

Advocacy



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My grandmother was not particularly wise but she did have a saying for every occasion. One of her favourites was 'if you can't say well of yourself, who else will?' Of course, you couldn't overdo self-promotion or she would quickly deflate you with a reminder that 'your head's too big for your hat'!

Granny would have approved of ALIA's advocacy activities — confident and well-placed. The Association has a continuing program of promoting the interests of libraries, library workers and library users. Similarly, ACLIS conducts a lobbying and advocacy program aimed at those who influence the policy and funding of libraries.

Greater opportunity for lobbying prompted the Library Association of Australia to relocate its headquarters from Sydney to Canberra. Although some members were not supportive of the move, the decision has proven worthwhile. Only by being close to the federal parliament and bureaucracy is it possible to lobby them effectively.

Those who do not know the intricacies and personalities of Canberra do not get far. When the Council of Australian University Librarians (CAUL) decided to become more active in higher education issues, it was soon apparent that a Canberra presence was necessary. As CAUL president, I tried to do it remotely from Wollongong for a while but it was never entirely satisfactory. We needed someone who was on the spot and who could get to know the power brokers.

This is one of the many roles performed by the ALIA executive director and National Office staff. Virginia Walsh spends a lot of her time advocating Association issues. Often this occurs in formal settings such as meetings with senior bureaucrats or members of parliament. Sometimes, it is at one of the many openings or official occasions which mark the passage of time in the national capital.

Through much diligence on the part of many, ALIA is well-recognised as an organisation which can provide rational opinion not just on matters directly associated with libraries. The Association's view is frequently solicited on a broad range of topics including telecommunications, control of the Internet and censorship. When a glitch occurs and an opinion is not sought, National Office staff are ever ready to contact and educate the recidivists.

It is generally thought in Canberra that nothing of importance occurs outside of the ACT — confirmed in the *Canberra Times* which reports the most trivial occurrences in the surrounding parishes while ignoring major events in the land of the taxpayer. The Association's advocacy, however, is not restricted to Canberra and national issues.

Identifying advocacy needs and opportunities is often best done by those closest to the issue. National Office can, and does, assist with activities throughout Australia but much of the responsibility falls on state branches, divisions and individual members.

Advocacy is not just lobbying politicians and bureaucrats. Opportunities arise everyday to promote library issues. It can be as simple as speaking positively about what is happening or just providing the best possible service to clients. Providing good service and presenting a positive image is the best form of advocacy.

I often hear complaints that ALIA is not doing something about a particular issue. Frequently this is because the issue has not been brought to the attention of General or Branch Council or raised with National Office. More often, a vague description of the issue is given but no suggestion about how it can be addressed, by whom or what results are needed.

When I worked at the University of Wollongong, the then vice-chancellor (Ken McKinnon) always first asked for the solution whenever a problem was brought to him. Next he asked what resources were needed to address the issue and what the gains would be.

It is the same with advocacy by ALIA. Enunciating a problem or issue carries with it a responsibility to at least think about how it can be addressed. Australians are national experts at saying 'something should be done about it' and expecting a miraculous cure. ALIA is largely run as a voluntary effort with members fitting Association activities in between work and other commitments. While National Office staff are there to assist, there is only so much they can do in the time available.

Advocacy of library and information issues requires us all to do our bit. As Granny would have said if she had been an ALIA member — 'Every day, in every way, I'll advocate better and better'. ■

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