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LING HWEY JENG, EDITOR

The M.L.S. Degree: Time for a Two-Year Program?

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To make meaningful broad generalizations about today's library world is often difficult. There are just too many different kinds of libraries, librarians, and library activities, the diversity being due in large part to the proliferation in recent years of computerization and other electronic developments. With the increasing complexity and shifting heterogeneity of the library world, it may be asked: How well are library schools preparing students for future participation in the library profession?

To provide a definitive answer is not easy due to the great variety of M.L.S. programs and curricula. Perhaps this is an interim period and the current mélange of library school programs will eventually settle into some consensus where the common element is larger than at present. However, heterogeneity is only part of the difficulty. Another problem, and perhaps more troublesome, is the short duration of study required by most M.L.S. programs. One year, the typical period of full-time study required to gain the professional qualification in most ALA-accredited library schools, is, I believe, not long enough to allow adequate coverage of the topics with which a new library school graduate should be acquainted.

Business administration, social

work, and health services management and hospital administration, to mention only a few disciplines, all typically require two years of full-time study for the professional master's degree. Surely we regard the discipline of library and information science to be just as intellectually rigorous, as broad ranging, and as complex? So, why is the M.L.S., with a few exceptions, only one year's duration? The field of librarianship is vast, a fact patently attested to by the great diversity of M.L.S. curricula. Clearly, not everyone agrees on just what knowledge and skills library schools should imbue in their graduates. But even if some general consensus were reached on what core subjects all library school students should master in their professional training, it seems that there remains very little time in a one-year program to devote to any specialized and extended treatment of either core curricular or other topics.

Most individuals who commence the M.L.S. still come from extremely diverse academic backgrounds. There are few prerequisites for prospective students, apart from an adequate performance in a bachelor's degree and, usually, a respectable score in the GRE. Whatever library schools look for in future students they generally do not re-

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quire undergraduate training in specific subjects. Accordingly, once in a program all of these diversely prepared students, as Bobinski has observed, have to receive a grounding in the core areas of librarianship as well as be allowed "to specialize—all within a relatively short curriculum and time span."¹ But this, I believe, is nearly impossible to accomplish with any real success—there is simply too much to be covered in too short a time. Accordingly, I am convinced that it is now high time that very serious consideration be given to the merits of mandating that two years of full-time study (or its part-time equivalent) be devoted to the M.L.S. This program should be rigorous and intellectually challenging and should cover, broadly as well as in depth, most aspects of library and information science as well as cognate areas.

The first year of the two-year program should be devoted to core education in librarianship. During this year stress should be placed on a curriculum that is more fundamentally library-oriented. In recent years many students have been graduating from ALA-accredited library schools whose one-year programs have ill-prepared them for the library duties that they encounter in their day-to-day jobs. The graduates have not, in short, been sufficiently exposed to librarianship. Consequently, as Gorman has observed, in many cases libraries have been forced to teach what should already have been imparted in the M.L.S. program.² It may be argued that, because of the growing variety of

library and information jobs to which the M.L.S graduate can apply, studying many of these traditional elements may be meaningless and a waste of time for numerous students. Many in the field will never have to catalog materials, work at a reference desk, give bibliographic instruction classes, or be a bibliographer. Still, few M.L.S. students are sure where exactly their future work paths will lead them. Accordingly, the study of a broad range of traditional topics in librarianship should serve as an ideal grounding for many library and information positions.

Lengthening the M.L.S. to two years will aid the development of real specialization that is spread over at least a year's study and is not limited to a mere two or three courses, if that, in a given area (as is so often the case at present). It is in the second year of the M.L.S. program that students should be provided opportunities to specialize. In some cases it will be appropriate and easy for this specialization to be provided within the library school itself, especially in areas associated with the traditional librarianship taught in the first year core curriculum. In other areas, particularly those less traditionally library focused, it might be possible for the library school to expand and develop new specializations. On the other hand, some students should be permitted to go outside of the library school during the second year to take most of their courses in their chosen area of specialization. This would also have the benefit of helping to build bridges

between traditional library subjects and those in other departments. This is increasingly necessary, especially since the tendency of certain library schools toward isolation from the rest of the university community has been adduced as a conspicuous reason for their recent demise.³

Certainly those M.L.S. students more interested in a future in library administration might be well served during the second year of their program by enrolling in M.B.A. courses in their institution's school of management. Students planning to work in library automation and systems might turn to the computer science department. Those wishing for a future career in bibliography could take a range of courses in their chosen academic area in the appropriate department. Others whose main focus is rare books and archival studies could spend much of the second year of the M.L.S. in the history department.

It would also seem particularly fitting for library students who wish to concentrate in bibliographic instruction or other forms of teaching to take classes in the university's department of education. Considering the thorough changes libraries have undergone over the past decade and the electronic advances that will ensure that changes will continue at a geometric rate in the future, it is probable that it will not always be obvious to patrons how to utilize libraries, how to retrieve information, how best, in short, to approach the vast resources available electronically through the information highway. There will have to be individuals—called librarians or perhaps information specialists or something else—who will impart to patrons knowledge of how to deal with this information explosion.

Clearly they will accomplish their duties better if they are skilled in teaching and in transmitting knowledge.⁴

All too often bibliographic instruction of a mind-numbing quality is conducted by librarians who have few teaching skills. But where are librarians to receive adequate training and preparation to improve their teaching ability? Presently only a minority of library schools offer full courses in pedagogy and user education. Admittedly, more schools provide such teaching as constituent parts of other courses, but can much of value be learned in a few hours?⁵ Robert Louis Stevenson wrote that "Politics is perhaps the only profession for which no preparation is thought necessary." We might amend that opinion today to include bibliographic and other library instruction! While not everyone can become a skillful pedagogue, the great majority, whatever their innate pedagogical talents, can have their skills honed. Consequently, it is now high time that M.L.S. students be provided the opportunity to specialize at length in the theory and practice of teaching and to take suitable courses in curriculum theory, educational psychology, instructional methods, and so on. Where better to do so than in the institution's department of education?

In short, library schools should establish more formal alliances with other university departments and, in doing so, create more powerful and effective units. I do not believe that this would be deleterious to the authority or independence of the library school. The *raison d'être* of the latter, namely the teaching of and research into the traditional, and still very necessary, areas of librarianship, will ensure their survival and future well-being. Moreover, such a policy would undoubtedly result in im-

proved library education for the next millennium.

It is often reasoned as justification for maintaining a one-year M.L.S. program that graduates of two-year programs are not offered starting salaries that are substantially higher than those offered to their one-year counterparts. However, I categorically reject this argument and ask whether the fact that starting salaries are relatively low means library qualifications should remain at a correspondingly low or inadequate standard. The problem of low salaries is a tough one, but it is a problem that also affects graduates of many programs other than librarianship. Those who obtain master's degrees in philosophy, history, political science, French—in short, most arts, humanities, and social science subjects—cannot as a rule automatically command substantial starting salaries. Nor, typically, can graduates of master's programs in social work and some other professional areas. And, many of these degrees are spread over two years.

What would happen if there were no choice—if all M.L.S. programs were at least two years in length? Adopting the mantle of seer, I predict that this would not spell the end of library schools. On the contrary, for many it would lead to revitalization. In fact, when it was realized that M.L.S. programs were improved, not only would students continue to attend these programs, student numbers might greatly increase. Furthermore, higher standards in librarian education and training should result in an improved library work force, as well as greater appreciation in the work world for the library profession. This should, in time, lead to greater remuneration for librarians.

In conclusion, I reiterate my conviction that if library schools are to edu-

cate librarians successfully for the next millennium, many will be required to undertake a major restructuring of their program and pedagogy. Though I acknowledge that the logistics of this restructuring may not be easy, I am also convinced that in many cases a valuable component of the undertaking will be the expansion of the M.L.S. to two years.

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3. Marion Paris, "Why Library Schools Fail," *Library Journal* 115 (Oct. 1990): 41.
4. See Charles D. Patterson, "Librarians as Teachers: A Component of the Educational Process," *Journal of the American Society for Information Science* 28 (Summer 1987): 7.
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Educators and library school students who would like to write about teaching methodology, review relevant books, abstract articles, or comment on specific teaching methods are invited to send their contributions to Ling Hwey Jeng, Assistant Professor, School of Library and Information Science, University of Kentucky, 502 King Library South, Lexington, KY 40506-0039. Contributions should be 1,000 to 1,500 words.