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The Role of the Association
in Developing Professional Competence

I would like to begin by reviewing what it is about an association that shapes the special role it can play in developing professional competence. To begin with what is perhaps the obvious, a professional association consists of a group of people who identify with a particular profession.

The *Encyclopaedia of the Social Sciences*[1] defines a profession as an occupation requiring intensive and continuous preparation. In searching back in my memory to library school classes, I remember the characteristics then cited to describe a profession:

1. it has a body of knowledge that describes the field and some consensus about that body of knowledge;
2. it requires extensive study or preparation;
3. there develops a commitment to training new entrants and extending the knowledge;
4. it develops a body of literature and the publication of scholarly journals to disseminate the information; and
5. groups are formed to advance the goals of the profession—in other words, the development of associations.

Characteristics of an Association

Reviewing the characteristics of an association that will influence the roles it can assume within its profession, it is apparent that an association:

—has access to a large number of people in the profession;
—is a body of people who collectively have a tremendous wealth of experiences to draw upon in a common field;

—has access to pooled funds (from membership dues and other revenue
sources) to attack problems that are industry wide and which may be too
expensive for any one institution to deal with;

—can influence entry into the profession, and the education of those in the
profession, because of its concern with professional practice;

—can set general standards for the performance of its members, by the
promotion of statements such as "Codes of Professional Ethics, which
keep before us the ethical implications of allowing the obsolescence of
professional skills...";[2]

—develops journals and a literature for disseminating developments in the
field;

—attracts a significant mass of the profession whenever it holds meetings,
be they national, regional or local;

—can speak on behalf of the profession in presenting a unified voice on
issues affecting the profession; and

—is perceived by outside groups as a voice of legitimacy and authority
about issues and matters relating to that profession.

Roles Played by Associations

Taking advantage of these characteristics, an association can develop
the competencies of members of that profession by executing a variety of
roles. Examples of these include the following.

An association can highlight "good" or innovative practice, so that
the practice can be viewed as a role model for other libraries to follow.
Examples of such practices and how they have been highlighted are
discussed below.

—The Literature-Attached-to-Chart (LATCH) programs where a packet
of relevant current medical articles is attached to the patient's medical
record so that each person on the health care team treating the patient
has easy access to the latest published information about that particular
disease or pathology. The LATCH program was highlighted in the
Medical Library Association's twenty minute movie *Rx Information—
The Health Sciences Library.* This film has been used in teaching library
school students, as a discussion film with an accompanying guidebook
at library meetings throughout the United States and abroad, and in
promoting innovative library services with hospital administrators and
medical staff.

Similar examples can be cited for other types of libraries. Peggy
Sullivan's ALA film *Libraries and the Pursuit of Happiness* shows
libraries and librarians playing a variety of innovative roles for their user
groups.

—Model bibliographic instruction programs in academic libraries of all types have been replicated more quickly around the country as a result of the publicity given to such programs through association journal articles, speeches at library association meetings and handbooks published by the Bibliographic Instruction Section of the Association of College and Research Libraries.

—By highlighting the cost reduction programs at the libraries of the Claremont Colleges in California, where significant savings have been made by thoughtful substitution of technology for labor, other libraries and librarians are able to explore if such an approach, or a modification of it, might be applicable in the way they practice librarianship in their own institutions.

Highlighting innovative or special practices encourages not only library staffs to emulate newer developments, but also makes their user and funding audiences more aware of the capabilities of their library resource. This in turn can encourage professional development as the library staffs respond to increased user expectations.

An association can influence the development of professional competence by *setting educational standards* for the profession. This may be done in the formal basic education programs such as the accreditation program administered by the Committee on Accreditation of the American Library Association. Or, another approach taken by some library associations, most notably law and medical ones, has been the development of certification programs that may be used by employers as a requirement for certain positions, usually entry ones. The Medical Library Association has gone one step further by requiring continuing education or reexamination as a necessary requirement for recertification.

An association can provide an environment where *leadership and group skills can be developed* through committee work and governance structures. This is particularly important for librarians who work in small organizations where other opportunities for the development of these skills may not exist.

In some circumstances association committee work can also provide opportunities to *learn new technical skills or knowledge* as part of particular association assignments. For example:

—Editors of journals and newsletters learn about the publishing process.

—Assignment to a Budget and Finance Committee may be a person's first experience at dealing with an organizational budget. He/she may have to learn how to read balance sheets and income statements, and the importance of cash flows despite an accrual accounting system.

—Developing new standards—such as the Z39 committees or developing a new cataloging code—will teach a committee member the finer points about very technical subjects.

—Working on an association conference can bring insights to the behind-the-scenes activities of hotels, convention centers, exhibits, contracting for social events, and organizing and implementing publicity campaigns.

—One committee I am working with at the moment is learning about the costs and feasibility of developing and producing a machine-readable database that will ultimately become the third edition of *Books for College Libraries*. This has required the committee to gather and analyze data from OCLC, from vendors and database producers, to conduct pilot tests in their own libraries and, in sum, learn more about database construction, publishing and production than any of them would ever have had an opportunity in their own libraries.

—My ACRL president-elect suggested I mention to you another competence she has developed by participating in the association—a working capability with electronic mail. While it was technically available in her own institution, she had not previously used it until she served on the governing Board of ACRL where the decision was made to experiment with electronic mail.

Because an association has the capability of pulling together a body of librarians at its national, regional and local meetings, it provides an opportunity for the *exchange of ideas* and the resolution of professional problems. A person working in a small library setting needs to hear about how things are done in other libraries. And librarians who work in large organizational settings have a similiar need to mix so that they do not become parochial and insulated in their view of the world they serve.

An association has natural *mechanisms for disseminating information* in a variety of formats that transcend space, time and geography. Its meetings provide a forum for the exchange of ideas, the presentation of papers, and an opportunity to learn about new products and services from advertisers and exhibitors. The meeting programs may be subsequently published, may be available on audiocassette, or even teleconferenced from the site of the meeting for those people who are unable to be physically present.

An association usually publishes at least one journal in which research and practice can be disseminated to the profession. Most associations have also developed publications programs for the distribution of monographs, handbooks, checklists, and nonprint materials. Each of these activities has as one of its goals the increase of knowledge or competency of those who use the materials.

An association can engage in *projects that are aimed at improving professional performance* but that are too costly or impossible (for reasons other than cost) for any one individual library to conduct. Several examples come to mind. In medical librarianship, the membership of the Medical Library Association decided that it was important to identify the competencies needed to be a "good" generalist medical librarian. Such a project could not be carried out in any one medical library because:

1. it would be too costly, if done using generally accepted methodologies;
2. the competencies identified could not be directly extrapolated to all types of medical libraries (hospital, medical school, big, small, special) and to all regions of the country, nor even to another similar medical library which had different procedures; and
3. such a study would be less likely to be viewed as credible without the reputation of a more broadly based body behind it.

In academic librarianship the decision was made to promote the concept of bibliographic instruction with subject discipline associations. A comprehensive plan was developed to get faculty members to speak on the programs at the conferences of subject discipline associations around the country. In addition, traveling exhibits were developed to be used at these meetings, and a variety of materials were prepared for distribution. A project of this nature, which aims to enhance the academic librarian's participation in the student's education, may be an activity which an individual institution may feel is sorely needed, but no one institution could justify organizing speakers at fifty-seven subject-discipline associations around the country in order to get its own faculty and librarians to work together in new and different ways to improve the student's educational experience.

Most of the programs developed by the Office for Management Studies of the Association of Research Libraries would also fall under this rubric. The development of the methodologies used in the Management Review and Analysis Project, the Academic Library Development Project, and the Collection Analysis Project would have been extremely expensive if only applied to a single library. By funding the development of the methodology collectively through membership dues and grants, many libraries were able to benefit from these studies that would otherwise have been unavailable to them.

In sum, an association has access to pooled funds to attack problems or challenges that are industry wide but which may be too expensive for any one institution to deal with.

A final role on my list of those roles an association can play in developing professional competence is the one which may have been the

first to occur to you—the role of the association as a *provider of continuing education programs.*

A survey done in 1975[3] showed that library associations were the largest single provider of continuing education programs, accounting for 28 percent of the courses offered in that year. While that percentage has probably decreased over the past eight years, library associations of all types still account for a significant proportion of continuing education courses.

Associations at each level have important and distinct roles to play. Quoting from Barbara Conroy, library associations are:

> Primarily responsible for identifying the larger learning needs within the library field. Often in the best position to look ahead at tomorrow's needs as well as those of today, associations organize and implement efforts to desseminate new information and produce new skills. This includes committing conference time and resources for learning purposes as well as establishing committees and assigning staff with specific responsibilities for continuing education. By making information, access and opportunities available, they can encourage active participation of their members in learning activities. They establish standards and guidelines for learning opportunities, produce journals and publications, and identify resources to help practitioners learn.[4]

Local associations, aimed at small geographic concentrations, are likely to become increasingly important given today's economy. An article discussing the advantages of local associations stated:

> The local association has several distinct advantages over regional or national associations in preparing programs or workshops. One advantage,... is familiarity with the audience—their backgrounds and levels of experience. Second, the...local association can tailor its programs to the specific needs and interests of its membership...because committee members are physically close together, it is easier to plan and coordinate a program. The cost should, of course, be less when committee members do not have to make long-distance telephone calls or travel [far] to other towns. In addition, committee service and program participation at the local level can provide excellent opportunities for younger librarians to develop skills (e.g., organizational and public speaking skills) that readily transfer to service in larger organizations.
>
> [While] the local association...[will] never replace regional or national associations..., it can provide supplemental enrichment especially in times of tight budgets, when travel money is scarce.[5]

National library associations are able, on the demand of their membership, to develop courses and put them on in different parts of the country. Research has shown that librarians generally are able to get release time more easily for conferences than for short courses. The association which conducts continuing education courses in conjunction with its

conference may be able to attract registrants for whom permission to attend a conference in more readily available.

In assessing the problems, challenges and constraints on the association's role in developing professional competence it may be helpful to review what we know about the attitudes and economic/social/political environment as they relate to librarians and professional development.

From surveys of librarians[6] we have some data on how librarians view continuing education, what motivates them to participate and what factors are deterrents. "Librarians with higher career aspirations are more likely to support and take advantage of continuing education opportunities[7]....Librarians...viewed continuing education as a source of more effective job performance, challenge, creativity, and satisfaction...."[8]

As deterrents, they indicate "lack of time...as the prime deterrent, followed by prohibitive costs...."[9] Allie Beth Martin and Maryann Dugan, in their study, found that insufficient time and money were major frustrations for libararians interested in pursuing continuing education.[10]

In a study of health sciences librarians by John Naisbitt,[11] it was found that people who received no paid release time nor financial support to attend meetings or courses attend few of them. For those working in smaller library situations where no one can cover their jobs for them, it is difficult to obtain release time.

A survey of academic libraries recently found that virtually all academic libraries provide some degree of assistance to their staff members for attendance at library conferences and continuing education activities.

> Among the...libraries [surveyed] 98 [percent] make available at least partial support for staff travel to meetings and workshops. Ninety [percent] help defray the costs of hotels and meals; ninety-seven [percent] provide funds for registration...;and...100 [percent] allow released time for meetings and continuous education. Forty-eight...[percent] offer at least partial tuition reimbursement for library-related academic courses.[12]

Turning to considerations of what kinds of professional development experiences librarians prefer, it was found from the Neal study:

> All the librarians surveyed were involved in both formal and informal activities, with books read and course work in a subject area, and association membership and conference participation in librarianship clearly favored...." "[They] viewed the interaction and self-study modes as being best suited to their needs, objectives, and job demands...."[13]

Another study by Virgo asked: "Briefly describe the most meaningful professional learning experience you have had in the last year."[14] The results showed that the response rated most frequently (twice as frequently as the next most frequently rated response) was "on-the-job challenge or problem solving experience." The results were:

—On-the-job challenge or problem solving experience	32%
—Group learning experience (for credit)	16%
—Individual learning experiences (writing papers, preparing a course, planning and pursuing a sequence of activities of self-instruction)	14%
—Professional meeting	11%
—Group experience (noncredit)	11%
—Discussion with colleague	7%
—No answer	9%
Total	100%

It seems that those surveyed found most meaningful continuing education through practical experience, an assumption common in other areas of adult education.

During the past ten years, there has been a tremendous increase in the number of continuing education courses being offered by all continuing education providers. Recent data tend to indicate the market for association courses as we presently know it may be becoming saturated (and now I am referring only to the short workshop type courses). While the number of course registrants may have increased slightly, we are seeing that the association-sponsored courses are attracting fewer registrants.

This may be a result of two factors. A declining economy may have impacted on the number of registrants. A complementary hypothesis is that there is a relatively stable number of librarians in the profession who participate in continuing education courses at the national level. As more organizations are getting into the act of producing continuing education courses, the slice of the pie available to any one organization is likely to become progressively smaller. Preliminary data from SLA, MLA, ACRL, ASIS, and ARL suggest this trend.

These very preliminary data bear additional scrutiny and data gathering, but they are provocative for continuing education providers. In order to grow our programs, we need to increase the number of people participating in continuing education, encourage those who are already enrolling to take more courses, and to rethink our delivery systems and change our formats.

What other things have we learned that should impact on our future programming? It was mentioned earlier in this paper that research has shown that some library staff receive more support to go to conferences than to attend independently held continuing education courses. Salaries received by the large majority of library staffs are not sufficient to support expensive continuing education activities when such activities are not paid for by the employing institution. And we know that well planned formal continuing education activities, which provide continuous feedback to participants, are relatively expensive.

We are experiencing a tightening job market which comes as a result of budgetary cuts affecting libraries and an extension of the mandatory retirement age from sixty-five to seventy years. The tightened job market has resulted in less job mobility as people choose the security of existing employment, and there are fewer job openings for those who do wish to make a change.

There is an increasing awareness of self-responsibility for professional development. As career opportunities become increasingly competitive it is in the individual's self-interest to have maintained currency and even demonstrably to have contributed to the profession through formal professional development activities, participation in association activities, committee membership, and publication.

With less turnover among library staffs, employers will need to find ways of stimulating and renewing their library staffs through internally-developed opportunities. At the same time we will continue to be faced with limited resources for such development. As a result we will need to look for more home-grown varieties of continuing education opportunities. Examples we are beginning to see more of include:

—brief reassignment to other positions either within the library or to other libraries;
—regular rotation during the first years of beginning appointments;
—assignments to committees within the library;
—assignment to problem-solving task forces;
—visits to other libraries;
—in-house staff development programming, such as each unit taking responsibility for a mini-update of advances in their field; and
—exchange programs with counterparts in other libraries, even in other countries.

Since many people find that their most meaningful professional learning experience comes as a result of dealing with an on-the-job challenge, we need to develop opportunities that promote problem solving. The establishment of task forces within a library has already been mentioned. Social interaction with colleagues can provide an environment for informal problem solving or for discussing issues of mutual concern. Librarians should deliberately plan occasions when such informal exchange can take place and recognize the benefit of this type of activity. This type of learning experience also points to the need of the librarian to recognize and respond to his/her own need at an individually-motivated level.

If it is so that employers are more supportive of employees attending professional meetings than separately held continuing education courses, then groups conducting meetings should perhaps try to conduct continu-

ing education courses in conjunction with professional meetings. In this way they will hit a captive audience whose expenses are more likely to have been paid.

For whatever reasons, librarians are often unwilling to pay the real cost of continuing education programming. In order to have formally planned experiences at low cost, it will be necessary to design continuing education programming at the local level by largely volunteer groups. In this way a significant part of the cost of programming can be split up and borne *invisibly* by the individuals and their employing institutions. Continuing education programming carried out by a paid staff, and having to recover all staff and operating costs, results in a high cost per participant.

If the preliminary data we have from the Medical Library Association, the Special Libraries Association, the American Society for Information Science, and the Association of College and Research Libraries stands up to further testing, they may indicate that we have reached a saturated market for formal continuing education programs. This does not mean that these organizations should decrease their activity, but rather assess:

1. What it will cost them to attract further participants.
2. Why potential participants are interested in continuing education and what that knowledge might mean for designing alternate forms of continuing education.
3. What other delivery mechanism for continuing education should be pursued and made cost-effective.
4. How to design continuing education opportunities that can be used by local groups and libraries at the grass roots level.

There is a place for the development and offering of quality formal continuing education courses. A national association, because it is national in scope, has the opportunity to repeat courses for its membership in various parts of the country, as well as in conjunction with its national conference.

For the individual, the need for continuous self-development will be necessary for survival in the profession. Developments are taking place daily which change the library and the delivery of information services. There are other librarians coming up through the ranks who are eager for our slots if we are perceived to be marking time or resistant to change. As times get tougher for libraries, and they will, employers will be unable to afford staff who are viewed as "not pulling their weight."

For those librarians working in smaller libraries, where it is difficult to get time off because there is no one to cover the position, there is often a compounding sense of isolation and of being away from the mainstream of current advances. Without a broad peer group of support and interaction, the need for association with colleagues is even more important. The

responsibility to set up structures to get that peer reinforcement is again the individuals. The association's responsibility is to suggest structures that people in these situations might try, and to develop products and services that can reach people at their home level.

Challenges and Constraints Facing Associations

Taking the foregoing into account, I would include the following as specific challenges facing associations in their role of developing professional competency.

Development of Specific Competency Data

The King study, in as far as it will go, will provide a useful set of data about required competencies. Yet the data identified will only be the tip of the iceberg. As Griffiths said in her talk on Sunday evening: "Once the competencies are set out, it is the role of the schools and the professional societies to redefine them and to provide the training." From her figure 2, one can see that the King study will stop at the level of the first wide bar—i.e., the "identification, definition, description, and validation of competencies." It will be the library associations or schools which will have to design and implement competency attainment measures and evaluate them for validity and reliability. And to do so will require much greater specificity in the definition of the competencies.

From my experiences in developing the competencies used in the Medical Library Association's certification examination, I know that this is a difficult, expensive, and very large next step. Yet it is an essential one, not only for basic education and certification purposes, but as a necessary next step to developing self-assessment tools that individuals can use to plug into professional development programs. It is not enough to know you need "management skills"—rather one needs to know exactly what skills and at what level.

The financial costs of going this next step are too great to be borne by any one institution and will likely have to be borne by an association, a grant, or some combination of the two.

Costs of Developing Model Programs

One of the roles previously described is to develop highly visible models of "good" or innovative service to demonstrate both to the profession and to our outside audiences ways in which libraries effectively support society, institutions or businesses in situations that may be different from stereotypical librarians' roles. Yet such activities cost money to be successful. For example, the Medical Library Association film cost $85,000

in today's market. The Bibliographic Instruction Liaison Project of ACRL has cost $50,000. In both these instances the dollars came from membership dues and other revenue sources. These funds are increasingly being eaten up by the basic operating costs of the associations—as inflation has outpaced membership, dues increase.

The Stereotypes and Realities of the Profession

To some extent we are caught in the chicken and the egg syndrome. When I used to show medical directors and administrators the file "Rx: Information" they would become excited about the prospect of what their hospital library could become—an integral, throbbing part of the patient care team. Inevitably they would turn to me and say, "find me a librarian like that" and I could not. For reasons of low pay, unattractiveness as a dynamic stimulating profession, lack of job mobility or what have you, librarianship does not always attract the kind of people we like to think we are.

As one participant at this conference said during a coffee break, "they blame the library schools for what we turn out and say we should be more selective—they should see what we get to work with from the start." This is a very real problem which has to be addressed.

Too Narrow a Definition of Continuing Education

In assisting librarians in maintaining their professional competence we need to overcome the perception that continuing education is achieved by short courses only. The opportunities for continuing education are limited only by our imagination and creativity. Continuing education is *anything* that helps a person or institution do something better, learn something new, or think about something in a different way. It includes:

—attending state and local library meetings, or conferences;
—visiting exhibits or suppliers/vendors;
—establishing journal clubs or sharing journal subscriptions;
—reading library journals, books or reports on your own;
—looking at the advertisements in library journals;
—preparing a talk or a course;
—listening to an audiocassette or viewing a videocassette;
—writing a paper;
—taking a self-study course;
—reading news items about library programs elsewhere, and thinking about how to adapt them to your own library situation;
—working on a committee or task force; and
—solving a problem at work, or talking with a colleague about library related matters.

Inability to Assume Responsibility for Professional Development

Some librarians fail to recognize that, while it is nice for an employer to support one's efforts to maintain and improve professional competence, the lack of such support does not absolve the employee of this self-responsibility. It may require the librarian to seek less expensive ways of maintaining old, and developing new, competencies.

Continuing Education and Other Forms of
Professional Development Should Not Cost Much

The belief that continuing education programming, conferences, workshops, association memberships, etc. should not cost very much is an unrealistic view, perhaps encouraged by an extension of the view of a library as a public good. The reality is that these forms of maintaining professional competence have to be funded from somewhere. Association members can be heard to complain that a workshop costs $100 a day, or that their membership dues cost $75 or $100 a year. When it comes to formal programming you get what you pay for, or someone else has picked up a lot of hidden costs. Quality programming costs money.

Directions for Future Association Efforts

Associations will continue to play many of the key roles in developing professional competence as they have in the past. These roles will include the holding of national and local meetings, promoting exhibits, publishing journals and other materials, promulgating standards of performance, sponsoring courses and institutes, monitoring educational requirements, and publicizing the profession.

Over the next several years increased emphasis is likely to be placed on the following roles:

1. A reexamination of the basic education for librarianship and information science. In this process attention will need to be given to such thorny issues as:
   —The minimum size of a library school for it to maintain a large enough critical mass to exist.
   —The possible dissolution of schools that cannot adapt to a changing environment.
   —A greater accountability on the part of the schools for the students they graduate.
2. In turn, the profession, probably through the associations, will need to focus on what the profession sees as needed competencies. Competencies, in much greater detail than those developed by the King project, will be developed to help guide library education curricula, self-

assessment, and continuing education programming. And once developed, they will need to be monitored and updated regularly.

3. The associations, together with the library schools, have an important role to play in promoting the concept of lifelong learning as a part of professional responsibility. The associations have a special responsibility to inculcate this viewpoint into the minds of employing institutions, as a routine cost of doing business.

4. Associations will continue to be exploring mechanisms for cost-effective delivery systems for professional development. This will include assistance with programming at the local level as well as the delivery of national programs through audio and video teleconferencing.

5. Associations need to monitor and publicize trends in the profession, the economy and society to bring them to the attention of members so that these members are not caught unawares. The associations need to concentrate on developing credibility so that these early warning signals will not go unheeded.

6. A final role for which the effective association will plan, is that of promoter of librarianship to the many audiences with whom libraries and librarians come in contact. This will be a marketing task in the sense of the word "marketing" as Ted Leavitt meant it to be used. From each of our audiences we will identify what needs and wants the library can fill for them, and then respond in those terms:

   —For the hospital administrator we can promote the concept of the librarian as contributing to better patient care.
   —For the politician the library can represent a better satisfied constituency.
   —For the management consulting and executive search firm the librarian can be the reassurance that a fast library search has resulted in a carefully researched project proposal that will not be an embarrassment because a recent relevant article was not referred to in it.
   —For the potential library school student, the library must be projected as a dynamic, challenging institution.
   —For the college president the library, through its bibliographic instruction programs, can represent a superior educational resource.
   —For the student the library represents the security of knowing a book or article is accessible through the reserve book room.
   —To regional accrediting agencies, the library symbolizes a commitment to knowledge and learning.

   As a marketing *and* public relations agency the associations can help shape the role that future libraries and librarians will play in our society.

One final note. Associations play many roles in the furtherance of the profession and in developing professional competence. However, an association is not a discrete body—it is you, the people, working together, that create any role at all.

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