

Guest Editorial

Changing Education for a Changing Profession



The Congress on Professional Education, sponsored by ALA, drew more than one hundred delegates to Washington, D.C., on April 30 and May 1 of this year. It was an outgrowth of the concern among many practitioners that ALA-accredited programs do not adequately serve the library profession. The meeting brought together a diverse group of delegates from various stakeholder groups, and most of ALA's constituency groups, including ACRL, were represented there.

There was a great deal of heated discussion in person, in print, and on listservs before the congress took place. As might be expected, there was often a chasm between the viewpoints of the practitioners and those of the educators. Many practitioners believe that LIS educators are not interested in what practicing librarians want and expect from the schools, especially in terms of requiring courses in core competencies such as cataloging, and in producing new librarians to work in areas where there are national shortages, such as youth services. Some also feel that schools that have dropped the word *library* from their names are sending a clear signal that they want to disassociate themselves from the library profession. On the other hand, many educators feel that practitioners are often unaware of the competitive reality of contemporary higher education and are unrealistic about what they expect from graduates emerging from what are still primarily one-year master's programs. In addition, educators are keenly aware of the difficulty of attracting students to specific areas of librarianship. Market forces prevail in LIS education, as elsewhere, and students often bypass specializations

such as children's librarianship for others that offer better entry-level salaries. The tension between practitioners and educators has been intensifying over the past few years as many LIS schools have undergone change, usually in response to pressure from their parent institutions; and it is being exacerbated by the lack of effective means of communication. It was obvious from the position papers issued before the congress that practitioners and educators live in two separate worlds, with each group being more aware of the needs and demands of its own environment than of what is going on in the other group's environment.

Conflict between practitioners and educators is not unique to librarianship; it can be found in most professional fields. Moreover, conflict can be healthy as long as both sides are committed to engaging in ongoing dialogue and working together. The congress provided a wonderful opportunity for those who attended to engage in discourse and to become more aware that practitioners and educators are joined in a common purpose—to ensure that the librarians working in the libraries of the next century are the best that can be provided.

The congress provided a good start toward fostering greater cooperation. The conversations were spirited, and a number of recommendations were made on issues ranging from core values and competencies to recruitment.¹ However, although a great deal of ground was covered, it was merely a beginning. One of the outcomes of the congress will be the recommendation of a structure for continuing the dialogue started there. Educators

and practitioners will need to act in concert to provide the education needed for the professionals who will work in the libraries of the twenty-first century.

Everyone finds change hard, but it is inevitable that the schools will continue to change and that the schools of tomorrow will bear little resemblance to those that produced most of the professionals working in librarianship today. These changes will be necessary not only to ensure the continuation of LIS education within academe, but also to produce the types of librarians needed for the future. A number of professional organizations have recently assembled lists of competencies needed in the future.² If competencies similar to the ones in these lists are desired, LIS programs will necessarily be reshaped and perhaps lengthened.

Conflict between practitioners and educators is not unique to librarianship; it can be found in most professional fields.

As they are presently constituted, the schools are too small to have faculty with expertise in all the areas required and the programs are too short to enable students to acquire knowledge in all of these areas. LIS education will need to become more interdisciplinary. Students will still need to learn about the acquisition, storage, retrieval, and dissemination of information from individuals, similar to present-day LIS faculty, who have specific expertise in these areas. But, in addition, they will need to gain knowledge from economists, cognitive psychologists, and experts in fields such as communication and instructional technology. In the future, most LIS education will be in larger units in which the library program will be one of several, and students preparing to work in libraries will share classes and facilities with students going into other information careers. If the individual programs within the larger unit are designed to provide the appropriate specialized preparation needed for each, information professionals of all kinds can

benefit from sharing elements of their educational experience.

Moreover, a greater variety of types of programs will be available in the future. There will not be just one type of program preparing librarians, but many different models. Each school will need to look at the local academic environment and to be responsive to local demands and needs. Schools are being reshaped now in various ways. The day of the small, single-purpose, freestanding unit to prepare librarians is likely nearing its end. There has been a move on many campuses to consolidate LIS schools with other schools or departments as universities continue to streamline by either consolidating or eliminating small units. It is likely that there will be more mergers and more LIS schools seeking to expand the types of programs offered. Some schools have started undergraduate programs. Others have moved into distance education, offering all or part of their LIS program to distance learners. Perhaps to meet the need for various subspecialties such as academic librarianship or archives, schools will begin to work cooperatively with different institutions specializing in different areas and providing more specialized courses through distance education to students across the country. The shape of the schools of tomorrow is unclear, but as these transformations take place, the need for educators and librarians

A major component of making recruitment efforts successful is to raise the salaries of librarians of all types.

to work together will be greater than ever.

In addition to help in shaping the curriculum, practitioners need to work in tandem with educators to attract to the profession the individuals who will be needed in the future. Enrollments in LIS schools are high, but many graduates seek jobs as information managers in private indus-

tries instead of working in traditional libraries. There are going to be a large number of retirements in libraries in the next decade, and the profession needs to be thinking about recruitment now to ensure a future supply of talented librarians. Larry Hardesty has begun that movement within ACRL with his presidential focus on developing programs to recruit individuals to academic librarianship. A major component of making recruitment efforts successful is to raise the salaries of librarians of all types. The kind of individuals we most wish to attract to libraries will have many other opportunities available in the expanding information industry. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the fastest-growing segment of new jobs over

the next decade will be information related, in areas such as computer software development and networking. If we want to ensure "the best and the brightest" for the libraries of tomorrow, we will need to compete.

There is no way that either LIS educators or practitioners working alone can succeed in preparing tomorrow's librarians. We need to work together to define the roles of librarians and information specialists in society, to explain the contributions made by these professionals, and to ensure the high quality of LIS education programs. There needs to be good effort and goodwill on both sides. And there needs to be much more communication. The recent congress provided a good opportunity to start the conversation. Let the discourse continue.

BARBARA B. MORAN

School of Information and Library Science

*University of North Carolina at
Chapel Hill*

Notes

1. The recommendations and much more may be seen at the congress Web site: <http://www.ala.org/congress>.
2. For one produced by the Special Library Association, see <http://www.sla.org/professional/competency.html>.