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President's Column

What's So *Special* About Special Interest Groups in ASIST?

by Trudi Bellardo Hahn

The Special Interest Groups (SIGs) were first formed in 1966 – 37 years ago! Their goal, as Barbara Flood described it for the *Bulletin* in 1988 (v. 14 (5): 42) is to "provide forums for the formal and informal exchange of ideas among individuals who shared common concerns in the emerging field of information science."

The earliest SIGs focused on automatic language processing, classification research, library automation and networks, information analysis centers, user groups and education for the field. Later came SIGs dedicated to such information interactions as selective dissemination of information and user online interaction, information management, foundations of information science and others. Few original SIG missions survive unchanged today, but throughout the four decades of their existence, SIGs have remained remarkably stable in addressing their core interests as well as responding to new trends. They have served very well to define the scope and specialty areas of ASIST and of the field itself.

But enough of history – what about today? Presented below are some of the current SIG activities. With all this going on, what do SIGs need? They need *you*. As you read further, think about what you could contribute or where you could participate. A few SIGs have many willing volunteers to create and implement sessions and services. Most SIGs, however, struggle every year to find new leaders and participants to carry on. The expectations for SIG activity are not standardized and are not impossibly burdensome. While guided by the bylaws, SIG activities can be innovative, relevant and responsive to the needs of the interest group and the talents of the leaders, members and potential members. Each Special Interest Group is special, and can be whatever it wants to be, as long as *you* get involved.

What content areas do current SIGs cover? The scope of each SIG is described in the *ASIST Handbook & Directory* or at www.asis.org/AboutASIS/asis-sigs.html. Drawing a truer picture of what SIGs really look like these days, however, requires looking at what they are actually doing.

Current news via electronic discussion lists. Terrence Maxwell (Albany) of SIG/IFP (Information Policy) distributes a regular briefing on information policy topics for electronic list subscribers. Issues covered include privacy, copyright, intellectual property, Freedom of Information Act and free speech. Each post contains links to more information and stories.

Workshops and pre-conferences. For over a dozen years SIG/CR (Classification Research)

and for the last two years SIG/USE (Information Needs, Seeking, and Use) have been running intensive, focused, highly participatory workshops. These allow subject exploration in much greater depth than is possible in a crowded conference technical program. SIG/CR has published proceedings of these workshops (*Advances in Classification Research*), which preserve and disseminate the workshop content. SIG/HFIS (History and Foundations of Information Science) has been a co-sponsor of two pre-conferences on the history and heritage of science information systems.

Service to students. For several years SIG/ED (Education for Information Science) has conducted a program at the Annual Meeting for those students who have won awards. All the winners present in a public forum and then a few top students go into private sessions to work closely with mentors matched to their areas of research. SIG/ED also supports the students' travel and attendance.

Service to job seekers: This year SIG/MGT (Management) held a lunch time session (so as not to conflict with the technical program) where all job seekers, no matter what their specialty areas, could get and give advice.

Interactive discovery. For two years SIG/HCI (Human-Computer Interaction), under the leadership of Joette Stefl-Mabry (Albany), has built an interactive workshop during the Annual Meeting. This year she obtained wireless cards from IBM, a wireless router from Cisco and several I-Macs from Apple and held an interactive Delphi study. There were some problems, naturally, but the SIG's willingness to push the frontier of technology utilization moved an ASIST session beyond the usual, tried-and-true format.

Alternative modes of engagement. Many SIGs today emphasize the informal side of the original mission to "provide forums for the formal and informal exchange of ideas among individuals who shared common concerns." Extreme examples of this are two SIGs (with a third one forming) that are not really SIGs by the traditional definition. SIG/Metrics, SIG/BIO (Bioinformatics) and the forming SIG/CRIT (Critical Issues) are all doing what their members want through electronic lists only. SIG/DL (Digital Libraries) uses a website heavily for communication, as does SIG/LAN, which just changed its name to SIG/LT (Library Technologies).

SIG/IA (Information Architecture) represents one of our most innovative SIGs. It has formed an electronic community, without the traditional administrative structure. While a physical community meets every year at the IA Summits, the electronic community supports the group between summits and provides information regarding local "reading groups" and other structure. Its electronic discussion list is the most vibrant, even *rowdy,* of any in the field. Participants ask questions and give answers and suggestions, with occasional deep, often amusing observations. Acknowledged IA experts are as likely to post or reply as novices.

SIG-of-the-Year Award winners. SIG/STI (Scientific and Technical Information Systems) was a winner of the 2002 award because of doing a lot of what SIGs have traditionally done, plus sponsoring two student awards for travel support. They also co-sponsored the 7th Quadrennial Tri-Society Symposium for Chemical Information.

The other 2002 SIG-of-the-Year winner was SIG/III (International Information Issues), which boasts a raft of officers from the United States and other countries, the InfoShare program to recruit members from developing countries, co-sponsorship of international meetings, sponsorship of a popular paper competition for authors from developing countries and travel grants through the new ASIST travel grant program. This year they administered a Eugene Garfield Foundation grant to bring 12 scientists from the world's poorest countries to the Annual Meeting. They also sponsored the International Reception and silent auction

fundraiser at the annual meeting, and six sessions, one of which was the innovative Global Village poster session.

These examples show that ASIST is open to a wide variety of SIG administrative structures, special projects and programming. The original mission of Special Interest Groups remains the same, but can be carried out in many different ways. Likewise, your participation can take many forms. If you are not sure how to get more involved, do not hesitate to contact any of the current officers of a SIG, the SIG Cabinet Director (Gretchen Whitney), the Executive Director (Dick Hill) or me. We all will be happy to help you get connected and involved with the very *special* Special Interest Groups.

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