



prepared for the  
INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON BAHÁ'Í LIBRARIES AND ARCHIVES  
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Dear friends,

This statement (originally prepared for a conference of Bahá'í librarians) outlines the past, present, and near-future of the online Bahá'í Academics Resource Library, [bahai-library.org](http://bahai-library.org). Refer also to [bahai-library.org/unpubl.articles/digital.libraries.html](http://bahai-library.org/unpubl.articles/digital.libraries.html). As everyone's time is precious, it is important not to duplicate work that someone else is doing, and you in this audience will know if anyone else is working on similar projects. Please contact me at [winters@bahai-library.org](mailto:winters@bahai-library.org) if you have any pertinent information, or expertise to share.

This statement is in five sections: intro, mandate, staff, what's next, and funding.

## **INTRO**

The Library was started six years ago, January 1997, as a small place to put my grad-school papers. I began adding documents that had not been posted elsewhere online, and the library soon became the largest online repository of Bahá'í-related texts. I envisioned it as a temporary site, awaiting the emergence of authorized, funded online libraries. Until this happens, the Library will continue to grow.

The Library currently contains 1600 unique items, comprised of 17,500 distinct files, which are categorized into 35 separate collections. Every file is processed by hand, from initial correspondence to proofreading, editing, formatting, and finally classifying and posting. This process takes an average of two hours per document, and book-length works take up to 50 hours. At this rate 100 volunteers and I were able to post an average of one document per day for six years.

However, the Library has reached critical mass and can no longer function within this structure. The size of the site and the number of its users have grown to the point that administration, correspondence, and basic maintenance now occupy all my available time. The next step is thus to freeze the Library at its current size and begin converting the entire collection into a database structure. This will allow for greatly improved manipulation of the data, both by editors and by users. It will streamline the document preparation process, and will allow the Library to be infinitely scalable. I have started taking courses in database design and will begin converting the Library this spring. The conversion process will last over a year, during which time the existing Library will remain as is.

## **MANDATE**

The Library conforms to both Bahá'í and academic standards, e.g. it only includes material that is informative or historical, is written in a respectful manner, and is not intentionally deceptive. It does not contain any material which is proscribed in Bahá'í practice, e.g. "Covenant-Breaker" materials, personal or confidential documents, or photographs of Bahá'u'lláh. It also does not include any material

which does not have a direct scholarly or historical application, e.g. "Teaching" manuals, contemporary photography, or basic deepening materials.

To respond to a frequently-asked question, the Library is not intended to be a "Bahá'í" site. My own personal beliefs are just that—personal—and are not stated in or relevant to the Library's content. Most of the Library's assistants and users are Bahá'ís, but some are not. This should have no bearing on the Library's content or editing, because editorial judgments are easy to base on objective academic or historical criteria. Having said that, the vast majority of its users are Bahá'ís (recent poll results: 93% Bahá'ís, 3% non-Bahá'ís, 4% ex-Bahá'ís, and 0% seekers), who can be assured that nothing here transgresses Bahá'í standards. The Library's content ends up being over 99% by Bahá'ís and/or sympathetic to the Faith, and less than 1% in any way critical of the Faith. This is not a ratio I have intentionally selected but rather a reflection of the documents available, of which only a tiny fraction are both critical and worthy: most pieces Bahá'ís would object to are automatically disqualified by virtue of being polemic, disrespectful, or academically unsound. It is also a reflection of which documents volunteers have felt motivated to type or scan over the years.

The Library is independent of the Bahá'í institutions, in that it is not funded or endorsed by any Bahá'í body and I have received no external editorial input. I frequently request guidance from the United States Bahá'í National Center Literature Review Office, the USBNC Research Office, and the Universal House of Justice, but have never received unsolicited editorial suggestions. It is important for users of the Library to know it is not an "official" site, because non-Bahá'í readers must be assured of its transparency and objectivity. Conversely, and in contrast to some Baha'i-oriented scholarly websites, the Library has no "agenda," either covert or explicit, that is in any way critical of Baha'i institutions. The Library also contains some content that was not written by or for Bahá'ís, i.e. documents by non-Bahá'ís attempting to better understand the Faith. Given that there are 5 million Bahá'ís and 5 billion non-Bahá'ís, I think the latter is the more important audience: I am more interested in helping the world's non-Bahá'ís come to know and understand the Faith than in providing another forum for Bahá'ís to discuss it amongst themselves.

## **STAFF**

I am greatly appreciative of the enormous amount of work people have put into the project. I thank the authors for their generosity in sharing their work and the hundreds of volunteers who put in thousands of hours proofreading and formatting. All editing, administration, and training of volunteers has been done by myself.

I have attempted to make the Library a consultative endeavor rather than controlling it as my own personal project. A dozen colleagues agreed to participate in an editorial board, but it proved to be a head without a body. Then I set up a managing editor system in which the more dedicated and skilled volunteers could each select a collection to call their own. Each was given a style sheet, editorial guidelines, any necessary training, and a list of volunteers willing to work under their oversight. A broad support structure was created, including practice files, a listserver, and a bulletin board, allowing editors to produce finished, edited documents for posting within their own section of the Library. To encourage participation, editors were given broad latitude to run their collection as they see fit. However, few volunteers have been strongly dedicated or had the necessary skills, and thus far just one

collection, "Provisional Translations," is actively publishing under its own management. Training numerous occasional workers and administering the infrastructure required proved too time-consuming, and I have not sought additional volunteers.

Having said that, the Bahá'í community is often a wellspring of activity, and numerous people have offered their more-limited services. The only way for me to incorporate these many volunteers, without trying to maintain a middle-manager structure, will be to formalize and automate the document submission and preparation process. Once this structure is in place, it should be very simple for me to accept the gracious help of the many people who offer to proofread and edit the occasional document.

## **WHAT'S NEXT**

The following six steps outline the process I'll follow, starting in mid-2003 and completing by January 2004.

1. re-examine each and every document as judged by a set of specific editorial criteria, and discard anything that doesn't meet the defined standards
2. parse each file into its component parts, e.g. title, author, body, links, etc.
3. add classification data and controlled keyword vocabulary to each file, hopefully incorporating the [Bahá'í World Centre Library's](#) classification
4. import all files into a database (MySQL), and if possible, convert the URL addressing scheme to the next-generation URN scheme
5. construct a web interface (PHP) and implement cascading style sheets (CSS)
6. edit each document's main body for spelling, content, and formatting, including standardizing its html for CSS

Once the above steps have been accomplished, the entirety of the Library's content can be sorted, cross-referenced, and interfaced by any number of means, including optimizing it for WAP devices and next-generation "G3" phones. The data could also be exported into other digital archives (e.g. other digital libraries), accessed by external networks (e.g. the International Bahá'í Library), or imported into interface programs (e.g. [Archive](#)). Individuals will be able to publish documents themselves using a web interface — see <http://indymedia.org/publish.php3> for a simple example of such a system in use (ours will be more detailed, and will pass all new items through an editorial process before "publishing"). At this point and at this point only could further growth of the Library be considered. And for the distant future, I envision opening a physical counterpart to the Bahá'í Academics Resource Library, namely a lending and research library open to the public.

## **FUNDING**

I have sometimes paid people to help with certain projects, and this proved superior to the volunteer relationship in that I could require a higher quality and timeliness. When finances allow, new Library projects will thus be contracted on a for-pay basis (at US\$10/hour), a relationship which produces the best and fastest results.

The Bahá'í Library is unfunded, though the generosity of a long-time supporter covers the actual server costs. Other funding options are not apparent. As I am not affiliated with a university, educational grants and government grants are largely not accessible. Selling subscriptions or charging for access to the Library is not an option, for too many reasons to list here. Selling ad space would generate only minimal revenue. Actively seeking funding through donations has also not worked. Perhaps donations could be solicited by requesting specific amounts for specific projects, such as having a donor contribute \$100 for 10 hours of work scanning a book, or having a Tablet provisionally translated for a college paper. I welcome funding suggestions!

Please contact me at [winters@bahai-library.org](mailto:winters@bahai-library.org) to share information or expertise.

*Thanks! -Jonah Winters*