

# Editorial Board Thoughts: System Requirements

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This past Spring, my alma mater, the School of Library and Information Studies (SLIS) at the University of Alberta, restructured the IT component of its MLIS program. As a result, as of September 2010, incoming students are expected to possess certain basic IT skills before beginning their program.<sup>1</sup> These skills include the following:

- Comprehension of the components and operations of a personal computer
- Microsoft Windows file management
- Proficiency with Microsoft Office (or similar) products, including word processing and presentation software
- Use of e-mail
- Basic Web browsing and searching

This new requirement got me thinking: Is this common practice among ALA-accredited Library Schools? If other schools are also requiring basic IT skills prior to entry, how do those required by SLIS compare? So I thought I'd do a little investigating to see what others in "Library School land" are doing. Before I continue, a word of warning: this was by no means a rigorous scientific investigation, but rather an informal survey of the landscape.

I started my investigation with ALA's directory of institutions offering accredited master's programs.<sup>2</sup> There are fifty-seven institutions listed in the directory. I visited each institution's website and looked for pages describing technology requirements, computer-competency requirements, and the like. If I wasn't able to find the desired information after fifteen or twenty minutes, I would note "nothing found" and move on to the next.

In the end I found some sort of list of technology or computer-competency requirements on thirty-three (approximately 58 percent) of the websites. It may be the case that such a list exists on other sites and I didn't find it. I should also note that five of the lists I found focus more on software and hardware than on skills in using said software and hardware. Even considering these conditions, however, I was somewhat surprised at the low numbers. Is it simply assumed that today's students already have these skills? Or is it expected that they will be picked up along the way? I don't claim to know the answers, and discovering them would require a much more detailed and thorough investigation, but they are interesting questions nonetheless.

Once I had found the requirements, I examined them in some detail to get a sense of the kinds of skills listed. While I won't enumerate them all, I did find the most common ones to be similar to those required by SLIS—basic comfort with a personal computer and proficiency with word processing and presentation software, e-mail, file management, and the Internet. A few (5) schools also

list comfort with local systems (e-mail accounts, online courseware, etc.). Several (7) schools mention familiarity with basic database design and functionality, while a few (5) list basic Web design. Very few (3) mention competency with security tools (firewalls, virus checkers, etc.), and just slightly more (4) mention familiarity with Web 2.0 tools like blogs, wikis, etc. While many (14) specifically mention searching under basic Internet skills, few (7) mention proficiency with OPACs or other common information tools such as full-text databases. Interestingly, one school has a computer programming requirement, with mentions of specific acceptable languages, including C++, PASCAL, Java, and Perl. But this is certainly the exception rather than the rule.

I was encouraged that there seems to be a certain agreement on the basics. But I was a little surprised at the relative rarity of competency with wikis and blogs and all those Web 2.0 tools that are so often used and talked about in today's libraries. Is this because there is still some uncertainty as to the utility of such tools in libraries? Or is it because of a belief that the members of the Millennial or "digital" generation are already expert in using them? I don't know the reasons, but it is interesting to ponder nonetheless. I was also surprised that a level of information literacy isn't listed more often, particularly given that we're talking about SLIS programs. I do know, of course, that many of these skills will be developed or enhanced as students work their way through their programs, but it also seems to me that there is so much other material to learn that the more that can be taken care of beforehand, the better.

Librarians work in a highly technical and technological environment, and this is only going to become even more the case for future generations of librarians. Certainly, basic familiarity with a variety of applications and tools and comfort with rapidly changing technologies are major assets for librarians. In fact, ALA recognizes the importance of "technological knowledge and skills" as core competencies of librarianship. Specifically mentioned are the following:

- Information, communication, assistive, and related technologies as they affect the resources, service delivery, and uses of libraries and other information agencies.
- The application of information, communication, assistive, and related technology and tools consistent with professional ethics and prevailing service norms and applications.
- The methods of assessing and evaluating the

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specifications, efficacy, and cost efficiency of technology-based products and services.

- The principles and techniques necessary to identify and analyze emerging technologies and innovations in order to recognize and implement relevant technological improvements.<sup>3</sup>

Given what we know about the importance of technology to librarians and librarianship, my investigation has left me with two questions: (1) why aren't more library schools requiring certain IT skills prior to entry into their programs? and (2) are those who do require them asking enough of their prospective students? I hope you, our readers, might ask yourselves these questions and join us on ITALica for what could turn out to be a lively discussion.

## References

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2. American Library Association Office for Accreditation, "Library & Information Studies Directory of Institutions Offering Accredited Master's Programs 2008–2009," 2008, [http://ala.org/ala/educationcareers/education/accreditedprograms/directory/pdf/lis\\_dir\\_20082009.pdf](http://ala.org/ala/educationcareers/education/accreditedprograms/directory/pdf/lis_dir_20082009.pdf) (accessed Aug. 5, 2010).
3. American Library Association, "ALA's Core Competences of Librarianship," January 2009, [www.ala.org/ala/educationcareers/careers/corecomp/corecompetences/finalcorecompstat09.pdf](http://www.ala.org/ala/educationcareers/careers/corecomp/corecompetences/finalcorecompstat09.pdf) (accessed Aug. 5, 2010).