I had a hard time figuring out where to start with this report. I sat at my computer, with all the information I needed laid out, determined to put down some talking points, and I’d look at the screen and my papers, and say “maybe later.” This went on for nearly a week. Then I got the SAC agenda, and all became clear. It said that I’m here to talk about the LC response to the WG report. And so, the place I need to start is at the end.

The Working Group was formed in the fall of 2007 and completed its task when it delivered its report in January. Since then, many Working Group members have been asked to speak about the report at various conferences and libraries, and we have done so. This is, for example, my fourth time talking about the Report. LC has kept our e-mail discussion list open, and through it we’ve kept in touch with each other, forwarded items of interest to each other, shared our presentations and power points among us, and kept each other informed about what kinds of responses we’ve gotten, what questions have been asked, and so forth.

Even so, and even though we think that the degree to which we are making presentations around the country, and the degree to which we are in communication with each other is a strength for this process, and an important factor in helping the community to move ahead with some of the recommendations, we are very clear that none of us really speaks FOR the WG. And especially, none of us speaks for LC.

Further, both because we wrote the report at LC’s behest, AND because that task is complete, we are agreed that it isn’t our role, or our responsibility, nor would it be
appropriate for us to “respond to responses.” We thought that this would just be understood by others, but a recent item in LJ that described a proposal mentioned by Thomas Mann, ended with the sentence: “But neither the Working Group nor LC has responded to this proposal.” This suggests that the role of the WG, and its status may not be understood. And so that’s why I’m mentioning it here.

It may continue to be somewhat confusing to people, though, because even though our original task is complete, Deanna Marcum at LC found it so useful to have a disparate group of people, none of whom have any organizational ties to LC, who are willing to talk and think about bibliographic control issues, that she has asked the members of the WG if they would be willing to continue to serve, but in a somewhat different and informal advisory capacity, as a kind of “sounding board.” And all of us said yes.

Nevertheless, even though the group still exists in this nebulous form, at this point we think that the community needs not to focus on our group, but on the points of the report. Moreover, we hope that the community doesn’t get bogged down in a kind of cycle of "report / response / reaction to response / reaction to the reaction to the response / talk some more / reply to the talk .... " because that sort of activity doesn’t get us any further, and it lets us avoid planning for or taking action.

On June 1, right on schedule, LC issued its response to the WG report, and a week later, most of the WG convened at LC again to formally receive LC’s response to our report, and to discuss the response, and talk about what might come next. During those discussions, it was impossible to touch on everything in the response .... And we made no effort to do so .... But it was clear that we had substantial agreement about many things:

- We were impressed by how seriously the LC staff and administration had taken the report and its recommendations.
We were impressed by how many things LC either is doing, or already has done, that are related to WG recommendations.

Given that so much is going on, (and that so much of it comes as a surprise even to people who pay attention to such things), however, we think that it would be worthwhile for LC to be more attentive to communication, and to find ways to be better/more diligent/more effective in communicating with “the outside world” about its accomplishments and projects. Virtually everything is announced or recorded somewhere, but just being announced somewhere, or being accessible through a specialized website isn’t enough.

We note that the LC response is succinct. This may seem like a strange thing to say about a document that’s 79 pages long, but there’s a lot of white space in it. Also, true to LC’s commitment, there is a response to every recommendation we made, so the response to each individual item is succinct. When an answer is brief, and expressed rather starkly, with few details and little in the way of qualification, it can give the impression that many of the activities it described are further along, or more fully formed, or more “operational” than is actually the case.

(e.g. 4.3.3.1 includes the statement “An LC staff member has developed automated mapping between MeSH and LCSH.” But the NLM member of the WG checked it out and discovered that …... what happened was that an LC staff member wrote a program based on the mapping Gary Strawn [from Northwestern] did, and NLM later enhanced. At present the LC program is only being used by 1 or 2 people and is technically still in development mode).
This isn’t a criticism of the response. It almost had to be this way, or else few people would have made it all the way through, but it is something for people to be aware of as they consider individual responses.

Something that has been identified by both the WG and by LC as a problem is the matter of moving from pilot programs or experiments to fully operational and routinized processes, or for discovering, for instance, whether a process that works on a small scale makes operational or financial sense on a large scale. Yet pilot programs or small implementations, or experiments aren’t always specifically identified as such in the response. This is something else for us to be aware of as we read the report.

The WG found, after it issued its draft report, that we received some criticism for not saying exactly how X should be done, or what the steps to achieve Y might be. And so, in the final report, we included a statement to the effect that the Report was not an implementation plan. The LC response has come in for some of the same criticism, and so on their behalf, we think it’s worth underscoring the cautionary note that LC put into its own response, that “the response is not an implementation plan”. Implementation plans are the NEXT step - or steps.

We understand - and so should everyone else - that the response was from LC, and that it was primarily concerned with the recommendations that were aimed at LC, or on which LC sees itself working. And so, sometimes the outlook is narrow or inwardly focused. This was was appropriate, given the circumstances, but readers of the Report and the Response should not suppose that this focus is necessarily appropriate for them, or for the bibliographic community at large.
Deanna Marcum committed to responding to every single recommendation in the Report. And she did, but we need to remember that many of the recommendations were aimed in whole or in part to people or entities other LC. In those cases, therefore, what LC may plan to do is interesting, but may be less important than what those other entities may do.

Members of the WG have some concern that the bibliographic community may take LC's response as an “ending” or as having solved anything, rather than realizing that LC's response is only the beginning ... for all of us.

We also have some concern that many people or entities in the bibliographic community at large may not fully understand that the community (and its component parts) also needs to respond to the report, too --- not necessarily in writing, but instead with action.

A particular concern of mine is trying to figure out how to get people outside of cataloging to understand the extent to which they should be interested in the report, the extent to which it might have an impact on them, and how to get individuals and individual institutions to recognize the responsibility they have in acting on some of the recommendations. Bibliographic control is the foundation of the profession, and what happens there will have an impact on every type of library, and every aspect of the profession, yet the only people paying much attention to the Report and the Response, are within the cataloging community. But if we are to move ahead with some of these recommendations, we need the support of the whole profession, including from library management, and professional associations. A small step in this direction was taken at the ALA (2008) Annual Conference, when the ALCTS Board sent a resolution to ALA Council, regarding encouraging Congress
to provide adequate funding for LC for the purpose of providing bibliographic
Control. It passed overwhelmingly.

Getting a little more specific about a few items …

- Some of LC’s responses highlighted the central and powerful position that OCLC occupies in bibliographic control. OCLC is important to the realization or implementation of many of the recommendations, but despite the fact that OCLC is a membership organization, no one --- not even LC --- has a lot of leverage over OCLC actions. Theoretically the membership at large should be influential, as should LC, but as OCLC has branched out in recent years, and grown beyond huge, there’s some question about how much focused influence the cataloging community can or will have. This is especially important to the recommendations concerning identifying incentives and disincentives to effective sharing of data.

- The WG recommendation for a "working group" to be put together to develop a shared frame of reference and common design goals for a coordinated renovation of the shared bibliographic apparatus was translated in LC’s response as a need for a white paper and a conference. But the WG believes strongly that a single conference (no matter how august the members, and even if it spans a few days) will not be as useful as the kind of continuous process that forming a "working group" would be. We believe this for many of the same reasons that led us to hold a series of meetings over a year’s time instead of host a single summit, to wit:
  1. A single conference could bring together only a relatively small number of participants
  2. A single conference would not allow for a continuum of thought and discussion.
  3. All official input would come within the space of a few days, and participants would not have time for the kind of reflection or evolution of thought that will be needed
At the 2008 ALA Annual Conference, some members of the WG met with some consultants to talk about the creation of a “white paper.” Once the white paper is received, the WG will consider what the best next steps might be.

- The WG also thinks that a part of its message about improving CIP was misunderstood, missed, or resisted. I bring this up not because the item itself is of overwhelming importance, but because it may be indicative of possible misinterpretation in other areas. The WG had neither the time nor the resources (nor the assignment) to vet each of LC’s answers.

Some things that have happened since the draft report, or since the final report was issued that seem to me to be of special concern to SAC:

The CPSO report on “Library of Congress Subject Headings: Pre-vs-Post-Coordination and Related Issues” in which LC states its continued support for pre-coordinated subject strings. If you just read the announcement of the report, or just skim the report itself, you might think that the “save LCSH” finding was its focus, but many other things are covered, and many of them are related to recommendations made by the Working Group. (though it bears mentioning that CPSO began working on this before the publication of the WG draft, and published its report between the publication of the WG draft and final report). In LC’s response to the WG report, the CPSO report is referenced in several places, as LC expresses a commitment to implement the recommendations of CPSO.

It’s a little unsettling, though, to note that some of the recommendations in the CPSO report, or some of the things that are happening that are described in LC’s response, derive from the Airlie House conference in 1991.
Which brings us back to another of the WG recommendations: When you build a huge construct of any kind, changing it takes time. The pace, process, and coordination of the standards development and maintenance process was one of the things that the WG specifically mentioned in its recommendations as needing to be addressed ... by that working group we talked about.

Another thing of importance to SAC is the report of the ALCTS Task Group on the LC Working Group Report, as well as the separate document of “Ten Actions for ALCTS” which identifies the top ten priorities of recommendations from the Task Group’s main report. Among the “Top ten” are some that would involve SAC, including especially #2 (“convene a division-level working group, with the task of examining incentives and disincentives regarding more widespread creation and sharing of both bibliographic and authority metadata”), #5 (integrate user-contributed data into library catalogs), #7 (optimize LCSH for Use and Reuse).

But just as LC’s response to the report was shaped by its mission and focus, the ALCTS response was shaped by its own mission and focus, and accordingly ALCTS considered what the ORGANIZATION could or should do about the recommendations, including what committees might be charged with responsibility, or what groups ought to be formed, or what groups ALCTS might work with. Once again, this leads me to mention (adopting the Chinese water torture method of getting points across) the need for EVERYONE to look at the recommendations and consider what they as individuals, or as individual institutions might do.

Beyond the specific recommendations made by the WG, what I find of great interest are what the broader implications for us all might be organizationally. I gave a talk to NETSL about this in May, and a version of that talk is going to appear as a guest editorial in LRTS this fall.
From my perspective, these include:

1. Recognizing the importance of all types of information resources in all formats
2. Recognizing that a single set of rules, a single mechanism, a single type of discovery tool cannot accomplish everything that needs to be accomplished
3. Recognizing that entities other than libraries can, want to, and will contribute to the information-finding construct
4. Recognizing that all of us are a part of the whole, and that it is an interdependent relationship
5. Recognizing that the way we have made decisions in the past may no longer serve us well.

In the interests of “full disclosure”, I need to point out that of all the parts of the report, and of all the issues that we discussed, I personally found the recommendations related to subject analysis among the least interesting or compelling. And I found some of the arguments used to justify recommendations to be not all that persuasive. But of course, some of the potential recommendations that were floated, never found their way into the report. For example, a recommendation was NOT made to abandon the single unified compilation of LCSH in favor of discipline or subject-specific thesauri. It was suggested as a possible recommendation, but the group’s consensus was that in a time of increasing interdisciplinarity, a collection of smaller, specialized, greatly but not entirely overlapping special thesauri would not be an acceptable substitute for the single, most-things-to-most-people resource that is LCSH.

And maybe I’ve just been in the field too long, but I found arguments about how difficult it is to use or teach LCSH to be at least somewhat overstated, and not always logically connected to the recommendations that used those arguments as justification.
There are some things among the subject analysis recommendations, though, that I find really intriguing --- like the suggestions to encourage or develop greater integration and linkages among vocabularies and classification schemes.

And I get a real kick out of considering the whole area of user tags. And not the least of my fascinations with it is the thought that here we have a field based on bibliographic control, but where only a small minority of the field is actually engaged in it, and the rest run away from it. But out there among the great unwashed, there are people who WANT to do subject analysis .... Who can’t resist the temptation to do it, AND who are discovering all on their own the value of a controlled vocabulary, and making up their own little lists of preferred headings.

Obviously, I have touched on only a few points regarding the LC response to On The Record (the WG report), but given the time available, I believe I’ll stop here.