Exploring the core: An examination of required courses in ALA-accredited

Russell A. Hall
Penn State Erie, The Behrend College, 4951 College Drive, Erie, PA 16563, USA
Tel.: +1 814 898 6426; Fax: +1 814 898 6350; E-mail: rhall@psu.edu

Received 21 April 2009
Revised 7 July 2009

This paper examines the required courses of ALA-accredited Library and Information Science programs as published on their websites. The study expands on previous research in this area. Findings show that the typical core curriculum has grown to include both research and information technology in addition to the more traditional subjects. The number of programs that require a secondary set of required courses (semi-core curriculum) in addition to the primary core curriculum increased. The paper concludes by suggesting that LIS programs keep a robust general core curriculum while considering the “career-track” model to help students best meet their professional objectives.

1. Introduction

Much has been written in recent years about the “crisis” in library education. Practitioners and others charge that Library and Information Science (LIS) programs produce graduates who are not prepared for the workplace [1–3]. LIS professors and administrators counter that practitioners do not understand the goals of LIS graduate education and/or do not understand the constraints placed upon LIS schools [4,5]. Of course, none of this discussion is new [6]. The song remains the same, only the names and specifics under debate have changed. These discussions, often heated, are not a bad thing. Debate brings facts to the foreground and the depth of feeling and conviction among the discussants shows a vital and vibrant profession.

In the midst of all this debate, what does the LIS curriculum actually look like? Perhaps more importantly, what does the core curriculum of required classes looks like? Since core courses are required of all students in a program, these form the basis of a common understanding of librarianship. Clearly, there is variability between programs in terms of what courses are required. However, in looking at the aggregate, we can make some inferences into what areas of librarianship LIS educators believe are most valuable for their students. In investigating the core curriculum in both structure and content, we can develop an idea of what fundamental knowledge, skills, and abilities the average LIS graduate can be expected to possess.

This study will review the core curricula of ALA-accredited LIS programs. The structure of the core curriculum will be examined and the content of the required
courses will be analyzed. This examination will provide a snapshot of what subject areas are considered core to the curriculum as of this writing and assess changes in the core compared to previous studies. The results should not only provide information about what is considered core to the current LIS curriculum, but also reveal changes in the curriculum over time.

2. Literature review

In 1994 Guy Marco wrote about “The Demise of the American Core Curriculum,” in library schools [7]. Marco opens by noting that in 1976 the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) set out a list of core subjects considered fundamental for all students in library schools. He points out that these are subjects, and not necessarily courses. However, these are all subjects that should be taught in required courses in order to be certain that all students have this basic body of knowledge (see Figure 1 for the list of IFLA core subjects). Marco continues by tracing the history of the core curriculum in the United States from 1901 (when the core was cataloging, classification, bibliography, reference, book selection, accession, bookbinding, shelf work, loan work, library buildings, management, history of books and libraries, editing and printing, and indexing) through the 1960s and 1970s. Then, Marco writes, the 1972 ALA accreditation standards failed to mention a model curriculum or suggest core subjects. These standards only gave mention of ensuring that a foundation of library education was taught, “the library schools were free to experiment; and their experimentation eventually demolished the core”. Marco’s actual study compared the LIS core curricula in 1994 to the subjects listed in the 1976 IFLA standards. In this examination, he found that none of the LIS programs required students to study all the basic, “United States core.” The core was reduced to cataloging and reference, though not all schools required even those subjects. As a result, to Marco, there was essentially no core left: “As long as the student has the final voice in what courses to take and what courses to avoid, the library school cannot be certain that the essential subjects will be covered. A subject is either essential or it is not; surely it is the expert professional who is in a position to make that distinction, not the student.” Marco concludes with worries that students will not be prepared with the fundamentals of librarianship and thus will not be useful in their jobs.

Ray Irwin built on Marco’s work in 2002 [8]. Irwin again used the 1976 IFLA subject areas and examined the required courses of 48 ALA-accredited LIS programs in the United States. Irwin’s results are a stark contrast to Marco’s, as Irwin notes that by and large, the IFLA subject areas are covered by LIS core curricula. Further, the size of the core “remained fairly healthy,” at more than a third of the total credits of the curriculum. Irwin noted that from the time of Marco’s study in 1994, three programs had adopted what he termed “semi-cores” or “menu cores,” where students select their required classes from pools of courses grouped by subject area. Rather
than taking Marco’s gloomy perspective, Irwin concludes that, “in both quantitative and qualitative terms, US library and information science schools seem not to have forsaken the notion of a core. Rather, the idea of a set of common courses for future librarians looks, for the time being, to be alive and well.”

Karen Markey’s 2004 study examined changes in LIS curricula between 2000 and 2002 [9]. She examined the websites of 56 institutional members of the Association for Library and Information Science Education (ALISE). She notes that “information technology (IT) was the driving force behind the development and enhancement” of LIS programs, but was not as important a part of the core curriculum as reference, organization, foundations, management, and research. In this study, “a typical set of core courses consisted of five courses, one in each of the following five categories: Organization, Reference, Foundations, and Management, and one course in either Research or IT.” She determines that the LIS curriculum is strong in the traditional areas of librarianship, especially in terms of service to users. She cautions that the “user service” niche “may be dangerous for librarians and information professionals because it places them in an intermediary role,” which she believes is a role that technology might threaten, much as it had a negative effect on travel agents and other information intermediaries.

Renee McKinney’s 2006 article examines the full LIS curriculum compared to the American Library Association draft of core competencies for librarians [10]. Not limited to the core curriculum, she finds that nearly 95% of the ALA-accredited programs list courses that address all of the fundamental competencies laid out in the draft. However, only 15% of LIS programs meet all the proposed competencies via required courses. McKinney dismisses this because the ALA Standards for Accreditation do not give a prescription to meet curricular goals, but rather allow for a flexible program. This means that due to electives indeed being elective, it’s possible that students are not learning all of these fundamentals because they are not part of the required curriculum.

In a related article June Lester and Connie Van Fleet, determined that many LIS programs plan their curriculum with competencies and standards documents in mind [11]. Perhaps even more interestingly, they find that a large majority of public libraries do not use the Public Library Association competencies document and many do not find the competencies document useful; while many of the LIS programs find them very useful or even essential. This shows yet another disconnect between LIS schools and practitioners. Moreover, this may indicate poor representation by the larger organization in reflecting the competencies desired by their membership (at least in public libraries).

The role of the current study will be to re-visit and expand upon these previous studies. Primary emphasis will be given to Marco, Irwin, and Markey because their studies were largely built upon each other and this paper extends their methodologies. However, McKinney’s work should be kept in mind because, as Lester and Van Fleet point out, many LIS programs use the competencies document to plan their curriculum. LIS faculty and administrators do not create their curricula in a vacuum.
While further exploration into competencies and the curriculum would be useful, that is not the goal of the current study.

3. Methodology

The websites of 55 of the 57 ALA-accredited Library and Information Science programs were examined to determine the content and structure of their core curricula. In order to keep findings as comparable to previous studies as possible, the two non-English language schools (University of Montreal and University of Puerto Rico) were omitted from the study [9]. The program websites were analyzed in April and May of 2008.

3.1. Categorization

Since the terminology used to describe these courses varied rather widely, core courses were sorted into broader categories based on course title, catalog description, and syllabus content (when available). In order to draw comparisons, attempts were made to sort according to categories derived in previous studies.

Marco, and later Irwin, categorized core courses using the 1976 IFLA standards [12]. These categories can be seen in Fig. 1. As one might imagine, given the sea change in the profession over the last 30-plus years, many courses in today’s core curriculum do not map very well to these categories. Many of the IFLA core subjects have disappeared from the core curriculum, while other core requirements have emerged in many curricula. Examples of these new areas of study include: human-computer interaction; capstone projects or theses; and perhaps most prominently, research methods.

In preliminary analysis, it was determined that a new categorization scheme had to be adopted to account for these changes. The resulting framework is similar to the one used by Markey but some adjustments had to be made. Three categories have been added to reflect new trends in the core: ethics, user instruction, and capstone/thesis. These categories were added to the scheme because the course descriptions and/or syllabi explicitly indicated that the course almost completely focused on a more granular aspect of librarianship than the existing categories allowed. These additions were necessary to give readers a clearer understanding of what the core curriculum actually includes. In another framework change, access and retrieval are placed together, where Markey categorized strictly as retrieval. Access and retrieval course descriptions show that the emphasis is on learning how to search databases as well as learning how they are constructed. Further, many of these classes were titled as including both of these skills and thus it seemed correct to combine them into one category.

Rather than attempting to pigeonhole courses into an outdated model, it is hoped that this categorization scheme gives a clearer picture of the core curriculum despite
Categories of Core Courses

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th></th>
<th></th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Organizing Library Materials</td>
<td>Organization of Information Sources</td>
<td>Organization of information sources</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Reference and reader services</td>
<td>Reference services and sources</td>
<td>Reference services and sources</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Library automation</td>
<td>Information technology</td>
<td>Information technology</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Library management</td>
<td>Library management</td>
<td>Library management</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bibliography</td>
<td>Collection development</td>
<td>Collection development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Selecting, acquiring, and using print and non-print materials</td>
<td>Collection development</td>
<td>Collection development</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Role of the library in society</td>
<td>Information and society</td>
<td>Information and society</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Library history</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bibliology</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Documentation and information science</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Planning, construction, and equipping a library</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Foundations of the field</td>
<td>Foundations of the field</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research methods and evaluation</td>
<td>Research methods and evaluation</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Information retrieval</td>
<td>Information access/retrieval</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Practicum</td>
<td>Internship/Practicum</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>User needs and behavior</td>
<td>Capstone/Thesis</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Ethics</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Instruction</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: Blank boxes indicate no comparable category.

Fig. 1.

the overlap with several of the IFLA categories. Figure 1 provides a comparison of the IFLA subjects to the categories used in Markey’s study and the current study. Quite a few of the IFLA categories have fallen away over the years and new categories have emerged. This reflects the changing nature of the profession during the information revolution.

3.2. Size of the core

In looking at the structure of the core, the number of credits required as well as the number of courses was noted. This was then used to determine what percentage of the curriculum was considered core. In other words, how much of a common
curriculum do all students in that program share? Unusual core structures, such as a “semi-core” arrangement, and their implications will be discussed below. Some schools use the quarter hour system rather than the semester system. In this case, using the University of Denver’s formula, 1 semester credit equals 1.5 quarter hour credits [13]. Using this formula, quarter hour schools were brought into line with the traditional semester hour schools. A few Canadian schools give a half credit for a course. It is very clear that these half credits are equal to a 3 semester credit course. In these instances, the credit hours were simply multiplied by 6 to bring them in line with the other schools.

In several instances it was necessary to decide a certain “educational path” to take. For the purposes of this study, the educational path chosen was to take the most general route. In other words, additional credits were avoided, a non-thesis option was taken if available, and the most general career objective was selected. If it was necessary to be more specific, classes were chosen that would reflect a student whose career objective was to be a public services academic librarian. Additionally, the core curriculum requirements were applied as if the researcher were an incoming student for the fall 2008 semester.

3.3. Limitations

While this study captures the structure and contents of the current core curriculum, the methods used have certain limitations. The primary limitation is that categorization is a subjective process and therefore may introduce bias into the data. Every effort was made to use the language found in the course descriptions and syllabi in order to categorize the courses. However, this means that course content that was not clearly mentioned in those sources could not be used for categorization purposes. This leads to the second limitation which is that the research relies strictly on course and curriculum information freely available on the LIS program websites. Interviews of LIS program faculty and administrators might yield qualitative data that reveals why the core curricula have these different structures and contents. Both of these considerations should be taken into account when reviewing the results. Finally, based on this study, no inferences about the curricula of archives, information science, and school media specialists can be made. As their curricula are much more specialized, they were outside of the scope of this study. The study was designed to strictly look at the library science core curriculum in these programs.

4. Results

Twelve of the 55 programs (21.8%) noted on their web pages changes in the degree requirements since 2005. In some cases the changes were as small as the addition of an e-portfolio. In others, the entire curriculum was overhauled. Four of those programs noted that the curriculum would be changed for those entering in the fall 2008 semester.
4.1. Structure of the core

Not all required courses are called core courses any more. Nearly all the programs establish a set of courses that are called core or required classes. However, many now add courses that they call “additional required” courses or “required electives” or some other distinction, even though they are still mandatory and therefore can be deemed core.

In addition to the traditional core, the semi-core mentioned by Irwin seems to be expanding. Many programs now not only require core classes, but also require several selections from a pool of courses from thematic areas or require course selections based on career “tracks,” such as academic librarianship or systems librarianship. Thirteen of the 55 programs (23.6%) have semi-cores in addition to the core. This is a significant increase from Irwin’s study where only three programs had what he termed menu cores or semi-cores. For example, the University of Iowa requires three core courses and also requires that students take four out of eight from a pool of “Tier II” courses [14]. Examples of courses in this pool include reference, management, and collection development. The University of Oklahoma is a good example of the other structure of the semi-core. In this program, in addition to four required courses students must take at least one class in each of five “guided elective” areas that are defined as: “organizational development and management;” “information technology;” “content management;” “access to knowledge structures;” and “research, discovery, and evaluation” [15]. Clearly these are all addressing areas of the traditional core.

Another semi-core structure is based on the student’s career track. Almost all programs make distinctions for their Archives and Record Management students as well as their School Librarian/Media Specialist students. Some, such as the University at Albany, extend these tracks to include other areas of focus, such as Library and Information Services, Information Management and Policy, and Information Systems and Technology [16]. Students must take specific required courses based on their track (sometimes called concentration or focus area) in addition to the core courses. Once again, as has long been the case for school librarians and archivists, these tracks are designed to create librarians with specialized foci in addition to the general core.

Figure 2 shows that 46% of all credits in LIS programs are required. This ranges from a high of 80.9% to a low of 20%. This represents an increase from Irwin’s study, where the required credits made up 37.7% of the average program [8]. Markey does not provide the number of required credits, but rather notes that 5.68 courses were required as part of the core. Assuming three credits per course and taking the average program size (38.9 credits) from her study, 43.8% of all program credits in Markey’s article were required [9]. These findings indicate a movement within LIS programs to require more courses since the time of Irwin’s study. This increase appears to have held fairly stable at just under half of the curriculum being made up of required courses since Markey’s study. Perhaps not surprisingly, the programs that have a semi-core in addition to the core have a higher percentage of required credits.
(59.2%) than “standard” core programs while the total amount of credits required to receive the degree is roughly the same in both groups.

4.2. Contents of the core

As shown in Fig. 3, the common core seems to be made up of six main areas of emphasis. These results are similar to Markey’s but with several noticeable differences. Nearly all LIS programs require at least one foundations and organization of information class. This is expected. Management is the third most required area, which is the same rank as it had in Markey’s study. Reference is the next most required area and is also the one experiencing the biggest drop since Markey’s study. Formerly the second most required area, reference is now the fourth most required course. Information technology recognized the greatest increase since 2002, jumping more than 50%. This should come as no surprise, since the profession is more and more reliant on computer technology, so clearly this is an area that should be considered increasingly critical to librarianship. Research is another concentration area that has grown as a requirement. The biggest difference from Markey’s findings is that the “typical core” would have classes in Foundations, Organization, Reference, Management, and both Research and Information Technology.

Only nine of the LIS programs required an internship or practicum. This figure holds steady from Markey’s study in 2002. This is interesting because many of the programs stress the importance of an internship, especially for those students who do not have library experience. Given this rhetoric, it is surprising that the number of programs that require internships has not increased.

Only one library school, the University of Washington, includes user instruction as a core class. Five programs have user education classes set up as part of their semi-core. In other words, they are electives that are either strongly encouraged or electives that are set up as part of an educational track, such as academic librarianship. This leaves the overwhelming majority of LIS programs offering user instruction courses as simple electives, if they even offer them at all.
5. Discussion

The core curriculum has certainly changed since Guy Marco, Ray Irwin, and Karen Markey each examined required courses in LIS programs. LIS programs still maintain a group of core courses designed to teach their students the rudiments of librarianship. Today’s core is very different from the initial core of the early 20th century but this reflects the evolution of the field rather than a devaluation of core principles. Reference is becoming less a part of the core and research methods and information technology are seen more often in the core curriculum. Other subject areas, such as human-computer interaction or information ethics may become even larger as technology further changes the profession and the use and mis-use of information becomes more important to the general public.

The size of the core represents an increased portion of the curriculum than seen in prior studies. The semi-core seems to be gaining favor as an adjunct to core courses. This is all good news. It demonstrates that LIS programs are paying attention to their core curricula and adjusting to perceived changes in the information environment. Hopefully these changes produce better prepared new librarians.

Further to this end, many programs give their students more guidance in selecting their “required electives.” This allows students to tailor their semi-core classes to their career goals. Many programs helpfully note on their web pages what courses are likely valuable to a specific branch of librarianship. For those that do not, one hopes that the advising program is strong, because as Marco noted “surely it is the expert professional who is in a position to make that distinction, not the student” [7]. It does seem important to give students specializations in the competitive job market, but it also seems critical that they receive a broad set of fundamentals that are common to all branches of librarianship. The career-track semi-core approach seems to be a sensible approach to this problem. Of course, not every student knows what area of librarianship they would like to enter, but the career-track model provides
the fundamentals of librarianship while also equipping the student with specialized knowledge that will hopefully make them better prepared and more marketable as a new librarian. Clearly, Irwin’s refutation of Marco’s claim that the core has been destroyed still holds. The core is alive and well.

There definitely appears to be a common set of required subject areas. It also seems that LIS programs are modifying their core curricula to meet the changing complexities of the information environment, particularly as evidenced in the increase in programs that require information technology classes. In some ways, one has to worry that LIS programs are not evolving quickly enough to keep up with the demands of the profession and in other respects, perhaps the programs are abandoning venerable skills too quickly [17–19]. Given the current emphasis in the profession on information literacy and life-long learning, perhaps more programs should require user instruction classes. Given the headlines about digital piracy and copyright infringement, perhaps more programs should require classes on information ethics. These changes would require tough decisions on whether to cut electives, cut out other requirements, or give the core an even greater share of the total curriculum.

LIS programs need to maintain the essential knowledge, skills, and beliefs of librarianship, but must also quickly respond to the perpetually changing needs of our users, employers, and profession. Achieving and maintaining this balance is no mean feat. Steadfast monitoring, evaluation, and adjustment of the core curriculum is essential for LIS programs to have continued success.

References

[12] International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions, Standards for Library Schools, 


[14] University of Iowa School of Library and Information Science, School of Library and Informa-
section=c&page=current/ma_chart.html (accessed April 17, 2008).

[15] University of Oklahoma School of Library and Information Studies, Master of Library and Informa-
tion Studies Degree Requirements, http://www.ou.edu/cas/slis/NewSite/Programs/MLIS/MLIS,
DegreeReq.html (accessed April 15, 2008).

[16] University of Albany College of Computing and Information, Master of Science in Information 


[18] C. Sproles and D. Ratledge, An Analysis of Entry-Level Librarian Ads Published in *American 
2004), http://southernlibrarianship.scaap.org/content/v05n02/sproles_c01.htm.

Classification Quarterly* 46(2) (2008), 182–200.