**AN OPEN LETTER TO ALA LEADERSHIP AND MEMBERS FROM ALA PAST PRESIDENTS RICHARD DOUGHERTY AND PATRICIA SCHUMAN**

Dear Colleagues,

ALA faced a significant budget shortfall of $1.4 million at the start of FY2021. Though the executive director and her staff found ways to close that deficit, staff members have still been required to take unpaid furloughs. ALA's fiscal problems aren't helped by the fact that many school, public, and academic librarians have also faced economic hardships. The pandemic forced many libraries to shut their doors, reduce or cut hours, shift services online or remotely. Since the start of the pandemic, ALA membership has dropped nearly 10%, and the current fiscal climate could cause further erosion.

What can be done to convince more librarians to invest in ALA memberships? What can be done so that current members, former members, and potential members view ALA membership as a worthwhile investment? Librarians need to know, in crass terms, “What can ALA do for me?” According to [the 2018 Avenue M survey](http://www.ala.org/aboutala/sites/ala.org.aboutala/files/content/ebd12_12_ALA_survey_results_AvenueM_presentation.pdf) that ALA conducted to evaluate its membership and communications strategies, many don’t see membership as worth the investment.

We happen to believe that the Association is doing quite a bit, but how many members really know or are aware of its accomplishments? While ALA helps to develop and disseminate new programs and practices that strengthen and evolve the field, collects and publicizes stories of creative services introduced by libraries and library workers, distributes grants, and lobbies hard for federal library funds, these efforts have not always been enough to attract new members or to convince many library workers to renew their membership.

Many devoted ALA members do care deeply about ALA and its programs. [The Forward Together reorganization efforts](https://forwardtogether.ala.org/) reflect such commitments, but how many practicing librarians really care about ALA’s attempts at reorganization? And more importantly, will the reorganization solve ALA’s problems? We hope we’re wrong, but we seriously doubt it. No reorganization will guarantee the committed member leadership required to successfully reinvigorate ALA.

This leads us to our next question: What should current and incoming ALA officers be doing about this? We believe they should be in close collaboration, developing strategies to increase public awareness of libraries and the contributions of librarians to our lives, and of ALA. In other words, advocacy. We need librarians who are on a mission, leaders who have “fire in their bellies.”

An effective advocacy campaign will take a huge commitment of time, staff, and resources. The recent introduction of the Build America’s Libraries Act, which would provide $5 billion to repair and modernize library facilities, offers excellent timing to launch such a sustained advocacy campaign.

An all-hands-on-deck approach means a proactive ALA membership, council, executive board, executive director, staff, chapters, divisions, and round tables all working together to tell our story. We need a campaign that will convince local officials that “Libraries Are Worth It,” that “Libraries Really Do Transform,” that “Libraries Change Lives,” and that “Librarians Make It Happen.” These slogans reflect a variety of advocacy efforts over the years, and while they’re not new, they’re as relevant today as they were when they were first introduced years ago. The basic problem is that many of these initiatives lasted only one year, emphasized by specific presidents. A successful advocacy campaign requires a multi-year effort with a total commitment. Current library leaders can learn from past efforts: What worked and what didn’t? And more importantly, why?

We urge our current ALA leaders to realize that sustained advocacy is key to achieving other ALA priorities. We hope you will commit to raising public awareness—to advocating for libraries and librarians. We hope you will initiate and support an advocacy campaign to reach out to the media, to government and local officials, and to practicing librarians and library workers. Most importantly, we urge the creation of a campaign that reaches out to existing library users and would-be users. People who are convinced that libraries can improve their lives and the lives of their children will be more willing to jump at the chance to support their local libraries.

A strong membership-wide multi-year advocacy program that is propelled by committed ALA leaders would benefit libraries of all types—school, public, academic, special—and yes, librarians. Librarians, public officials, and potential library users would finally understand what ALA is doing for them and how they are benefitting.

We are confident that ALA membership would grow exponentially as more librarians see a return on their investment in ALA membership.

Sincerely,

Richard Dougherty, Past President, 1990-91

Patricia Glass Schuman, Past President 1991-92, Past Treasurer1984-88