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## From Library School to Information Studies: Professional Education for Oregon Librarians Then and Now

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# From Library School to Information Studies:

## Professional Education for Oregon Librarians Then and Now

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Library school, information studies, iSchool. Regardless of the moniker it's still the study of librarianship and information. However, significant changes in knowledge delivery methods and learning environments during the last 30 years have affected library education as well as all post-graduate and professional-level education. In addition to changes in delivery mechanisms, the content and scope of library and information studies have expanded. Students' expectations are diverse and dependent on their individual professional career goals.

The following three authors share their individual library and information science education experience. From attending on-campus programs during the advent of technology by Valery King to distance programs using cutting edge technology at home and in the classroom as experienced by Andrew Cherbas and Linda Malone, they discuss how the delivery method, learning environment, and content of their library school experiences prepared them for their professional careers.

### **Valery:**

Once upon a time, there was a library school in Oregon. It was located on the 3rd floor of Chapman Hall at the University of Oregon, where I came in the summer of 1977—just in time to witness its death in 1978.

The University of Oregon had been offering classes in librarianship for school libraries since 1913, and this steadily expanded over the years. As the School's last Dean, Herman L. Totten, outlined in his article about the school in *Encyclopedia of Library and Information Science* (1977), the Department of English began offering a certificate in public school librarianship in the 1930s. The program moved to the School of Education in 1948, and by 1960 was a depart-

ment within Education offering graduate level courses leading to an M.A. or M.S. with a major in librarianship. A separate School of Librarianship was established in 1966 and received ALA accreditation in 1968. In those ten years between 1968 and 1978, the school awarded approximately 990 students the Master of Library Science degree.

At the end of the 1970s library science was just beginning its transition to information science. Like students today we studied cataloging, reference, and collection development, but the tools were different. Cataloging students created records on catalog cards. Filing rules were very important. Before the advent of electronic resources we studied lists of important reference books, and learned how to use them. Our information management classes did not include databases. We studied classification and subject heading systems, but not MARC records or metadata. There were no courses in web design, information technology, or virtual reference.

But students and faculty were aware of coming changes. To help prepare for it, a class in computer science was strongly recommended for all students, where we discussed how libraries and our work would change when catalogs were online. We created a simple program in Basic, using a keypunch machine to record it onto punch cards to run on a mainframe computer (I never did get mine to run properly). Since no library in Eugene was yet using OCLC, classes visited Willamette University library to observe online cataloging accomplished on large dedicated computers with tiny green screens—resulting in shipments of catalog cards!

Why was the program eliminated at the very edge of the profound changes automation was to bring to libraries and librarianship? Several reasons were cited by



University of Oregon administration: declining enrollment, too many unemployed librarians in the state, the existence of other library schools in neighboring states, the University's need to save money in a recession (*Library Journal* 1977, 1439) But universities collectively did not predict the shift in the profession nor recognize the implications, as the closure of Oregon's library school was only the first of more than a dozen such closures across the country over the next decade (Paris 1990, 38-42).

All the students who started the program at UO were allowed to finish, but the closure of the school was a depressing blow and many were left wondering about the value of their degree when the school was gone. With the exception of a few media specialist programs, Oregon was left without a library program and Oregon librarians without a local option for continuing education. Not until the advent of the Internet and of distance education programs such as Emporia State in the 1990s were Oregonians able to obtain a masters degree in library science without having to leave the state.

### **Andrew:**

When I applied to Syracuse University's distance learning Information Studies program I was still uncertain what the demands would look and feel like. Becoming a librarian seemed like a nice fit for my information hunger and existence as a generalist. As I filled out the forms and sent in the check it was not without trepidation, but I wanted my MLS degree and at least on paper, it looked like the best choice for my circumstances at the time. In 2000, I was not in a position to move from Corvallis, Oregon, where I enjoyed my job as an Internet sales representative. Syracuse offered the program I wanted, and it promised to allow me to stay employed, and in Oregon.

As I look back on my graduate school experience, I appreciate how effectively the program at Syracuse prepared me for my work as the Extension Services Librarian at the Corvallis-Benton County Public Library. The Extension Services position in Corvallis demands an open mind and the ability to adjust on the fly because no day is the same. I have my hand in a little bit of everything that the branch libraries do on a daily basis. This flexible and diverse work environment has been a fantastic fit for my career expectations as a Librarian.

While at Syracuse my main tract of study focused on technology but the program encouraged a general background in all areas. The professors pushed hard, demanding creative and forward thinking solutions, and the coursework required I use the latest technologies, not just learn about them.

I was confident of my technological abilities when I became an MLS student, but Syracuse demanded more. The program was a generalist's dream, exposing me to a variety of emerging technologies, some library specific and some not. Creative projects were promoted and encouraged, but with the caveat that they be tailored to explore how the work applied to the library profession. From that point on, I looked at technology completely differently.

I learned quickly that it was easy to get lost in the technological "realm of possibility", and that creativity alone was not enough. For positive assimilation to occur I learned the value of identifying a focus and a direction early in the process. Today, when reviewing and working with technology, my evaluation starts with a very simple question; how will this specific technology help me do a better job? Often the answer is 'it won't', but without the experience at Syracuse, I would never have asked the question.

When the new Harney County Library was built in 1969, the librarian was delighted to move. Prior to that, the library was in city hall and the aroma of baked beans cooked by the prisoners in the jail downstairs was overpowering and their banging on the pipes and singing could not be shushed!

—Cheryl Hancock,  
Harney County Library



Many people are fearful of what can be perceived as today's technological minefield. It is hard to let the technology sleep. It has become more and more difficult to step away from the screen, turn the switch to the off position, and unplug. I am a better librarian when I take time to separate myself from the computer, unplug, and go for a mountain bike ride or a trail run. Turning off the technology keeps my fingers dirty and helps me understand how new technologies such as Twitter, Facebook, Xbox live, blogs, wikis, and the like, can have a positive impact on libraries.

Distance learning is ideal for people who thrive in a flexible and independent learning environment. But it is not the right fit for everyone. Finding the correct balance between school and your personal and professional life can be problematic. Because the classroom door is always open, it is easy to slip into using every available moment to check classroom message boards or research your latest assignment. The ability to turn off the computer and call it a night is essential for the distance student who still maintains other responsibilities, like work and family. To be successful in this type of program, establishing balance is a must.

**Linda:**  
Acceptance into Emporia State University's SLIM-II distance program in the summer of 1997 struck me as a gift. I had been working in libraries for years, but had never been in a position to at-

tend a regular, campus-based MLIS program. Now, a program was coming to me! I was so infused with enthusiasm I almost floated into the orientation.

It didn't take me long to realize that while my enthusiasm was great, the main ingredient for success in the program would be discipline. The program was well-structured, but I needed to schedule the time and make sure I had the necessary hardware and software to produce the work.

While distance programs can be a godsend, they are just that – distant. Intensive weekend classes were followed by weeks of work done in isolation, at least physically. Yes, there was significant electronic presence, but no joint study sessions at the university library or coffee seminars where we could meet face to face. We were essentially on our own.

While pursuing my degree, I made a critical decision to continue working at my local library as a page and then a circulation clerk. Without library exposure, I would have been operating in a vacuum except for those intensive weekends at the PSU campus, which, by nature, existed in a rather rarified theatre.



Klamath County bookmobile on rounds, 1932. A librarian helps a child choose a book from the Klamath County Free Library's bookmobile as the bookmobile makes its rounds on snowy roads. Bookshelves are visible through the open back doors. (Courtesy Oregon State Archives, Oregon State Library, OSL0007.)



Shortly before my graduation, I realized I hadn't developed a career path beyond the vague idea of becoming a "reference librarian." I further realized that selecting an independent study course over a practicum was a mistake. While interesting and academic, independent study didn't prepare me for entry into the job market. I needed the hands-on, real-time, experience of a practicum and I needed it in a hurry.

When I was offered the directorship of the La Conner Regional Library in Washington State a few months after graduation, I jumped at the opportunity. Managing a small library with five employees, a very involved board, and a large and active Friends group provided me the opportunity to develop practical, operational skills, presented challenges and experiences, and helped me further crystallize my career path towards a management position in a larger library system.

This experience also painfully exposed the weaknesses in my MLIS management training and preparation. I read all the management books I could, attended continuing education classes and conferences, and networked with other library professionals.

I joined the Washington Library Association (WLA) and volunteered for every steering committee, board, and planning group I could fit into my busy life. These relationships were invaluable in developing my networking skills as well as providing regular opportunities for learning from more experienced librarians.

The local politics imbued in the governmental entities under which libraries exist are daunting at best. I realized I was in no way trained or prepared to attend city council meetings. Again, my MLIS education did not prepare me for the importance of managing the inner workings of community politics. If a class in the politics of local and state governments is not part of your MLIS program's profile, request it, or at the very least, educate yourself. Attend the public city council meetings and local library board meetings in your community. Familiarize yourself with the codes regulating libraries and with the structure of your local library's fiscal agent. It's also important to recognize and develop critical relationships with local community groups such as the rotary club or chamber of commerce. A network of local, invested stakeholders is essential for fundraising and future library support.

Much of what I gleaned from my first director position in Washington prepared me for my next position as the director of the Garden Home Library, a small special-district library in the Portland metro area. One of my first major tasks as director was to oversee the library building's ren-



Snowbound bookmobile at Sprague River, 1932. The librarian of the Klamath County Free Library's bookmobile shovels snow. (Courtesy Oregon State Archives, Oregon State Library, OSL0008)





Lake County Library in Lakeview, 1954. This interior view of the Lake County Library shows the children's area in the foreground with adult books and reference in the background. (Courtesy Oregon State Archives, Oregon State Library, OS10018.)

The Oregon Library Association was founded in 1940 at Timberline Lodge.

—OLA Web site

ovation and remodeling enhancements that were to be completed during open hours. I had no practical or educational background in the area of library building construction. I spent hours learning all I could with a very patient and knowledgeable contractor and attended every meeting as the work progressed.

Developing an understanding of the consortium operations of a library was another critical element missing from my MLIS education and previous training. Managing a library within a consortium is quite different from operating an independent library. Working with other branch and department managers requires finesse, self-awareness, team-building and communication skills. Again, I learned on the job, joined associations, volunteered for committees, and ran for board positions. I did everything I could to garner the insight and skills I needed to help me be a better manager in a larger consortium environment.

The 2004 PNLA Leadership Institute held near Dumas Bay, Washington, provided me with one of my most significant and rewarding continuing education experi-

ences. Immersion in this intense week-long seminar developed my skills in personnel interactions, decision-making, and communication and offered an unparalleled opportunity to learn from and network with professional colleagues from libraries around the Pacific Northwest and Canada.

Gradually my library experiences, along with my MLIS education, began to coalesce into my career as a library manager. Looking back at the program, I should have paid more attention to management issues, requested more management and government-type classes, and developed a practicum to enhance my education. I realize that my own lack of self-direction during my MLIS education and my inability to find or request a mentor left me to develop essential skills in creative ways and on-the-fly.

For the last five years I have worked as the Head of Adult Services for a mid-sized library in the Portland metro area and am currently the Interim Director. I still face personnel challenges, budget shortfalls, and delicate political negotiations. And I still fall flat on my face sometimes! But I continue to network, volunteer, get involved, and pay attention to little details while keeping my eye on the big picture. My MLIS education gave me a very strong foundation, one on which I need to continually build in order to stay at the top of my game and to continue my pursuit of excellence. 🌿

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