What Do We Know So Far?

A review of library degree coursework and professional development opportunities

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Overview and Methods

Skills for 21st-Century Librarians: Task Force for the Development of a NILPPA-Informed Programming Librarian Curriculum is an IMLS-funded grant initiative of the American Library Association (ALA) Public Programs Office. Working with Knology[1], a social science research organization, we share key findings from the first activity conducted as part of the grant, a landscape review of course syllabi currently being taught in MLIS programs and through professional development nationwide.

In earlier work, as part of the National Impact of Library Public Programs Assessment (NILPPA),[2] we identified nine competency areas[3] for library workers who do public programming.

The goals of the landscaping task were threefold: 1) To assess how widely each competency area is instructed; 2) To begin identifying levels of mastery within each competency area; and 3) To identify common themes among training opportunities in and out of academic institutions.

This key findings document is a brief overview. Additional detail about these findings will be shared during a series of facilitated conversations with project advisors.

For this landscape review, we collected 11 syllabi from library degree programs, and materials from more than three hundred courses, conferences, and professional development workshops outside of universities. The analysis was conducted iteratively. First, we coded each course for the presence or absence of each competency area. Second, we more closely examined all courses and training sessions relating to each competency area except "content knowledge." Third, we reviewed all items qualitatively and identified themes.

Professional Development Opportunities

- The majority of professional development trainings (125 of 232) focused on **Content Knowledge** as a core competency, but took a range of forms. Some

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[1] Knology
[2] American Library Association, 2019; Norlander, et al., 2020; Sheppard et al., 2019.
[3] Library Programming Competencies (excerpt from Sheppard et al., 2019)

focused on general content areas like digital literacy, STEM, or health topics, while others taught how to replicate particular programs like an edible book festival or financial literacy classes.

- Many professional development sessions (88 of 232) incorporated **Event Planning** by first presenting a particular program and then helping participants work through how to adapt it for their particular context and community. Some focused on structuring programs to be inclusive of a particular audience, such as adults with disabilities or bilingual community members - which often fell under **Knowledge of the Community** as well (82 of 232).
- The most commonly taught **Interpersonal Skills** (64 of 232) were facilitation skills. Many of these sessions were associated with Libraries Transforming Communities[4] and taught specific facilitation methodologies. Several trainings also included information on collaborating with partners, networking, and getting buy-in.
- For **Outreach and Marketing** (62 of 232), we saw a focus on reaching populations not currently well served by libraries or initiating new partner relationships to increase capacity of both the partner and the library.
- Relatively few professional development sessions addressed the competency area of **Creativity** (29 of 232), but one notable example was PLA's "Outside the Box Programs."
- When **Organizational Skills** (22 of 232) were taught explicitly, these included skills ranging from logic modeling to creating a replicable planning process that could be used over and over again. These also included some technical skills relating to setting up accounts and running videoconference programs.
- **Evaluation Skills** (20 of 232) focused on designing learning outcomes, evaluating specific program types, and using metrics – as well as one four-part series called "EvalBasics" from the National Network of the Library of Medicine.
- Finally, only a very few trainings taught any kind of **Financial Skills** (9 of 232). These trainings included general grant-writing, pre-application webinars about applying to specific grants, and a few trainings about staying on a budget more generally.

MLIS Coursework

- **Knowledge of the Community** (12 of 17) was the most common competency covered, primarily how to develop programs that address community needs and how to effectively collaborate with community partners. Examples of this include units or assigned readings on developing meaningful relationships with community partners, providing valuable information from the library to those who would benefit from it, and how to make sure all audiences feel welcome and included at the library.
- **Event Planning** (10 of 17) was also frequently taught in MLIS courses, often by requiring students to write an event proposal or plan an event.
- Community engagement in rural libraries as well as social media strategies for sharing information about upcoming programs were some of the ways courses

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[4] [Libraries Transforming Communities](#)

covered **Outreach and Marketing** (9 of 17). One course had students develop an outreach plan. Others offered strategies for reaching specific audiences.

- **Organizational Skills** (4 of 17) included the practical side of helping programs run smoothly, as well as a range of project management tasks.
- **Interpersonal Skills** (8 of 17) focused on helping students develop writing and communication skills to interact with a range of stakeholders. One course taught students to effectively communicate recommendations for program improvement.
- Learning how to conduct an **Evaluation** (8 of 17) occurred largely through a hands-on approach, designing assessment plans and even requiring students to observe and evaluate a library program they attended.
- **Financial Skills** (2 of 17), **Creativity** (3 of 17)**, and Content Knowledge** (0 of 17) appeared least frequently in MLIS courses, likely because these are more case specific and challenging to teach apart from a particular instance of application.

Preliminary Observations

The most obvious difference between formal academic coursework and professional development sessions is the relative emphasis on **Content Knowledge**. Professional development largely teaches programming skills in the applied context of some particular program or topic, while academic coursework may be more general in its emphasis -- as is appropriate to the longer time scale.

We also note the relative lack of training in **Evaluation** and **Financial Skills** in either library degree programs or continuing professional education. Both of these competency areas contribute to the sustainability of library programming - and library workers would benefit from more training in these areas.