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# Professional Development for Special Librarians: Formal Education and Continuing Education for Excellence

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## ABSTRACT

THIS ARTICLE EXPLORES recent developments and future prospects in the area of professional development for special librarians/information service professionals. Both formal education programs and continuing education are discussed. A review of the factors in the case studies presented in *Corporate Library Excellence* provides the basis for emphasizing the importance of continuous education for librarians working in corporate environments.

## INTRODUCTION

As we think about professions, preparing people to work as professionals, and professional development, one factor is indisputably clear: the educational foundations of a profession are of paramount importance. Through educational processes, the body of principles, issues, skills, and attitudes that anyone entering the profession needs to know are transmitted. This is one reason why the accreditation of professional educational programs exists; to ensure that the core concepts of the profession are taught so that graduates of accredited programs enter the profession equipped with this body of knowledge and with professional standards. But this is just the beginning. Continuing education is important in every profession and it is absolutely essential in a professional environment where rapid change alters the scope, knowledge base, and methodologies of that profession. This is certainly the case with

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librarianship in general and with special librarianship as practiced in the corporate environment in particular.

### FORMAL EDUCATION

Many have expressed their views on formal graduate programs in librarianship. They include recent graduates, potential employers, and library educators themselves (for example, Hill, 1990; Rothstein, 1985; Tees, 1986). The general conclusion that many authors draw is that the basic MLS curriculum, especially a one-year program, cannot prepare a new graduate for all of the demands of the first professional job. While most programs give their students the opportunity to "specialize" in some aspect of the field, by and large the most any school can do is give students both a philosophical and practical foundation upon which to begin their careers.

Furthermore, when you look at what it takes to be successful in the corporate information environment, many of the traits that have been found to be important are not the kinds of things that can be taught in the classroom. In Matarazzo's (1990) recent study on corporate library excellence, a set of characteristics were found among a group of special libraries that were recognized as being excellent. These factors included support from corporate management; the efforts and leadership ability of the library manager; a library staff that was willing to follow the manager's lead; and a real service orientation toward clients, which in turn resulted in a great deal of loyalty and support for the library/information center. These characteristics are not very surprising, and we would hope that the attitudes involved—hard work, dedication, and a strong service orientation (among others)—are developed within every library school student. Having the students respond and put those attitudes into practice in the workplace is another matter.

This reinforces what Miriam Tees (1986) found when she asked practicing special librarians what knowledge and skills were important for new library school graduates. Of the top ten listed, only four were specifically library related, the kinds of things a student would/should get out of his/her MLS education. Those four are:

1. knowledge of basic reference sources;
2. ability to conduct a reference interview;
3. ability to develop a search strategy; and
4. knowledge of subject sources particular to your library.

Of the remaining six listed, three involve communication skills:

5. ability to communicate orally;
6. ability to write well;

7. ability to communicate with staff;
8. an attitude of service;
9. ability to make decisions; and
10. ability to state a problem.

As Matarazzo found later, many of these last six traits are not taught as basics in an MLS curriculum and certainly not as separate courses. Most, if not all, of the six nonlibrary-related traits, however, should be covered in a basic management course. Management, once a highly neglected area in library education, is now found as part of virtually all library school curricula and it is required at many schools. Furthermore, these traits can be enhanced through other courses found in library school. Communication skills and decision-making skills should be enhanced by *every* course a graduate library school student takes.

The question that arises from this viewpoint is whether library schools should be involved at all in teaching what amounts to personality traits to their students. The assumption is someone either has a strong work orientation or they do not. While we feel that this article is not the best forum for that debate, we also feel that library schools do have an obligation to inform their students about the realities of the workplace. And, if that workplace is the corporate library environment, then those students better be ready to work and work hard as both Tees and Matarazzo found.

The usual outcome of such studies is a call for curriculum reform. The response on the part of library schools has either been to defend their current course offerings or actually add a new course or two. Curriculum reform is easy to call for and, for most schools, it is also easy to provide. However, curriculum reform may not be the best solution to the problem. As Mary Culnan (1986) wrote, "massive curriculum reform is not the answer to providing the skills needed to effectively serve corporate information needs in the future. Rather, educational programs at all levels should focus on adapting the traditional skills to the new environment brought about by technological and external environment changes" (p. 214). In other words, it is not the set of course offerings but rather the content and teaching methods and access to current technologies that is crucial.

### SPECIAL LIBRARIES ASSOCIATION

Rather than prepare their students for careers as special or academic or public librarians, MLS programs should be providing their graduates with certain knowledge, skills, and attitudes to compete in the job market in the twenty-first century. The Special Libraries Association (SLA) has recognized this in putting together

its *Position Statement on Graduate Education* (provided in full in the Appendix). In the statement's original construction in 1988, and in a recent revision in 1992, five broad areas were presented as those requiring special knowledge and/or skills to be successful in the overall special library environment, regardless of the specific type of special library (Special Libraries Association, Professional Development Committee, 1988, 1992). These areas include: (1) provision of information services, (2) technology, (3) management, (4) information resources, and (5) information service/product evaluation. The statement does not prescribe certain courses that a library school should offer, rather it outlines various competencies that any special librarian should have. This allows library schools to look at their course offerings as a whole and use this total package to address the areas mentioned in the statement.

While the competencies offered in the statement are felt to be crucial to success in the special library environment, they are also important in other libraries. For example, the technology section provides a "laundry list" of computer/electronic technologies that any librarian should know. The management section stresses awareness of the political process and structure within the parent organization, again something all librarians should know regardless of the size or type of organization in which they work.

This approach addresses the content of courses, which is where the emphasis should be. Just because a particular course is "on the books," doesn't say anything about how often it is taught or how well it is taught. By taking a more competency-based approach, library schools can ensure that elements of these various competencies are spread throughout the curriculum. This is in contrast to an approach whereby specific courses are offered covering particular types of libraries—e.g., a special libraries course. When specific courses such as this are part of the curriculum, schools are under pressure to offer it constantly, and students struggle to fit it into their schedules and beat the rush to get into it. There is another benefit that should result from this approach. Students should feel capable and have the self-confidence to go into most any information environment and know they can make a contribution to that organization rather than think that lack of one specific course prevents them from being successful in that kind of environment.

The *Position Statement on Graduate Education* is but one example of the contributions professional associations and societies can make in the educational arena. During his term as president of the Special Libraries Association (1991-1992), Guy St. Clair appointed a special commission on Professional Recruitment, Ethics and Professional Standards (the PREPS Commission). A relationship

between these issues and professional education was clearly seen by the commission. Seven of the commission's recommendations deal with formal educational programs, while other recommendations are concerned with SLA's role in continuing education (Special Libraries Association. Presidential Study Commission on Professional Recruitment, Ethics and Professional Standards, 1992). These recommendations cover a wide range of activities, from keeping the *Position Statement on Graduate Education* updated to creating a list of questions applicants can ask a library school to determine how strongly the school supports education for special librarianship. Other recommendations include continuing to work with ALA and other appropriate groups in the area of accreditation, working with programs offering special library courses and/or sponsoring SLA student chapters, providing some type of recognition for these schools, working with those schools not providing a curriculum conducive to special librarianship to change that situation, and helping local chapters establish liaisons with schools providing library education. In the area of continuing education, recommendations included working with other groups to identify and deliver continuing education opportunities and developing a directory of continuing education opportunities of potential interest to SLA members.

All of these recommendations were seen as positive actions that the Special Libraries Association could take to demonstrate its concern about the educational preparation of people coming into the field of special librarianship. At the time this article was written, SLA's Board of Directors had not taken any official action on these recommendations beyond asking for a timetable as to how they would be implemented. If SLA adopts all the education-related recommendations, it will be a strong statement regarding their concern and involvement in the issue.

### CONTINUING EDUCATION

The new graduate really begins to "specialize" on the job. Unless someone starts library school with a very specific interest and with working experience, then takes the requisite courses to support that interest, and finds a position in that specific area after graduation, initial on-the-job training is necessary and continuing education to mature professionally and to maintain currency is necessary. In fact, the need for education never disappears. Continuing education in the form of professional reading, conferences, vendor demonstrations, workshops, seminars, and formal courses must be a continuing component of professional life.

One response to this on the part of schools of library and information science is to open their advanced courses to practicing

professionals and allow them to take these courses along with their MLS students. While this may meet the needs of a few practitioners, it really only helps those that live in the vicinity of a library school and those that have the time to take either a quarter- (10 weeks) or a semester- (15-16 weeks) long course. In his study of continuing education among special librarians, Fisher (1987) found that taking a full-term course was the least often used method among five options presented. The four most used options (in order of preference) were: workshops sponsored by commercial groups (e.g., vendors), workshops sponsored by professional groups (e.g., SLA or ALA), in-house training offered by the individual's organization, and workshops sponsored by academic institutions.

The significance of professional continuing education programs was recognized by SLA members themselves, as they rated their association's professional development programs and services very highly in a recent survey of membership needs (Special Libraries Association, 1991). This included rating the association's professional development programs second in value behind the annual conference and indicating an increased interest in participating in professional development activities sponsored by SLA. Furthermore, the results of this 1991 survey were very close to the findings of a similar survey in 1986 conducted by the association.

The role of continuing education and its relationship to excellence in the provision of service became even clearer with the results presented in *Corporate Library Excellence* (Matarazzo, 1990). In this book, library managers at thirteen libraries were most articulate when addressing the continuing programs of education and training made available to, and taken advantage of by, staff members. Interviews conducted with library staff members, in turn, also document the relationship between continued learning and meeting client needs.

In a review of the findings in this study, it is clear that successful library managers have staff members who are sensitive to the demands of clients, know the industry of which they are a part, and are close to client needs. What may be less clear is that library managers have planned programs of continuing education, often with staff input, to develop these staff competencies through continuing education. The aim of the managers has been to contribute to the ability of staff to meet the demands of clients, partly through providing for staff education and professional growth.

The important point is that managers plan opportunities for staff continuing education as part of their managerial roles. The opportunities include vendor-provided programs, participation in professional associations, access to courses offered at firms, and courses

offered by other sponsors. Along with the requirement that managers be aware of opportunities for continuing education, these same individuals must be concerned with the cost of these programs and the needs of the staff. The cost extends not only to the dollar cost of the course, but to the staff member's time away from his or her position.

It is usually at budget time that a plan for continuing education must be developed. This will ensure, as far as possible, that the funds will be available as the need and opportunity arise. The existence of a budget for continuing education also provides a sense that this aspect of professional life is a continuous process.

From the data in *Corporate Library Excellence*, it is clear that the library managers in this study actually plan for staff development through continuing education from the point a staff member is hired. The library managers, ever vigilant to ensure quality service, are mindful that the provision of continuing education is a good investment. This is not to suggest that all staff requests for continuing education are honored. Indeed, the needs of the library staff team and the particular responsibilities of the staff members at that time are all taken into consideration.

When planning for staff continuing education, Miller (1987) states that there are three factors to consider as a manager: (1) need and level of interest, (2) awareness of course availability, and (3) cost in time and dollars. She further notes that planning jointly with a staff member for continuing education can add to the morale of staff, while making them aware of their organization's support for their activities.

The librarians at the firms included in *Corporate Library Excellence* share the following characteristics as a group: a dedication to provide an extraordinary level of service to clients, a determination to deliver whatever is asked for in a timely manner, a feeling that they are part of the organization they serve, a sense that they are well treated, and an appreciation of the many opportunities made available to them. Among these opportunities is the availability of continuing education.

At each of the libraries visited, it is clear that continued learning is expected and is accorded a high priority. For the individual, this may indeed be the most important factor: to work in an environment which encourages this activity. It is perhaps even an atmosphere where continuing education is a firm goal or part of the corporate culture and is expected of each and every professional. Thus, the library professional, by participating in this activity, may mirror what other professionals at the firm are doing on a regular basis.

Novack (1987) points out the five reasons continuing education is important when she states that it affects the quality of search service, it plays a role in career development, it serves as a factor in employee

negotiation, it instills self confidence, and it results in greater productivity.

Thus, continuing education contributes not only to a sense of being well prepared to meet user needs, it also plays a role in how much the librarians at these thirteen libraries like their jobs and how much they strive to carry out their roles at the highest level of client expectations daily. Indeed, we are convinced that the sustained interest in their positions, in their company, and in their industry stems in part from a rigorous and cooperative program of continued learning.

Those interviewed for *Corporate Library Excellence* turn to vendors, in-house company seminars, and to other formal programs of continuing education. The best source, or most appropriate source, is often determined by the course content. Fisher (1986) provides convincing evidence that the Special Libraries Association is in the best position to provide access to continuing education for special librarians. As has already been pointed out, he found special librarians very active and very pleased with the continuing education experiences afforded to them by the SLA.

Schools of library and information science also provide continuing education programs for their own alumni and for those employed in the immediate region. Tees (1989), however, has documented a nearly complete lack of library school involvement with the Special Libraries Association. Few faculty members were even members of SLA, few have served as officers at any level of the association, few have served on an SLA committee, few have spoken at an SLA conference, or written for an SLA publication. "SLA has not been blessed with a close relationship with library school faculty," she concluded (p. 300). So, while schools of library and information science provide continuing education opportunities, it is usually by chance rather than by design that these opportunities are relevant to special librarians. If we accept the premise that special librarians have unique continuing education needs, then library schools' response to those needs will be haphazard at best without increased communication between the schools and special librarians. Tees's point is that the best way for this to happen is through increased faculty involvement with SLA.

On the other hand, SLA has a vigorous program of continuing education. In 1991, at the Winter Education Conference, Annual Conference, Middle Management Institute, and via co-sponsored courses, 1,521 members and nonmembers participated. With better than 10 percent of the membership actively involved as participants, SLA can and should claim enormous credit for meeting member needs through its continuing education programs.

## CONCLUSION

Formal education programs and continuing education providers each have important roles to play in keeping the special library community prepared to meet the demands of the workplace. Although not the only provider of continuing education in this area, SLA has recognized its educational role and taken the lead in providing continuing education activities. In some respects, organizations like SLA or commercial vendors are better positioned to provide more focused services because they do not have to serve such a diverse clientele as library schools must do. The schools, especially those that are publicly funded, must respond to the educational needs of the entire library community. This applies to both their basic curricula as well as any continuing education programs the schools may offer. This allows other providers of professional development, such as associations, vendors, state or local agencies, and the like to sponsor very specific programs/workshops. These offerings can either "fill in the gaps" of someone's library school education or respond to new problems and issues more rapidly than the schools are able to get new courses through the curriculum review process.

As the knowledge base that is necessary to remain competitive broadens and the resources available to obtain this knowledge shrink, the current providers of professional development (both formal education and continuing education) need to work cooperatively to provide the best overall package of educational opportunities for the special library community. Through this kind of effort, special librarians will be able to achieve corporate library excellence.

## APPENDIX

### GRADUATE EDUCATION POSITION STATEMENT\*

Professional Development Committee

Special Libraries Association

Revision—Spring 1992

#### Introduction

Special librarians must meet a set of professional demands requiring competencies and skills that are not required in other library settings. The Special Libraries Association agrees that the competencies, skills, and attitudes derived from an accredited MLS program are important in any information environment. However, SLA is concerned that many library schools' curricula do not offer the type or the range of educational experiences necessary to prepare students for careers in special librarianship.

Education for special librarianship falls into two distinct categories:

- 1) subject-specific
- 2) library/information related

Although subject-specific knowledge is critical in most special library environments, the Association recognizes that in-depth subject education is outside the realm of library education and must be acquired through other degree programs. This does not, however, rule out knowledge of core information resources in a variety of subject areas. This is well within the arena of library education and vital in all special libraries for the provision of information services.

This statement is concerned with library/information education only, specifically those areas of current curriculum which require expansion, or modification to meet the educational needs of potential special librarians.

Areas of concern include:

- 1) Provision of Information Services
- 2) Technology
- 3) Management
- 4) Information Resources
- 5) Information Service/Product Evaluation

While these broad subjects are included in the typical library school curriculum, instruction may not include, or sufficiently emphasize, the components of these subjects that are critical to special librarianship.

#### Provision of Information Services

The ultimate goal of special librarianship, and perhaps the key distinguishing factor between special libraries and other library settings, is the provision of customized information services that meet the requirements of the parent organization in the most cost-effective and efficient manner possible. In special libraries there is less emphasis on functions, such as acquisitions, cataloging and collection development, and greater emphasis on the provision of active services in immediate response to client needs.

\*"Graduate Education Position Statement," unpublished document of the SLA Board of Directors, revision, Spring 1992

Typical special library services that are not usually performed by traditional librarians include:

- a) packaging of information to meet specific demands
- b) selective dissemination of information
- c) analysis and interpretation of information
- d) selection, configuration and evaluation of individual systems to meet client needs
- e) development and delivery of new services as client and external demands require
- f) design and development of information "products"
- g) exhaustive database searching
- h) database development
- i) thesaurus and index construction

### **Technology**

The impact of computer and telecommunications technology on the information environment has dramatically changed the way special librarians work. As clients have increasingly emphasized the need for immediate response to information requests, special librarians have optimized the use of advanced technologies.

To a greater extent than other librarians, special librarians rely heavily upon various computer and electronic technologies, such as *online*/telecommunications systems, artificial intelligence and expert systems, multimedia systems, desk-top publishing systems, national and international information networks, magnetic disk and tape, video disk and laser optical disk to capture, store, and deliver information.

Knowledge of the variety of systems available, the capabilities and limitations of each, and the compatibility among different systems is essential. Competency in systems analysis and design, and advanced knowledge of computer applications are critical, as today's special librarian must be able to plan and implement technological solutions to the information problems of the parent organization.

### **Management**

To a greater extent than other librarians, special librarians are placed in management positions early in their careers. In these positions, they must excel in both general business management and in management of the information activities and resources of the parent organization.

The theories and principles of general business management and organizational behavior are key knowledge areas for special librarians, as they must develop a comprehensive understanding of the parent organization, including its business mission, goals, policies and procedures, overall structure and key personnel. They must also be able to communicate and work with other managerial personnel in various functional areas of the organization and at different levels in the organizational hierarchy. In order to do this, they must be aware of the political process and structure within the organization.

The current trend toward decentralization of information functions may require the special librarian to control the flow of information on an organization-wide basis. This type of information management includes

coordination of both internal and external information resources and provision of continuous support to all functional units within the parent organization.

To prepare special librarians for general management and information management roles, library schools must place greater emphasis on communications, human resources issues, planning, budgeting and finance, marketing, cost effective performance, productivity, profitability, organizational behavior and politics, and leadership.

### **Information Resources**

Special librarians are concerned with the identification, selection, and acquisition of the information resources needed by the library's clients. They need to be sensitive to the parent organization, have knowledge of the current collection, know how to assess its strengths and weaknesses and develop it to insure its usefulness. Special librarians must also be aware of opportunities for resource sharing and cooperation with other libraries.

Once the necessary information has been identified and obtained, it needs to be as accessible as possible. Methods of classification and organization of information may differ from one special library to another due to the specific nature of the collection and degree of automation in use. Increasingly, information is being stored and accessed through the use of electronic formats. For this reason, database design/construction and thesaurus development have become important skills.

Because special librarians still collect, organize and classify traditional information resources in addition to the electronic formats mentioned above, knowledge of current cataloging, classification, indexing and abstracting methods is also important.

### **Information Service/Product Evaluation**

Special libraries are user-driven. Immediate response to clients' requests is the norm. Accurate evaluation of all aspects of the provision of information services is critical. Continual assessment of client needs and the quality of the information service/product is vital. This requires use of non-traditional information sources and the packaging or repackaging of that information based upon clients' needs. Value-added services such as information product analysis as well as evaluation must also be considered basic tools.

The various methods of measurement and evaluation, particularly those related to cost/benefit, are essential knowledge for special librarians. Evaluation will become an increasingly important tool as corporate and other information specialists are confronted with the need to justify the library's existence and are charged with recovering costs and producing profits from the information resources of the parent organization.

### **Conclusion**

These five subject areas are key components in the education for special librarians. To prepare students for special libraries careers, greater emphasis must be placed on knowledge of management, technology, provision of information services and evaluation techniques, as indicated above. Without greater proficiency in these areas, graduates of accredited MLS programs

will not be adequately prepared for the professional demands of special librarianship.

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