

What do you do for *your* Association?



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What does ALIA do for me? Sadly, this has been a too-frequent question posed to me during the last twelve months. Even more regrettably, it has come from members as well as non-members.

At first I was dumbfounded by the question. I have always considered my membership as a commitment to the profession — part duty, part obligation but mostly support for the aims and objectives of the Association. My only grumble has been that the subscription notice arrives at Christmas time!

As vice-president, I had an opportunity to see the inner workings of the organisation. A great deal of the vitality of ALIA comes from those members who give so freely of their own time to participate in special interest groups, divisions, branches, ALIA Board of Education, ALIA General Council and other activities. This work is supported by the staff of the ALIA national office who are equally dedicated to the Association.

ALIA provides a wide range of services which have been developed over the years in response to member needs. They are reviewed regularly as part of the Association's strategic plan. The difficulty for the Association is that the membership is so diverse in terms of geography, interests and composition. Providing services which are relevant to people in remote, one-person libraries as well as to those working in large metropolitan libraries is complex.

The Association's role is complicated also by a membership which includes individuals as well as institutions. In many of its activities, ALIA must tread a fine line between the sometimes competing interests of its constituents. This is particularly the case for activities involving lobbying, personnel and industrial services and some aspects of the ALIA Board of Education.

With the change in industrial relations toward workplace or enterprise agreements, some members expect ALIA to act as a trade union to protect their working conditions. While ALIA can, and does, provide advice and assistance to members, it can not act as a trade union. Even if it were possible, there would be potential conflict where individuals and their employing institutions are members of the Association. Nevertheless, ALIA devotes a considerable amount of resources

to the provision of services which assist members who are not covered adequately by a trade union or who need independent advice.

An important, and often undervalued, service undertaken by the Association is lobbying government especially at the federal level. Although many members may not see a direct relationship between visits to a parliamentarian and their needs, it is one of the most important activities of ALIA. The location of the national office in Canberra is a strategic benefit which enables ALIA to participate in both the formal and informal networks affecting government policy.

The Association maintains a watching brief to identify issues which affect libraries and information services. It then reacts in the most appropriate manner, including written submissions, lobbying key individuals and issuing public statements. These activities are aimed at promoting the library and information sector in general but produce long-term advantages for all members. ALIA benefits enormously from the personal contacts, experience and political acumen of the executive director, Virginia Walsh.

No matter how diligently ALIA works to ensure that services meet member needs, someone always seems to be affronted. Often, the problem is a perceived lack of information. Yet, ALIA works extremely hard to ensure that information about its activities is disseminated. *inCite* is one of the best and most informative society magazines in Australia but not all members read it. Likewise, the ALIA web site is a mine of information about the Association and librarianship. State and Territory branches, divisions and special interest groups all do their best to provide information to members.

ALIA strives to meet the needs of members, but it can only be truly effective if members participate. With the convergence of ACLIS and ALIA, there will be an opportunity to re-appraise the future of the library and information sector in Australia in terms of public representation, the needs of individuals and the future of institutions. It will also be a great opportunity for individuals to become involved in shaping the future.

As J F Kennedy would have said — 'ask not what your Association can do for you but what you can do for your Association'. ■