

Library Schools in Research Universities

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During much of 1990 an Advisory Committee on Professional Education (see page 34) assisted the Council on Library Resources in its effort to explore the problems of and prospects for the professional education of librarians. This text is the author's interpretation of the substance of the Committee's discussions and does not represent fully the views of any single member. In a real sense, it is a status report, and an incomplete one at that, with much yet to be added. It is also not a balanced report, for it concentrates on problems more than on strengths. But the problems deserve emphasis, for they are real and must be tended to if professional education is to flourish intellectually, which is, in the end, what counts.

Introduction

Not long ago, Derek Bok asserted that "education schools will continue to be relegated to the margins of university life if they do not raise the quality of their teaching and research." The evidence is strong that comparable observations are being made about library schools (witness the recent closings of several schools with long and distinguished records). It is especially disturbing that the quality and even the substance of education for librarianship is a matter of concern at this point in time, when the basic information structure on which not only scholarship and education rest, but upon which much of society depends, is in a dynamic and promising period of change. The concern of many of our most visionary educational and public leaders that the promise of the "information age" is taking shape too slowly and unevenly is, in part, a sign of frustration with librarians or, more accurately, frustration with librarianship. Justified or not (and there are many explanations for the present discomfiture), the feeling

is real. There are serious problems that need to be addressed seriously by librarians and library educators, a conclusion that is already endorsed by some and is a matter of discussion for many.

These notes summarize at least a portion of that discussion and, more important, suggest some ways of proceeding. But even at this early point, it is certain that library schools in research universities must take the lead in making needed educational improvements if librarianship as a profession is to meet personal and public expectations.

The ability of society, and of each individual, to make use of what has previously been learned or created is a matter of fundamental and enduring importance. The function of librarianship is to promote and continuously improve that ability. Librarians capable of contributing to that goal with energy and imagination are the profession's principal asset, but given the magnitude of the assignment, they are too few in number. Library schools must educate more librarians who comprehend fully the obligations of the profession and who bring to their work the exceptional range of capabilities the times require. If librarians succeed because of their education, library educators will have succeeded.

As with all critiques, the risk is great that the efforts and successes of those individuals and institutions who already sense the form of the future and are constructively at work giving it substance will be too easily overlooked. It is imperative that progress already made be recognized and enhanced, not written off in an ill-advised search for utopia.

Summary of Conclusions

1. Graduate schools in library and information science are, typically, small in faculty size and enrollment when compared with other graduate professional schools. Further, their operating budget— income and expenditures—tends to be low.

Comment: By itself, small size (but, obviously, not so small as to be non-viable) is not necessarily an insurmountable handicap, provided that the quality of the faculty is uniformly high, admission is clearly competitive, and both faculty and students are visible in and contributing to the entire university. But the reality is that schools

must find ways to expand their contributions to their universities so that their presence is felt and acknowledged. For example, undergraduate courses, whether in preparation for graduate professional education or to introduce undergraduates to the issues of personal and public importance that are implicit in the information age, need to be developed and offered. It is also essential that productive alliances be formed with the university library, both for the obvious reason that the libraries can be visible and important educational allies, and for the operational reason that each party can contribute to the performance of the other.

2. Teaching (as distinguished from research) is a principal function of all graduate library schools. It follows that the quality of teaching should be uniformly high and the course content should be centered on important and intellectually interesting issues. The academic program of library schools must be viewed as important by the university community as a whole and pertinent to the mission of the university.

Comment: While I am operating from incomplete information, this may be the most serious problem area for library schools, one requiring immediate attention. To begin, library schools in research universities should join forces in an energetic and quickly moving effort to prepare a brief, unambiguous statement on the intent and substance of graduate education in information studies. Second, each school should find ways to assure that improving the quality of teaching and the opportunities for learning are high priorities for both faculty and students.

3. While educational programs of high quality are naturally expected, the library schools in research universities have a distinctive and parallel obligation to develop and maintain the research capabilities required to press forward the frontiers of knowledge in all facets of library and information science. The research effort and its ultimate influence on practice are expected to match in quality and importance that of other university components.

Comment: In recent years, no single topic in the broad arena of information studies has had the attention accorded research productivity and quality. Development of research “agendas” has occupied federal education agencies and professional bodies with little in the way of visible results. The facts are that too little research is done, not enough that is done is distinctive and influential, and there is inad-

equate communication among researchers. The reasons are many: faculty members have heavy teaching loads, funds for research are not readily or consistently available, there are many faculty members who are not interested in undertaking research, what research there is is widely dispersed (both in and outside library schools), and there is too little productive communication between librarians and the members of the research faculties. The problem will become more serious unless appropriate corrective steps are taken, because a majority of all current tenured library school faculty members are unlikely to be teaching by the year 2000.

It is possible that, for a decade at least, an "institute for advanced information studies" should be created and operated as a collaborative enterprise and as a national base for information studies research. With imagination, funding, institutional self-effacement, and constructive leadership, such an enterprise could bring many benefits. Productive faculty from member schools would gain visibility and more opportunities for support; prospects would be improved for bringing individuals from complementary disciplines into the field of information studies (increasing the pool of potential faculty); librarians and other professionals with research interests and operating problems could be brought into a receptive intellectual setting; and doctoral and postdoctoral students would have improved prospects for support and constructive affiliation. The projected institute would have to become an integral part of each partner, not a competitor. By the same token, each member would have to contribute to the work and prestige of the institute.

4. The library schools in research universities need to assert that their principal objective is to educate students, not to train them. Virgil Hancher (one-time president of the University of Iowa) asserted his views of professional education in 1944. Nearly fifty years later, they are still sound. To paraphrase:

"Every professional student at graduation should have:

- A minimum body of basic and fundamental knowledge which is commonly possessed by members of the profession
- Skill in handling source materials and in adding to one's previously acquired body of knowledge
- The ability to think, analyze and act in the presence of a new or unprecedented situation
- An ethical attitude toward the users, to which a member of the profession may put his or her knowledge and skill.

• Finally, professional schools must stand against the illusion of practicality with which professionalism cloaks itself...narrow expertness inhibits creativity and adaptability in ways our society can ill afford. [Professional education must] enable graduates to continue to learn throughout life.”

Comment: The implications of taking this step and then following through are many and important. Admissions, student quality, faculty capabilities, the curriculum, program length, etc., will all be affected. Libraries will also be forced to give serious attention to the matter of internships and training capabilities. Most of all, it will end ambiguity about the purpose of professional education.

5. The demographic characteristics of library school students reported by Heim and Moen¹ and the motivating factors or habits of students, practitioners, and educators discussed by White and Mort² do not present an inspiring picture of professional vitality. Put simply, all components (schools, libraries, and even students) tend to follow the path of least resistance. If it weren't for visible exceptions to the norm, prospects for improvement would be bleak, but there are many notable exceptions—first-rate students, imaginative and effective faculty, demanding and progressive employers. The challenge is to make the exceptions the new norm.

Comment: Promising individuals need to be identified earlier and pressed to complete their education in their twenties so that they have the years ahead for a full professional career; employers need to rethink the composition of their staffs and demand educational credentials that reflect the importance of the work; library schools need to specify additional credentials for admission and expectations for graduation. If admission to the profession is ritualistic rather than intellectually demanding and substantive, the profession itself will be seen as one of little consequence. Practicing librarians are very influential in shaping the pool of applicants. A major target in improving the composition of the pool of applicants to library schools must be the best practitioners.

1. Heim, Kathleen M., and William E. Moen. *Occupational Entry: Library and Information Science Students' Attitudes, Demographics and Aspirations Survey*. Chicago: American Library Association, 1989.

2. White, Herbert S., and Sarah L. Mort. "The Accredited Library Education Program as Preparation for Professional Library Work." *Library Quarterly* 60, no. 3 (July 1990).

6. The generic librarian—i.e., librarians with a basic professional education but no substantive knowledge of any subject field or an important area of specialization—will be increasingly at a disadvantage in many large or specialized library settings. It seems likely that formal specialized education will be required in information technology, in the management of library systems and other information service organizations, in the structure and analysis of knowledge, and in information organization and information services for broad subject fields—requiring, in turn, in-depth understanding of pertinent academic disciplines. Basic education, for an increasing number of students, should be supplemented by a full program in a specialty that may take a year or more to complete and that, in some circumstances, might be undertaken in collaboration with a research library.

Comment: The core of knowledge of information studies needs to be reconsidered; it is not simply a synthesis of what libraries do. Even the general library education program needs to emphasize issues rather than procedures. The complexity of professional obligations and responsibilities has greatly increased in recent years and will continue to do so in the future. Library operating performance, and the work of individuals who depend on libraries, will be greatly affected by the skills and abilities of librarians. The case could be made that many current library problems stem from a shortage of well-trained professionals with distinctive capabilities in areas of primary importance.

7. Librarianship (a generic term meant to include the full range of information service organizations and information management functions) lacks definition and cohesion in the public mind and even in professional circles. Until there is a well-articulated and widely understood definition of the profession, making improvements in recruiting, funding, and even performance will be handicapped.

Comment: The introduction to this paper addresses this matter and even proposes a simple definition: “The function of librarianship is to promote and continuously improve the ability of society, and of each individual, to make use of what has previously been learned or created.” This may, or may not, offer an approach to a full definition, but it is essential that educators and working professionals join forces not only to shape a modern—and credible, easily comprehended—definition but to give the definition meaning. If library schools are to adjust their objectives and methods, the understanding and endorse-

ment of the professional community will be essential. Library schools must find ways to foster a long-term and constructive affiliation with the profession itself.

8. If the library schools of research universities are to take the lead in recasting library education and building an influential and credible research program, an all-out collaboration of the strongest schools is required to enhance and reinforce even the most ambitious institutional efforts.

Comment: Consolidation of strengths offers the only realistic prospect for success in making fundamental, long-term improvement in professional education. An opportunity exists to invigorate the profession, but it will require great effort by first-rate institutions and individuals—faculty and academic officers alike—with a personal commitment to librarianship in all its forms.

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