In Race for Relevance, a critical examination of the future for professional associations (ASAE, 2001), authors Harrison Coerver and Mary Byers argue that the landscape for such associations has altered drastically as a result of new technologies and that few have managed to respond appropriately. Their arguments are somewhat simplified, but their conclusions seem to fit the data. Most professional associations are struggling to sustain, never mind grow, membership, and ASIS&T is no different. Our latest figures continue to show a slow decline in our regular membership, a trend we have witnessed for the last few years. Currently we have 1100 regular members but we can add to this a somewhat healthy 591 student members and a further 100 institutional members. That said, these data points are real and should give us pause as we plan the long-term future of our association. Since there are far more than that number of students pursuing information-related degrees around the world, one imagines we can do a better job of recruiting new members here. And once recruited, a crucial issue is converting these students into regular members once they become employed.

When one considers joining a professional association, costs are measured against benefits, and one wonders if we do all we can to really explain the many benefits one receives...
from membership. Typically, we can distinguish two benefit types: tangible and other. The tangibles, such as easy or discounted access to the association’s publications and conferences tend to be taken for granted after a while, and we must acknowledge that for some, these benefits may not even be valued too highly in the first place. But it is important to note that these benefits involve more than access. JASIST, through the publication agreement with Wiley, brings much-needed revenue into the association. Further, annual membership dues alone are completely offset by the reduced rate a member pays in registration at the Annual Meeting. Since our dues are often lower than those for comparable societies, once you add in the other tangibles such as discounted rates for seminars, webinars and summits, access to the jobline, plus free membership to a special interest group or local chapter, there is a suite of benefits to be obtained from joining.

I suspect it is time to revisit the tangibles to align them with member interests, but it is the many intangible benefits of membership that give real purpose to joining an association. Among them are the opportunities for networking or community building and for the professional identity, socialization or credentialing that membership provides.

looking forward, with the anticipated growth in our international coverage, one annual conference, invariably in North America, seems unlikely to provide the real engine for growth. Participation in the life of the association must be increased throughout the year.

We are not yet at the stage of a membership drive, but at the board level we are working on initiatives to strengthen and enhance relationships across the information world. For example, as reported in Inside ASIS&T (page 7), we have just completed formation of a management partnership with the Dublin Core Metadata Initiative (DCMI) (www.dublincore.org). This relationship will provide opportunities for synergistic partnerships between ASIS&T and those with a commitment to improving the global metadata ecosystem. Beyond management logistics, we are hoping this new partnership can provide increased opportunities for metadata specialists to engage with ASIS&T at the Annual Meeting and beyond. As a colleague here reminded me, most scholars in the digital humanities have heard of DCMI, but few of them have heard of ASIS&T. Let’s rectify that situation.

We should also recognize that we have tremendous synergies with the broad information architecture community. ASIS&T was instrumental in setting up the first IA Summit in 2000, which I attended as a speaker. What was intended as a one off meeting has spawned a very successful annual conference here in the United States and has been joined by a Euro-IA meeting. As an association, these events happen under our auspices, so to speak, and we benefit financially from the healthy attendances they attract. While there is some overlap, these communities have become largely independent. I am keen to explore ways in which we can build more bridges among the IA community (including the IA Institute), DCMI and ASIS&T. Staying small has advantages but they are invariably outweighed by the threat of becoming irrelevant. One possible future for ASIS&T is for us to become an umbrella professional grouping under which somewhat distinct
practitioner or scholarly communities affiliate. Going forward, I believe we have to be flexible in imagining how ASIS&T will be structured as a professional association if, as some believe, the classic dues-paying membership model will no longer sustain us.

This is all for the future but we are laying the groundwork now. It is all well and good to write self-promotional material, replete with tag lines, claiming to be “the” information society for the information age, but we have to demonstrate this distinction. In an age when the communication network of an association is no longer unique or even the best way for those with similar interests to share ideas, it is time to ask some fundamental questions about what the real benefits of being a member might be and where we want this organization to go in the years ahead. For me, the tangibles and intangibles need to be revisited, and I welcome your input. Previous presidential columns remind you that this is your association. Let us make sure that an increased sense of ownership is the result of more engagement, not a result of severely reduced membership. If you have views on what you’d like to see us do or achieve, let me know.