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Abstract

After participating in a multi-year project considering the future directions for library and information science (LIS) education, the authors of this paper realized an essential aspect of the nature of libraries and librarianship was continually overlooked or sidestepped in the events and discussions. That is, libraries as institutions and many of the actions of library professionals are inherently political, yet LIS education has not traditionally prepared students for them. Confronting this aspect of LIS education and the profession in general and creating curriculum that emphasizes the politics of librarianship will better prepare students to serve their patrons, their communities, and their institutions. Such an educational approach would emphasize preparing future library professionals in areas such as leadership, education, activism and advocacy, community service and engagement, policy and law, rights and justice, and marketing and evaluation, resulting in the politically-savvy librarians ready to be activists for their institutions and communities. This paper explores the design of library education, criticism of library education, and the actual environment of contemporary librarians as the context for suggesting this significant change in the focus of library education. We live in a political world, and it's time we prepare our students for this world.

Library Education Matters to A Lot of People, Not Just Librarians

The College of Information Studies at the University of Maryland has spent the past few years working on the *Re-Envisioning the MLS* project. During 2014-2015 we brought together administrators, professionals, national leaders, scholars, and other stakeholders to help us identify priorities in LIS education. In identifying priorities we focused on real discussions and asked “tough” questions about the true nature of LIS and LIS education, even going so far as to ask “do we really need the MLS anymore?” While the events and publications helped us identify many new important educational goals and outcomes for library education to pursue (Bertot, Sarin, & Percell, 2015; Bertot, J. C., & Sarin, L. 2015; Bertot, J. C., Sarin, L.

C., & Jaeger, P. T. 2016). This effort also demonstrated to us the long-standing issues that have been a challenge to library education since it was first formalized.

Members of the field have a long history of self-reflection and self-doubt about the education programs that prepare them for the profession. Formalized education programs for librarianship date back 130 years in the United States. The standardized Master of Library Science (MLS)/Master of Library and Information Science (MLIS) (and other variations) degree is now over 50 years old and two-year library degrees have been the norm for more than 30 years (Murray, 1978; Swigger, 2012). Yet, distress about library education has been a continuous concern throughout this time.

In 1985, a library school professor created “An Anthology of Abuse” documenting the different criticisms of library education up to that point. These ranged from the perceived limitations of the faculty to the perceived limitations of the curriculum to the perceived limitations of the students themselves (Rothstein, 1985). This list was expanded by another author a few years later (Bohannon, 1991). In looking at the discourse, it is hard not to conclude that the library profession tends to see the new as a crisis rather than an opportunity.

In 2005, Andrew Dillon and April Norris applied the term “crying wolf” to describe the seeming need for librarianship to continually question education in the field and suggested that the perception of crisis was a way for the profession to avoid substantively changing. This avoidance of evolution was cleverly labeled the “panda syndrome” in the 1990s, reflecting an animal that has notably failed to evolve to its own detriment (Sutton & Van House, 1998; Van House & Sutton, 1996). In short, instead of perceiving changes and challenges in society, changes in technology, and changes in the needs of the profession as opportunities to improve education and in turn the impacts made by programs graduates, many in the field react to each change or challenge as “an existential crisis that threatens the nature of the field” (Jaeger, 2010, p. 290). We have, for example, viewed newspapers, recorded music, and films at various points a threat to librarianship as a profession and libraries as an institution (McCrosen, 2006; Preer, 2006).

For all of this ongoing concern, libraries have never been as widely or heavily used as they are now, nor have they provided as impressive an array of services and programs for their communities. From the library community's adoption of service roles for immigrants, to digital literacy and inclusion, government services, job training, and access to food, libraries have demonstrated their role as institutions of education, public discourse, and equality (McCook, 2002; Thompson, Jaeger, Taylor, Subramaniam, & Bertot, 2014). In short, libraries inform, enable, equalize, and lead (Bertot, 2014). Such actions occur in many different contexts: education, inclusion, employment, social services, public spaces, digital literacy, and community development, as well as other community needs (Jaeger, Taylor, Gorham, Kettlich, Sarin, & Peterson, 2014).

Along with providing access to materials in various formats (as they have done since the mid-1800s), libraries now are a primary source by which communities gain access to computers, digital literacy, and digital inclusion; access to and help with a wide range of social and government services; help in responding to disasters; partnerships with other community institutions to create new and innovative services; and advocacy for human rights and the promotion of social justice in their communities (Gorham, Taylor, & Jaeger, 2016; Jaeger, Gorham, Bertot, & Sarin, 2014; Jaeger, Taylor, & Gorham, 2015; Thompson et al, 2014). The performance of these roles is like so many things, heavily shaped by the political environment around libraries in general and the environments of the specific communities they serve.

The ever-evolving and expanding contributions of libraries represent an opportunity to re-envision and recreate the MLS degree program to better prepare students for both the amazing roles that librarians now play and ready them to be innovators of new contributions to their communities. We must make sure future librarians are being prepared for the realities of the environments in which they are going to be working, to determine and evaluate the needs and expectations individuals and communities may have, AND to respond accordingly.

The need for training future librarians for the true nature of the profession emerged rapidly and consistently throughout the Re-Envisioning the MLS

project¹. During year-one we hosted numerous speaking events and engagement sessions, conducted regional visits across the state of Maryland, spoke with a range of leaders in the information professions, in addition to continual research and analysis of relevant literature and trends. Some of the key findings identified were (see the [final report](#) for a complete list):

The Shift in Focus to People and Communities.

The shift de-emphasizes collections to focus more on individuals and the communities they serve. In particular to how institutions can facilitate community and individual change and transformation through learning, making, content creation, and other forms of active and interactive engagement.

Core Values Remain Essential. Participants articulated a core set of values that are fundamental to the MLS degree and information professionals that included ensuring access, equity, intellectual freedom, privacy, inclusion human rights, learning, social justice, preservation and heritage, open government, and civic engagement.

Competencies for Future Information Professionals.

Information professionals need to have a set of core competencies that include the ability to: lead and manage projects and people; facilitate learning and education either through direct or indirect instruction; to work with, and train others to use, a variety of technologies. As well as marketing and advocacy skills; strong public speaking and written communication skills; a strong desire to work with the public; problem-solving and the ability to think and adapt instantaneously; knowledge of the principles and applications of fundraising, budgeting, and policymaking; and relationship building among staff, patrons, community partners, and funders.

Knowing and Leveraging the Community. There is a need for information professionals who can fully identify the different populations and needs of the communities that they serve. By understanding their challenges and underlying opportunities, they can adapt and respond effectively to their individual needs.

The common thread among these finds for the authors

¹ Visit hackmls.umd.edu for full text of all documentation and to view the archive of recorded events.

is their political nature and the political savvy necessary to address them. In order for a librarian to fully respond to individual community needs, they must understand the types of users they are working for as well as those who aren't using their services. They must identify resources needed to serve these individuals or groups, create justifications for these resources using real data, and then make the case for why the resources are necessary to those in power, whether it be the provost in a university, a principal or superintendent in a school, or to the voters who must vote to approve a new tax or millage in order to pay for new services or facilities. To be effective in these librarians must understand this political process and tactics that can be used to get them to Vote Yes.

Challenges in Library Education

University-level library education has been ongoing for nearly 150 years, and the criticisms of its failings are the same age. Even the quickest look through library discourse reveals a mind-boggling range of perceived faults – many contradicting one another – and numerous pronouncements of the death of library education. Based on a fairly random collection of papers from the past thirty years, library education has been deemed a failure because:

- We have not demonstrated the authority of our profession to other fields (Dillon & Norris, 2005);
- There is no agreed upon core of library education, so we therefore do too many different things and we cannot adequately express our value (Haycock, 2005);
- There is not enough focus on technology in library education (Watkins, 1994);
- There is not enough focus on collaboration in library education (Marcum, 1990);
- Faculty should be practitioners rather than PhDs (Eschelman, 1983);
- The library school curriculum is too narrow (Budd, 1992);
- Library education perpetuates unhelpful myths about the importance of libraries (Martell, 1984);
- Library education lacks theory (Cossette, 2009);
- Library education pays too much attention to theory (Gorman, 2003);
- There is too much emphasis on research (Cox, 2010);
- Library schools are trying to be both professional education and a research discipline (Lynch, 2008);
- Library education is too user-focused (Markey, 2004);
- Library education is trying to be both idealistic and

utilitarian (Dick, 1999).

So, our programs are too broad and too narrow, too library-focused and not sufficiently library-focused; too long and too short; too technology-focused and not sufficiently technology-focused; and too theory-focused and not sufficiently theory-focused.

These are conflicting and sometimes very confusing messages especially in the context of the Re-Envisioning findings – we're too user-focused? Seriously? But while the messages surrounding LIS education are confusing there is certainly evidence that there hasn't been enough evolution in LIS education over the past 50 years.

In 1950, library school curriculum across programs tended to focus on administration, collection development, reference, classification, and history (Leigh, 1950). Many of the MLS programs today are distressingly closer to 1950 in what they teach than they are in preparing their students to work in the world of today. Markey (2004) concluded that typical course offerings could be grouped into five broad categories: organization; reference; foundations; management; and research methodology of information technology. While these are important they do not reflect the primary roles of librarianship today.

Many of these criticisms have at least some level of validity. For example, as is raised in a number of the items listed above, many library courses in information schools are taught by people who have little to no experience or interest in libraries. This situation is a loss in terms of the practical, applied knowledge that the faculty member can provide, as well as career guidance and help in networking for jobs. On the other hand, it might balance out with the diversity of perspectives added from different fields of expertise and the broader knowledge of an area – such as, expertise in management rather than just library management.

Like the issue of the background of those teaching in library and information science programs, many of the other concerns raised with regards to library education have some merit. However, most of the issues noted are usually either very small or very large and are not necessarily practical. None ultimately challenge the underlying concepts that are central to library education, and most importantly few if any acknowledge the political nature of libraries and librarianship as a central part of library

education. But first, let's examine the ways that the field currently engages – or more often does not engage – the political world.

Ride the Waves and Don't Ask Where They Go

Our field has evidenced a long-standing desire to engage in communities, yet we are often hesitant to describe our impacts on these communities. In many cases, our institutions fail to get the credit, acknowledgement, or support that they deserve in their communities because we do not clearly articulate what these institutions do and what they need to succeed. Buschman, Rosenzweig, and Harger put it well, “We somehow seem to be a profession startled to find that we really do have deeply held convictions, that our words really do have meaning and consequence, and that when we act on our professional values someone actually notices” (1994, p. 576).

Much of hesitancy to engage policy and politics and advocate for the continued survival of the institutions – and to prepare future librarians to do so – is derived from the thorny idea of neutrality. In one sense, neutrality is used to indicate that a collection should include myriad viewpoints on any topic. In the other sense, neutrality is used to assert that the institutions themselves should not have viewpoints to avoid alienating any community members.

Wanting a collection to represent a range of views is a fine goal, but wanting the profession to be neutral on issues that impact our jobs, institutions, and the people we serve is cowardice. It is also unrealistic. People have perspectives, as do publications, collections, databases, search engines, and technologies. Not a single item or person in a library is neutral. There is no way the institution or the profession can be neutral.

Nor should they be. If you want to help the communities you serve, you will not do a very good job of it if you don't fight for their rights and needs. Your institution will not be able to do much good if you do not work for funding and policy decisions that support the institution and its goals. “If the librarians cannot be motivated to take a stand on pressing social issues out of a sense of moral duty, certainly the librarians should break his or her neutrality in the name of self-interest” (Good, 2007, p. 28).

The steadfastness of this neutrality stance, in combina-

tion with libraries' struggle to articulate their value in an environment increasingly hostile to the notion of public good, frequently places libraries in the position of having major political and policy decisions happen to them, with their voice basically unexpressed, unheard, or ignored (Jaeger & Bertot, 2011; Jaeger, Bertot, & Gorham, 2013; Jaeger, Gorham, Bertot, & Sarin, 2014). The gravity of this situation is highlighted when we consider how these very decisions shape funding, freedom of access to information, intellectual property, and library management, among many other core elements that determine the extent to which libraries can successfully serve their communities.

Some librarians present a neutral – that is, apolitical – posture as an act of service to patrons, while others see the commitment to a plurality of opinions in library collections as mitigating against political engagement (Byrne, 2003; McMenemy, 2007). Neutrality, however, is an unrealistic ideal that relies on the non-existent opinion-free librarian selecting non-existent bias-free materials (Alfino & Pierce, 2001; Budd, 2006; Burton, 2009; Samek, 2001; Wiegand, 2011). Critics of neutrality have noted a huge range of additional flaws in the position (Burton, 2009; Cornelius, 2004; Durrani & Smallwood, 2006; Floridi, 2002; Graham, 2003; Shavit, 1986). As a practical matter, proclamations of neutrality are not truly representative of the reality of the activities of the library profession.

Consider the context of teaching digital literacy as an example of myriad ways in which neutrality simply does not work:

- Materials of all types – including everything online – are not neutral and, as educators, librarians must make patrons aware of this reality (Alfino & Pierce, 2001; Budd, 2006; Burton, 2009);
- Teaching people to be able evaluate among the potential information sources online is impossible if the librarian maintains a stance of neutrality pretending that some sources are not more accurate or reliable than others (Graham, 2003; Jaeger, Bertot, Thompson, Katz, & DeCoster, 2012);
- Presenting all sides of an issue as having equal moral weight is engaging in moral relativism and misleading patrons, particularly when they are searching through the great many sources of varying quality and authority online (Good, 2007);

- Patrons will have their own views and interests, which will be part of how they learn digital literacy (Cornelius, 2004; Floridi, 2002); and, most holistically,
- Providing free access to information is an inherently political act (Knox, 2013).

These considerations can be made more tangible by thinking about teaching digital literacy to a middle school student doing research on civil rights protests. If the first result they get in a search is the site of a hate group and the second is a news parody site, a librarian who does not explain the true nature of these sites and how to try to identify similar untrustworthy sources of information may be maintaining neutrality but is certainly not fulfilling his or her role as an educator.

By simultaneously declaring themselves central to democracy and above the world of politics that all other public institutions inhabit, libraries (public libraries in particular) have “evolved into a paradox” (Shavit, 1986, p. 3). Political and policy decisions shape what libraries can do, but libraries commonly say they want nothing to do with politics and policy. The result is a self-imposed voicelessness on many important issues with dramatic impacts on libraries, including their ability to articulate and demonstrate their central roles in their communities (Ingraham, 2015; Jaeger & Bertot, 2011; Jaeger, Bertot, & Gorham, 2013; Jaeger, Gorham, Bertot, & Sarin, 2014; Nardini, 2001). In this case, the approach of riding the waves – trying to avoid controversy or responsibility – leaves our professionals and institutions hopelessly adrift in debates that shape the institution and the contributions it can make. If we want to break this cycle, a significant rethink of the point of library education is desperately needed.

The Political World Comes to Call

Ironically, as libraries have increasingly taken on essential roles to promote human rights and social justice communities, library support – both financial and political – has been slashed at the local, state, and federal levels. This overall denigration of the value of libraries among economic, political, and policy-making circles has accelerated since the Ronald Reagan administration in the 1980s, being driven by the widespread embrace of the principles of neoliberal economic and neoconservative political ideologies. These forces work in tandem to undermine the value accorded to public goods and public services in policy-making and political contexts by demanding that

public institutions demonstrate the economic contributions of service to the public. And by trying to remain divorced from political concerns, libraries have greatly increased the damage that they have suffered as a result.

The neoliberal economic ideology is an approach to the economy that extends beyond economic policy, mandating that decisions of governance be based on what is best for markets, as free markets are seen as being dependent on all decisions reinforcing their freedom. Under this approach, economic, political, and social decisions are driven by market concerns and organized by the language and rationality of markets. The neoliberal ideology is designed to support the consolidation of wealth and influence through the “creative destruction” of institutions with egalitarian objectives (Harvey, 2007a, 2007b). As such, neoliberalism is the key force in moving support away from public entities to private ones, serving to undermine the ability of many public institutions – such as libraries and schools – to meet the same goals that they were once able to (Buschman, 2012). As president, Reagan liked to frequently repeat the joke that the nine scariest words in the English language were: “I’m from the government and I’m here to help.”

In 1987, after being elected Prime Minister for a third consecutive term, Margaret Thatcher stated: “There is no such thing as society;” instead “the great driving engine, the driving force of life” is individuals and groups wanting to make money (Thatcher, 1987). This statement was a clear window into the thinking of adherents of neoliberalism. Without society, nothing can be the fault of society, alleviating government of the need to look after members of society who are in need of help. Without the need to support members of a society, institutions of the public good become utterly superfluous. Now, there are at least three different major arguments that society does not exist, all emanating from the neoliberal economic ideology and being united by a central premise that rejects any central structure binding people together beyond economics (Dean, 2013). The past several decades have provided numerous other examples of this approach, with many attempts to transform previously common functions of society into ones of self-care, using the language of consumerism to do so. A famous example of this was President George W. Bush’s ultimately unsuccessful proposal to change Social Security to individual retirement accounts, under which citizens would

have been left to fend for themselves in the market. The movement to require all government functions to justify themselves in economic terms may be the essence of the neoliberal economic ideology, with many public goods being assessed as cost calculations. Al Gore spent much of his eight years as Bill Clinton's Vice President spearheading efforts throughout government – known collectively as National Performance Review studies – to focus on efficiency, productivity, and profitability rather than good governance or the public good. A little remembered part of the early development of e-government was that Gore initially advocated for it as a revenue stream for government, which would have forced citizens to pay for searches, transactions, and interactions with government that they would only be able to do online. Ultimately, the notion that all government functions can and should have a clear economic value has led to dwindling investments in and support of education, physical infrastructure, benefits, workplace safety, environmental safety, and libraries, among many other government functions.

Neoliberalism has become the driver of “policy and economic discussions,” but it also “has a strong and fluid cultural aspect” (Buschman, 2012, p. 9). Thus, as the neoliberal economic ideology has greatly decreased regulation of the corporation, the moralistic aspect of the neoconservative political ideology has increased the regulation of the citizen. The neoconservative political ideology is based on the idea that the state should exercise power as moral authority rather than through representative governance. A neoconservative state is strong and willing to use that strength to accomplish policy goals that may be driven entirely by moral evaluations, such as “wars of choice.” Limitations on previously established rights, such as limiting women's access to the services of reproductive choice as a way to curtail the ability to seek an abortion, amount to moralistic regulations on citizens. The moral-basis of governance is embraced by the elected officials. President George W. Bush famously spoke of his decisions in terms of “political capital” that he had earned and could spend as he saw fit, rather than in terms of trying to represent the interests and perspectives of the governed.

Under the combination of the neoconservative and neoliberal ideologies, the rights of corporations prevail over the rights of both individuals and educational institutions. When failed Republican presidential nominee Mitt

Romney stated, “Corporations are people, too” in a 2012 campaign speech, it was no mistake. Corporations are also much more likely than individuals to garner political support and funding for the infrastructure on which they depend – roads, railways, shipping, and power and other utilities – and the government generally acts to ensure that those corporate infrastructure needs are met.

Since the combination of these ideologies swept into common usage under the Reagan and Thatcher administrations in the United States and the United Kingdom, the result has been radical change through reductions in tax rates, spending cuts for public services, deregulation, and erosions of social support for the public good. In a public discourse in which every public good can be questioned and required to demonstrate a tangible value, economic terminology began to dominate public discourse. Yet, as with librarians and library collections, economics and economic analysts are not neutral. By treating political and moral questions as being interchangeable with economic ones, these ideologies have allowed for political discourse and policy-making processes to question anything to which it is hard to assign a tangible value or that does not comply with a strict moral vision of the government. Being a public good is no longer sufficient to warrant support.

The omnipresence of these ideologies at the federal level has resulted in their widespread adoption in lower levels of government as well. Unfortunately, the market and the government provide services in very different ways. Public goods can deliver many kinds of contributions, supporting democratic equality, social efficiency, and social mobility (Labaree, 1997). However, because many elements of the public good are not easy to monetize, decreasing government support to them will not easily be replaced by support from the market.

In the recent years of the prolonged global economic downturn, the emphasis on the devaluing of public services has been extended under the buzzword of “austerity.” While clearly an intentionally ambiguous term, austerity provides a means to justify deeper cuts into public goods and services that cannot articulate an economically-quantified value and/or that are deemed morally objectionable under the neoconservative ideology. As the language of value is based on economic contributions rather than public good, the terms of austerity are clearly biased against educational and cultural institutions

like libraries. By targeting institutions such as libraries, austerity policies ironically serve to undermine one of few institutions that exist to provide the digital literacy skills and education necessary for many people to be able to participate in the workforce.

The economic climate in the country has played a tremendous role in how the value of information is discussed, which in turn has affected how libraries operate. In the early 1980s, Sheldon Wolin (1981) described a shift from political rhetoric and belief informed by intellectual and philosophical groundings (e.g., English common law and the Enlightenment) to a political landscape that placed enormous emphasis on the economy and capitalism. The current situation, as it has evolved since the start of the Great Recession, serves as a microcosm for the interrelationship between public libraries, policy-making, and political processes.

Politicians often campaign on platforms that emphasize austerity (any tax is a bad tax) and cost-cutting, and aggressively cut budgets of libraries and other institutions for the public good. All the while, earlier policy decisions that weakened the economy have led to an increasing number of people turning to public libraries for help with finding a job, applying for social services, interacting with government agencies, and learning new digital skills through the technology access and assistance provided by the library, as well as availing themselves of entertainment options for which they can no longer afford to pay (Bertot, Jaeger, & Greene, 2013; Sigler et al, 2012; Taylor, Jaeger, McDermott, Kodama, & Bertot, 2012).

Notwithstanding a growth in demand for their services, libraries are increasingly appearing in political debates as a symbol of big government by politicians who seek to curtail spending and/or limit social mobility of under-represented populations (Bertot, Jaeger, & Sarin, 2012). Additionally, many laws have been passed in the last two decades that bring political debates – filtering, copyright, national security, privacy – into the library, affecting both library functions and perceptions of libraries (Jaeger, Gorham, Bertot, & Sarin, 2014).

Even though the main economic arguments for austerity in America were based on poor assumptions with data, incorrect math, and data errors in spreadsheets that resulted in wildly incorrect results, these arguments continue to

hold sway among conservative policy-makers (Herndon, Ash, & Pollin, 2013). The end result is that, despite libraries increasingly taking on essential roles to ensure access to information and create digitally inclusive communities, library support at local, state, and federal levels has dwindled. Libraries have often failed not only to directly engage these political issues, but also to even define their essential roles within these issues in a way that resonates with policy-makers concerned primarily with the economic contributions of public services. If we do not prepare information professionals for these realities, we will continue to be unable to engage in these arenas that are vital to the survival of our institutions.

A Library is Inherently Political

As the above discussion hopefully makes clear, libraries are significantly affected by politics in many ways that shape what the institutions can do, what they are required to do, the ways in which they are perceived, and the ways in which they are treated in public discourse and the media. Trying to avoid being politically engaged, even under the cover of “neutrality,” actively hurts libraries, as we are silent about or unprepared to deal with many of the political issues that directly impact our institutions.

The silence on political issues also means that the contributions of libraries they need to convey to their communities, policymakers, funders, and politicians are often unspoken outside the insular world of librarianship. When you do not convey your contributions to the public good, it allows those with competing interests to downplay such contributions, likely for political reasons. In the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina and other major hurricanes along the Gulf Coast in the mid-2000s, libraries played enormously important roles in emergency response and recovery, helping reunite families that had been separated in evacuations, assisting in filling out insurance and FEMA forms, distributing aid and supplies, and much, much more (Bertot, Jaeger, Langa, & McClure, 2006a, 2006b). However, as libraries did not emphasize these contributions and successes to political figures, FEMA was able to take credit for much of the work of libraries – while repeatedly asserting that libraries were of no help – to cover for their own failings and incompetence in response and recovery (Jaeger, Langa, McClure, & Bertot, 2006; Jaeger, Shneiderman, Fleischmann, Preece, Qu, & Wu, 2007).

There is one further political dimension to libraries – their very nature. Creating an institution for the purpose of educating the community with resources and assistance that they can use without cost is an inherently political act. A library represents a political stance, an assertion of the value of spreading knowledge and the importance of equal opportunities. “But what is more important in a library than anything else – than everything else – is the fact that it exists” (MacLeish, 1972, p. 359). To deny the political nature of a library is to deny what makes the institution so unique and so successful.

The inherently political nature of libraries can also be seen in the ways in which they are attacked. From Forbes proclaiming that an MLS is the worst Master’s degree, to campaigns for closing libraries to save money, to claims that Google has replaced libraries, attacks on libraries have a political root in either neoliberal economics or neoconservative politics. The library is frequently chosen as the target because of its success as an institution that challenges the status quo and the powerful. Libraries threaten the politically and economically powerful by trying to empower the most vulnerable and disenfranchised community members to promote equity of opportunity. Educated and empowered masses are much harder for the powerful to control.

Library Education for the Political World

If building and operating a library is an inherently political act and libraries are constantly interacting with the political world, then library education needs to prepare future librarians to successfully navigate a politicized profession. This approach would be a considerable change from the way in which the field has conceived of education thus far, but, as we have tried to detail above, it is a very necessary change for the vitality and sustainability of the field and its institutions. To be the activists that their communities need and effective advocates for their institutions from the day they graduate, LIS students must be well prepared for the political nature of their chosen careers.

Librarianship is a job based on hope. The hopes of teaching children to read, of promoting digital inclusion, of helping people find jobs, of teaching students how to use databases for research, of welcoming newcomers into the community, and so much else. These hopes are the

reasons that most people chose to pursue an MLS/MLIS; these hopes are also what make libraries so uniquely valuable to their communities. Librarians and libraries exist solely to make things better. But being hopeful and wanting to help is not enough for libraries to be successful today. These hopes and the ability to contribute to communities rest on very practical issues of funding and support and policy.

Many educational components can go into preparing current students to be activist librarians ready to engage the political realities that surround the practice of librarianship. At a minimum, MLS/MLIS students need to be immersed in:

- Activism and advocacy – engaging policymakers, politicians, funders, local institutions, and community members about the needs and contributions of the library;
- Leadership – serving as innovators and organizers in their institutions and their communities;
- Public policy and the law – understanding the processes of law and policy and the ways in which they can impact the library, as well as the existing laws and policies that shape the activities of the library;
- Finance, grants, and funding – awareness of budgets and funds sufficient to articulately express the use of funds and the reasons for funding, as well as the skills to approach outside sources for additional funding;
- Marketing and evaluation – generating substantive qualitative and quantitative data about the library and creating effective narratives about library activities and impacts;
- Partnerships/collaboration – building partnerships with other local institutions allows libraries to expand their impact and recognition considerably, achieving much that would not be possible on their own;
- Education and literacy – teaching roles of librarianship, particularly with technology, are key parts of elements of the unique contributions of libraries;
- E-government and social services – the application for and the delivery of social services through libraries – particularly through library technology – is a key intersection of libraries and politics and policy;
- Community outreach and engagement – an important dimension of building and sustaining support in political contexts is building community support and mustering that support when it is needed; and

- Human rights and social justice – libraries play major human rights and social justice roles in their communities and describing library activities in these terms helps to build an easy-to-comprehend narrative of the contributions and necessity of the library in the community.

This list may not be complete, but it is what we have figured out thus far. At different LIS institutions, these components could be given different weights depending on the focus of the institution, the location of the institution, and the primary employers of their graduates.

The politically-prepared, activist librarian will be ready to demonstrate and communicate the value of the library to all of its stakeholders, policymakers, and funders. This approach does not mean preparing students to lobby for specific candidates, engage in politicking, and put political signs on the front lawn of the library; it means preparing students to fight for the library and the people who depend on it. Political and social changes of the past several decades have made it abundantly clear that we cannot rely on others to fight these fights for us. We must inspire our own new professionals to be activists and advocates.

A library “is an achievement in and of itself – one of the greatest of human achievements because it combines and justifies so many others” (MacLeish, 1972, p. 358). Since that sentence was written, the changes to the political, social, technological, and media environments around libraries have been titanic. The inherent truth of the sentence, however, has not changed. The evolution of libraries over the past four decades has been one of growth, expanding their contributions to their communities in myriad ways, inspired both by the capabilities of new technologies and the dwindling roles of the institutions of the public good.

Libraries serve more individuals and greater percentages of their communities than ever before, in traditional ways and in ways that could not have been imagined even twenty years ago. Since our institutions and their contributions have changed so greatly in recent years, we need to expand how future professionals are prepared for the field. Libraries as institutions and librarianship as a profession is inherently political; it is long past time that we educate students accordingly.

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