Professional Competencies for the Digital Age:

What Library Schools Are Doing to Prepare Special Librarians

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Abstract

What library/information science education offerings are relevant to preparing graduates for careers in the special library sector? The strengths and weaknesses of education for special librarianship; the match between SLA's competencies statement and what is being taught in LIS master's degree programs; and the role of SLA in continuing education are discussed.

Nearly seven years after the Special Libraries Association (SLA) approved its statement, "Competencies for Special Librarians of the 21st Century" (http://www.sla.org/content/SLA/professional/meaning/comp.cfm),
it seemed time to ask whether the document was still viable. Given the changes in the economy, technology, and globalization, what skills and knowledge are now needed by information professionals? These issues were addressed by a panel at the 2003 annual SLA conference, sponsored by the Education Division and the Pharmaceutical and Health Technology Division. . The session sought to give the audience an impression of what library/information science (LIS) education was offering that was relevant to preparing graduates for careers in the special library sector; the strengths and weaknesses of education for special librarianship; the match between the SLA's competencies statement and what was being taught in LIS master's degree programs; and the role of SLA in continuing education. It should be noted that a revision of the competencies statement has since appeared on the SLA Web site (http://www.sla.org/content/SLA/professional/meaning/comp2003.cfm). There is one significant change that is noted below. This paper published is a slightly edited version of one of the 2003 SLA conference presentations.

What Course Catalogs Show

The following "snapshot" is based on a quick review of the Web sites of 53 of the 56 Master's in Library/Information Science programs accredited by the American Library Association (http://www.ala.org/Content/NavigationMenu/Our_Association/Offices/Accreditation1/lisdir/LIS_Directory.htm) Almost all programs offer basic courses in management, online searching as well as information sources and services, information technology, and organization of information (including indexing or something else on controlled vocabulary). If they do not have courses devoted to business and government information, they do have one covering the social sciences. Most provide a practicum or internship, and many allow independent study. Thus a student with an interest and background in a specialized field such as business could focus term projects and papers and pursue individual research and field experience in that field, and graduate reasonably well-prepared for the chosen specialty.

Two-thirds of the programs have courses devoted to special libraries/ librarianship in general. Almost as many have courses in health sciences, and somewhat fewer have courses on legal information and/or law librarianship. Other specialties are rarer, but

there are over twenty programs that have courses in music, art, and other specialties.

Seventeen programs offer courses in marketing/public relations; seven offer knowledge management, six competitive intelligence, and seven entrepreneurship (including information brokering and consulting). Only four have courses on communication. User instruction is becoming more common, but it is hard to tell whether a given course covers the special library settings. All schools have a reasonable array of technology courses, and quite a few have digital libraries or electronic resources and services courses. Most seem to have integrated online information into their reference courses. Web site and database design are included in technology courses, but often are presented as separate courses.

Recent trends include freestanding courses on information architecture, metadata, and data mining. There are very few courses concerned with the economics of information and the information industry, and there seems to be a paucity of courses dealing in depth with financial aspects, such as vendor negotiation. Most surprising is the fact that there are still relatively few courses on user needs and information seeking behavior.

The revised SLA competencies statement incorporates the Association's statement on the importance of evidence based practice (http://www.sla.org/content/memberservice/researchforum/rsrchstatement.cfm). In light of this addition, which calls for the application of research to decision making, it is important to note the dearth of research methods courses in LIS programs, as reported by Dan O'Connor and Soyeon Park in *American Libraries* (January 2002, 50).

What Strengths and Weaknesses Exist in MLIS Programs Vis-a-vis Special Librarianship?

Strengths:
- Core courses have evolved to incorporate technology;
- management is recognized as basic;

- specialized information resources are covered to some extent almost always;
- students have opportunities to customize their program of studies;
- faculties seem to be able to introduce new topics as they arise;
- practitioners are teaching those courses that need to be grounded in current practice.

Weaknesses:
- MLIS programs for the most part are too short to allow students to learn all that is now required of entry level special librarians;
- faculties are stretched thinly, so many courses cannot be offered as regularly as they should be;
- what is offered and how it is taught depends on current faculty interests and not necessarily on the demands of the marketplace.

How Well Does MLIS Program Content Reflect SLA's Competencies?

Except for the subject expertise that must come from other study, MLIS courses generally address the *professional* competencies, although no program covers them all. Some of the *personal* competencies are also fostered in MLIS courses that promote service orientation, good management, and professionalism. Because programs are short and students are often mature individuals, however, ingrained attitudes and personality traits are unlikely to be changed. In regard to the SLA competency document, MLIS courses are probably at their best in honing students' technical information skills and shaping their service orientation, and at their worst in developing "soft" skills.

What Are Implications for Continuing Education?

SLA does a fairly good job at identifying CE needs and using innovative methods, such as virtual seminars, to meet those needs. Teleconferences and webcasts on topics such as communication with management, marketing, and vendor negotiation seem to

be on target, and do not take librarians far away from their workplace. There never seems to be enough on user behavior, evaluation, and costing/valuing information within the special library context. Quite a few of the generic business skills that would benefit special librarians are taught in workshops offered by organizations such as the American Management Association. Teaching and presentation skills can also be sought through non-library organizations. The role that the SLA should play more aggressively is that of promoter of the entire range of CE. It should inform members about learning opportunities emanating not only from SLA and other library organizations, but from other sources also, especially those delivered electronically. SLA might want to consider creating a recognition system along the lines of the one instituted by the Medical Library Association.

Concluding Comments

The snapshot that has been presented here is somewhat fuzzy -- more courses on special libraries specifically than one might expect, but spotty coverage of some of the skills that SLA thinks are important. One has to remember that MLIS degree programs are mostly very short, and that the typical LIS school or department suffers many constraints, faculty size being the most significant. On top of that, there are marketplace failures -- employers do not always hire the best prepared person, nor do they always provide for adequate and appropriate continuing education. At the same time, professionals do not always pursue the career path for which they prepared. Some personal anecdotes illustrate the point: At SLA conferences, I sometimes run into people who started out to be children's librarians, while at the New Jersey Library Association conferences I come across alumni working in public libraries who graduated well qualified to be law librarians. Even when students arrive at library school with a solid subject background in a field in which they wish to work as an information professional, accidents of geography, or timing, or hiring freezes may militate against success in landing the desired position upon graduation. Meanwhile, good opportunities in certain businesses and industries may go begging, because there are so few MLIS graduates who have appropriate degrees in the sciences, business, law, or other fields not typically recruited into librarianship. Better recruitment strategies and more scholarships are needed, and the SLA might want to consider doing something about that.

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