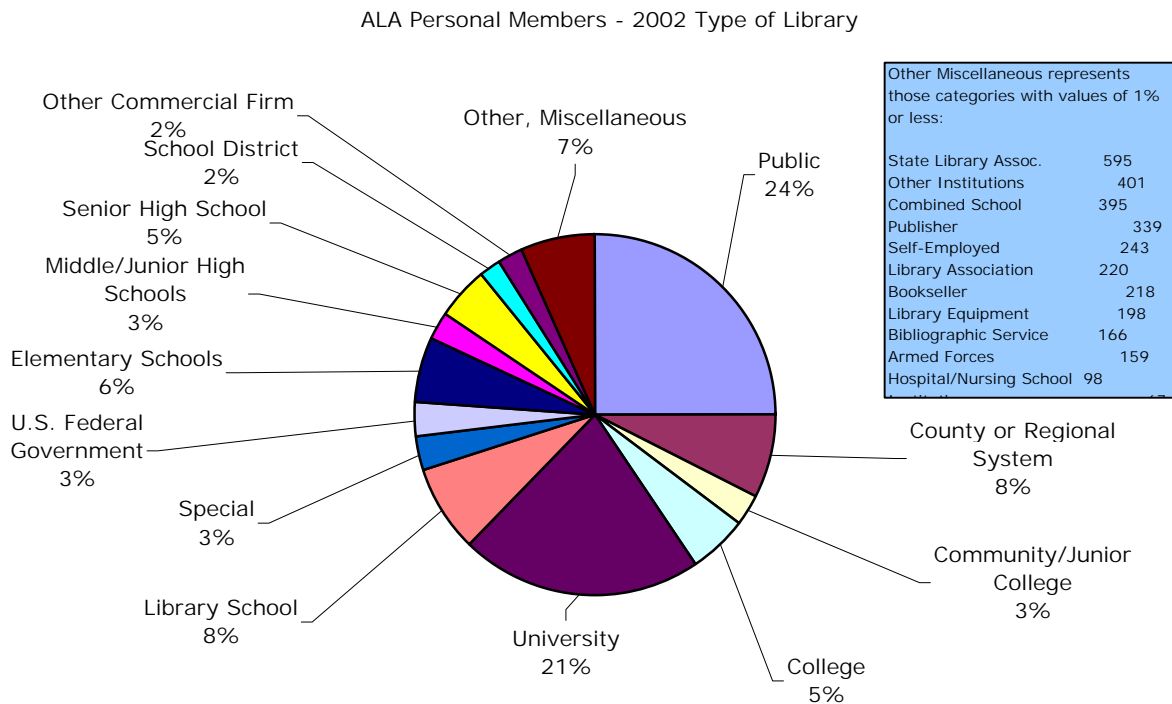


Know Thyself

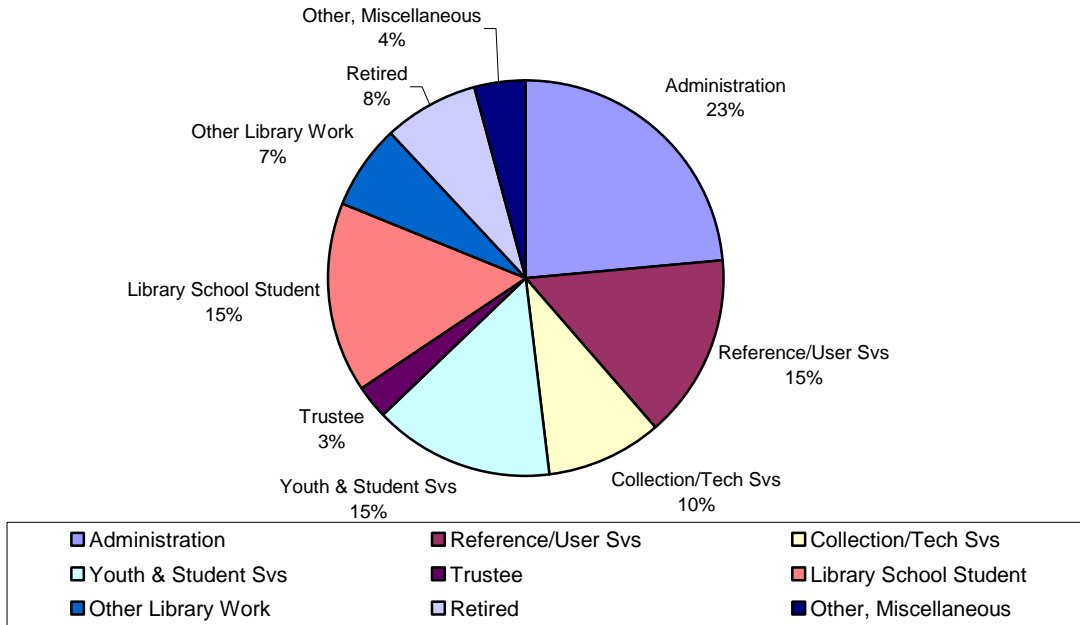
By Mary Jo Lynch, Director, ALA Office for Research & Statistics

The ancient sage who advised knowledge of the self was not thinking of non-profit membership organizations like ALA. But most such groups do collect basic professional and demographic information about their members. This information helps in planning programs and services, in presenting the group to policy-makers and potential funders, and in responding to questions from the press and from the members themselves.

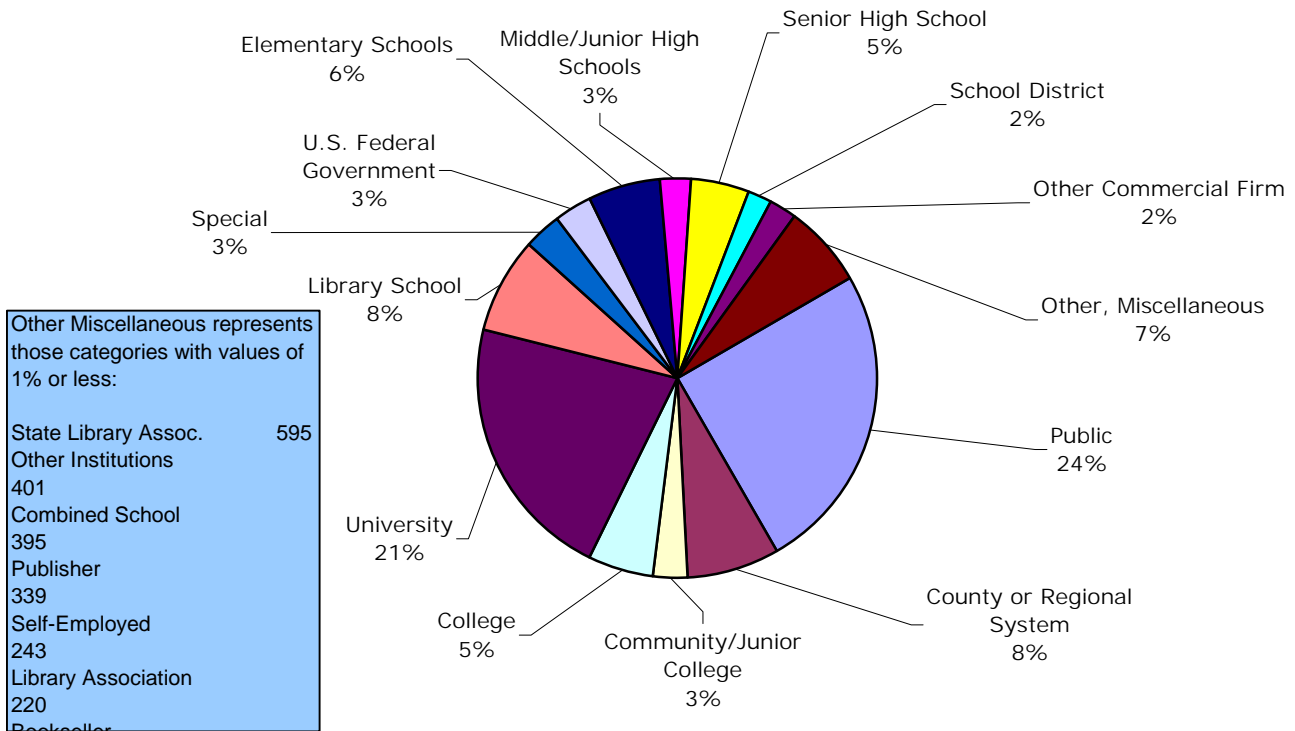
For many years, ALA has asked members to provide information about three aspects of their work lives by choosing categories that describe their type of library or organization, principal area of work, and type of responsibility. The graphs describe the membership as of August 2002. In the graphs on Type of Library and Principal Area of Work, we have combined multiple categories to produce a pie chart that is easy on the eyes.



ALA Members-2002 Principal Area of Work



ALA Personal Members - 2002 Type of Library



This information is useful in many ways, but it is not enough. Frequently there is a need for basic demographic information about our members. Often the question comes from units within the membership who are planning an activity or developing a policy. Sometimes it comes from outsiders who want to understand our group. In all cases the interest is not in individual members, but in the group as a whole – e.g. What percentage are male versus female? What percentage are under thirty? What percentage are Hispanic? As of membership year 2003-04, ALA will begin to collect this type of information (see Box 1). The categories will appear first in the online Dues Manager scheduled for rollout no later than the second quarter of 2004. Provision of this information to ALA is entirely voluntary.

The groundwork was established in 1999 when ALA began using powerful new software for managing member records. The basic iMIS software package included fields for such demographic variables as gender, age, race, and education. The software vendor told us that many of their association clients used those variables, but ALA chose not to implement that part of the program.

The impetus for doing so began in the mid-1990's when the OLOS Advisory Committee started discussing the value of having racial/ethnic data on ALA members. In 1999 the Council Committee on Minority Concerns and Cultural Diversity (now the Committee on Diversity) asked the Membership Committee to begin collecting data on race. The Membership Committee agreed to do it and asked CCMCCD to develop the categories. The chair of the OLOS Advisory Committee and the chair of CCMCCD appointed a Task Force to do that work (see Box 2). The original charge of the Task Force was to develop categories on race and ethnicity. As the group worked, however, it became clear that questions on gender, age, and disability would also be

appropriate. The Membership Committee approved the work of the Task Force at midwinter 2002 and asked staff to implement it. The Committee also approved a question on degrees awarded.

The two issues that consumed the most time for the Task Force were what categories to recommend for a question on race and ethnicity and how to assure members that their privacy would be protected. In both cases, the Task Force was able to make good use of work done by others.

For the questions on race and ethnicity the Task Force decided to follow the recommendations of the U.S. Office of Management and Budget (OMB) in the 1999 revision of Statistical Policy Directive No. 15, Race and Ethnic Standards for Federal Statistics and Administrative Reporting (<http://www.whitehouse.gov/omb/fedreg/print/ombdir15.html>). As of January 1, 2003, all federal agencies are required to use these categories and it seems likely that many state agencies will use them too. Therefore, ALA can expect librarians and others to ask for data on ALA membership using these categories.

The Task Force recognized that these categories are not perfect. The group had several discussions about ways to improve the categories, but finally concluded that it makes sense to follow the Federal guidelines. OMB also recognized that the categories were not perfect and stated that "The categories represent a social-political construct designed for collecting data on the race and ethnicity of broad population groups in this country, and are not anthropologically or scientifically based." These categories were recommended by the Interagency Committee for the Review of the Racial and Ethnic Standards after extensive study and testing, which is documented at the website given above. That documentation indicates that agencies may use

more categories for the question of race as long as data can be reported out in the five minimum categories. Census 2000 has already done that. The Task Force considered this option, but decided that required minimum categories were the best choice for ALA.

Concerns about privacy were eased in April 2003 when ALA posted the ALA Privacy Policy on the Web with the related "Communications Preferences" form. Both can be found by visiting the ALA website (www.ala.org) and clicking on the words "Privacy policy" at the bottom of the first page. Those documents take care of privacy concerns related to email and postal mail. But they do not address the issue of disclosure of personal information by ALA staff, who have easy access to the membership database. That last issue was settled in late October when ALA Senior Management made explicit the "Policy on Privacy of ALA Member Records" that had been implicit for many years. It states that people who ask ALA staff directly for information about a specific member can be told only the following: work address, phone, fax, and email. No other information can be disclosed.

With the addition of these demographic categories, ALA takes a big step towards knowing itself and being able to describe itself to others. The key to success in the effort is, of course, member response. The higher the percentage of members who respond, the better that knowledge will be. Every response adds strength to the demographic portrait we hope to present in this place in two or three years.

Box 1. ALA Member Demographic Information

1. What is your gender?

Male

Female

2. What is the year of your birth? _____

[NOTE: Please answer BOTH question 3 and 4.]

3. How do you describe your ethnicity?

Hispanic or Latino

Not Hispanic or Latino

4. How do you describe your race/family origin? (Please select one or more to indicate the race(s) you consider yourself to be):

American Indian or Alaska Native

Asian

Black or African American

Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander

White

Other race/family origin, please specify: _____

5. Do you have a disability? That is, do you have a physical or mental impairment that limits your ability to perform one or more major life activities?

Yes

No

6. Degrees awarded. Check all that apply.

Associate Degree

Bachelor's Degree

MLS from ALA accredited program

MLS from other program

Master's Degree (other than MLS)

PhD Degree

Box 2.

Members of the Ad Hoc Task Force were Vivian Pisano, (Chair) former Chair Diversity Council and Chief of Automation and Technical Services, San Francisco Public Library; Lorna Peterson, Associate Professor, University at Buffalo, SUNY; Tess Tobin, Member of ALA Committee on Diversity and Administrative Services Librarian, NY City College of Technology (CUNY); Satia Marshall Orange, Director, ALA Office for Literacy and Outreach Services (OLOS) and Mary Jo Lynch, Director, Office for Research and Statistics (ORS).