Library Science Education: A New Role for Academic Libraries

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abstract: Many individuals working in library and information organizations do not hold a master of library science (MLS) degree or other specialized library science credential. Recognizing that this professional gap could be addressed by diversified educational opportunities, the W. Frank Steely Library at Northern Kentucky University in Highland Heights developed an online bachelor’s degree in library informatics and a series of professional development workshops. These initiatives dovetailed with programs being promoted across the university’s entire academic curriculum. However, placing these degree and professional development programs within the library, rather than in a separate teaching department, was an uncommon arrangement. This arrangement has proved an efficient, sustainable structure for curriculum appropriate to undergraduate degrees and continuing education. This article will address the appropriateness of undergraduate and professional development levels of library science education, the sustainability of operating these programs within an academic library, and the vitality that this educational role has brought to Steely Library and its library faculty.

Introduction

C ommunities and organizations increasingly face the need for professional management, organization, and access strategies for information resources. Many of the individuals working in libraries and information offices must provide sophisticated information management and services without specialized education in the field. Through discussions with public and special library colleagues in the early 2000’s, the administration and faculty of the W. Frank Steely Library at Northern Kentucky University (NKU) in Highland Heights began to consider opportunities to address this need for specially trained experts in library science. Steely Library’s dean, Arne Almquist, had extensive discussions with Wayne Onkst, the state librarian, who had regularly advocated an increased level of professional education among Kentucky’s public library staffs. Almquist and Onkst also conferred with Martha Birchfield, the director of an associate’s-level library science program at Bluegrass Community and
Technical College in Lexington, Kentucky. These three leaders began to identify a role for a bachelor’s degree available to library workers within a variety of educational choices.

During the same period, NKU President James Votruba led the university in a visioning process focused upon community engagement efforts with educational programs supporting economic growth and strength in the region. Almquist participated in these vision discussions, describing the central support position that libraries and information centers play in local communities as well as in small businesses and public organizations. Provost Gail Wells became familiar with his perspective on the importance of professional library programming and services and the enhanced educational opportunities needed to support that work.

A concurrent development at NKU that helped shape the eventual degree proposal made by Steely Library was an increasing interest in, and encouragement to offer, online education. As the faculty of Steely Library began formal planning for a new bachelor’s degree, they immediately saw the benefits of building a completely online program. The likely audience was primarily working adults, place-bound and committed to their communities, to whom the economics of distance education would appeal.

In 2009, Steely Library at Northern Kentucky University began offering a bachelor’s degree in library informatics, followed in 2010 by a series of professional development workshops. Academic librarians frequently participate individually in professional library education programs and often serve as adjunct instructors in secondary part-time positions. The administration of these educational programs, however, usually rests in another academic department, outside the library. At NKU, the library is the primary administrative body offering these educational programs. Steely Library manages personnel, facilities, funding, and strategic planning for the two programs, reporting to the dean of the library. Bachelor’s degrees are presented to students through a collaborative agreement with the College of Informatics. The traditional, broad-based academic support operations of a university library live side-by-side in Steely Library with the operation of these degree and credential programs.

NKU’s placement of professional library education within the library is not the first time this approach has been used, nor is NKU the only university offering a bachelor’s degree in library science. However, NKU’s administrative support for the library and its faculty, enabling them to take on this expanded responsibility, has provided an opportunity to demonstrate that this model is a logical and effective extension of academic library programming, particularly at the undergraduate and continuing education level. The paths taken at Steely have been experimental and transformed its definition of the academic library’s functions.
Developing Support for Professional Education in the Library

Dean Arne Almquist had long advocated the growth of the library profession through bachelor’s degree programs. He discussed the positive potential of this educational initiative with colleagues in all types of libraries and with the university’s administration. His work laid the foundation for these stakeholders to become strong supporters of the proposal we eventually made for a degree that was nontraditional in many aspects. In 2007, Steely established a formal degree planning committee that included NKU’s vice provost and Birchfield, who directed an associate’s degree program in library science. Both were familiar with Almquist’s views. They became willing, active contributors to the planning group. Just as importantly, they served as visible endorsements of the viability of placing the program within the library, though both were connected to more traditional structures for delivering academic degrees.

The strongest argument our planning committee presented was the evident need for more library workers with specialized credentials. In the increasingly complex field of information management and organization, with expanding information and communication technologies and commitments to community outreach, library staffs face significant demands that on-the-job training may not meet. Individuals serve in the full range of library positions without the specialized training an MLS degree offers. Among librarians in 2014, 45 percent reported not having earned a master’s degree, and 19 percent indicated that they had not attained a bachelor’s degree. Also in 2014, 61 percent of library assistants reported that they had not earned an associate’s degree or higher; 70 percent of library technicians reported education levels below an associate’s degree. These figures demonstrated that an audience exists for undergraduate library science degrees and progressive continuing education training.

The type of programs offered in Steely Library can mediate both the financial and motivational barriers that prevent many library workers from attaining specialized education. The United States Department of Labor’s Occupational Outlook Handbook indicates that the median pay for library technicians and assistants in 2015 was $27,930 per year. The American Library Association’s career exploration guide states, “Obtaining a master’s degree can involve a large investment in time, effort, and money. There is no question that having a degree is a positive sign of accomplishment, but it may not always be feasible or practical for an individual to obtain.” A person must weigh how well anticipated salary levels will offset the costs of a bachelor’s degree or professional development credentials. An individual must also consider whether the training budget of his or her library supports continuing education for current employees. Individuals with a non-master’s-level library science education can often obtain relevant credentials with the training provided by many small and local information organizations.
Ready access to lower-cost educational opportunities could radically change our profession, which now operates with many positions requiring no specialized training in library science. The *Occupational Outlook Handbook* indicates that hiring individuals for library work who hold a postsecondary certificate or an associate’s degree is only a preference, and many smaller libraries hire people with only a high school diploma. This industry review does not mention the value of non-master’s-level study in library or information science. Yet in many geographic areas, all positions, even the library director, are filled by individuals who lack the focused training of a master’s degree in library science.

**Achievable Professional Credentials**

After launching our bachelor’s degree in library informatics, we began to see the value of scaffolding degree options. Professional training organized as an educational ladder may be more achievable than the several-steps-removed master’s degree for many individuals. Progressing from continuing education or undergraduate certificates to undergraduate degrees to possibly graduate studies, with recognized professional credentials earned at each level, enables individuals to manage their financial and time commitment to specialized education. A university news feed interviewed Holly Ritchie, a recent graduate of NKU’s bachelor’s-level library science program, and reported:

> The library informatics program was the reason Holly chose NKU. She wanted to become a librarian and did not want to do it the “normal way,” which she said was to get something random as her undergraduate degree and then get a master’s degree in library science. “I wanted to get in it right away with my undergraduate work,” Holly said.

The success individuals experience at each level of a formal educational ladder can serve as a strong recruitment tool for the profession, building commitment and confidence for some to move to the next level of specialized education. From the beginning planning stages, we decided to closely connect our program with the associate’s-level library science degree available at Bluegrass Community and Technical College. We established plans for credit transfers and actively worked with Birchfield, the program director at Bluegrass, in the advising process, encouraging students to build upon the first-level credential they earned in her program. Bluegrass presented our degree as a bachelor’s
completer program. We also actively worked with Mount West Community College in Huntington, West Virginia, in a similar collaboration.

Since spring 2017, Threasa Wesley, the head of Steely’s library education programs, has taken part in university-wide planning for micro-credential programs in which students can earn one or more skill-focused credentials with three or four courses only. These micro-credentials are designed to be stackable and to support progress toward a degree. We hope that these credentials will offer a successful additional option for students to gain library science education and enable us to reach entirely new groups of library workers. We are also creating course equivalencies that would allow individuals to earn college credit through the development of continuing education portfolios.

**Targeted Recruitment**

Recruitment of individuals into specialized professional training may also be enhanced by targeting specific groups with “first steps” that concentrate on training that is immediately applicable to their current work and clearly achievable. The federal Institute of Museum and Library Services awarded two grants to Steely Library for scholarships and professional mentorship of non-degreed library directors who work in low-income communities. One grant was designated for directors in the poorest counties of Kentucky, and a second provided funding in West Virginia. These grants focused on introducing library leaders into formal library science education at the community college level. Most recipients of scholarships funded by these grants enrolled in associate’s degree-level courses. Several of these directors went on to earn their bachelor’s degree in library informatics, but the recruitment focused on that first two-year step. We are currently considering plans for similar grant and recruitment programs for library workers who belong to underrepresented minorities in our field. The continuing education program offered a specialized workshop series on early literacy development and specialized childhood pedagogy to library staff involved in children’s programming. By offering a range of educational paths, we hope to connect with library workers in various library positions, information organizations, and geographic areas, as well as with members of minorities and underrepresented age groups.

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Whether the individuals participating in these specific educational programs progress to more advanced educational levels or not, our profession, our communities, and our organizations benefit from the work of individuals with more education in the specific skills, methodologies, and philosophies of library science. In 2009, only 28 percent of Kentucky’s public library directors held an MLS, and 80 percent of these master’s-degreed individuals were concentrated in Louisville, Lexington, and northern Kentucky, the three urban regions of Kentucky. In addition, 30 percent of the directors lacked a bachelor’s
degree in any field. Since 2009, over 180 students have taken bachelor’s-level library science coursework at NKU, and 53 students have graduated. Over 340 enrollees have completed professional development workshops through Steely Library. A 2016 survey of the degree program alumni indicated that:

- Holders of our bachelor’s degree worked in a wide variety of information positions, ranging from bookmobile librarian to library director to “principal information architect.”
- Sixty-three percent of our graduates attained new jobs after completing the degree.
- Thirty-three percent received a raise after graduation.
- Twenty-nine percent of these newly degreed individuals have enrolled in a graduate program.

When asked how well the NKU library science degree prepared them for their current career, 79 percent responded “very well,” and an additional 13 answered “more than adequately.”

Barbara Fischer, an enrollee in one of our continuing education workshop series, wrote:

> I have found . . . that I have become more aware of how to better serve our library patrons, and for me as a library staff member this is an accomplishment, giving me more credibility with library patrons as to my library skills, as well as being better able to utilize what is available in our library services areas. Thank you for all the new skills that have assisted me in my library career.

Another enrollee, Kathy Clevenger, commented, “This has given me more self-esteem, as I feel more respected at work and continue to get compliments from the MLS staff.”

While these remarks come from only one academic library’s educational program, they strongly indicate that a bachelor’s degree in library science as well as continuing education programs have enhanced the work skills of participants, have resulted in improved professional positions for many, and have provided a step toward more advanced professional education for a significant number.

### A Marriage of Practitioner and Academic Roles

As noted earlier, educational programs such as these are not commonly based in academic libraries. However, this unique positioning has been a key factor in the success of Steely Library’s professional education programs. The instructors and administrative personnel of Northern Kentucky University’s library science programs function in two complementary roles, as practitioners and as academic educators, significantly enhancing the program’s organization and content. Our library faculty bring a strong practitioner’s perspective to their library science curriculum. Their active involvement with tested practical applications helps ensure that our students can readily apply their newly gained knowledge and expertise. One student working in a library found the best-practice examples particularly helpful: “Thanks, we are knee-deep in policy revisions right now. This class has not only shown that we don’t have a collection development policy to put our hands on but that so many of our other policies have shortcomings.”
Practical content not only dominates our continuing education offerings but also plays an important role in the bachelor’s degree courses. This content resembles that in many master’s degree programs that include operational training for students. Some schools of library science bring in practitioners as adjunct instructors to provide this real-world knowledge and experience. By using the same faculty group to operate an academic library’s services and to teach the library science courses, our professional education programs always represent the practitioner’s perspective.

A second important advantage of positioning an educational program within a practicing academic library is that the program can utilize a broad range of faculty expertise and perspectives. Many niche professional education programs in a stand-alone academic department have only one, two, or three full-time faculty teaching most courses. An academic library can have a larger number of instructors teaching, as well as fully participating in curriculum development and student support efforts, while also delivering traditional library programs to the rest of the university. The entire cost of the instructor positions need not be funded by the enrollment in specialized library science courses or workshops.

Having practitioners so completely integrated into a professional education program is valuable, as noted earlier. However, the perspective of an academic faculty, daily engaged in scholarship and teaching, is also essential for well-rounded educational offerings. The library faculty of Steely Library also serve as academicians, participating in all activities that the university has established as vital to providing quality higher education. Our librarians have achieved advanced specialty degrees, engage in continuing research, and bring an academic grounding to their teaching and curriculum design through their broad, forward-looking conceptual visions of the profession.

Course content is not limited to practical, operational details. The curriculum also focuses on understanding and appreciation of broader frameworks within library science that allow students to grow professionally during their studies and later in their own practice. Instructors focus on preparing these students to respond to challenges not currently apparent and to build new initiatives in library programming that will help shape the future of our profession. Students learn about history and philosophy that can guide their work and decision-making in the field. They gain an appreciation for evidence-based program development as they review and even create independent assessment tools. They have opportunities to engage with students and instructors in other disciplines, creating a deep understanding of the breadth of our field. Overall, the academic grounding for the students’ training opens a world beyond the libraries that employ them and gives depth and perspective to the on-the-job training that builds library skill sets.

Finally, academic library faculty are uniquely positioned among library science educators to reach a broader group of professionals who will be tasked with managing information systems and services in other fields. Many organizations, public and
private, staff information-related operations with individuals trained in a discipline other than library science. These professionals could benefit from training in information management. Academic library practitioners have gained widespread acceptance of their expertise to teach research skills in the curriculum of other disciplines, preparing students for using information in various professions. These information literacy programs or library instruction programs are common in traditional academic library services. When an academic library adds professional library science curriculum to its sphere of responsibilities, library faculty can also advocate and deliver instruction in the management of information systems that professionals in many fields will find valuable.

When an academic library adds professional library science curriculum to its sphere of responsibilities, library faculty can also advocate and deliver instruction in the management of information systems that professionals in many fields will find valuable. Consider the appropriateness of teaching information management concepts to students in business, public administration, Web design, health system management degrees, and other fields.

Since the first year that NKU offered library informatics courses, we have collaborated with the university’s General Education program, marketing degree, and broadcast media degree to enroll students from these areas in information management courses alongside individuals pursuing a library career. The established library service of information literacy instruction opened a path to discuss the value of information management in addition to information use and research skills. Faculty outside our department are accustomed to librarians teaching, team teaching, or serving as guest experts within their discipline. With both this established collaboration path and a new curriculum to offer in library science, our library faculty could reach a broader range of future information managers, building this expertise among professionals whether they identify as library workers or not. We continue to expand these efforts to collaborate with faculty and advisers in additional fields, advocating that some of the courses we teach in intellectual property, metadata systems, and the like could serve as strong electives or even required courses for nonlibrary majors. In addition, we see a similar opportunity to collaborate with other disciplines in our university’s upcoming launch of skill-set micro-credentials for postsecondary, postbaccalaureate, and postgraduate students. Information organization, management, and access systems could be valuable credential programs for professionals in a wide variety of fields.

Revenue Generation

NKU’s placement of a professional library science program within the academic library proved a boon to both library science students and students entering other professions, and by extension to the libraries and communities that employ these individuals who have gained specialized training and education. In the short history of offering these educational programs, we have also realized benefits for the library itself and its faculty.
Revenue production has been the most immediate of these benefits. Indeed, aside from initiatives by the Friends of Steely Library, these educational programs are the only money-earning operations of the library. Traditional library services, collections, and facilities consume money. In the budget model that many universities employ, funding for library programs is viewed as a “tax” on the course enrollment revenues that other departments produce. In the 2015–2016 academic year, Steely Library generated $410,104 through bachelor’s degree courses and continuing education workshops. Costs to provide these programs totaled $169,482. This total included marketing and recruitment expenses, fees transferred to other university offices to cover registration services, salaries of library positions devoted to the programs, and overload teaching fees for some library faculty. That is a one-year net revenue fund of $240,622. Portions of this revenue are funneled through the Office of the Provost. While that budget process may change to a more direct return of funds to the library, the programs’ success and financial efficiency has led to regular reallocations of funds to the library.

Even more valuable than the one-year revenue total is that these funds are part of an ongoing operation, likely to bring in a quarter of a million dollars or more year after year. These funds form part of the monies that our library dean calls the “margin of excellence” in traditional services. They have paid for extra-budgetary purchases such as equipment and facility furnishings, for special service programming expenditures, and for professional development costs for our library faculty and staff. An ongoing revenue stream is a boon that any library director would appreciate.

From the university’s perspective, delivering the professional education program through the library rather than through a separate academic department outside the library is also a good arrangement. As noted, when such a program is administered within the library, the staffing is largely supported by funds already allocated for traditional library operations. In addition, utilizing the administrative support available within the library, such as the secretarial staff, managers, equipment, office space, and classroom space, is a significant financial efficiency.

Perhaps an even more important benefit has been the long-term intangible capital these programs have created for the library within the university. Dean Arne Almquist wrote in an April 3, 2017, e-mail that the successful education programs raise our profile, give us increased credibility, and help to increase perceptions of our faculty as members of the institutional faculty team . . . We saw the impact of our program on our campus prestige when the President invited us to be one of two programs highlighted in his Kentucky Road Trip [a yearlong tour of Kentucky communities presenting the best of NKU initiatives] a couple of years ago. Having our program as the only one selected to be a part of the University Center of the Mountains [a consortium of higher education institutions in Hazard, Kentucky], and one of a very few chosen for the Academic Common Market [a program that allows out-of-state students to enroll in Kentucky degree programs that are not offered in their own state at discounted tuition rates] also brought increased credibility to the library.11

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In 2017, the library informatics degree was also chosen by our university administration as one of only seven stand-alone bachelor’s degrees included in a major, nationwide marketing and student recruitment campaign.

An Invigorated Library Faculty

Offering library science education programs within Steely Library has also contributed to an energized level of experimentation and research among the library faculty. The requirements to provide relevant course content dovetail with the university’s expectations for the maintenance of faculty expertise through professional service and research. Since the development of our educational programs in 2009, our faculty has collectively produced a full sabbatical study, two grants worth over $2 million, two book chapters, nine articles, and three presentations focused on our professional education programs. In addition, as both the bachelor’s degree and continuing education programs have evolved, an increasing number of partnerships have developed for the library within the university, within our broader profession, and within our community. These active collaborations have resulted in numerous service opportunities, have refreshed career work for senior librarians, and have opened new avenues for professional contributions for our younger faculty members.

Conclusion

Perhaps the next major evolution in our field will be a fuller utilization of multiple levels of library science education to heighten the overall level of professionalism in community and organizational libraries. We should not rely completely on MLS degrees or on-the-job training to generate the range of professionals needed to staff libraries and information offices. Continuing education programs and undergraduate library degrees can build a strong pool of information specialists with the grounding in our profession that will support enhanced programming and services.

Academic libraries offer a uniquely effective organizational model for providing these levels of professional library science educa-
tion. The dual roles of delivering traditional library services to the entire university while also providing formal library science education fit together synergistically. Library practitioners can design curriculum with acknowledged real-world applications, providing undergraduates and continuing education enrollees with direct preparation for library work. Academic library faculty are also immersed in the scholarly perspective and therefore can create course content that goes beyond current practice. That academic perspective can guide students in building a foundation for responding to new trends and creating effective responses to new opportunities.

Administratively, establishing professional education programs within the library is an efficient and effective configuration of resources. Instructors, administrators, and support personnel all become shared resources, as do facilities, equipment, and operational costs. This efficiency is particularly valuable in niche professional education programs and can easily lead to enhanced revenue generation for all library services. And in a circular fashion, library faculty who are brought into greater involvement with the teaching of new professionals are increasingly encouraged to be more active researchers and leaders of the profession through their scholarship and service.

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Notes

4. United States Department of Labor, BLS, “Library Technicians and Assistants.”
5. American Library Association, “Do I Need a Library Science Master’s Degree?”
11. Arne Almquist to Threasa Wesley, e-mail, April 3, 2017.