

The ivory tower as preparation for the trenches

The relationship between library education and library practice

by Robert P. Holley

Why can't library education and library practice get along better? I'm disturbed by the number of librarians who believe that library education has abandoned libraries. I'm even more concerned when these librarians attempt to use the ALA accreditation process to force library education to change. For example, a recent ALA Council resolution, fortunately defeated, would have required all ALA-accredited programs to include "library" in their name.¹ I'm equally disturbed by those in library education who overlook the continuing need for traditional librarians and, perhaps more importantly, devalue the long and honorable history of libraries and library education in helping people find the information they need.

I bring a dual perspective to this issue from library practice and library education, since I have been both a top administrator of a major academic research library and the director of an ALA-accredited library school, and I am currently a library science professor who nonetheless retains close ties with the library system. In addition, I've been involved with ALA for 30 years, with multiple committee appointments and elected positions; I've also actively participated in the accreditation process.

I propose to look at four issues in this article—program name, the curriculum, theory versus practice, and accreditation.

The fate of the "L word"

I have the most sympathy for those who criticize programs for removing the "L word" from their names. "Library science," itself a name that seeks to establish a rational and positivist nature for the profession, better defines a program that educates librarians than "information science," a more general term that could equally apply to computer science, parts of the business curriculum, and communications.

A recent posting on a discussion list told the believable story of a potential library science student who overlooked the programs in his immediate area because none of them included the word "library."

Including the word "library" somewhere in the program name reaffirms a long and honorable professional tradition. I also consider the argument that changing the name doesn't really change anything else as a facile rationalization. Why then bother to remove "library," since such a change is certain to offend some,

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including a program's alumni who are assuredly asked to donate to the program?

Yet I can see valid reasons for changing a program's name from the perspective of a library education administrator. Times are tough right now in higher education. In addition, the principles of the market economy are holding increasing sway among university administrators. "Library" sounds stodgy and retro to many; "information" is trendy and hip, even if we can't define what it is.

Library practice has not been immune to the trend either as school libraries have become media centers and academic libraries emphasize their "information commons" and "information portals."

An article in the *Journal of Education for Library and Information Science* pointed out that the name changes and mergers must have helped library programs survive since the great wave of closures from 1978 to 1990 (15 schools) appears to be over.² While I prefer keeping "library" in the name of programs that graduate librarians, I'd rather have an "information science" program with excellent library content than no program at all.

Shaping the curriculum

The curriculum is a second area of concern. It is not difficult to find studies in professional literature that report that a certain number of the 56 ALA-accredited library programs don't require a course in cataloging, youth services, government documents, or whatever else is important to the author. Worse yet, these articles report that some don't even offer an elective course in this critical area.

This criticism assumes that a core body of knowledge exists for the profession. But I believe that any attempt to establish this core would be as prickly as the debates in higher education about establishing general requirements, since experts would all rate their specializations as being of critical importance. Even if there is a theoretical core body of knowledge, I see little evidence of any attempt to enforce this concept in practice. If librarians had to pass the equivalent of the lawyers' bar examination to get a job, I'm sure that library programs would teach to the test. School librarians often have such a test and a list of required courses for state certification. Students often complain about the rigidity of their programs, the need to take courses where they

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already have expertise, and the lack of electives. I'd hate to see a similar rigid course structure imposed upon academic librarians.

One of the changes that surprises me the most from a generation or two ago is the emergence of the student as informed consumer. Students now expect to have great influence on the curriculum. Many, like administrators, think technology is trendy and will lead to better paying jobs. They may even be right. Students also expect courses that fit their plans rather than the plans of their professors.

Finally, the curriculum has to cover so many more areas, as academic libraries have taken on new tasks without abandoning the old ones and simultaneously deal with the information explosion. Something has to give because a 1970s curriculum won't meet current needs, which require all librarians to be computer literate. Even the traditional areas of reference and cataloging have undergone significant transformations. Library educators argue with great truth that the alternative to painful change is stultification and obsolescence. In addition, professors from communications, psychology, business, or computer science have much to offer library science students.

Theory versus practice

Another criticism of library education from practitioners is that library science students graduate with lots of theory but don't have the skills required for their first library position. I would argue that the fundamental purpose of library education is not to train students for their first jobs but to prepare them for a professional career in librarianship. In addition to practical skills, students must acquire the ability to integrate new knowledge and become socialized to the values of the profession, such as open access, service, objectivity, and intellectual freedom. Library education has shortchanged the graduate who

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knows how to do things but not why to do things because the current "how" will rapidly become obsolete.

Even if the goal were to train students for their first positions, this would be an impossible task. As stated above, the curriculum, even for the relatively few programs that have increased the requirements for a master's degree from the traditional 36 credit hours, cannot cover all areas and all specialties. Practice varies too much, even among academic libraries, for library education to be expected to train students in exactly how it is done in any one institution. What the library can expect is a graduate who has a good enough theoretical model of the process to learn quickly the specific practices of the institution.

In my opinion, the best resolution is to show that "theory versus practice" is a false dichotomy by combining the two. For example, library educators can offer simulations by leading a class through a real world library activity—such as reference, cataloging, collection development, or creating a Web page—while taking care to identify the problem to be resolved, the context, and the theory behind each action. Using case studies when realistic simulation isn't possible is another effective method for teaching topics such as library management and intellectual freedom.

I also see value for some pure theory in library education. Students need to take a research methods course to acquire the ability to evaluate research studies in the literature and to conduct research of their own to answer operational questions in their libraries. Further, a course or two in theory is excellent for developing abstract thinking skills and for the sheer excitement of discussing ideas. Finally, academic librarians may profit the most by acquiring a better understanding of the major interest of a large number of their faculty and student users—the creation of theoretical knowledge.

Working with accreditation standards

Accreditation is the most formal link between library practice and library education. Most academic libraries require an ALA-accredited degree or its equivalent for librarians. To become ALA accredited, a library program must submit a detailed study and be judged by the Committee on Accreditation (COA), which receives a report from an external review panel that visits the library program. All panels include both educators and practitioners. In addition, Council, as the legislative body for ALA, has the authority to change unilaterally accreditation standards, as is shown by the resolution cited above, though I believe it would be unwise to do so. In my 11 years on ALA Council, I have seen several resolutions that would have had unintended consequences on library education through the accreditation process.

I have great respect for the current "Standards for Accreditation of Master's Programs in Library and Information Studies," approved in 1992.³ Within broad limits, these standards allow a library program to define its own mission. One program, for example, might decide to concentrate on information technology while another emphasizes rural librarianship. COA makes some decision on the appropriateness of this mission but concentrates on how well the program does what it says it wants to do. Thus, COA can't tell a program to offer all specializations or to focus on academic librarians because they are in short supply. I favor the current policy because it allows for differentiation among the schools and for spikes of excellence. A smaller program can't do everything well.

Trying to change library education through accreditation is more likely to destroy the current process than to change library education. University administrators are increasingly skeptical of accreditation, regarding it as a means for professional associations to require increased resources for areas that are not the administrators' highest priority. For library practice to retain its role in the accreditation process, it needs to understand the realities of higher education.

Conclusion

I wish that both library practice and library education would realize the essential congruity of their goals. Academic libraries wish to hire qualified librarians; library schools wish to graduate students who are employable. Potential students are evaluating future employ-

ability when selecting a profession or an individual library program. If libraries are not hiring graduates from a specific program, this program is either placing its graduates outside the library world or it will need to change to survive in a competitive, enrollment-driven market of 56 accredited library schools. This process also leads to the positive change of forcing programs to update the curriculum regularly. In fact, perhaps some of the complaints from library practice are based on a view of required skills that is no longer supported by the library marketplace in general.

I also believe that more communication between those in the trenches and those in the ivory tower would help. Events such as the two ALA Congresses on Professional Education are a good start. Librarians need to do more to encourage participation by library educators whose backgrounds are not in library practice. Asking them to speak at library conferences and hiring them as consultants in their area of expertise, for example, would be an excellent way to encourage them to learn more about libraries. Most programs would welcome constructive feedback from library employers. Both recent and not-so-recent graduates can have an influence either individually or through alumni associations. Most library schools are also actively looking for adjunct professors who can have a critical influence on at least one class of future graduates.

My main recommendation to library practice is to be sympathetic to the realities of academia. No program in any subject ever offers perfect training; everyone needs to learn on the job. Programs can't always find the professors to teach the courses they want to have taught. There is never enough funding. Students could always have better preparation before entering library school. Academic librarians should be particularly sympathetic because of personal experiences with their own institutions of higher education.

The key goal for both library education and library practice is to recruit and retain the best and the brightest. Library education needs to challenge these students while in school and graduate them with a strong knowledge base. To assure their growth in the profession, library practice needs to offer them possibilities for continuous learning and intellectual development, interesting work, and decent salaries. From my dual viewpoint, I don't think the

system is broken; but both sides should definitely cooperate to make it better.

Notes

1. "CD# 51 Call to Action on Maintaining the Words 'Library' or 'Library Science' in the titles of Programs Accredited by ALA," ALA Council Minutes 2002, Annual Conference, Atlanta, Georgia: 16.

2. Charles R. Hildreth and Michael Koenig, "Organizational Realignment of LIS Programs in Academia: From Independent Standalone Units to Incorporated Programs," *Journal of Education for Library and Information Science* 43, no. 2 (Spring 2002): 126-133.

3. "Standards for Accreditation of Master's Programs in Library and Information Studies 1992," adopted by the Council of the American Library Association, January 28, 1992, effective January 1, 1993, available at <http://www.ala.org/alaorg/oa/standard.html>. The process is described in "Accreditation Process: Policies and Procedures," effective September 1, 2002, available at <http://www.ala.org/alaorg/oa/ap3.html>. ■



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