

Libraries — global reach, local touch

American Library Association



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Ensuring that all Americans have the skills and resources they need to live in an information-based society is the biggest challenge facing the American Library Association (ALA). It is what we call our ALA Goal 2000. To achieve this, we are focusing our activities in four key areas.

The first is literacy. Those who are not logged-on and literate will be lost in the next century. Without basic literacy skills, technology has no relevance. Our children must know how to use computers to succeed.

It is estimated that as many as one third of American adults lack basic reading skills. Librarians have always been leaders in promoting literacy and this is more important than ever as we face the new millennium. The 'Born to read' program initiated by ALA's Association for Library Service to Children reaches out to new parents and teaches them to raise children who are healthy and ready to read. It is an excellent model of the kind of leadership we, as librarians, can exercise both in our own country and around the world.

The second critical area is equity of access. Our profession was among the first to recognise

the growing importance of electronic information, and ALA was instrumental in bringing equity issues to the attention of policy-makers and the public. With support from an expanded Washington Office and the new Office for Information Technology Policy, ALA has enjoyed noteworthy successes, including passage of the new *Library Services and Technology Act* and significant discounts on telecommunications services for libraries. But the goal of connecting every school, public, college, and university library to the Internet remains to be achieved. Active roles in advocating funding and other legislative support is needed to keep information free and open in the 21st century. ALA is a key player with other groups in organising national summits that will address issues of the Internet and access.

A third key area is diversity. Today, all successful organisations have to deal with diversity. Several new initiatives are underway in ALA.

The 'Spectrum initiative' will provide scholarships to minorities in an effort to diversify the library workforce and better serve diverse library users. At the ALA annual conference next summer, a diversity fair will allow members to share their programs, projects, and perspectives on this topic. A web-based diversity initiative will allow members who are unable to attend conferences opportunities to learn more about this important issue.

The fourth key area is international co-operation and communication. The digital age has released us from geographic limitations as the basis of friendship, collaboration, commerce, and community. As librarians, we have a responsibility to facilitate the flow of communication, since we understand how to organise and present information and how people use information once they have it. International co-operation will further transform the library's role from warehouses for books to electronic information-delivery centres. Just as information easily crosses borders, our challenge now is to take a larger role on the world stage.

ALA's participation in the Geneva copyright negotiations is a good example of how our profession can act on a larger stage to ensure a balanced and fair information doctrine. We must urge members of the public and policy-makers to use and support libraries as multicultural institutions that connect even the smallest and most remote communities to global resources.

With 57 000 members, the American Library Association has much to be proud of and much to accomplish in the years ahead. Visit our web page at www.ala.org to learn more about our varied initiatives. ■

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Membership 57 000 personal, organisation and corporate members

Mission

The mission of the American Library Association is to provide leadership for the development, promotion, and improvement of library and information services and the profession of librarianship in order to enhance learning and ensure access to information for all.

Who is ALA?

The American Library Association (ALA) is the oldest, largest and most influential library association in the world. For more than a century, it has been a leader in defending intellectual freedom and promoting the highest-quality library and information services. Today this role is more critical than ever. The American Library Association is committed to protecting public access to information in all forms and to ensuring that library users in the 21st century enjoy the same free and open access to information that they do today. Through a broad-based program of legislative advocacy, public awareness and professional education, the association provides leadership and support in more than 100 000 school, public, academic and special libraries across the United States of America.