Meeting Format and Process

A Continuing Conversation - Public Libraries and LIS Education, held January 25, 2019 during the ALA Midwinter Meeting in Seattle, was framed as a continuation of a conversation convened by the Seattle Public Library at the 2018 ALA Midwinter Meeting in Denver, bringing together leaders from public libraries and LIS graduate programs to discuss the changing nature of public library services and the new and emerging skills, dispositions, and experiences necessary for success in public library work.

The 2019 conversation was open to all Midwinter Meeting participants and was facilitated by Kathryn Deiss (Kathryn Deiss Consulting). In addition to participants in the room, the conversation had been promoted to a list of interested parties from the 2018 discussion, some of whom were not available to participate but submitted their comments and feedback. The room set provided round tables of 10 seats and allowed smaller groups to discuss two topics. The first topic focused on the skills needed for new professionals entering public libraries (the discussion prompt read: What are the skills necessary for successful work in public libraries now and in the near future?). The second topic focused on the means by which the profession could better develop those skill for the current and emerging roles of public libraries (the discussion prompt read: How can we – LIS graduate programs, public libraries, library associations – contribute to the development of these necessary skills?). Participants held small group discussions at their tables before voluntarily sharing their comments with the larger group. At the conclusion of the table discussions, a discussion of next steps was opened to the full community of participants.

The meeting was convened with an opening meditation from Beck Tench, PhD Candidate at the University of Washington Information School, to help center participants in a spirit of collaboration.

The notes compiled below are meant to relay both the information shared at the meeting and feedback shared via email from individuals who could not participate in-person but still wished to contribute.

What are the skills necessary for successful work in public libraries now and in the near future?

Communication skills were among the most frequently stated needs for new professionals. Of specific interest were skills in facilitation (for use with both the public and internal to the organization); de-escalation (conflict management skills); active listening; and cultural competence (to adjust communications styles with and for different members of the community). Communication skills critical to working with others in the organization were seen as highly important. Skills in communication might help many new professionals overcome introverted tendencies to develop extroverted ability. And while communication skills help enhance customer service within an organization, there is also a need for professionals to know how and when to say “no.” Finally, communication skills cannot substitute for the foundational
information skills (information seeking, evaluation, organization, and instruction) needed to deliver on what people most often expect in libraries.

While highlighting the importance of creativity and innovation, several participants referenced new professionals’ challenges around risk-taking, perfectionism, and discomfort. As a profession, there may be a disposition to being risk-averse or adherence to an ideal “perfection.” Curriculum or early career experiences might be designed to let new professionals get into messy, uncomfortable situations that help them replace an idealized perfection with resilience. New professionals need to be able to thoughtfully assess risk, make good business decisions, and go “out there” sometimes. A continued focus on design thinking or design theories as a mindset and method (not just skills) could help LIS programs prepare new professionals to think critically and creatively. Public libraries have a responsibility to be responsive to community needs with strategies that adapt quickly – that can place a strain on educational preparation but finding ways to embed a spirit of creativity and risk-taking can help prepare young professionals for public library work.

Collaboration was discussed as not only a skill for inter-departmental or inter-organizational work, but as an essential skill for integrating the library within the larger community. Several participants noted public librarians’ need to untether themselves from the building – to truly integrate themselves in the community. Part of this collaborative spirit requires that professionals understand changes in the community and connect those changes to a changing profession – an ability to help communities change their assumptions about what libraries do. Collaboration in communities will require skill in appreciative inquiry to understand the aspirations and concerns of the community and the ability to develop a reflective practice to help contextualize and center efforts in the goal of collaboration.

A commitment to community-centered or community-led librarianship would incorporate design thinking principles and other community discovery strategies to shift how libraries meet ever-changing community needs, shifting the work of libraries from transactional to transformational. These community-centered librarianship topics are likely to be most effective when embedded in core curriculum instead of offered as stand-alone topics.

There has been a strong tendency to frame the library as a space for programming – away from a more transactional or collections profile. This focus on events increases the need for collaborative skills that can forge relationships across civic organizations, local non-profits, and peer government agencies. There might also be concerns for how libraries support national efforts like the Census or healthcare enrollment that require collaboration within communities as well as coordination at a national scale.

As management and access to library collections (streaming content, digital assets, open access resources) increasingly depends on technological competency, new professionals will need to understand current systems and have the capacity to anticipate future systems. This anticipation also requires thoughtful consideration for enduring values such as the privacy and security of users.
Several participants noted a continued focus on 21st Century Skills as presented in the Framework for 21st Century Learning. That framework organizes skills into three broad categories:

- Learning and Innovation (creativity and innovation; critical thinking and problem solving; communication; collaboration);
- Information, Media, and Technology Skills (information literacy, media literacy, ICT literacy);
- and Life and Career Skills (flexibility and adaptability; initiative and self-direction; social and cross-cultural skills; productivity and accountability; leadership and responsibility).

While employers made clear their interest in having these 21st Century Skills ready in new employees, several employers noted that they sometimes bear the responsibility for developing these skills in the workplace given the nature of graduate education. This was especially concerning as more and more graduate programs turn to online delivery methods that do not often support the soft skill development that happens through face-to-face learning. There were questions about whether soft skill development is a reasonable expectation of graduate education. Graduate programs provide a core, but can’t go too deep into many other topics – or if it should be the responsibility of the employer. Some libraries end up teaching people these skills, at least in part, because they aren’t taught or can’t be taught in graduate coursework.

Several participants noted a shift in hiring practices that have sought to prioritize 21st Century Skills. While this shift has allowed organizations to recruit staff who might be more embedded in the community and customer service driven, they have also recognized the need to rebalance. These organizations have recognized the need for library fundamentals. These shifts have revealed the need for larger organizations to hire for the team, not a one-size fits all approach to talent recruitment. One participant noted the ways that core library skills and 21st Century Skills come into play in the context of civil service exams, where there may be a core group of individuals who demonstrate competence in the core skills of librarianship, but the hiring process becomes a winnowing of those that complement core skills with 21st Century Skills. Even if LIS curricula can’t accommodate specific courses on specific 21st Century Skills, programs might find ways for the skills to be reinforced in the grading and evaluation of individuals’ performance in courses.

Several participants, especially library directors, noted a lack of preparation among new professionals for some of the realities of public library management. Most public librarians will need some skill in facilities management, including working with contractors and maintenance staff. Additionally, most public librarians will eventually serve in some management or branch management capacity and need skill in employee relations and conflict resolution. Real concern was expressed about some new professionals’ seeming disinterest in management. These concerns are compounded for those that find themselves in small libraries where they may be the only degreed professional on staff.
There was a question about whether larger organizations should begin to reevaluate requirements and competencies for positions for which the most important skills (merchandising, marketing) are not really core to a LIS graduate program. There are opportunities in public libraries for people from other sectors that have practical experience in the services libraries seek to offer. More and more organizations are abandoning the idea of only having degreed librarians among the professional ranks, opening the leadership to varied professional backgrounds (journalists, anthropologists) that can help push the library mission forward.

**How can we – LIS graduate programs, public libraries, library associations – contribute to the development of these necessary skills?**

There was almost universal agreement for *stronger collaboration between public library practitioners and LIS educators* – and even among community organizations. This involves discussions about what kind of library staff institutions are hiring, what kinds of skills are needed, and the opportunities and threats that are shaping practice. Further, educators expressed interest in having opportunities to bring classes to libraries. Public libraries could support the work of LIS education by making themselves available as mentors or career coaches to students, grounding theory with advice from practice. There was also an appeal for public library directors to serve on advisory groups for graduate programs.

There were strong feelings around *internships*, everything from mandatory internships (to experience the challenges of public librarianship), to a pre-internship (before enrollment in a program) to serve as a sort of discernment, to a longer and intensive volunteer project that engages students with a community and its needs. One proposal involved a limited experiential project in which a student undertakes one of the more complicated public library transactions (e.g. a reference interview with someone with limited English proficiency) to help determine their true interest in the field. There were suggestions for greater collaboration between LIS programs and public libraries to place graduate assistantships in public libraries or even coordination to have undergraduates (considering a master’s program) placed in public libraries to experience the work.

While internships hold appeal for infusing practical experience into theoretical preparation, several participants noted the challenge and burden this may pose to students. Many students work full-time non-library jobs, manage family obligations, and handle a full course load. This leaves them with few opportunities for participation in internships or other practical work experience. This challenge is then made worse when new professionals enter the job search only to find entry-level jobs that require experience working in libraries. The simple availability of internships isn’t always enough. It requires a careful integration with the graduate program to accommodate the availability of students.

*Continuing education and professional development* play an important role in libraries and should be factored into planning for new professionals. Managers should plan for new professionals to participate in the strong cultures of learning in libraries, planning for their
participation in continuing education and professional development to enhance and expand the learning that happens in formal library education programs.

There was a call for *honesty and candor in talking with people about careers in libraries*. While recruitment efforts promote the good experiences in libraries, prospective professionals need a realistic picture of a day in the life of a public library. This could both inform expectations and be used as course resources to help students prepare accordingly.

A longer strategy discussion of *recruitment* focused on attracting and developing young people before library school through community youth engagement and involvement of teens as volunteers or on library boards.

While many stakeholders have contributed to *competencies* for various areas of the profession, it may be time to review the profession’s competencies, their roles in the accreditation process, and confirm some of the core skills identified through these and other conversations.

**What do participants in this dialogue commit to doing to advance the conversation and to develop the strongest LIS workforce?**

Several participants noted the need for very focused, purposeful conversations with the relevant parties – library directors, program deans and directors – that have the authority to move from ideas to implementation. There were differing perspectives about whether this should be a facilitated retreat, invitational summit, open meeting, etc.

One participant noted the absence of students’ voices from these conversations. Any attempt to move forward should intentionally include the perspectives of students and new professionals.

Building on the support for stronger collaboration between public library practitioners and LIS educators, there was a call for a formalized group or body to compile and promote a program of model practices that support collaboration between public library practitioners and LIS educators. Several public librarians noted that as they change their institutional practices (around internships, mentorship, etc.) they would need a place to share that information so that other institutions and LIS programs might adapt and improve those practices. The challenge to this is that many of these conversations and actions might best be achieved at the local level, between institutions and their “feeding” LIS programs. The needs of one library or region for their new professionals likely differs from what others need. In place of mandating practices, the model practices could provide institutions and LIS programs with more effective ways to engage. One individual noted that this connects to the Committee on Accreditation’s *Standard I – Systematic Planning* to help ensure that accredited programs involve the constituencies that the program seeks to serve. Individual program’s responses to this standard will vary, but model practices might help programs and the Committee on Accreditation better articulate adherence to the standard.
Some participants noted the need for a high-level conversation about the evolving role of libraries. There needs to be some common ground around the changing role and responsibility of public libraries in communities before we can begin to articulate and come to agreement on the skills needed.