diglib.org/groups/>

² See <https://www.diglib.org/groups/clir-dlf-affiliates/>

participants. Kossuth also issued an open call to the community in July 2019 encouraging any interested individuals, regardless of affiliation with the program, to contact her with questions or comments.³ Kossuth made herself available via phone, video conference, and in person where possible. In all, she received several hundred responses.

These conversations included questions on:

- what worked well for DLF and CLIR;
- what could be improved; and
- what future goals looked like in a three to five (3-5) year timeframe.

At the October 2019 DLF Forum held in Tampa, FL, to ensure the broadest possible input from the community, Kossuth:

- facilitated an unconference session open to all Forum participants titled “The Next 25 Years of DLF”;⁴
- hosted open “office hours,” where any interested individual or group of individuals could sign up for a 15-minute slot to share their thoughts on DLF;⁵ and
- met with affiliate organization representatives.

On March 25, 2020, Kossuth provided a written report to CLIR on her findings. This document summarizes the detailed findings.

Review Findings

Findings may be considered in three areas: community perception of the DLF program, how and where increased collaboration among DLF and other CLIR programs and initiatives is desirable, and how the program can evolve to best meet current and future needs.

Perception of the program

The program has been praised for its inclusivity and engagement of those new to the profession. Its commitment to “research, learning, social justice, and the public good” is taken seriously by the community, with commenters particularly noting the value of DLF as a rare and valued place for professionals to discuss their working environments. Its encouragement of participation in Working Groups by community members not affiliated with member institutions is also seen as a significant positive, as is the administrative and technical support (e.g. listservs, Zoom meeting spaces) provided to those groups by DLF. The community further appreciates the flexibility and simplicity the Working Group format provides; groups may spring up in short order, often based on conversations arising when the community meets at the annual Forum, on a bottom-up basis (that is, not imposed by DLF but determined by the community itself).

³ See <https://www.diglib.org/dlf-review-update/>

⁴ See <https://dlfforum2019.sched.com/event/WE07/t1e-unconference-session-the-next-25-years-of-dlf>

⁵ See <https://dlfforum2019.sched.com/event/W1NI/joannes-office-hours>

Increasing connections between the DLF and other CLIR programs

Numerous opportunities exist to interweave DLF's activities and communities with other CLIR initiatives and programs and thereby strengthen both. The annual DLF Forum, a longstanding and highly regarded event with a strong reputation for supporting collaborative efforts, provides a natural platform. Kossuth writes:

There is consensus around engaging other CLIR communities in the DLF Forum and additional activities as a positive. The CLIR communities include CIOs, Post-Doctoral Fellows, Mellon Fellows, LCI and Frye alumni. One recommendation is to appoint liaisons from these groups to be part of the DLF Forum Program and/or other committees related to the Forum to increase participation from these groups.

CLIR has made some moves in this direction already. For the past several years, CLIR has hosted a subset of current postdoctoral fellows to the Forum as part of their larger professional development curriculum. CLIR has also begun hosting regular alumni reunions for the LCI/Frye Leadership Institute participants who attend the Forum (or are located in or near the host city). In October 2020, CLIR plans to co-locate a symposium for its *Digitizing Hidden Collections* program with the Forum in Baltimore, MD. These existing ties might be used as models to create and enhance connections with other CLIR programs and communities such as the CLIR CIOs group.⁶ Targeted efforts to recruit Forum presentation proposals from those engaged in CLIR initiatives such as the grants programs and from CLIR affiliates (e.g. the International Image Interoperability Framework (IIIF) and the International Internet Preservation Consortium (IIPC))⁷ would also further this aim.

The Forum is a touchpoint, but DLF's activities and those of its community, including the Working Groups, continue year-round. Kossuth therefore suggests:

Another potential for growth lies in developing a year-long programmatic arc for DLF and CLIR. Opportunities include: a speakers' series, mentoring relationships, expertise driven presentations and engagements, internships, change project micro-grants and ultimately a "coherence of change makers" resulting in a symposium. The purpose of the symposium would be to hear actual change stories that can be shared, leveraged and documented in order to facilitate real change among higher education institutions and affiliated cultural organizations.

Kossuth's report also suggests creating pathways to enable Working Group and other DLF community members to engage in larger CLIR projects and collaborative initiatives (e.g. the Digital Library of the Middle East (DLME), Pangia, the HBCU Library Alliance partnership).

Program evolution

There is wide consensus that the program has built a deep-seated foundation and has a remarkably dedicated community behind it. CLIR is privileged to serve as its home, and has a responsibility to honor its longstanding traditions while also providing vision for the future. Sustaining and building on existing initiatives, e.g. the Forum and the Working Groups, while also assessing and piloting activities

⁶ See <https://www.clir.org/initiatives-partnerships/cios/>

⁷ See <https://www.clir.org/initiatives-partnerships/clir-affiliates/>

that enhance collaboration and comprise longer programmatic arcs as described in the previous section, offer a wealth of opportunities that will enable the program to continue to thrive over the next quarter-century.

The Working Group structure is quite strong and provides a solid framework enabling collaboration across institutions and geographic regions that can readily be scaled as needed in response to the community's (and CLIR's) interests and needs. CLIR's hiring in fall 2019 of a program associate dedicated to Working Group maintenance puts the organization in a good position to continue to support and grow this important service to the community.

In addition to fostering better awareness of the CLIR/DLF relationship, and nurturing connections between the DLF and other CLIR programs and initiatives as described in the sections above, further avenues for beneficial exploration could include:

- **Expanded use of the program as a partner for collaborative projects and grant proposals.** A good example of this is the D-CRAFT project, which began as a project of the Content Reuse Working Group (itself a sub-group of the AIG Working Group). The group wrote and submitted a proposal to IMLS via CLIR and are now in the midst of a 30-month project to create a toolkit for use in digital library use assessment.⁸
- **Development of programming and support around technology modernization.** From the report: "Even though projects and standards that have been developed were intended to be easy avenues into the preservation and publishing of materials, they have become the opposite. Gaps exist all along the spectrum. CLIR and DLF programming could potentially bring the technological, legal, copyright, meta data, collection and sharing disciplines together."
- **Refinement and potential growth of affiliates and partnerships,** including better definitions of the different roles, the rationalization of partners and affiliates across CLIR and the DLF program, and an exploration of methods to foster better connections and communications between the affiliates/partners, the DLF program, and CLIR as an organization.
- **The creation, maintenance, and hosting of toolkits and other resources** by the Working Groups and program staff to ensure they remain available to and are easily accessible by the community. This might also include aggregation of resources from other sources outside DLF's traditional community where relevant and useful.

In addition to these crucial community-support initiatives, Kossuth also recommends better situating the staff within CLIR, especially in the context of CLIR's current initiatives to better match its organization to its programs, scale and objectives. Notes Kossuth: "one chief executive for one organization working with one board is the appropriate form of structure. A program officer for DLF working collegially with all parts of the organization would facilitate the maturation of DLF into a vital

⁸ See <https://reuse.diglib.org/home/d-craft/>

component of CLIR's overall mission." CLIR has taken this recommendation seriously and the next staff member hired will be engaged as a senior program officer, a title in line with CLIR's organizational structure while also reflective of the importance and seniority of the appointment. The hiring process is currently underway, with the anticipated start date set at January 1, 2021. (This hire date has been set in line with academic hiring schedules, as it is anticipated most candidates will come from the higher education environment.)

Summary

Kossuth concludes her report with an inspirational vision of DLF's importance to CLIR and the community, and what may be yet to come.

By further engaging the DLF community's programming, projects, and working groups with the opportunities presented by CLIR's initiatives, there is enormous potential that could be unlocked in moving all digital professions forward in solving the "grand challenges" faced by the academic enterprise ecosystem. We all know that technological conversations in the field of higher education are siloed. For example, moving digital preservation from an individual perspective to an institutional perspective to collaborative perspectives is neither well understood as a concept nor are the problem sets that need to be coordinated in order to succeed well-comprehended. With CLIR as an umbrella, DLF can bring the technological, legal, copyright, metadata, collection and sharing disciplines together. This approach provides an opportunity to articulate the "lanes" in a large landscape: how the "lanes" are defined would lead to projects in support of a solution framework that exists nowhere now in the higher education landscape. The genesis of this idea was evident in CLIR's Coherence at Scale endeavor earlier in this century, which envisioned the potential to break down silos by developing a true sharing platform. The further development of the digital world has set the stage for coherence to become a reality: leveraging the strengths of the DLF community in the context of CLIR's umbrella organization provides a unique pathway to that reality.