

Membership drives — or student education?

As a second-year student of librarianship at a tertiary institution, I can honestly say that within the last six weeks I have seen more of the LAA's executive than at any time in the past.

Being something of a sceptic, I venture to say that these visits, whilst cloaked under the auspices of educating the members as to what the LAA is doing, were, in fact, nothing more than membership drives.

In the first visit, an Executive Vice President informed us that there were about 6,700 financial members of the LAA of which some 400 were students. However, we, as students, should not be frightened of joining such a large, amorphous body! The Executive Vice President then went on to propagandise the LAA saying with some pride that it was in the process of drawing up a trial code of ethics. (This being in a professional body that has been in existence since 1937 and had its Royal Charter presented in 1963!)

The Executive Vice President also informed the student body who had previously been ignorant of the fact, that it was not compulsory to join the LAA. An apparent by

product of this non-compulsion was a falling off of membership numbers. No wonder the need for a membership drive! Could a lowly student make a suggestion? Make it compulsory to be a member of the LAA in order to hold down gainful employment. Also, do away with those 'sliding scale' membership fees. It would probably prove beneficial both to the members and that large amorphous body, both could budget accordingly.

For the benefit of those readers that have never had the experience of an executive visit, at the end of their pep talks, there is a short period set aside for questions, thank you's, acclamation, etc. I managed to ask the Executive Vice President a question in this short time. The question was: 'What was the LAA's attitude towards pressure groups and censorship?' I asked the question in the form of an example to avoid confusion. The example I gave was: 'If a pressure group asked a librarian to remove material from the shelves and the librarian refused, so the pressure group then approached the library board and through judicious lobbying managed to get the board to agree to their way of thinking, ie to remove the "offensive" material. The librarian still refused to do so, and as a direct result lost his/her job. What would the LAA's attitude be, one of support or laissez-faire? Needless to say, I did not get a satisfactory answer. Thinking back, I wonder if I got any sort of an answer at all, as I was referred to the LAA's Statement on Freedom to Read (p.55 of the 1982 handbook). On perusal of that, is there anywhere in the statement where it says that the LAA will support a particular librarian in this eventuality? To save you the trouble of looking it up, the answer is No! It says to resist pressure groups, but does not let you know what happens if you do, which basically was the essence of my question.

'Never mind,' thought I, 'maybe my question wasn't understood, I'll give the Executive Vice President the benefit of the doubt.' However, other students and lecturers then approached me and commented how my question had not been answered. So, if any of the LAA executive are reading this mis-sive could they please answer my question? Before you do, I have another.

Approximately a month later, we got another visit from a member of the executive. This time we were treated to an interesting talk (if I could have understood it) on the effects of technology upon libraries. We can either be dynamic (in the positive sense of the word) and rise to meet the challenge, or think in doomsday terms and complacently lose our monopoly as providers of information (if, in fact we ever had this monopoly).


As a student, I am more than a little perturbed as to job availability when I finish my course. I therefore see computers as a competitor, even although I am assured by the powers that be, that they are going to create jobs, not lose them. I keep asking myself a question, which although can be called simplistic, has yet to be answered to my satisfaction. If a chief librarian had a choice between me (say starting on \$16,000 to \$18,000 p.a.) and putting an on-line service in at say, a cost of \$5,000 to \$7,000 once only, also taking into account the ease with which operators can be trained, (if at all), what is the likely choice? The answer I keep coming up with is Not me! So I asked this executive member a question as to what to expect when, (and if) I get into the workforce? Will computers be taking the place of people in the workforce, and how should librarians acclimatise themselves? The answer was again (surprise, surprise) not satisfactory.

I was told not to be frightened of technology, the technological changes the lecture was prophesying would not take place in the immediate future, perhaps not even by the end of this decade. This was after telling us that in 1982 the number of on-line information centres had increased by 47%, and it would not be long before owners of micro-computers will have access to the data

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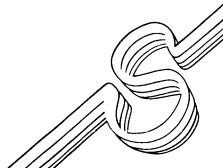
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banks. There still will be such an animal as the reference librarian, but on an ever-diminishing basis.

I was also told that there was a proposal in front of the LAA that newly qualified librarians should have to have a licence to practice their job. In short, an apprenticeship to gain practical skills. Also, accreditation by continuous study would be a prerequisite to keeping this licence and therefore, presumably your job.

On the face of it, this seems a good proposal. Students gain that all important experience, and through continuous study the 'dead wood' is shown the door, thus allowing the professionally minded librarian to take his/her place. The latter group will be so pleased with the LAA for thinking of this wondrous idea that ensured them jobs, that they will join the LAA out of sheer gratitude, membership will balloon and that stigma of compulsion will be circumvented.

However, this concept is a bit all-encompassing, don't you feel? We all know the person that is good at their job, but hopeless when it comes to theory and the same could be said of the person that is good at theory but hopeless in practice. To be really sceptical, this licentiation could be seen as a desperate ploy to help gain the acceptance of the general public that librarianship is a profession, not to ensure job availability, opportunity or security.

So I ask again. Is there any point in attempting to master this fascinating career, because it really can be, or to be realistic and either a) change courses while one still can, or b) become a computer salesperson selling on-line systems to libraries?

Russ Elwin

The President's reply

I appreciate the opportunity to respond to Mr Elwin's letter and note his comment on seeing several members of the Executive.

In other circumstances it is often claimed that members do not see enough of their elected officers, so a balance is obviously hard to achieve.

Susan Acutt will most likely correct the error in her title and leave me to correct the misconception about my visit. I was actually invited to the RCAE on the same basis as in 1982 and that was as Institute Librarian of RMIT. The fact that I am President of the LAA is, in this case, somewhat accidental,

although I am always happy to use the occasion for the LAA cause.

My brief at RCAE was to talk on technology to encourage students to think about their future working environment, even if this was a little provocative in the process. In so doing I took what factual information I had found and added some projections of my own. If I did not answer Mr Elwin's questions on the future it was because, like him, I am still searching for the answers. I do not, however, agree with Mr Elwin's equation of machine versus staff and thought I had indicated my assessment of the value of the human resource.

The idea of a licence or charter has been adopted by General Council and is better put by Margaret Trask in her paper as 'the responsibility of the LAA for the guarantee of competency in the practice of librarianship'¹ rather than as either of the sceptical reasons Mr Elwin suggests.

As to the question of whether "there is any point in attempting to master this fascinating career", only Mr Elwin can answer. Many of us think that there is, and I suspect that it is still preferable to Mr Elwin's alternative.

Barrie Mitcheson
Institute Librarian
RMIT

¹Trask, Margaret; Professional Practice — Whose Responsibility? ALJ, February 1983, pp. 5-14.

and the Executive Director's

It is not often that a visit by the Executive Director (=Executive Vice President) leads to correspondence in *InCite*, even if it is critical. Hearing these visits termed as nothing more than membership drives cuts a little close to the bone — I am still naive enough to think that people in the profession, and students in particular, are interested in their professional association and what it is doing for without that association I doubt if there would be a librarianship profession. Whether people join it is incidental and a decision they make themselves. (Even though I believe everyone *should* join). However, the nature of our free-enterprise country is such that without members' fees we would not survive, as everything, including this pen and paper, costs money. In this sense a secondary offshoot of these visits is to encourage more people to join.

While falling membership was a phenome

non in 1980 and 81, we have seen a reversal of this trend in 1982 and 1983. At last I believe we have the 'real' level of membership; perhaps not the most desirable in numbers, but now our membership is not propped up by those compelled to join because they want to do the Registration Examination. Apart from the fact that we have no legal capacity in which to impose compulsory fees, this is the wrong reason to join or do anything. Also, the fact that we have to be accountable to maintain members 'keeps us honest'. I question the comment about a 'sliding scale' — surely a student does not believe it is equitable if he should pay the same fee as a State Librarian earning in excess of \$40,000 per year.

Now to the question which caused all the fuss — I still do not have an answer off pat. A librarian who lost his/her position for upholding the principle of freedom to read *would* be supported by the LAA as long as this did not conflict with the existing censorship laws. Again, I can only refer to our *Statement on Freedom to Read*.

4. A librarian, while recognising that powers of censorship exist and are legally vested in state and federal governments, should resist attempts by individuals or organised groups within the community to determine what library materials are to be, or are not to be, available to the users of the library.

7. A librarian must obey the laws relating to books and libraries, but if the laws or their administration conflict with the principles put forward in this statement, he should be free to move for the amendment of these laws. *LAA Statement on Freedom to Read* Adopted 1971 Amended 1979

If the series of events outlined in Mr Elwin's letter took place the Association (if requested) would actively make representations on behalf of the librarian to their administration and draw particular attention to our *Statement*.

Whether this would result in reinstatement is another matter. A body such as the LAA has to be very circumspect when entering into such debates, as the 'full story' is not always obvious. In the worst situation, the removal of material incident could be used by an administration to remove a person for reasons not known by the LAA.

In fact, upon second thoughts our *Statement on Freedom to Read* certainly answers the question. There is little point having Statements if we are not prepared to support them.

Susan Acutt
Executive Director

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