

A Statement of Direction for Becoming the Best ILA in 2020 and Beyond

Executive Summary

In creating an approach to the ILA's future, the ILA Vision Taskforce identified a need for a "bridge document" to connect the grand sweep of our mission/vision statements with the specific steps needed in an actionable strategic plan. The following Statement of Direction is the result. It is intended to help members articulate the ILA's purpose more effectively while serving as an invaluable measuring stick for all current and future ILA initiatives.

The Statement, in turn, puts forth the following strategic objective to guide the ILA's future efforts: **to shape the teaching and advancement of listening worldwide**. This outward-facing statement seeks to apply the signature strengths of the ILA—intellectual distinction, distinguished research, multiple streams of practice, international presence, and others—to the world's most pressing needs vis-à-vis listening.

The following text for the Statement of Direction was approved by the Board of Directors on 15 March 2019.

ILA Mission: To advance the practice, teaching, and research of listening throughout the world.

ILA Vision: To be the international leader of listening practices, teaching, and research.

Why This Document

The ILA is blessed with mission and vision statements that briefly, simply, and eloquently sum up what the ILA is, what it has been, and what it can be in the future. Like most mission and vision statements, they cover a broad expanse with almost no detail. This is as it should be: it allows members and leaders to translate them into purposeful action in various countries, cultures, times, and contexts.

However, organizations cannot effectively jump from such expansive statements to individual strategies. They must, instead, take an intermediate step: setting a medium-term direction that matches the ILA's greatest strengths to the greatest needs of that particular era. A statement of such direction will serve five purposes:

1. It will help members articulate the ILA's purpose to anyone who asks.
2. It will serve as a measuring stick for assessing proposed new initiatives (and changes to current initiatives). With a statement of direction we can answer not only *is this a good idea?* (most ideas are), but also *is this idea right for the ILA?*
3. It will serve as a generator of initiatives.
4. It will help us to align our limited resources and thus deploy them more efficiently.
5. A clear statement of direction will make us more attractive to prospective members *and* prospective funders. With time and funding constraints becoming ever more severe, individuals and foundations are seeking organizations through which they can make the biggest difference with the smallest investment.

Why This Process

In recent years, ILA leaders have gathered a substantial body of input from its members. Most notably, this includes the 2016 "What Do You Want from the ILA?" survey and the 2018 Board brainstorming session in Dublin. Under Helen Ralston's leadership, it was decided to ponder this input, together with previous attempts at strategic planning stretching back 20 years, rather than create whole new initiatives to gather yet more feedback. This eliminated duplication of steps and thus accelerated the time frame for production of a meaningful framework.

A team of four ILA members was assembled to review the input, reflect on their own ILA experience, and see what emerged in their thinking on the ILA's future. The team members were carefully selected for their experience, the respect they enjoy within the ILA, their length of membership (both longtime *and* newer members), their chronological age, and their demonstrated excellence in deep, innovative thinking. The original four members included John Backman, Nicole Bodin, Jennie Grau, and Philip Tirpak. Jennie resigned in November, and Sandra Bodin-Lerner joined the team.

This group has its limitations, as all groups do. We could have used a member specifically from the research community, as well as a couple of members outside the United States. Our hope is that these drawbacks will be corrected in the review process, given the greater diversity in these areas among members.

What the World Needs (and Thinks It Needs)

In this age of bitter divisiveness, many commentators (from world-renowned columnists to obscure bloggers) have editorialized about the world's urgent need for listening. Indeed, a hallmark of this divisive age is the absence of listening: in everyday conversation and social media, in legislative assemblies and in families, a great many discussions have devolved to a format of "I say my angry piece, then you say your angry piece, I respond with hostility and restatement of my angry piece, etc., etc." Listening seems an indispensable step toward breaking this vicious cycle, many observers agree.

From there, however, at least three factors thwart further attempts at listening:

1. An assumption that listening is automatic.
2. A profound lack of understanding of *how* to listen.
3. The immediate response that the "other side" should listen first.

To obstacles 1 and 2, the ILA can bring a towering wealth of assets, which has developed within the organization over the past 40 years.

What ILA Can Bring to the Table

- *Intellectual distinction.* Our membership includes some of the world's leading researchers and thought leaders on listening. Collectively, their work has plumbed the depths of a vast area of listening knowledge, from theoretical listening models to practical tips for immediate use. These members value the ILA for the exchange of ideas, learnings, and best practices. It is no exaggeration to say the ILA is already listening's think tank.
- *Numerous streams of practice.* Our members come from a substantial array of fields that are central not only to listening, but to human endeavor: business, healthcare, education, research, training and consulting, spirituality, music, and others. In coming together, we have become well-acquainted with listening across disciplines and across barriers both real and perceived. Since the breakdown in listening spans so many areas of society nowadays, our readiness to address effective listening in those areas positions us to be an influential voice for the cause of listening.
- *A spirit of welcome.* Again and again, new people have come away from the ILA (especially ILA Conventions) raving about the sense of welcome and inclusion they received. For a group with so many leaders and researchers in the field, this is extraordinary.
- *An international presence.* The ILA currently has members in 19 countries; five of those countries are represented on the Board. Our annual Conventions draw participants from all over the world. Moreover, we are taking steps toward becoming even more thoroughly international—e.g., holding consecutive Conventions in Dublin and Vancouver, considering initiatives for regional networking.
- *A prominent place in the global listening network.* This is a growing edge for ILA. While we have long been connected with National Communication Association (NCA), additional organizations have now joined us through the ILA Partners Program. Many current and prospective Partners can benefit from the ILA strengths listed above.

How It All Comes Together

Particularly with our intellectual distinction and accumulated knowledge, we are ideally positioned to meet the aforementioned listening challenges head-on—especially the ignorance of how to listen and the myth of “everyone knows how.” We recommend, therefore, that as an elaboration of our mission and vision statements, we focus on one overarching direction:

To shape the teaching and advancement of listening worldwide.

A closer examination of each key word or phrase in this statement will help us elaborate the direction we envision as a guide for the ILA:

- *Shape.* The word implies an active influence over the advancement of listening—an influence wielded via the collective contributions of our listening researchers, thought leaders, and practitioners in many fields. At the same time, the word *shape* does not cast the ILA as a grassroots organization whose whole purpose is to bring listening to the masses. With our scholarship, our leaders in many fields, and our cross-pollination, we can support both the academy and the grassroots (and other types of organizations besides) while steering the “general conversation” toward the advancement of listening in general.
- *Teaching and advancement.* In this context, the active word *teaching* encompasses the whole spectrum of educational activities engaged in by our members: courses and other instructional vehicles in academia, business seminars, conferences, webinars, keynotes, and other forms of communication. But *teaching* does not include the entire range of endeavors by which our members shape the world’s listening. Hence the word *advancement*, which speaks to the ultimate end: embedding listening as a practice throughout the world.
- *Worldwide.* Since the challenges of listening are global, so must be the ILA’s part in the solutions. The word *worldwide* serves as a ringing endorsement of our crucial, and long-held, commitment to our status as an international organization. As such, it reflects the ongoing priority of adapting our organization and our initiatives to the requirements of various countries and cultures.

Several key words can fill out this direction for the ILA’s future:

- *Educational.* As mentioned earlier, this direction affirms the teaching efforts of the ILA and its members—courses and other instructional vehicles in academia, business seminars, conferences, webinars, keynotes, etc.—as central to the organization’s purpose.
- *Practical.* People overwhelmingly favor ideas they can use now. Even academic funders are shifting their attention to more qualitative research on more practical issues. The ILA’s relevance with a larger body of future members depends on emphasizing the practical (while not losing the theoretical basis from which practical strategies spring).
- *Innovative.* The ILA’s leadership in listening theory and research will continue to create ever-better understanding of, and best practices for, listening, which ILA will promote through teaching and advancement initiatives.
- *Supportive.* Of activist organizations, of organizations that use listening as part of their focus.
- *Listening.* This may seem self-evident, but we include it here to stress the need for the ILA to commit itself to listening in every context—including its own internal affairs.
- *Inclusive.* Of people, to be sure, but especially of ideas and strategies. This invitation to “bring your ideas” can be a powerful motivator to join.

- *Sustainable.* No membership organization can survive without two essential ingredients: membership and revenue. Regardless of the details of our strategic planning, we must include sufficient efforts to increase both, so that the ILA has the best opportunity to remain viable for the future.