

# The Urgent Need for Political Literacy in LIS Education

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## ABSTRACT

Libraries are essential institutions, yet they face escalating threats from political pressures, ideological attacks, and unstable funding. Despite libraries' reliance on public support, current library and information science (LIS) programs often fail to adequately prepare graduates to navigate the complex political and financial landscapes required to secure sustainable funding and advocate effectively. This white paper examines these gaps in LIS education, underscoring the urgent need for LIS education reform. This reform would include adding political literacy as a learning outcome for LIS programs. Political literacy is being "knowledgeable of basic political concepts and facts" (Cassel and Lo 1997, 321).

**The stakes for libraries have never been higher.** The Trump administration has moved aggressively to restructure federal education funding and dismantle long-standing protections for marginalized communities—threatening the stability, autonomy, and future of libraries nationwide. The White House has issued an executive order to shut down the U.S. Department of Education and return authority to the states, undermining federal education programs and services. Simultaneously, the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS)—the primary source of federal library funding—has begun terminating grants and laying off staff. At the time of this writing, states including California, Connecticut, and Washington have already received official notices of IMLS grant cancellations, cutting off critical funding for library services in real time.

These actions come alongside a broader political agenda that denies the existence of book bans (book bans are NOT a hoax), rolls back diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives, freezes federal research funding, and emboldens efforts to criminalize librarianship at the state level. Across the country, politicians who promote censorship, restrict access to information, and target the very communities that libraries exist to serve are shaping local, state, and federal government bodies.

This paper briefly synthesizes existing literature to highlight gaps in MLIS curricula related to advocacy, policymaking, and funding strategies. It proposes actionable reforms for LIS educators, accreditation bodies, and policymakers to better equip LIS graduates with the skills needed to navigate today's political climate and safeguard libraries' indispensable role in society.

## Why Reform Is Urgent: Advocacy and Policy in LIS Curricula

The absence of comprehensive training in funding, advocacy, and policymaking in LIS curricula has left graduates unprepared to address library work's financial and political realities. While some MLIS programs offer relevant courses, they are rarely mandatory.

Over 90 percent of library funding is derived from local, state, and federal sources, yet these funds are subject to frequent fluctuations and political pressures. A recent informal poll of Maine Library Association members revealed that sustained funding is the largest advocacy concern among librarians, emphasizing the urgency of addressing these gaps in LIS education. Without proper training, library professionals lack the tools to counteract these threats and secure sustainable funding, making library advocacy a matter of social equity.

Studies such as “The Library Advocacy Gap” highlight these deficiencies, revealing that librarians with higher political self-efficacy (LPSE) are more likely to engage in advocacy activities such as building relationships with stakeholders, educating the community on information policy issues, and advocating for library funding. Political self-efficacy describes a person's belief that they possess the skills to influence the political system (Caprara et al. 2009). Librarians' political self-efficacy reflects their confidence in influencing political decisions to benefit libraries and their communities. A national survey of professional librarians found a strong correlation between high LPSE and active participation in advocacy efforts, yet only 27 percent of respondents felt their MLIS curriculum provided sufficient advocacy training, and just 31 percent believed they received adequate instruction on how public policy impacts libraries (Durney 2023).

This study also includes a 2022 review of LIS programs in the US, which found that only two explicitly list advocacy-related courses, while six offer policy courses. Association for Library and Information Science Education (ALISE) data showed that few programs highlight advocacy or policy as concentrations or core areas of study, and policy courses, while more common, are rarely required. Where included, advocacy education is often limited to single lectures or optional courses, failing to provide comprehensive training (Durney 2023). The ALA Core Competencies, revised in 2023, outline the foundational knowledge expected of MLIS graduates, including the ability to identify significant social and economic policies affecting libraries, understand the legal framework in which libraries operate, and effectively advocate for libraries, patrons, and services (American Library Association 2022). How can students obtain these core competencies if relevant coursework is not available?

Scholars such as Jaeger, Bertot, and Gorham have called for LIS curricula to engage more directly with policies and politics, arguing that LIS graduates should have the skills necessary to effectively engage policymakers, politicians, funders, and community members. In “Wake Up the Nation,” Jaeger, Bertot, and Gorham stress that public libraries are deeply affected by political and policymaking processes that shape funding, services, and roles within communities. They argue that increased engagement in policy research and advocacy is necessary for libraries to navigate these challenges successfully (Jaeger, Bertot, and Gorham 2013).

Despite ongoing debate about the role of politics in the classroom, scholars such as Diana Hess and Lauren Gatti assert that political issues should be included in academic discussions. They argue that classrooms should allow students to build deep knowledge about critical controversies affecting the profession and learn to engage in political discourse productively (Hess and Gatti 2010). Similarly, Jaeger and Sarin emphasize the need for LIS programs to inspire future librarians to become activists and advocates, ensuring they are prepared to fight for the library services their communities depend on (Jaeger and Sarin 2016).

In addition to MLIS programs, professional development is a key avenue for filling gaps left by LIS curricula. In “The Library Advocacy Gap,” 64 percent of survey respondents felt that professional development provided sufficient training on advocacy skills, while 57 percent believed these opportunities offered a solid foundation in public policy. Participation in professional development programs, including webinars, legislative library days, and professional associations such as the American Library Association (ALA) correlated positively with librarians’ political self-efficacy. Organizations like the EveryLibrary Institute, ALA, and state library associations provide workshops, training, and action guides to enhance advocacy skills. It is important to note that advocacy skills across various library responsibilities, from leadership and marketing to fundraising, use many of the same skills as advocating with elected officials.

Jaeger and Taylor reinforce the urgency for librarians to “engage, advocate, agitate, repeat,” stressing that “without exaggeration,” the world needs librarians’ expertise regarding information literacy and information policy “more than ever” (Jaeger and Taylor 2019, 191). Bertot and Sarin note that LIS education has a long history of self-reflection and self-doubt regarding its effectiveness (Bertot and Sarin 2016). As libraries face mounting political and financial challenges, reforming LIS curricula to include structured advocacy education is essential to preparing future professionals for the realities of library work.

## Recommendations for Reform

### Assess LIS Curricula

- Conduct comprehensive research to evaluate current LIS curricula, focusing on gaps in training related to funding, advocacy, and policymaking.
- Identify best practices from programs that successfully integrate advocacy and funding education.
- Develop evidence-based recommendations to incorporate these competencies into LIS accreditation standards.

### Expand Advocacy and Policy Education

- Introduce more advocacy and policy courses in LIS programs, offering a mix of required and elective options to ensure all graduates gain foundational knowledge in these areas.
- Emphasize experiential learning through activities like legislative advocacy days, service-learning projects, stakeholder role-play, and classroom debates.
- Integrate political literacy into program learning outcomes, ensuring graduates understand how to influence stakeholders, navigate policy landscapes, and advocate effectively.

### Enhance Faculty Expertise in Political Literacy

- Increase the number of LIS faculty with expertise in political literacy and the intersections of libraries and public policy.

- Promote collaboration and resource sharing within the profession to strengthen educational approaches to advocacy.
- Encourage professional organizations to lead initiatives in developing political literacy education.

### **Cultivate Lifelong Advocacy Skills**

- Recognize that advocacy training is ongoing by providing professional development opportunities tailored to different career stages.
- Encourage library associations, state libraries, and nonprofits to collaborate on offering advocacy training through webinars, conferences, and strategic programming.
- Develop continuing education programs focused on lobbying, coalition-building, nonprofit management, and policy impact.
- Incorporate experiential learning opportunities, such as legislative advocacy days and workshops with subject matter experts outside the library field.

### **Conclusion: The Path Forward: A Dual Approach**

The omission of advocacy, funding, and policymaking training from LIS curricula has far-reaching consequences. Libraries are vital institutions, yet they remain vulnerable to budget cuts, political pressures, and public misunderstanding. Equipping MLIS graduates with advocacy and policy skills is essential to ensure libraries' sustainability and their ability to serve diverse communities effectively. Expanding advocacy education in LIS programs is not merely a curricular improvement—it is a critical step toward safeguarding the future of libraries and the communities they serve.

The future stability and sustainability of libraries depend on the ability of their leaders and staff to advocate effectively and secure funding in an increasingly politicized and challenging environment. Programs like Project 2025 demonstrate the urgent need for library and information science (LIS) education to evolve, ensuring graduates are equipped to navigate these pressures. LIS education must evolve to prepare librarians for immediate political threats and long-term systemic challenges. Programs like Project 2025 demonstrate that libraries are at risk unless LIS graduates have advocacy and policy skills. By embedding advocacy coursework into MLIS programs and strengthening professional development, LIS educators can ensure that future librarians are not only information experts but also advocates who can protect and sustain the institutions that uphold democracy and social equity. This is not just a curricular improvement—it is a necessary transformation to secure the future of libraries.

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## Author

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Sonya holds an MLIS from Simmons College, a BA in Political Science from Framingham State University, and a Ph.D. in Public Policy from the Muskie School at the University of Southern Maine. Her research focuses on how public policy impacts libraries and access to information.

When she's not working or reading, she enjoys the Maine outdoors with her husband, son, and very spoiled chocolate lab.