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Library & Information Science Education in the United States and Canada: Issues & Trends in the 21st Century

H.G.B. Anghelescu
Wayne State University, ag7662@wayne.edu

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Abstract

Schools of Library and Information Science (LIS) in the United States and Canada are accredited by the professional body, the American Library Association (ALA). LIS education is outcome-based and its main goal is to prepare graduates with high levels of specialization in the LIS field. Constant LIS curriculum revision and adaptation to the latest developments in the field ensures the updating of the educational process thus enabling graduates to choose from a variety of career paths in the information industry.

The Accreditation Process

Currently there are fifty-eight ALA-accredited LIS schools with master’s programs in the US and Canada with some 20,000 students enrolled. The accreditation is a voluntary process that schools choose to undergo in order to ensure a high quality level of the instruction they provide to their current students and future graduates who will enter the LIS job market. The goal of every school is to produce graduates equipped with a variety of skills that make them ready to perform at a high level the very first day they start a professional job.

In order to assess the quality of the LIS instruction available at a certain school going through the accreditation process, when the ALA Committee of Accreditation (COA) External Review Panel (ERP) visits the school, the members meet in confidentiality with all of the constituencies involved in
the education process (students, full-time, part-time, and adjunct faculty members, librarians, office staff, IT support) as well as with alumni and the employers who hire the graduates, the product of the LIS school.

Students may express their satisfaction or dissatisfaction, concerns and suggestions concerning the curriculum, the classes that are offered, the support they receive. Faculty are invited to evaluate the curriculum, the assistance they receive with their face-to-face and online teaching, the resources they have for professional development and for engaging in research and scholarly publications. Librarians demonstrate how the library system on campus meets the research needs of the LIS student body and of the LIS faculty. In their meeting with the ERP panel alumni provide feedback regarding the education they received, how successful they were in securing a professional position, how well prepared they came out of the LIS school to meet the requirements of their first professional job. Employers share their views on the skills and competencies their hires had upon hiring, what their expectations were of the school’s graduates, and how satisfied they are with their new employees. Employers also make recommendations for curriculum improvement and/or diversification. All of this constructive feedback is analyzed very seriously both by the ERP and the school, and further translates into new courses being offered or higher teaching levels resulting in more complex outcomes.

“L” vs. “I” Schools

LIS schools can be independent entities (school, department, program) or they can be embedded in other colleges or departments on campus, such as communication, media, education, etc. Many LIS schools chose to keep the “L”ibrary word in their name and they are taking great pride at it while others chose to drop the “L” word and turned into schools of “I”formation or “I”nformatics. There are several LIS schools that offer archival education and some have the word “Archives” in their official name.

While the “L” schools prepare librarians, school media specialists, archivists, preservation administration specialists the “I” schools prepare information scientists, information architects, and information systems specialists. The graduates of each type of school choose different career paths. However, it does not mean that “L” schools do not prepare competent information scientists. The opposite is not quite possible since the “I” schools do not have faculty prepared to teach in the “L” side of the LIS spectrum.
Professional Associations

In terms of LIS faculty belonging to professional associations, most of them belong to Association for Library and Information Science Educators (ALISE). The “L” vs. “I” dichotomy is perpetuated when LIS faculty choose their membership in a second professional association. Usually the “L” faculty join the America Library Association (ALA) and/or the other associations under the ALA umbrella, while most of the “I” faculty are members of the American Society for Information Science and Technology (ASIS&T). During their studies, LIS students are encouraged to join and become active in the student chapters of various professional associations such as ALA, ASIST, SAA (Society of American Archivists) or Association of Records Management Administration (ARMA). Professional associations promote mentorship programs and students are encouraged to seek a mentor and work with him/her towards achieving common goals and receiving guidance and support. Librarians are encouraged to become mentors and share their expertise with their mentees.

Specialization Tracks and Career Paths

LIS education in North America allows students a lot of flexibility, thus allowing them to select a specialized career path and to be, upon graduation, a specialist in a specific area rather than graduating as generalists who will specialize at a later date. Students can choose their specialization track by type of library (public, academic, school media, and special library), by type of special library (science and engineering, art, music, law, medical, etc.), by type of audience (undergraduate, graduate students, children, young adults, adults, populations with special needs, such as unemployed, homeless, multiethnic, multilingual, immigrants, etc.), by type of service with users (reference, information literacy, etc.), by type of service invisible to users (information organization, such as cataloging, indexing and abstracting, collection development, digital resources; system maintenance, etc.).

In order to gain expertise in one of these areas, students are advised to select optional courses that enable them to become familiar with and develop skills in very narrow fields. Students on the IT track develop skills and competencies in the management of information systems, information retrieval, web design, data mining, data curation, etc.

Students enrolled in archival education will develop competencies that will enable them to perform both in traditional and electronic archives. Students specializing in records management are expected to become
fluent in converting traditional records to digital formats and to make them available electronically. In terms of certifications, archivists are required to be certified by SAA and school media specialists need a teaching certificate at the state level.

In addition to core classes and elective courses, students can conduct independent studies under the direct guidance of a faculty member or they can do a practicum at a library that will provide them with the opportunity to work on hands-on projects under the direct supervision of a professional librarian. LIS students can also benefit from paid or unpaid internships that expose them to various types of activities related to libraries, information centers or data agencies. In order to get real hands-experience, students can also volunteer at various information agencies where they become familiar with day-to-day operations.

### LIS Curricula and Competencies

LIS schools revise their curricula on a permanent basis in order to adapt it to the high demands and to the latest developments of the current date. LIS schools try to maintain a balance between the new courses added to the curriculum and the ones that attracted less students over a period of time. Curriculum revision efforts represent a concerted effort among full- and part-time faculty, adjunct faculty and the school’s advisory board.

The supreme goal of curriculum revision is to develop in LIS students the “Core Competencies of Librarianship” defined as the knowledge to be possessed by all persons graduating from ALA-accredited master’s programs in library and information studies. LIS students are expected to master the Core Competencies of Librarianship by the time they finish the core courses. These competencies are:

1. Foundations of the Profession
2. Information Resources
3. Organization of Recorded Knowledge and Information
4. Technological Knowledge and Skills
5. Reference and User Services
6. Research
7. Continuing Education and Lifelong Learning
8. Administration and Management

Depending on their specialization track, in addition to the Core Competencies of Librarianship, built on general foundations of LIS,
students are expected to develop a series of Specialized Competencies, defined as knowledge and competencies statements developed by relevant professional organizations.

All of these ‘competencies’ represent quality standards imposed by the LIS profession and their goal is to prepare highly trained LIS professionals ready to perform at high quality levels once they start their first professional job. The LIS competencies are outcome-based. Outcome-based education is a method of teaching that focuses on what students can actually do after they are taught. All curriculum and teaching decisions are made based on how best to facilitate the desired outcome. This leads to a planning process in reverse of traditional educational planning. The desired outcome is selected first and the curriculum is created to support the intended outcome.

Conclusion

A degree in Library & Information Science/Studies can be the start of a varied and interesting career in the world of information in all its contexts: libraries, archives, record offices, the public and private sectors. ALA’s Standards for Accreditation of Master’s Programs in Library & Information Studies stress the importance of program-level student learning outcomes.

ALA-accredited programs must demonstrate that they are engaging in broad-based and continuous planning, development, and improvement through assessment and evaluation at the program level.

Resources

ALA Committee on Accreditation: http://www.ala.org/offices/accreditation/
American Society for Information Science and Technology (ASIS&T): http://www.asis.org/
ALA Specialized Competencies: http://www.ala.org/ala/educationcareers/careers/corecomp/corecompspecial/knowledgecompetencies.cfm
Society of American Archivists: http://www2.archivists.org/