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## **New Directions in Library Education: A Young Practitioner's View**

by Sally A. Rogers

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Over the past several years library literature has included a number of articles concerning proposed changes in library education programs in the United States. Two-year master's degree programs have received the most attention, and some library schools have already revised their curricula to allow for increased specialization and to provide opportunities for students to acquire practical experience through internships. Many of the articles regarding these new directions in library education have been written by library educators and administrators. As a recent graduate of a one-year master's degree program with several years of professional experience, I would like to express some of my views concerning these proposed changes.

One of the main sources of dissatisfaction with existing library education programs, which has been expressed by recent graduates as well as their employers, is the limited opportunity for practical experience to reinforce classroom learning. Proponents of extended degree programs anticipate that this need will be filled by student participation in summer internships. However, even if we assume (1) that library schools are going to be able to handle the substantial administrative responsibilities associated with planning, coordinating, and supervising these programs, and (2) that there will be a sufficient number of libraries within a reasonable distance of each library school able and willing (on a continuing basis) to provide interns with meaningful practical experience in their particular areas of interest, the possibility still exists that library students may not derive enough benefit from these programs to make them worth the extra time, expense, and trouble. If students are unable to anticipate accurately their long-term interests, or are unable to find positions in their chosen fields, then their internship experiences may have little relevance to their professional responsibilities. Because there is such a degree of dissimilarity even among libraries of the same basic type, the skills which a student begins to develop during an internship may not be applicable in another library. Some aspects of librarianship, such as cataloging, often require several months of acclimation to local practices and, therefore, may not lend themselves well to brief internships.

Proponents of the extended master's degree also cite the increased opportunity for specialization in a particular area of library science as an advantage. However, one might logically question whether a student is wise to limit himself or herself to a certain field before he or she has had a chance to explore the full spectrum of options which exist (and which are continually developing as a result of technological advances). A recurring theme in literature on library education is the communications gap which is perceived between library educators and practitioners. If students spend extra time and money specializing in an area of interest chosen primarily on the basis of what they have learned in library school, only to discover when they finally obtain professional positions that the "real world" is not what they expected, they are going to be even more dissatisfied with their library school education than are some of the graduates of existing one-year degree programs.

Because some libraries hire professionals to do work done by para-professionals in other libraries, a one-year degree program may provide more than enough education for many entry-level positions. If a majority of library schools in the United States adopt two-year programs, an increase in the percentage of their graduates who experience job dissatisfaction because they are, in fact, overqualified for their positions may be expected.

Continuing education, as an alternative to extended degree programs, could facilitate the bridging of the gap between library educators and practitioners. In an age when technology continues to act as a catalyst for rapid and far-reaching changes in all aspects of the information profession, library school students should expect to need to continue their formal education after they graduate. Educators, too, could profit from increased contact with practitioners who have had to cope with new developments on a daily basis.

Because of the additional investment which it represents, an extended degree program tends to force students to abide by the career choices they make in library school. Considering that employers seem reluctant to commit themselves to paying higher salaries to graduates of two-year programs,<sup>1</sup> it is unlikely that they would be willing to offer financial incentives to those interested in continuing their education beyond their extended degrees. As a result, graduates of two year programs are more likely to feel trapped if they become dissatisfied with their chosen areas of specialization. They will also lack motivation to update their professional skills and knowledge through further formal education. A program which allows students to earn a basic degree and take professional positions with the intention of returning at a later date to earn a certificate of advanced or specialized study permits them to make their career choices based on practical professional (rather than simulated professional) experience. This type of program also accommodates those who want to change careers, re-enter the work force, or simply keep up with new developments in their fields.

Admittedly, the idea of one year of education in the basics, followed by a period of supervised practical experience in a chosen area, and subsequent specialization in that field could work well for some students. However, in my opinion, a great deal of research into the relevance of existing library education curricula to professional job responsibilities and other alternatives to the status quo should be done before library schools in the United States unanimously adopt extended degree programs.

## **References**

<sup>1</sup> Laurence Auld, Kathleen M Heim, and Jerome Miller, "Market Receptivity for an Extended MLS," *Journal of Education for Librarianship* 21 (Winter 1981) 238.