Division Modern History

During the later 1970s and early 1980s, the Sci-Tech Division was characterized by a proliferation of sub-divisions (or, perhaps sub-sub-divisions) concerned with issues of energy and the environment. No doubt responding to the concerns of the time, groups were formed that dealt with nuclear power (and in particular with the information needs of the U.S. National Labs), renewable energy, petroleum, transportation, natural resources and public utilities. The Nuclear Science group was particularly active and in 1976 even arranged a scholarly exchange with librarians from the Soviet Union.

Also of note given the times was much discussion within the Sci-Tech division regarding whether the SLA should refuse to hold its conferences in states that had not yet signed the Equal Rights Amendment. (In 1978, as the deadine for ERA’s approval was extended by Congress, the SLA’s leadership narrowly decided against such action.)

Prior to the advent of widespread, online information resources in the mid-1980s, a major activity of nearly all sub-divisions within Sci-Tech was the compilation of directories and bibliographic resources and this was certainly true throughout the 1970s. The Chemistry division compiled lists of chemical trade names, the Documentation division compiled lists of advertising campaign slogans, and divisions of all types compiled lists of government and corporate reports relevant to their areas of interest. Creating and then distributing these otherwise ‘local’ aggregations of knowledge was a major concern of the divisions and new directories and bibliographies were regularly advertised in the pages of SciTech News. Of particular note, division members, under the direction of Bruce Cox, created a new edition of Strauss’ Scientific and Technical Libraries, a resource including bibliographies of the best materials available in a wide range of subject areas.

As those online information resources began to proliferate, Sci-Tech kept their membership informed with special sessions at the annual conference throughout the mid- to late-1980’s devoted to new resources and librarians’ new roles. This push included sessions on supporting computer systems and applications in 1985 and a full day of panels devoted to CD-ROM resources in 1987. In 1990, the Sci-Tech division co-sponsored a two day seminar on Science and Technology at the Library of Congress focusing on their use of new technology which 25 sci-tech librarians atteded on-site.

The late-1980’s also saw the addition of several long-standing new activities to Sci-Tech. The Vendor Relations committee was founded in 1986 joined by the Government Relations Committee in 1988. The first Achievement Award was given out in 1986 and the Conference Buddy program was founded in 1987.

Continuing the division’s adaptation of and to new technologies, the first Sci-Tech mailing list was born at slascitech@sei.cmu.edu in 1994. It moved to a listserv hosted at LSU the following year and had gained 110 subscribers, 9% of the membership, by March 1996.

In 1995, the Professional Development committee was established with Marsha Wilson as chair to plan continuing education courses for upcoming conferences, supporting courses and workshops. Their first offering was a sold-out session titled “Patent searching for science and technology” presented by Lucille Brown from LBJ Associates at the 1996 conference in Boston.

That was only one of several notable Sci-Tech events at the 1996 conference planned by the division’s first Conference Planning Chair, Sandy Moltz. That was also the year of the first Newcomers’ Brunch, which was organized by John Sandy, the Student Relations Committee Chair and had 55 attendees. The Special Professional Development award was first presented that year and the 50th anniversary of Sci-Tech News was celebrated.

In 1997, the Projects Committee, chaired by Mary Lee Kennedy, developed the first official Sci-Tech division website. Most of the work was done by Sci-Tech member Joe Kraus. An unofficial site had been up since September 1996, but the new site was far more extensive. It contained information on the division; library companies, societies and publishers; and links to sci-tech news and magazines, indexing services and virtual libraries. The new website prompted the creation of the Communication Committee that year, formed to coordinate the new electronic and old print modes of communication with the membership. In 1999, a new membership database system was integrated into the site, allowing members to access an online membership directory, full-text issues of Information Outlook and other exclusive materials.

In 1998, the division began its mentoring program with an initial 10 volunteers.

In 1999, the division celebrated its 75th anniversary with a series of events at the annual conference including a “night out”, a luncheon and a keynote speaker. The division invited Dr. Katheryn D. Sullivan, noted scientist, educator and astronaut, to speak on the theme of exploring frontiers and expanding scientific knowledge through discovery.

In the late 1990’s, the division was very involved in planning the Global 2000 Worldwide Cofnerence on Special Librarian held in Brighton, England in October, 2000. It worked on developing programs and sessions, and awarded two $750 travel stipends for international members’ attendance and a $2,000 travel stipend for a librarian from a developing country to attend.

2000 was a year of focus and renewal for Sci-Tech with the creation of a new strategic plan, selection of a new logo and the establishment of a Science-Technology Projects & Publications Grant. It was the year Sci-Tech News went online and its first year with a refereed section for selected articles. At that year’s conference, Sci-Tech held their first contributed papers session and first vendor update.

2001, unfortunately, hit Sci-Tech hard. After a decade of membership slowly dwindling from a peak near of near 2000 members, the division lost 13% of its membership in just two years. Perhaps surprisingly, the same years saw a turn around in finances with the division returning to healthy financial shape after several years of running deficits. This allowed the diversity commitee to give out five awards, two international, in 2004.

However, membership continued to fall, reaching a low of 438 in 2012 before rebounding slightly in the following years. Recruiting of new members was strong during this era, with 64 new members joining between June 2011 and May 2012 for instance, but has been more than compensated for by dropped memberships.

In 2007 a survey revealed that only about a quarter of the Sci-Tech listserv’s subscribers were members of the division, while only 20% of division members subscribed to the list. In an attempt to solve this communications puzzle, a new discussion list, hosted by SLA, was created and all members automatically subscribed.

That same year, an award for members who have been with the division for 25 or more years was inaugerated.

2009 saw the division completing its move online. In October, the division held its first webinar “Toxnet and Beyond: Using the National Library of Medicine’s Environmental Health and Toxicology Portal”, offering it for free to Sci-Tech members. In December, the last paper issue of SciTech News was printed. Less than two years later, the website was converted to WordPress to incorporate interactive Web 2.0 features proving that the evolution of division communications is an ever-ongoing process.

In step, the division’s programming, both at SLA conferences and in webinars, moved forward technologically, focusing on helping librarians remain useful and relevant in the new world of digital repositories, alt-metrics and data management.

In 2013, Roger Beckman, chair of the Archive Committee digitized issues of SciTech News from between 1966 and 1987 without which this history would not be possible.

In 2014, the division renamed the Sci-Tech Division Achievement Award, established in 1974, the Ann Koopman Sci-Tech Division Achievement Award in honor of her many yars of service to Sci-Tech including chairing the division, acting as treasurer and business manager and mentoring of many Sci-Tech librarians over the years.

In 2016, the division surveyed its members as part of their strategic planning. They learned that STEM librarians have increasing taken on responsibility for more subject areas and broadened their duties. In response, the following year, the executive board and officers began a process of refocusing and revitalizing its approach and efforts in response to the perceived need for a strong generalist organization supporting multidisciplinary STEM librarians. The board and officers revised the division mission, vision and goals and created a new strategic plan to implement them in the division’s activities.

The process and details of the new documents were documented by William Jacobs (chair in 2016) in a poster presented at the 2018 All Sciences and Engineering Poster Session,  viewable in the 2018 virtual poster session, and in an article published in Science and Technology Libraries at https://doi.org/10.1080/0194262X.2018.1515690.

The new strategic plan led to more interactive division activities at the 2019 conference and the addition of peer review and competition to the All Sciences and Engineering Poster Session.

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