

RE-ENVISIONING THE MLS:
PERSPECTIVES ON THE FUTURE
OF LIBRARY AND INFORMATION
SCIENCE EDUCATION

ADVANCES IN LIBRARIANSHIP

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ADVANCES IN LIBRARIANSHIP VOLUME 44A

RE-ENVISIONING THE MLS: PERSPECTIVES ON THE FUTURE OF LIBRARY AND INFORMATION SCIENCE EDUCATION

EDITED BY

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EDITORS' INTRODUCTION TO THE *ADVANCES IN LIBRARIANSHIP* SERIES

Through a combination of economic changes, political forces, and technological changes, libraries now are in a position of meeting the ever-increasing community needs and filling roles that otherwise would go unmet in key areas of economic and workforce development, health and wellness, education, civic engagement, and fostering and supporting open governments, among much else. Despite the often decreasing financial support, the growing political pressures to reduce support for public goods such as libraries, and the voices claiming that Google has made libraries obsolete, libraries of all types – public, school, academic, and special – have never been more innovative, more community focused, and more in demand than they are now.

Libraries play significant roles in digital literacy and digital inclusion, online education, provision of social services, employment skills, and even emergency response. They are creating partnerships with local government agencies and nonprofits to address local needs. They adopt and innovate with new technologies and expand their services and materials through new channels provided by emerging technologies, from online reference to the curation and management of digital resources. At the same time, libraries serve as a primary support structure for social justice and human rights by fostering and promoting inclusion, access, and equity for individuals, for their communities, and for society as a whole.

The *Advances in Librarianship* book series offers a completely unique avenue through which these major issues can be discussed. By devoting each volume – often in the range of 100,000 words – to a single topic of librarianship, the series volumes devote a great amount of consideration to a single topic. By including contributors who are library professionals, administrators, researchers, and educators from many different places, the series volumes bring an unparalleled range of voices to these topics of librarianship. And by exploring these topics as broad issues with a wide range of societal impacts, these volumes not only inform those within the library profession, but also community members, policy makers, educators, employers, health information professionals, and others outside of libraries who are interested in the impacts of libraries.

The ability to address current and future issues from both practice and research perspectives at great depth makes this series uniquely positioned to disseminate new ideas in libraries and to advocate for their essential roles in communities. To ensure the most current and future utility, each volume includes contributions in three areas: (1) current best practices and innovative ideas, (2) future issues and ways in which they might be prepared for and addressed, and (3) the large-scale societal implications and the way in which the focus of the volume impacts libraries as a social institution.

This volume of *Advances in Librarianship* is the first part of a two-volume set exploring innovative approaches to library and information science (LIS) education. Bridging the voices of educators, professionals, and current students, these two volumes offer a wide range of perspectives and cover a variety of educational issues. This first volume examines issues of degree accreditation; outcomes assessment and measurement in programs; preparing and supporting new professionals; and new approaches to the incorporation of theory, advocacy, and political engagement into the LIS curriculum. Across these two volumes, each reader will find some views they agree with and some they disagree with, but all of the chapters offer many important points to consider as the curriculum of the field continues to evolve along with the people, institutions, and societies that our field serves.

Ultimately, volumes in this series share innovative ideas and practices to improve overall library service and to help libraries better articulate their vital and myriad contributions to their communities. The range of library impacts can be seen in the recent volumes in the series, which have explored such important topics as library services to people with disabilities, libraries as institutions of human rights and social justice, the unique roles and contributions of rural and small public libraries, and efforts to promote diversity and inclusion in the field. Forthcoming volumes will be devoted to library services for LBGTQ populations and the pedagogical roles of academic libraries, among other vital issues. As fewer venues publish materials related to library practice, education, and research and many of the journals formerly devoted to library research have shifted their focus to information issues, the *Advances in Librarianship* book series is an unwavering venue devoted to documenting, examining, exchanging, and advancing library practice, education, and research.

Paul T. Jaeger, *Advances in Librarianship* Series Editor
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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION: RE-ENVISIONING THE MLS

Johnna Percell, Lindsay C. Sarin, Paul T. Jaeger
and John Carlo Bertot

During the academic year 2013–2014, a group of faculty, students, and staff at the College of Information Studies at the University of Maryland, College Park, began to plan a project what we would eventually call “Re-envisioning the MLS.”¹ Initially, we thought the project would last three years: year one for planning and data collection; year two for design and content creation; and year three for initial implementation. Four years later, this project continues, and it has been embedded into the day-to-day and long-term planning for the Master of Library and Information Science (MLIS) program at Maryland as well as other programs and discussions in the field more broadly. Re-envisioning will (and should) never be complete.

The questions we sought to answer during this process were (and continue to be) the following:

- What is the value of a Master of Library Science (MLS) degree?
- What does the future MLS degree look like?
- What should the future MLS degree look like?
- What are the competencies, attitudes, and abilities that future library and information professionals need?

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- What distinguishes the Maryland iSchool's MLS program from other MLS programs?
- What distinguishes the Maryland iSchool's MLS program graduates from other MLS program graduates?

The project involved multiple activities that included the creation of the MLS program's inaugural advisory board, a speaker's series, engagement sessions, stakeholder/community discussions, blog entries to document findings and promote further discussion, the development of a white paper for discussion purposes, and environmental scanning and research. Our key findings are as follows:

A shift in focus to people and communities. A significant shift has occurred in information organizations. The shift deemphasizes the physical collections (to include digital content) to focus more on individuals and the communities that they serve, in particular 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, which 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, which include (among others) the ability to lead and manage projects and people; to facilitate learning and education either through direct instruction or other interactions; and to work with, and train others to use, a variety of technologies. Additionally, information professionals need 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 policy-making; and relationship building among staff, patrons, community partners, and funders.

The MLS may not be relevant or necessary in all cases. There is an increasing awareness and acknowledgement of the fact that those with other degrees (e.g., instructional design/education, design, social work, public health, analytics, IT/IS, and human resources management) and skills might meet various needs better and that our information organizations should be open to those with a range of degrees other than the MLS.

Access for all. The tension between the growing societal gaps (income and other), a shrinking public sphere and social safety net, a desire to help those with acute needs, a lack of resources or skills to help, and uncertainty about whether this is an appropriate role for information organizations and professionals was a recurring theme throughout the re-envisioning the MLS process.

Social innovation and change. By forming partnerships, information organizations are essential catalysts for creative solutions to community challenges in a wide range of areas such as health, education and learning, economic development, poverty and hunger, civic engagement, preservation and cultural heritage, and research innovation.

Working with data and engaging in assessment. The data role for information professionals is at least threefold: (1) helping the communities that they serve engage in a range of data-based activities; (2) helping communities leverage data to better understand their communities and community needs and to develop solutions to community challenges; and (3) using data to demonstrate the contributions of their libraries, archives, etc. to the community(ies) that they serve.

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, their challenges, and the underlying opportunities. Additionally, our communities can serve as an extension of an information organization's services and resources. By leveraging the community's human resources, we can further enhance learning, education, expertise, and innovation.

Learning/learning sciences, education, and youth. Information organizations have an opportunity to foster learning by attending to an individual's particular interests, needs, and educational goals. An opportunity exists in youth learning – including focusing on pre-k and “readiness to read”; working with youth in schools; enhancing the understanding of primary data/information sources, including archival materials; and facilitating learning in libraries through making, STEAM (science, technology, engineering, arts, and math), coding, and a range of other activities.

Digital assets and archival thinking. The emergence of “smart communities” that are reliant on Big Data from sensors, open data, and other data sources and the wealth of individual data/information generated by Internet-enabled devices, social media, and continual content creation by individuals and communities has created massive amounts of digital content that requires individuals, organizations, communities, and institutions to curate and manage the digital assets and digital identities.

We also identified some significant implications based on those findings, including the following:

Attributes of successful information professionals. The findings indicate that successful information professionals need to be collaborative, problem solvers, creative, socially innovative, flexible and adaptable, and in possession of a strong desire to work with the public.

Ensure a balance of competencies and abilities. The debate between MLS programs needing to produce graduates with a “toolkit” of competencies versus providing graduates with a conceptual foundation that will enable them to grow and adapt over time evidenced itself throughout the re-envisioning the MLS process. Further interjected into this debate was the notion of “aptitude” (specific skills) versus “attitude” (“can do,” “change agent,” and “public service”). Any MLS curriculum needs to balance aptitude with attitude.

Rethinking the MLS begins with recruitment. A love of books or libraries is not enough for the next generation of information professionals. Instead, they must thrive on change, embrace public service, and seek challenges that require creative solutions. MLS programs must seek and recruit students who reflect these attributes.

Be disruptive, savvy, and fearless. Through creativity, collaboration, and entrepreneurship, information professionals have the opportunity to disrupt current approaches to and practices for existing social challenges. The future belongs to those who are able to apply critical thinking skills and creativity to better understand the communities that they serve today and will serve 5–10 years down the road – and those who are bold, fearless, willing to take risks, go “big,” and go against convention.

These broad implications identified by the University of Maryland (UMD), along with related projects including “Envisioning Our Information Future and How to Educate for It,” funded by the Institute of Museum and Library Services,² and ongoing discussions of the future of library and information science (LIS) education have resulted in changes to the degree at UMD and far beyond.

UMD has since updated its degree from MLS to MLIS, changed its recruiting and admissions criteria to seek students who can address needs and challenges in the field, and revised its core course curriculum, and, by the end of the 2017–2018 academic year, UMD will have launched four new specializations within the degree program. More importantly than specific changes to the program at Maryland, the projects have reinvigorated discussions surrounding LIS education and created space for new kinds of discussions including those in this volume.

When we put out a call for chapters related to the future of LIS education, we were thrilled, and a little unsurprised, at the volume of responses to the call.

Within the field, LIS education is a perennial and often disparate topic of discussion, as formalized education programs for librarianship were created in the United States 130 years ago. A simple search for “LIS Education” will produce an array of blogs, articles, opinions, and social media posts that run the gamut from bemoaning the horror and encouraging the demise of a graduate-level LIS degree all the way to suggesting that it is unique among graduate degrees and does much to ensure the future of the profession.

In two volumes, we have a variety of perspectives and responses to the question: What should the future of MLS education be? In this, Volume 44A, we explore the relevance of American Library Association accreditation in LIS degrees, imposter syndrome in new LIS professionals (a subject near and dear to two editors in particular), experiential learning and the changing role of theory in today’s curriculum, measuring degree outcomes, the needs of academic and other libraries, and the necessity of including political literacy and advocacy at the core of the LIS curriculum. For the editors, something very telling in this volume and from chapter submissions is the two chapters focused on (and others that mention) the need for design thinking and inventive approaches to designing degrees, curricula, and jobs in the field. LIS education that is thoughtful, creative, and not weighed down by tradition are at the heart of the findings and implications of the re-envisioning the MLS initiative, and its growing influence on the field is encouraging.

Volumes 44A and 44B of *Advances in Librarianship* are the culmination of direct work on the project from the initial team, John Bertot, Lindsay Sarin, and Johnna Percell (of course with the help and support of many others). However, the work of redefining the LIS curriculum continues at Maryland through the efforts of Paul Jaeger and Erin Zerhusen, who now coordinate the initiative, and through the work of the authors of the chapters presented here, who demonstrate the breadth and dedication of those within the field to ensuring that we prepare future members to respond to its everchanging nature.

NOTES

1. The Master of Library Science (MLS) was conferred by the University of Maryland until Fall 2016, when it was updated to Master of Library and Information Science (MLIS). For consistency, we use MLS here. Details and all reports on the project can be found at <http://hackmls.umd.edu>.

2. See <https://slis.simmons.edu/blogs/ourinformationfuture/>.