

On-Line Branches and Alternate Branch Structures A Preliminary Overview

by
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Report Prepared on 19 Nov 2008 for the AAUW-NYS Board Meeting

From the Association's *AAUW Membership Tool Kit*:

Online Branches

Computers can transform the way we interact and, in doing so, attract new members, revitalize current ones, and enable members to more easily fit AAUW work into their busy lives. Online branches conduct most business through the computer, meeting in person for community action projects, voter education and public policy efforts, and other initiatives. Even if your branch doesn't label itself an online branch, you may want to move in that direction by adopting some of these strategies:

- Conduct business meetings via e-mail.
- Offer opportunities for members to be involved in community outreach such as mentoring, helping fellowship and grant applicants complete their application forms, or helping girls follow up on Sister-to-Sister platforms for action.
- Hold interest group or book club discussions by e-mail or through AAUW discussion boards. The ¡Adelante! Book Club offers an e-mail discussion list and other online resources at www.aauw.org/education/community_programs . For more information, contact webmaster@aauw.org .
- Sponsor online meetings that feature well-known speakers on topics of interest in your community.

Open these meetings to the public. (You can receive credit for members recruited through this format in the Shape the Future and Member-Get-a-Member campaigns. See Chapter 6 for more information.)

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State Online Branch Examples:

Currently there are several states that list an on-line branch on their websites: **California, Oregon, Washington** (AAUW-WA President Dixie Swenson dixie@swensonassociatesinc.com), and **Wisconsin**. The **Wisconsin** webpage is at <http://aauw-wi.org/branches/online>, but they do not seem to be much beyond the

exploratory state, as yet. **Arizona** and **New Jersey** also seem to be in the very initial stages, but again, no solid information is available.

Texas is in the process of forming an online branch that is specifically for MALs and other busy Texas members (<http://www.aauwtexas.org/branches/online/index.html>), but to date don't seem very far along in the process. "The AAUW Texas Membership and Communications committees are working to form an online branch similar to the California Online Branch. Its purpose is to reach AAUW members and people interested in furthering AAUW's goals who may be too busy or too distant to attend regular branch meetings. The online format can give MALs a forum to interact with other like-minded people and to learn about and discuss issues which interest and affect women in Texas."

Of all of these examples, the most developed is the **California Online Branch** with a well-developed website, mission, membership, by-laws, etc. From their website:

The **California Online Branch** is a branch of the American Association of University Women that began in **2001** as an experiment in establishing a "virtual" community. As with all AAUW branches, we are dedicated to promoting AAUW's mission: **AAUW advances equity for women and girls through advocacy, education, and research.**

For the first few years of the branch's life, we held our meetings and conducted business in chat-room meetings, but in the Spring of 2005 shifted towards holding discussions through email listservs instead, allowing busy people to choose the time that best suits them to read and respond to emails.

Although we are technically a "California" branch of AAUW, a number of our members are from other states as well. The beauty of an online environment is the absence of geographical barriers in defining membership.

So we welcome anyone with an associate, equivalent or higher degree (minimum membership requirement of AAUW) who is interested in discussing AAUW policy issues, participating in action projects to further AAUW's mission goals, and getting to know a diverse group of people from across the state and country.

<https://svc.aauw.org/about/branchlist.cfml?stateid=CA>

The CA-Online dues structure:

- Dual Member: \$10 - For current AAUW California members who belong to another branch in CA or have already paid for at-large membership in AAUW-CA.
- Non-California Dual Member: \$26 - For current AAUW Members-at-Large (MALs) or non-California AAUW branch members.
- Primary Life Member: \$26 - For life members of AAUW who do not belong to another branch in California.

- Primary Member: \$75 - For those who want CA Online branch as their primary or only AAUW branch.
 - AAUW Student Affiliates: \$43 - For those who do not currently have a qualifying degree.
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Branch Without Borders

According to AAUW-NC's Nancy Shoemaker (nancy.shoemaker@aauwnc.org), AAUW in Montana and North Carolina (a work in process) have implemented the "branch without borders" concept, which is not online per se, but addresses some of the same issues.

Nancy told me in an e-mail that, "Claudia Richards at the Association interviewed me a couple of months ago -- saying she was preparing a "program in a box" information kit about virtual branches which would include both models (but I'm not sure I really made the distinction between the two clear)."

Montana's Branch Without Borders:

In an attempt to address how to connect at-large members to the state organization, and how to offload some administrative overhead from very small branches Montana has created "branch without borders" concept that may be useful to other states.

 [July 2007 report on progress](#)

 [July 2007 bylaws](#)

On 1 Aug 2, 2007, Diane Ehernberger, AAUW-Montana Finance Director wrote about Montana's New Statewide Branch.

Three years in the making, this new branch structure has offered solutions to several problems facing AAUW-Montana, primarily officer burnout and troubled branches. I hope this summary of the development process and a copy of our branch bylaws will help other states facing similar problems.

In 2004, while serving as membership VP for AAUW-Montana, I found that three of our ten branches were in trouble. One had all but collapsed, even with help from a nearby branch; another suffered from a major case of officer burnout; and the third seemed to disappear from view when their finance director was sent to Iraq. Corky Bush, then state president, asked me to develop a strategy to help these failing branches. Realizing that this would not be as simple as just supplying a bit more attention and outreach, our initial goal was simply to keep these members and branches connected to AAUW at both the national and local levels.

We later added a second goal—that of providing a means for a Montana branch to dissolve with dignity while dealing with its assets within AAUW guidelines and satisfying the wishes of its members.

For the past three years, I have worked with our state board and the members of our three failing branches to develop what has just been approved as the Treasure State Branch of AAUW. This is a non-community based, statewide branch that welcomes the members of dissolving branches to remain involved at the state and local levels of AAUW by providing a flexible umbrella under which AAUW activities may take place.

She welcomes further questions about this new branch structure; contact her at di47mt@yahoo.com or 406-579-3088.

North Carolina's Branch Without Borders

Purpose: This is a branch that will provide a new, simpler way to join the community of 100,000 members of AAUW (1500 members in North Carolina). (PDF of their brochure attached.)

Nancy Shoemaker says, "...in NC we've already seen it connect some folks in a community where the branch disbanded years ago (to attend a public policy event)."

She likes "the branch without borders model since it seems more flexible -- 'do what the spirit moves' -- but provides the branch roster as a starting point. If subgroups form (around an interests -- I can see it being the foundation for a lobby corps-like group -- or a geographic area where there's no longer a branch), fine. But there's no superstructure that pretends the entire branch is going to do much of anything.

Recommendations for Further Action by AAUW-NYS:

It appears there is no impediment to forming one or more on-line branches by AAUW-NYS. It also appears that any such efforts should be carefully thought-out with a specific goal and plan of action to ensure successful implementation. I can envision this model working for a number of constituencies:

1. MALs in NYS
2. Student Members in NYS
3. Geographic areas not currently served by an active AAUW Branch
4. Creating on-line communities of like-minded AAUW members (and others) who want to advocate for specific topics/issues. (For example, those people who come to Convention with a Resolution might be able to work to implement their ideas following convention using this model – Educational Equity, Economic Security, etc., by creating a state-wide advocacy e-Group as part of the follow-up.)

5. Creating state-wide Interest Groups like many branches currently have to pursue a specific topic/interest. (The Association currently offers three iAdelante! Books of the Month for 2008-2009 – Diversity, Leadership and Financial Security – AAUW-NYS could create an online book club for each.)

It should be said that these groups may or may not have much in common – it would behoove the state to target a group of potential members carefully and specifically. It may also be that this an idea whose time has come and if we provide the opportunity, people will congregate around an idea and get to work!

I also think the Branch Without borders idea is one that could be useful, especially in areas where there is no branch or where the branch is not meeting the needs of a potential group of AAUW members. It might be an excellent way to draw in younger folks who care about AAUW issues but to not have time to belong to a traditional branch.

Task Force For the Future

It has been quite a while since AAUW-NYS empowered a Task Force to look into the future. The one convened by Bobbe Fortunato did a great job of creating an understanding of what the branches and the state could do together by opening the lines of communication in the late 1990s. That set the stage for the mission-based programming that the Living the Mission theme capitalized on under Evvie Currie.

Additionally, it brought forth a new crop of leaders who moved into state roles and provided new energy and vision that helped vitalize AAUW for a number of years.

New York State remains one the most difficult states geographically in terms of finding a meeting place that is a convenient travel time for everyone. People's lives are not getting any less hectic; especially for young women who are juggling work, family, and other obligations. If we want AAUW to move confidently into the 21st Century and remain a vital organization, it is time to examine alternate branch structures that connect people to AAUW and give a meaningful opportunity for positive societal action.

I respectfully recommend AAUW-NYS formally explore these avenues for branch formation both at the state level and by encouraging groups of members within the state to consider non-traditional branch structures for advocacy. I further recommend forming an eGroup AAUW-NYS Task Force to work toward this goal. I believe an open call for volunteers will find a willing population ready to think outside the box (or at least cut a few windows in the boxes we have!).

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