Developing New Competencies Among LIS Professionals: Challenges for Educators

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Abstract

This paper describes the development of library and information studies/science (LIS) into different phases during the last century. Academic programs and preparation of LIS professionals have witnessed a continuous change. It is realized that unless this process of change of curriculum is clearly envisaged in the future, LIS professional would become irrelevant in the emerging market. For this purpose, new competencies have been defined that the LIS professionals need to possess in the light of i.e. Special Libraries Association (SLA), American Library Association (ALA) and Association of Southeastern Research Libraries (ASERL) competency documents. That has led to articulation of modules of coursework that could serve as benchmarks for curriculum revision and design. A number of environmental, organizational, and professional challenges have been identified that could impeded the process of change and curriculum redesign.

Keywords: Competencies; Library education; Information professionals
Development of LIS

Willimason's Reports of 1921 and 1923 in the United States proved to be the hallmark studies that transformed the training programs of library economy to the university-based degree programs in library science. That heralded revolutionary changes in the preparation of professionals. Consequently, new graduate degree programs were founded in universities since

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1950s that produced professionals who were expected to be grounded in the interdisciplinary underpinnings of a variety of socio-human disciplines. During the next three decades, this academic movement provided the strong impetus for change andrenovation and the field progressed into different phases of library science, documentation, and information science. There has always been diversity in the content and structure of these programs. During the last few decades, this wave of change has been most pervasive, resulting in a variety of interdisciplinary offerings. These programs have also been given fresh labels and nomenclatures such as information studies, information management, information systems, information resource management, knowledge management, etc.

The KALIPER Report (2000) has been identified as the second most significant study, next to the Williamson Reports, that has covered the wide landscape of LIS education in the United States.. The study, conducted over a 2-year span, evaluated the markets, situation of 31 leading LIS schools of North America, change dynamics, and the curricula of these schools. The Report identified the forces that sought changes in LIS curricula. Some of the factors identified:

- demands of students, employers, graduates, and professional associations for graduate competencies;
- growth and expense of supporting emerging technology;
- internal campus relationships and positioning;
- competition from other LIS programs; and
- availability of financial support for innovation.

The KALIPER Report (2000) has identified six trends in LIS education that have been extensively cited, reviewed, and debated in the literature. These are as follows:

> In addition to libraries as institutions and library-specific operations, library and information science (LIS) curricula

are addressing broad-based information environments and information problems.

While LIS curricula continue to incorporate perspectives from other disciplines, a distinct core has taken shape that is predominantly user-centered.

LIS schools and programs are increasing the investment and infusion of information technology into their curricula.

LIS schools and programs are experimenting with the structure of specialization within the curriculum.

LIS schools and programs are offering instruction in different formats to provide students with more flexibility.

LIS schools and programs are expanding their curricula by offering related degrees at the undergraduate, master's, and doctoral levels

The KALIPER Report has been positive about the course of change LIS schools have taken during the last 2-3 decades. The Report also predicts that these schools will keep producing graduates for the non-traditional wider markets. In order to be effective in the future, it will require new generation of faculty and students.

At about the same time when the KALIPER project was being conducted, TFPL (1999) conducted a seminal study in UK. The study was focused on the identification of new capabilities the information professionals needed to possess in the emerging information and knowledge environments. TFPL noted that the LIS profession had developed and changed significantly during the last decade in a way that affected the roles and opportunities for information professionals. They emphasized that knowledge management presented a unique opportunity for LIS professionals, if they recognized the complete picture on which an organization worked and the role of LIS as partners with a number of other stakeholders.

Use of Competencies

During the last, LIS educators have been, a growing emphasis has been placed on competency identification in the LIS profession. Major national and international professional organizations have invested abundant resources in defining these competencies. These statements are expected to provide groundwork for curriculum design. Also these can serve as useful benchmarks for evaluation of instructional programs and packages. For a number of human resources management functions these may serve as useful criteria such as selection, compensation, and reward administration.

The major efforts undertaken in the LIS profession for defining professional competencies during the last decade will be reviewed in the following section.

Factors Affecting Competency Definition

It is understood that while there might be agreement on fundamental competencies across different situational and topical contexts, we need to take certain factors into consideration while we target competencies in a given setting. SLA, ALA and other bodies have been adamant that general sets of competencies can be suggested, but these cannot be prescribed across the board. Socio-cultural differences play an important role in the competency definition process. Information policy, ethics, and intellectual freedom may have varied interpretations and perceived importance. Geographic realities of city states may give different meaning to collaboration and networking. Economic realities may also influence different aspects of information economics. Divide between information rich and poor has its own repercussions on the employment and infusion of technology. Likewise, functional domains of technical and public services would also indicate that different sets of competencies might be desirable. SLA's competencies would have different emphases on business acumen, corporate mindset, and individualism in service delivery as compared to public library setting.

These factors make it clear that when we are trying to configure competencies in a particular setting, we need to articulate contextual peculiarities. We also need to take into consideration the socio-politico-economic and technological realities. Only then we are able to identify competencies that could provide the focus for curriculum design.

Competencies Defined by SLA, ALA and ASERL

It is recognized that the wave of change has been most apparent in the LIS schools in many regions. Changes in LIS curricula need to be compatible with the competencies that the new generation of professionals needs to be equipped with. Special Libraries Association, American Library Association, and ASERL have presented sets of competencies during the last decade, which have a definite bearing on the design of LIS curricula. ALA competencies have been drafted for their use by the Committee on Accreditation for the assessment of curricula during the accreditation process.

The revised version of the SLA competencies was approved by its Board of Directors in June 2003. These competencies are defined in professional and personal categories. Professional competencies are related to the practitioner's knowledge of information resources, access, technology and management, and the ability to use this knowledge as a basis for providing the highest quality information services. These include the following four major competencies, each augmented with specific skills, defined in the SLA document (Special Libraries Association, 2003):

A. Managing Information Organizations
B. Managing Information Resources
C. Managing Information Services
D. Applying Information Tools and Technologies

The second category of personal competencies represent a set of attitudes, skills and values that enable practitioners to work effectively and contribute positively to their organizations,

clients and profession. These competencies range from being strong communicators, to demonstrating the value-addition of their contributions, to remaining flexible and positive in an ever-changing environment.

These two sets of competencies are then articulated as core competencies. Each professional competency has been translated into specific skills or capabilities each professional needs to acquire.

The ALA had initiated definition of core competencies in 1999. The draft was presented to a number of committees and conferences for review. In 2005, the exercise resulted in a document that outlined core competencies. McKinney (2006) used these statements for examining the curricula of accredited, accreditation-candidates, and pre-candidates among LIS schools. The core competencies were defined as follows:

1. Professional ethics
2. Resource building
3. Knowledge organization
4. Technological knowledge
5. Knowledge dissemination: service
6. Knowledge accumulation: education and life-long learning
7. Knowledge inquiry: research
8. Institution management

After examining the curricula and syllabi of 58 LIS programs in the USA, McKinney (2006) found that knowledge organization, professional ethics, knowledge dissemination, technological knowledge, research and management competencies were covered in the required coursework of 53, 45, 41, 37, 37, and 36 programs respectively.. All the core competencies were however covered in the required and elective coursework. Results of this study indicated that the accredited schools had an adequate coverage and treatment of the core competencies. That in itself validates the relevance and values of these competencies.

Association of Southeastern Research Libraries (ASERL, 2001) identified competencies that contained generic skills common to all professionals and those that are unique to research librarians. These are as follows:

- Developing and managing effective services that meet user needs and support the research library's mission.
- Supporting cooperation and collaboration to enhance services.
- Understanding the library within the context of higher education and the needs of students, faculty, and researchers.
- Knowing the structure, organization, creation, management, dissemination, use, and preservation of information resources, new and existing, in all formats.
- Demonstrating commitment to the values and principles of librarianship

In its official document, each statement has been defined by breaking it down into specific skills or capabilities.

Hallam, Partridge and McAllister (2004) explored the core knowledge and skills required by the successful modern day library and information professionals in thed United States. Drawing on the review of the literature, the paper considers three main, and intertwined, issues currently affecting LIS education across the world: the focus of LIS education, the process of LIS education and the accreditation of LIS education. They reviewed a number of competency studies and noted that there might be a focus on core competencies, yet it would be a particular context that would dictate what might be the competencies that could be targeted through electives and specializations. There is a wide diversity of competencies that can be noted from the studies of Middleton (2003), Myburgh (2003), Rehman (2002), Koehler (2003), Raju (2003), Maceviciute (2002), Irwin (2002), and Tedd (2003). These studies have reported a wide range of competencies, skills, knowledge areas, topics or modules for coursework in LIS programs. A number of areas emerge in this

body of research that include social informatics, knowledge management, information management, information economics, information resources development, IT applications, information systems, networking, Internet, virtual library, management of information organizations, human resource development, information organization, information retrieval, collection and access management, professional ethics and so on.

Findings of a Research Project

We conducted a survey of the alumni of the MLIS program of Kuwait University in order to examine their perceptions about the MLIS program and how they assessed the needs of the Kuwaiti information market for the preparation of graduates of this university. For this purpose a survey was designed for getting input of the graduates about vital aspects of the MLIS Program. They were also asked to identify the areas in which they felt deficiencies and they proposed new areas for instruction. The questionnaire was administered to all graduates in the 10-year period and 67 responses were analyzed. In response to one of the questions, the participants rated their need of new courses on a scale of 1-5 where 1 meant no need and 5 indicated most essential. Results are presented below in Table 1.

Apparently, the alumni attached high significance to the need of all the six areas that were listed in the instrument. They perceived that four areas that were most essential included information management, knowledge management, information organization, and information needs and behavior. It confirms that in this setting, the graduates of the program attached a great deal of significance to the inclusion of these areas in the curriculum.

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Table 1. Kuwait University alumni perceptions about new areas/specialization

Area/Specialization	N	Mean	SD
Information Management	60	4.60	.558
Knowledge Management	59	4.37	.740
Information Organization	60	4.26	.756
Information needs, behavior and use	59	4.13	.753
Corporate/business information systems and services	59	3.96	.927
Information Systems	60	3.93	1.022
Information Architecture	60	3.78	1.043

Curriculum Content: Framework for Consideration

Based on the assumption that competencies can be befittingly used for designing curriculum; competencies identified in the preceding sections provide us a viable groundwork for identifying curricular content for instruction. It is further assumed that these proposals serve as a framework for consideration, deliberation, and assimilation and have to be adjusted keeping in view the local conditions and ground realities. Hence these proposals are not prescriptive; rather these serve as general guidelines. The content proposed in the following section does not imply that each unit is supposed to be a distinct course. These may serve as modules that can be combined or integrated as the need might be.

Foundation component

Based on ALA core and other guidelines, the following foundation curriculum is proposed.

- Information/knowledge organization
- Professional ethics, policy issues
- Information behavior; use and user
- Managing Information Resources
- Managing Information Services
- Applying Information Tools and Technologies
- Research and inquiry capabilities

- Management of information organizations

Based on competency studies reviewed earlier and the results of the alumni study at Kuwait University, we have been able to propose additional competencies in certain functional domains. These are as follows:

IT component

Information retrieval
Database management
Networking
Systems analysis and design
Internet and Web applications
Digitization
Archiving
Information architecture

Service component

Customer focus
Information packaging
Information literacy

Information and knowledge management component

Information management
Knowledge creation and representation
Social and cultural dimensions of knowledge delivery
Knowledge mapping, taxonomies, ontologies
Technological enablers
Content management
Competitive intelligence
E-commeerce
Strategies and metrices

Management component

Planning

Environmental scanning
Marketing and public relations
Fiscal management
Evaluation and measurement
HRM applications
Physical plant and facilities

Personal attributes component

Critical inquiry
Problem solving
Communication
Interpersonal and teamwork
Leadership
Innovation
Initiative
Time and effort management

Challenges

It is easy to prepare a list of course modules for any academic program. We can also design such a program for its wider application at national or regional level. However, there are a number of challenges that the LIS programs face in the realization of the objectives of conceiving and implementing a revised curriculum. These challenges come from both the external environment and internal dynamics of the academic programs.

Analyzing Market Needs and Environmental Imperatives

The foremost challenge is how to analyze market needs and internalize its results in the exercise of planning for change. This could be a formidable task. A large number of factors—both in the public and private sectors—affect this process. We need to employ different strategies for analyzing these factors. We need to answer many questions in the process, which may include the following questions. What are the expectations of the employers? How do the graduates feel about the relevance and usefulness of the education they have had? How do the stakeholders in the

market react to the graduates? What is the situation of the IT market? What kinds of job opportunities are held by the corporate sector? Are there any non-library careers available to the graduates? Who are the potential competitors of the LIS graduates in the market? What kind of changes are impending in the employment sector? What kind of treatment is accorded to the professionals by the civil service structure? How does the Higher Education Commission treat library development plans? What vertical or horizontal expansions are expected in the higher education sector? What are the development opportunities of public libraries in the country? What are the employment prospects in the school media centers? These are some of the questions that need to be adequately addresses.. Conduct of simplistic surveys could provide superfluous insights that might be irrelevant. We need to use a variety of data collection and analysis strategies to seek reliable explanations. It is the most crucial stage in the articulation of market needs.

Complexities of the Process of Curriculum Design

Designing or revising curriculum is a highly complex process. The academic politics of the campus and an individual LIS department can create formidable impediments. If you are trying to approach this exercise at a regional or national level, the complexities are further compounded. There are always sensitive turf issues within academic departments. It is always through effective leadership and team dynamics that these challenges can be surmounted. The process is delicate and prone to apparent frustrations. One faculty member with negative outlook is capable of side-tracking the whole process. There is no easy solution to such problems. It is always through tact, wisdom and ingenuity that these problems can be faced.

Another problem is that the faculty members do not have the competence in all the areas in which you wish to develop new curriculum. Most faculty members in our academic departments feel comfortable in confining themselves to the traditional courses they have been teaching for ages. How to break this shell? Many schools have senior faculty members in administrative positions

that are least keen to venture into new academic areas. Many of them are least friendly with technological applications. Unless we have energetic and innovative faculty members, internal resistance could be insurmountable.

Inter-Disciplinary Collaboration

The competencies and course modules that we have discussed in this paper indicate that LIS program has to seek inter-disciplinary collaboration with a number of other academic stakeholders on the campus. These are there in the academic departments of computing, IT, systems, business, education, psychology, and many more. One strategy is that having faculty members from these diverse disciplinary background on board in a department. Many leading LIS schools in the developed world are practicing it. However, it may not be practical in the situation of developing nations where academic positions are allowed only within narrowly defined academic parameters. This is a major challenge for academics to offer course that are cross-listed, design dual degree programs, etc. Again it is a political issue with strong inter-personal dimensions.

Implementation Stage

We need a strong and proactive faculty who can implement curriculum design. In the service structure of most universities, little mobility is noted among faculty members. A faculty member selected in one place stays there for about 25-30 years perpetuating his or her influence. Unless you can have young faculty members with fresh capabilities and insights, curriculum change could become fearsome.

We also need adequate computing facilities and resources. Funds and personnel are needed to develop, manage, and maintain these facilities. It is a continuous commitment on the part of the university administration.

In the emerging scenario, distance learning could be a viable choice for academic departments. Then you can benefit

from expertise across continents. However, it would require collaboration at different stages. Conceiving, developing, and managing these programs would be a challenge. This tremendous opportunity can only be realized if backed up by adequate facilities and commitment.

Concluding Word

In today's world we have no choice but to be open, creative and enterprising in our outlook. The process of curriculum design and implementation is complex and intricate. However, if we do not tread this difficult course, we will become irrelevant. It is always a difficult choice, but only those who are willing to climb may achieve the height though they may experience a few falls. We must try that no fall is too disastrous.

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