

President's Message

Why Library Education Matters

by Michael Gorman

Libraries and librarians face a number of challenges. Who is going to replace all of the librarians who will retire in the next 10 years? Will they even be replaced? How can we ensure that our profession becomes more diverse and “looks like America”? How can we raise the salaries of all library workers?

Some of the answers lie in the education of present and future librarians. The uneasy coexistence of library studies (“L”) and information studies (“I”) in today’s LIS programs has become more uncomfortable as many of those programs have tilted toward the “I” at the expense of the “L,” leaving two key groups dissatisfied.

Studies show that a majority of LIS students enter programs with a desire to work in libraries and, upon completion, seek library jobs. Common sense tells us that those who manage libraries wish to hire LIS graduates who have a solid grounding in the elements that make up the field of librarianship. This is the issue: How can we provide a relevant education to those who aspire to work in libraries and, thus, satisfy their desires as well as those of potential employers?

Using existing standards

The American Library Association can lead us toward this happy state if it more effectively uses its existing accreditation process. Few of us have read the accreditation standards (available at www.ala.org/ala/accreditation/accredstandards/standards.htm), so many do not realize that those standards explicitly delineate the field of library and information studies.

The sometimes-less-than-pellucid language of the standards tells us what an educated librarian should know and outlines a curriculum for and an environment of LIS programs in which full-time faculty members are engaged in teaching and research in the field. Additionally, ALA is about to promulgate a set of core competences designed to track the content of the field as outlined in the accreditation standards as a means of reinforcement.

Standards and policies only have utility if they are applied. In order to meet the needs of students, new librarians, and library employers, ALA must clarify the intent



of its standards, integrate the core competences into that clarification, and ensure that ALA-accredited LIS programs are teaching and conducting research in the area covered by those core competences.

I believe the Association should move from a *descriptive* accreditation process—in which LIS programs define what they are trying to achieve and ALA assesses them in the terms of that self definition—to a *prescriptive* process—in which a core library curriculum is defined and programs are assessed on how well they teach and conduct research in the core elements of library studies as defined by ALA.

Such prescription would have no effect on other non-ALA-accredited

LIS programs or on other LIS program topics; all programs have had, since Melvil Dewey’s time, a penumbra of courses outside of the library core. Our only concern should be that all LIS students receive, as a minimum, a good education in librarianship and that ALA-accredited programs produce sound, useful research.

Reaching our goals

What does all this have to do with the Association-wide goals of diversity, recruitment, retention, and better salaries? Quite simply: ALA can use existing tools and policies to define the field of library studies in the early 21st century and regain control of professional education—how the field is taught and what members of the profession should know.

If ALA can make these changes, we will be better placed to present a coherent argument in favor of joining our profession to those considering it. We can also halt deprofessionalization and improve salaries by proving to library paymasters that those with mastery in our field are uniquely valuable employees necessary for effective library service in *all* libraries—great and small—and that they deserve better compensation for all the good they do for individuals, for communities, and for society as a whole. ❖

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