

Report of the SAC Working Group on External Review of Library of Congress Vocabularies

Recent improvements in Library of Congress controlled vocabularies

In the past several years, multiple positive changes to the Subject Authority Cooperative Program (SACO) / Library of Congress (LC) controlled vocabulary approval process have occurred.

- *Website additions.* After the May 2017 Consolidated Appropriations Act was passed into law, requiring LC to “use a process to change or add subject headings that is clearly defined, transparent, and allows input from stakeholders including those in the congressional community,” a new webpage was published on the LC website in July 2017. This page, the [“Process for Adding and Revising Library of Congress Subject Headings,”](#) describes the process for preparing and submitting proposals to revise headings or add new headings, along with the editorial process for review within the policy division. In June 2017, document [H 204 \(Evaluating Subject Proposals\)](#) was added to the LC Subject Heading Manual, which explains the workflow of proposals within the Policy, Training, and Cooperative Programs Division (PTCP) Division and discusses, at a broad level, how decisions are made about proposals.
- *Opening of editorial meetings.* In August 2021, PTCP staff opened the editorial meetings to people outside of LC. This has allowed many members of the library community to listen into meetings and give feedback about headings under discussion, providing more transparency into the process and more diverse perspectives to be represented in the discussion.
- *Expedited approvals.* In August 2022, a new expedited process was enacted which allows certain LCSH to be published on an approved list five weeks after being submitted.
- *New hires at LC.* The hiring of additional staff has provided new perspectives into the editorial process and allowed PTCP staff to attend SACO Funnel meetings.
- *New SACO funnels and reinvigoration of previously established funnels.* A renewed effort to do work within SACO funnels has resulted in the formation of new funnels and more collaboration with LC and funnel organizers. Meetings for the new Gender and Sexuality Funnel were started in summer 2022. The Latin American and Indigenous Peoples (LAIPA) Funnel, established in 2017, began regular meetings for the first time. The African American Funnel, established in 2000, was reorganized in 2017. The African

American Funnel members continued their regular meetings and adopted a new set of bylaws in February 2022.

- *New advisory group for Library of Congress Demographic Group Terms (LCDGT)*. In January 2022, LC formed an advisory group for LCDGT. "This group consists of [an LC] staff member and subject matter experts from nine institutions: the American Psychological Association, American Theological Library Association, Bureau of Labor Statistics, the U.S. Census Bureau, Council of American Overseas Research Centers, Kinsey Institute, the U.S. National Library of Medicine, the Pew Research Center, and SIL International."

We commend the Library of Congress' Policy, Training, and Cooperative Programs (PTCP) Division for their openness to change. Providing transparency into the approval process has helped librarians better understand the process and what is necessary to make good proposals.

Over the past two years, many offensive and inaccurate headings have been changed for the better. Additionally, new headings have been introduced that allow more nuanced and appropriate description of the subjects titles are about. These include the addition of headings such as "Settler colonialism" (list 2104), "Rape in correctional institutions" (list 2106), "Palestinian Nakba, 1947-1948" (list 2111), "Police abolition movement" (list 2205), "White privilege (Social structure)" (list 2206), "Climate justice" (list 2206), "Mass incarceration" (2207), and "Historically Black colleges and universities (list 2208). Additionally, revisions to existing headings include: "Noble savage" to "Noble savage stereotype" (list 2104), "Problem youth" to "At-risk youth (social sciences)" (list 2204), "Brothers and sisters" to "Siblings" (list 2205), "Primitive societies" to "Prehistoric peoples" (list 2206), and "Manic-depressive illness" to "Bipolar disorder" (list 2208). Finally, large projects such as the removal of headings such as "Primitive societies" (list 2206) and "Art, Primitive" (list 2203); the revision of "Evacuation and relocation" to "Forced removal and internment" (list 2106); and the revision of "Slaves" to "Enslaved persons," and its many related headings (list 2212a) are examples of important positive changes made by LC.

These changes and additions serve to reduce harm to library users searching subjects in their library catalogs, particularly those who are personally described by or whose community heritage or history is described by the subjects. Additionally, these changes and additions have contributed to the sense in the profession that substantive change is possible.

Background of this working group

At the February 2021 Program for Cooperative Cataloging (PCC) Participants Meeting, Judith Cannan, Chief of Cooperative and Instructional Programs at Library of Congress (LC), discussed a number of potential changes to LC Subject Headings (LCSH) that had been discussed, one of which was asking whether LCSH should have an editorial board comprised of non-LC members that work with LC on approving subjects.

In April 2022, the Subject Analysis Committee (SAC) of the American Library Association Core Division's Metadata and Collections Section, voted to form a working group to create a recommendation that LC should form an editorial board with non-LC representation. This working group "will have the latitude to investigate a wide variety of possibilities and will determine the form that the recommendation takes."

Subject Analysis Committee member Violet Fox agreed to chair the working group and put out a call for volunteers. Thirty-six people responded with interest. Jamie Carlstone (Northwestern University) volunteered to co-chair the working group. The first email to the volunteers was sent on April 20, 2022. The volunteers formed a working group and an advisory group to support writing this report.

Working group membership is primarily librarian specialists and experts in the areas of cataloging and metadata, though also includes library workers, managers, and specialists in technical services, systems, digital resources, media services, and special collections. Most working group members are from the library sector. However, graduate students of library and information science, recent graduates, professors of library and information science, archivists, and museum professionals are also represented. In addition to the working group, a small advisory group was formed. The advisory group is populated similarly, and also includes a librarian specializing in public services. Most information professionals in the groups are from colleges or universities. However, public, school, and unaffiliated information professionals are also represented. Most members are from the United States.

The working group and advisory group actively collaborated between May and December 2022. Another email was sent on May 23, 2022 to those who volunteered to be on the SAC Working Group, and over the next few weeks, they met with Violet Fox in Zoom meetings to get a quick introduction to the LCSH approval process. In June, a brainstorming document was shared among volunteers so that they could suggest ideas for how an editorial committee or advisory group could be structured. In July, the Jamboard tool was used for brainstorming the LC review process. By the end of October, volunteers completed a review of non-LC vocabularies/classifications to investigate how these vocabularies/classifications manage their editorial processes. The report was drafted and refined in November and December and submitted to SAC in January 2023.

Information about other controlled vocabularies or classifications leadership structures

The working group volunteers researched 36 international vocabularies, identifying whether or not an editorial board exists, as well as their governance structure and editorial review and approval process when possible. Out of 36 vocabularies we could confirm 10 had an Editorial Board. We have selected [three to five] vocabularies to highlight as case studies:

American Folklore Society: Ethnographic Thesaurus

The [American Folklore Society \(AFS\) Ethnographic Thesaurus](#) was developed in cooperation with the American Folklife Center of the Library of Congress. The vocabulary is meant to facilitate access to material on folklore, ethnomusicology, cultural anthropology, and related fields.

The Editorial Board of the Ethnographic Thesaurus is made up of volunteers from the staff of the American Folklife Center. The staff includes archivists, librarians, and folklife specialists. Since their position on the editorial board is ex officio, there are no terms for length of service on the editorial board.

Decisions are made by consensus after a discussion. The meetings are done as needed when new terminology is proposed. It is common for a group of terms to be proposed at the same time by a person or organization after the completion of fieldwork or writing an article.

Homosaurus

The Homosaurus vocabulary began in the 1990s by [IHLIA LGBTI Heritage](#) as a Dutch and English gay and lesbian thesaurus. In 2013, Jack van der Wel and Ellen Greenblatt published version 1 of Homosaurus. Originally, it was distributed in Word/pdf and was a comprehensive vocabulary that included non-LGBTQ related terms. In 2016 the board decided to limit the scope to LGBTQ terms only. In 2019, version 2 of Homosaurus was published on the web as a linked data vocabulary, and in 2020, version 3 went live with dereferenced URIs to avoid the need for versioning in the future.

The editorial board is not designed to be representative of any groups or organizations. Board members are found through outreach and in response to the Contact Us form on the website, which invites board applicants. There is no term length for board member service.

The board meets every month. Complicated questions are discussed at the board meeting and decisions are made by consensus. There is a streamlined process for decision making so that decisions can be made asynchronously between board meetings.

Updates to the vocabulary happen twice per year in June and December.

Vocabulary example 3 - to be added

Vocabulary example 4 - to be added

Vocabulary example 5 - to be added

Ideas about who should be represented on a Library of Congress Subject Heading advisory board

To facilitate discussion about who should be involved in discussions about potential revisions to Library of Congress (LC) controlled vocabularies, the working group members participated in a brainstorming session conducted through Jamboard, a digital collaborative whiteboard. Members reflected on who was currently left out of the proposal process.

Several groups of people emerged in the discussion of who should be represented on a Library of Congress Subject Heading (LCSH) advisory board:

- *Groups described.* Our working group members were adamant that when groups of people, or their history and heritage are being described by subject terminology, that the groups being described by LC vocabularies should be consulted as much as possible.
 - LC should prioritize sources from the peoples and communities described, privileging those sources over traditionally “authoritative” sources, including literary warrant. In this way, LC can take into account changes or additions to terminology related to under-represented groups that reflect a more inclusive and culturally relevant understanding of the language associated with these groups and their heritage and history.
 - Challenges in doing so were acknowledged, including that some groups are fluid in how they describe themselves, and that there can be differing opinions within communities. Members felt that even when intra-community opinions are varied, those opinions should clearly be considered and incorporated into an authority record as appropriate.
- *Experts.* Subject experts should intentionally be consulted as part of the process, and these efforts should be transparent and clearly communicated. Many members of the working group mistakenly believed that PTCP does not consult subject experts as part of its process. This demonstrates an opportunity for PTCP to highlight their current outreach practice by elaborating on consultations or other outreach activities that occur during the editorial process. This can be achieved by noting consultation details in the authority records themselves (in 670 fields), or through additional communication and promotion efforts such as write-ups in Library of Congress blog posts, newsletter articles, or journal articles.
- *International users.* Several working group members reflected that LC controlled vocabularies are used by many libraries outside of the United States. While it is

understood that LC's controlled vocabularies are US-based, international perspectives could prove valuable on an editorial board. Differing cultural contexts and regional variations in the use of English language leave room for misinterpretation or misrepresentation of certain topics, people, and/or cultures. International users lend a perspective that could lead to a more informed and inclusive development of vocabulary terms that better serves international users of LC controlled vocabularies, as well as improves local understanding of international or transnational concepts as represented in LC vocabularies.

Other groups were noted as being impacted by LC vocabulary choices, yet disconnected from the process of evaluating terminology chosen. The working group did not reach a consensus about adding members of these groups to a potential advisory board, but the members felt it was important to note that these audiences are not aware of the rules and structures that LC vocabularies work within.

- *Authors.* Creators of works often have opinions about the headings that are assigned to their works, but have no input into the editorial process.
- *Publishers.* Publishers often collect and generate description metadata as part of marketing, especially for ebook formats. Publishers often have a closer relationship with authors than libraries do, but our subject analysis does not always reflect a publisher's understanding of resources.
- *Non-catalogers and non-library catalog users.* The end users of LCSH are not usually catalogers, which means they encounter LC vocabularies devoid of the context of the hierarchy and rules catalogers work within.

Finally, the working group members had thoughts about who should *not* be reflected as part of an editorial board.

- Representatives from groups or organizations that purport to speak for marginalized communities, but who exclude the voices of members of the marginalized community.
- Researchers or representatives from groups or organizations where the experts cause harm to members of marginalized communities. For example, organizations like SIL International are known to be controversial in the linguistic community ([Dobrin, 2009, pp. 618-19](#)), and researchers on transgender people have historically harmed members of the transgender community ([Turban, 2020](#)).

Ideas for improving the Library of Congress controlled vocabulary approval process beyond external review

In addition to the idea of external review of the Library of Congress (LC) controlled vocabularies, the Working Group discussed the approval process in general, coming up with several themes that might be addressed by Policy, Training, and Cooperative Programs Division (PTCP).

Improving access to the proposal system was a major theme of these discussions. Group members discussed the limitations of hosting the proposal system within ClassWeb, which requires a yearly subscription fee. Because ClassWeb is primarily used by well-resourced academic libraries, it excludes a significant proportion of the library community.

Ideas to improve the process of submitting proposals included:

- Create a web form not hosted within Classification Web that non-Subject Authority Cooperative Program (SACO) members can use to submit proposals. The PDF form that is currently available for non-SACO members is cumbersome and has incomplete instructions (for example, it does not provide information about the additional email address users must submit their proposal to in order to be scheduled onto the monthly tentative list).
- Let non-SACO participants use the ClassWeb proposal web form. This still requires access to ClassWeb, but at least more librarians would be able to use the web form, which reduces errors and omissions in proposals.
- Provide view-only access to ClassWeb. This still requires access to ClassWeb, but at least more libraries would be able to view the status of proposals.
- Ensure that old forms and outdated information on the LC site are taken down, or are redirected to up-to-date information.

Once proposals have been submitted, there is often a sense from those outside LC that the proposals have entered an “abyss” until they show up on a tentative list, which can be multiple months later. Sometimes those proposals don’t show up on tentative lists, with proposers left confused about what happened.

Ideas to improve the process of reviewing proposals included:

- Notify catalogers if their proposal has been delayed for any specific reason; One work group member had a few proposals that sat for months and were scheduled to later lists but never knew why they were delayed (this is with Classification Web). Email follow up for one of these proposals eventually got a response
- If LC changes a heading before accepting it, communicate with the proposer. One work group member had a heading changed by LC in a way that made it inaccurate in the view of the proposer. When the proposer emailed to ask why, the response was that they spent a lot of time thinking about the heading. However, they never contacted the proposer to get input or feedback.
- Consider letting proposers know if their heading is going to be discussed. Typically the preview list goes out 1-2 days before the meeting and oftentimes, the proposer is unaware. The proposer may be able to provide clarification and useful feedback during the meeting.
- Add a “Submit for Review” button to ClassWeb. At present, proposals that are saved are not submitted for review until there is an email sent to SACO. This step can be easily missed, and lead to confusion when nothing happens to a finished proposal.

The working group members reiterated their gratitude and excitement that editorial meetings are now open to the public. Many ideas were floated about continuing this positive step and ensuring barriers to attending the meetings are reduced, including:

- Creating a registration form as opposed to requiring users to email LC.
- Providing a static webpage with information about attending editorial meetings as opposed to a yearly pdf.
- Providing information about attendance at editorial meetings for new attendees on a webpage, including brief explanations of the tentative list process and information about which topics attendees are welcome to comment on. This would also provide clarity about what types of questions are not welcome; for example, basic questions about how LCSH works might not be good uses of editorial meeting time, so there should be an email address or other place for people to get information about basic questions.
- Providing a short welcome at each editorial meeting inviting comments and setting expectations.

Other ideas to improve transparency included:

- Providing resources to email for help regarding proposing revisions or additions to LCSH. A member of the working group noted, “It would be nice if there was a resource you could email for help that isn’t LC or one of the listservs. There’s so much bad behavior on listservs, I wouldn’t feel comfortable messaging the list if I have a question about a heading. It’s also intimidating to email so many people.”
 - Providing an email address for FAQs about the subject proposal process that isn’t staffed by LC. This might be a project PCC could undertake, to provide an “ask an expert” service for non-SACO catalogers and other interested library workers.
 - Providing webinars and other training opportunities for people new to the SACO process, or just curious about how the LC editorial process works. There is a lot of interest in this process within the library community.

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