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The King Report on Library Education

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THE KING REPORT ON LIBRARY EDUCATION: THREE PERSPECTIVES

New Directions in Library and Information Science Education. By JOSÉ-MARIE GRIFFITHS and DONALD W. KING. White Plains, N.Y.: Knowledge Industry Publications, 1986. Pp. 465. \$45.00. ISBN 0-86729-159-1.

These are times of dramatic change in the scope and content of education for library and information science. Graduates of programs in the field now find employment in a broad range of information activities. While libraries, of course, still are the employers of most of the graduates of accredited programs, publishers, the information industry, entrepreneurs, government, and industry in general are employing increasing numbers of graduates of schools of library and information science. At the same time, curricula of those schools have had to expand to accommodate new information technologies and areas of specialization, and the demands of new jobs and employers.

This provides the context for the study carried out by King Research under contract from the U.S. Department of Education, of which this book is the final report. Its purpose, as indicated by its title, was to identify the professional competencies that education should encompass, given those new directions; the results are presented in quite overwhelming and, unfortunately, redundant detail. The redundancies reflect both the nature of a contractual report and the methodology used. But the report should have been thoroughly edited before being published as a book; it desperately needs careful, professional information work.

However, despite the redundancies, this is an important contribution and should be carefully read by all who are responsible for programs of professional education. The conceptual structure it presents and its emphases on professional competencies provide useful supports for curriculum development and evaluation.

The book consists of six chapters and five appendices, with nearly sixty charts, tables, and figures. Chapter 1, along with appendix 2, provides a review of "the information environment." First, there is a

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detailed description of the context of professional information work. Figure 3, for example, lists a wide range of job titles covering work from creation to use of information, including functions in recording and reproduction, transformation, description and synthesis, storage and preservation, physical and logical access, analysis and evaluation; there are thirty-nine titles in this figure alone. Chapter 1 then outlines the methodology used to determine the professional competencies required by these kinds of information work and concludes with a summary of the project findings. Chapters 2 and 3 provide the more detailed description of the conceptual framework and the related methodologies; they focus on the means of defining competencies, of identifying those that appear to be important, and of validating their importance. Chapters 4 and 5 present the details of the kinds of information work that were encompassed by the study and the related competencies that were identified. Chapter 6 concludes the book with a review of what the findings imply for education. Appendices 1, 4, and 5 present bibliographies and reviews of the literature, providing very nice coverage not only of library education but of the process of competency validation as well.

The most important contribution of the study is its clear recognition of the necessity to treat competencies at truly *professional*, not minimal, levels. In particular, while all levels of performance, from entry level to senior management, are covered in the evaluation of necessary competencies, primary attention is paid to the truly professional levels. As a result, "knowledge" and "attitude" competencies are given as much attention as "skills," and even skills are considered with emphasis on such aspects as "budgeting and making projections." The report explains: "It was strongly recommended by the Advisory Group that we should describe exemplary rather than merely minimal professional competencies" (p. 35); that recommendation indeed was followed.

It is impossible, within a brief review, to cover the full array of the three categories of competency presented. For that, the report itself must be read. But the result is more than the usual trivialized assessment; instead it is a valuable, thoughtful list completely consistent with the defined objectives of the best professional education programs.

Having identified professional competencies, the report turns to the primary objective of the project: testing, evaluation, and validation of the competencies' relation to professional performance. To accomplish this objective, the project team examined functions performed at various levels in a wide range of work settings. Emphasized were organizations known as excellent and at advanced stages in the state of the art of information work. Examples were included from all types of library and from information analysis centers, database producers, museums and archives, publishers, and so forth. Representatives from forty-three such

organizations were interviewed, including both managers and information professionals identified by managers as exemplary or superior. The interviews used "critical incidents" as the basis for in-depth probing and aimed to determine whether various competencies were considered essential, desirable, or not applicable.

Among the competencies reviewed in this way, some were regarded as universally important, "generic across all work settings and all functions": "Knowledge related to literacy, numeracy, and communication; Skills related to those kinds of knowledge, especially the ability to communicate, plus the ability to manage time; Attitudes of respect for the work unit, of willingness to share knowledge and experience, of alertness and dependability, willingness to accept responsibility and to ask questions, responsiveness to time constraints, accuracy, and a desire to follow through" (fig. 27, p. 196). In much the same way, competencies were evaluated as "generic" across the full range of contexts: library and nonlibrary settings and functions of various kinds. The result is virtually a checklist of objectives, expressed in the clearest possible form as "educational outcomes to be achieved" (to quote the language of the ALA 1972 *Standards for Accreditation* [1, p. 4]). As such, it should be invaluable for anyone developing a curriculum to meet specific programmatic goals.

Chapter 6 turns to that very issue, pointing out that competencies can be acquired in a variety of ways—through formal programs, through continuing education, through training and on-the-job experience. First, it emphasizes that employers themselves must recognize what can be expected from formal education; effective professional performance requires orientation and training to the specifics of their organizations. The report therefore considers each of those contexts in which professional competencies may be acquired and discusses the requirements for each of them. With respect to formal programs, it states, "Many . . . are already in place, predominantly in schools of librarianship. . . . Other[s] . . . should be integrable into existing programs with only minor modifications. . . . Yet others may require complete design or development of courses" (p. 247). The report does not attempt to assess the degree to which any requirement may or may not be met by any program, but it does identify some general requirements: subject knowledge; broad-based library and information science knowledge; knowledge of the information environment; functionally oriented specialization; knowledge of working environment realities; generic skills, such as communicating and decision making; and attitudes essential to successful performance (pp. 73–75 and 248–53). Similar, though more limited, statements are made concerning other means of developing of professional competencies—on-the-job training, continuing education, and career development.

Chapter 6 concludes with a look to the future. It is suggested that information professionals must become more outgoing and proactive, that persons with stronger scientific backgrounds are needed, that formal programs should improve their means of assessing both their own and their students' accomplishments. The entire process of education is seen as a cooperative responsibility, with educators, professional societies, employers, and individual professionals working together.

The results of the project should influence curriculum revision efforts, the accreditation process, employers' identification of what they need and should expect, and professionals' own determination of what they require for exemplary performance.

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A number of reports on library education have appeared over the years, including the Williamson Report (1923) [1], the Wheeler Report (1946) [2], and, most recently, the Conant Report (1980) [3]. The King Report belongs in a different category. It shares with earlier reports a concern about the current state of library and information science education and makes recommendations for its reform. Unlike earlier reports, however, it is not a study of education. There is no discussion of professionalism or the nature of professional education. There is no analysis of the many problems facing education for librarianship and information science. Library school curricula and course content are not examined. Faculty, recent graduates, and employers have not been questioned about the quality and relevance of current educational programs. Statements in the report about the current state of library and information science education are therefore little more than assumptions that may or may not be accurate.

The King Report is best regarded as a follow-up study to the Occupational Survey of Information Professionals (1980). That study, published as *The Information Professional: Survey of an Emerging Field*, by Anthony Debons, Donald W. King, Una Mansfield, and Donald L. Shirey [4], was a joint project of the University of Pittsburgh School of Library and Information Science and King Research, Inc. It documented the emergence of a very wide range of information-related occupations in the United States and estimated the number of "informa-

tion professionals" at 1.64 million, of whom only 10 percent were identified as librarians. The King Report is concerned with education for the information-related occupations identified in the Debons study. In his foreword to *The Information Professional*, Thomas J. Galvin wrote: "America's current leadership in information technology is . . . critically dependent . . . on the continuous availability of an adequate supply of highly trained information professionals qualified to design, create and manage a growing array of complex information systems and services" [4, p. iii]. According to the authors of the King Report, "Some components of the educational community must come forward to assume the responsibility of educating these information professionals for the future. Library and information science schools are logical candidates for doing so" (p. 18).

Two issues need to be addressed if schools of library and information science are to assume the primary responsibility for educating the new breed of information professionals. First, the schools' educational programs must be shown to be relevant—or capable of becoming relevant—to the needs of a wide range of information-related occupations without losing their relevance to librarians. And, because professional schools are concerned not only with theoretical knowledge and training in technical skills but also with instilling an understanding of the profession's social role, ethics, and responsibilities, it must be shown that librarianship and the new information occupations are either parts of a cohesive broader profession or sufficiently compatible in terms of roles and values to justify their coexistence in the same professional school.

The King Report applies the generic term "information professional" to librarians and those in other information-related occupations, but the issue of professionalism and the compatibility of professional roles and values is not addressed. The authors are skeptical about the relevance of current library school programs to the new information-related occupations, and, indeed, to rapidly changing library environments. They write: "Currently, employers react (sometimes rather slowly) to changing technology and the environment by determining a need for certain information-related competencies. Then, universities (and other education and training organizations) modify their curricula and courses to reflect these changes, but often years (or occasionally decades) after needs and requirements have surfaced" (p. 46). The report proposes that schools of librarianship and information science adopt the approach of competency-based education to insure that curricula and course content are up to date and relevant to the needs of a wide range of information professionals.

The competency-based education movement originated in the field of teacher education around 1970 [5]. In many respects it applies the

approach of operations research to the educational process, and it has been used in educational programs at various levels. According to the authors of the King Report, competency-based education at the post-secondary level is characterized by three basic features: "(1) The goals of education should be conceptualized as effective actions or performance in some later role, *rather than inferred cognitive states such as 'knowledge' or 'maturity.'* (2) Educational goals should be described in language that is as explicit as possible, broken down as far as possible into component outcomes which lend themselves to measurement. (3) Student achievement should be assessed in terms of the ability to demonstrate 'the behavior itself' (i.e., performance in the later role for which the students are being educated)" (p. 272, italics added).

I have a number of reservations about competency-based education as an approach to professional education. Here I shall note only two of them.

First is the implicit anti-intellectualism of an educational approach that rejects knowledge as such as an educational goal. The search for and transmission of knowledge are central to the university's mission. I do not see how an educational program founded solely on the competency-based approach described here can justify a place in an institution of higher learning.

Second, this approach appears to be better suited to high-level technical training than to professional education. The authors note that Bell Systems and the U.S. Air Force have used competency-based education successfully for in-service training programs. But there is a fundamental difference between training of this kind and professional education. Technical personnel are expected to perform assigned tasks requiring a high level of specialized training. Professionals are involved to a much greater extent than technicians in determining actions that should be taken. These decisions involve judgments about the current and long-term implications of actions for a system as a whole and draw on the profession's body of theoretical knowledge. They also involve considerations of the profession's purposes, ethics, and responsibilities. Professional education must prepare the student to make the intellectual decisions that lie at the heart of professional practice as well as to execute the actions that are judged to be appropriate in a given situation.

Since the competency-based approach begins with an analysis of actions and attempts to identify the knowledge, skills, and attitudes on which they are directly based, there is a danger that it will overlook the intellectual processes that lie behind these actions. Moreover, since competency-based education assumes that curricula and course content will be designed to teach competencies identified through the analysis of actions and that content not so validated should be excluded from the

curriculum as "no longer . . . necessary or appropriate" (p. 25), it risks excluding courses whose primary purpose is to provide the broader knowledge and understanding needed for professional decision making. In a recent article, Michael K. Buckland identifies three aspects of librarianship, which he calls library values, library technology, and library science. The third category, he writes, "has to do with an *understanding* of librarianship" and includes information retrieval theory, information gathering behavior, historical studies of books and communication, analysis and description of bibliographical control, and the understanding of the nature and working of libraries and related information services [6, p. 783]. It is precisely some of these areas that the competency-based approach tends to ignore.

The report is flawed by a lack of rigor in the use of such critical terms as "information" and "professional." Information is used both in its literal, everyday sense (to refer, for example, to discrete facts and descriptions of techniques and procedures) and in the abstract sense in which it is used in information and communication theory to refer to any message communicated from one person to another. Thus actors and clergy are described as communicators of information (p. 12), and authors, composers, and scientists are described as creators of information (p. 63). Examples of information in the abstract sense include works of the creative imagination, works expressing ideas and opinions, scholarly and interpretive works, and works that report factual findings generated within a theoretical framework. Yet when the King Report tries to define information, it focuses on characteristics that are applicable primarily to information in the literal sense. The authors state, "information should be factual. . . . Information should be provided in the right dosage. . . . Information should be available when it is needed (i.e., its provision should be timely)" (p. 4). These criteria do not even apply to all uses of information in the literal sense; historians, for example, may require information that is outdated and erroneous.

The phrase "information workers and information professionals" is used frequently in contexts where the distinction between the two is not clear. There is no attempt to define the nature of professionalism in library and information science. The M.L.S. or its equivalent is considered the first professional qualification, thereby limiting the scope of the report to "the education, training and subsequent performance of librarians and information professionals possessing a Master's level degree" (p. 34), but this is hardly an adequate definition of professionalism. Moreover, this criterion is not adhered to in the text, where the term "information professional" is applied to occupations like editor and speechwriter that do not normally require a Master's degree. In the Debons study anyone in the information field with "a bachelor's (or

higher) degree in a relevant area, or the equivalent in work experience" is considered an information professional [4, p. 29]. That usage creeps frequently into the King Report.

The new information occupations have not yet developed a clear sense of professional identity, and people have found their way into them from a variety of educational backgrounds, including business, engineering, and computer science. It is by no means apparent that we are dealing here with a single profession in embryo. As the fields develop, an institutional structure of standards, educational programs, and professional organizations will begin to emerge around them. When this happens we may discover that we have a cluster of related professions dealing with information, just as we have a cluster of related professions dealing with health care. In that event the generic term "informational professional" will be no more meaningful in terms of professional education than is the generic term "health care professional."

If the King Report documents anything, it is that librarianship and the new information occupations have surprisingly little in common. The report identifies competencies for twenty-two functions performed in twelve work settings, of which four are library work settings (academic, public, school, and special libraries) and eight are nonlibrary work settings (database producer, database distributor/service, information center/clearinghouse, records and information manager, archive/museum/collection, information analysis center, information service company, and library systems supplier). No work setting has more than eight functions associated with it. Only fourteen out of more than 8,800 competencies identified, described, and validated are generic across all work settings and all functions, and they are so general as to be meaningless. The same eight functions (acquisitions, cataloging, circulation and reader services, collection maintenance, interlibrary loan, management, reference, and serials control) are listed under all four library work settings; five of these functions are associated only with library work settings. The other fourteen functions are associated only with nonlibrary work settings. Competencies that are generic for functions across work settings are identified, but only three of the twenty-two functions are listed under both library and nonlibrary work settings; of these, acquisitions appears under four nonlibrary work settings, reference under two, and cataloging under one. This does not make a strong case for the existence of a cohesive information profession embracing librarianship and other information-related occupations. Nor is it solid ground from which to argue that education for the new information occupations belongs in the same professional school as education for librarianship.

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This work insists on a response from the community of library educators. "What is necessary," the authors state, ". . . is for the education community to establish ways of determining whether the competencies are being, should or can be taught, and to establish measures of the attainment of competencies" (pp. 56-57). There is a good incentive for us to adapt our curricular offerings to the *New Directions* proposals: a simple calculation of the number of faculty hours spent each year on curriculum review. Moreover, the identified competencies can hardly be disputed. But the study is myopic.

Griffiths and King acknowledge throughout the text that library and information science do not exist in isolation and that factors such as co-workers' competencies, the physical environment, and organizational resources may be as important to performance as individual competency (p. 78). But library and information science *education* is also part of a wider environment, and its success depends on factors other than competency-based training. It is precisely this interdependence that limits the possibility of achieving the goals of the *New Directions* study. We are limited, for example, by who chooses to attend our programs, and our actions are circumscribed by university guidelines for academic performance.

Those students who enroll in a one- or even two-year professional program can be educated in such areas as (a) the theory and practice of indexing and abstracting or (b) the "knowledge of definition, structure and formats of information" (p. 211). Students are far less likely to acquire qualities such as "confidence, patience and resourcefulness" (p. 213) during the short time we have them. For library and information science programs to graduate individuals with the competencies identified by Griffiths and King, it will be necessary to admit students who already have many of those attributes. In order to admit them, it is

necessary to recruit them. And to recruit them, it is necessary to change public expectations of what information professionals do. We still receive letters of reference that state, "I don't know why Ms. Smith wishes to give up her academic career to go into librarianship, but I am confident that she will succeed in whatever she puts her mind to." We also continue to receive applications from individuals who have been misdirected to the field by aptitude tests or college counselors.

Sometimes it is possible to weed out applicants who do not possess the required personal competencies. Sometimes it is not. The student with horrible body odor and an abusive personality who comes to the program with excellent recommendations, high GREs, and a Ph.D. in biology is a problem. We invite endless (and justifiable) litigation if we expel such a student, yet it is clear that this individual is not "competent" in some areas important to professional work. Every faculty member struggles with the problem of establishing legitimate and unbiased criteria for assessing student performance. There are limits to what can be taught and how students can be evaluated within the academic context.

We are so clearly connected one to another—the system of primary and secondary education, from which our students are drawn; our profession, which shapes library practice and public perceptions; the public, whose perceptions shape professional practice; the educational programs in library and information science; and those other professions that compete for talented individuals. *New Directions in Library and Information Science Education* fails to note the difficulties in accomplishing its goals that this very interconnectedness provides.

What the authors are really calling for is nothing less than an education in *virtue*. Against the purely technical competencies that are the goal of a positivist education, they range the qualities that allow one to obtain "the internal goods of a practice," in Alasdair MacIntyre's sense. Although they do not refer specifically to his influential book, *After Virtue* [1], Griffiths and King are indeed specifying his argument for the library and information science profession. In their view, Mae West would have been wrong had she said of *our* field, "Goodness has nothing to do with it."

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