

UNIVERSITY OF ALBERTA
School of Library and Information Studies
By John G. Wright and others*

Beginnings

Library education in western Canada began with school librarianship as a specialization for qualified teachers, offered first in British Columbia by Walter Lanning from the Department of Education in 1938, later moved to the University of British Columbia in 1956. Courses were first offered in 1947 at the University of Saskatchewan by Lyle Evans, the first appointed Provincial Supervisor of School Libraries, and in the University of Manitoba by Kay Coddington in 1950. Courses were offered at the University of Alberta in Edmonton beginning in 1950, offered first by Louise Riley, the Children's Librarian of the Calgary Public Library. Their popularity resulted in the appointment of Laurie Wiedrick from the Edmonton Public School Board as a full time professor in 1964. By the time the Library School was inaugurated on the Edmonton campus of the University of Alberta, there were full and part-time professors of school libraries on university campuses in Winnipeg, Saskatoon, Regina, Edmonton, and Vancouver.

The demand for professional library education for libraries in general was also growing rapidly, particularly during the expanding economies following World War II. It was then a necessity for chief librarians of universities and large public libraries to travel to the United States and to Great Britain seeking qualified candidates. It was reported in 1967 that "for Canada as a whole, there was one librarian per 6,500 population; in the prairie provinces, one per 15,000; in the United States, one per 3,000", and the combined graduates of the current library schools at the Universities of McGill, Toronto, and UBC would never in the near future supply the demand. The Canadian Library Association was also urging the formation of professional library schools in each of the major regions of Canada. Fortunately, at that time, the presidents of the three prairie universities met regularly to review mutual concerns and to consider the establishment of new programs.

The three prairie library associations shared this concern and jointly formed the Coburn Committee in 1964. After reviewing the possibilities of a library school on each of the three prairie campuses, the committee took its case to a meeting of the university presidents. The result was a decision of the Board of Governors of the University of Alberta in 1965 to establish a library school on either its Calgary or its Edmonton Campus. The Coordinating Faculties Council determined its location on the Edmonton Campus in 1966.

Although this decision enjoyed the support of the three prairie universities and of the three prairie library

associations, the first School of Library Science was not regional in any other than a geographical sense. Indeed, the School has always been financially supported solely by the University of Alberta, although in the early years there was representation from the three provincial library associations on its governing council. The School does, however, make every effort to provide both a Canadian and a prairie context to course work wherever it is applicable.

The School's first Director was the dynamic Sarah Rebecca Reed, formerly the Library Education Specialist of the United States Office of Education in Washington, DC, and a former Executive Secretary of the Library Education Committee of the American Library Association. She was appointed in 1967. The School opened its inaugural sessions on the second floor of the Education Library in the summer of 1968.

Sarah possessed a resolution of iron, but at the same time she was always gracious and welcoming. At every School or social event involving students and faculty, she would be at the door to welcome them; and the next day she would, just as graciously, inform those who were absent how much they were missed! She arranged a School presence at every prairie library event, usually by providing airplane fares, but after the air disaster of the famous soccer team in England, she would allow only one faculty person on any one flight!

Initially, the School of Library Science operated as an independent unit within the university with the BLS as the first professional degree. In 1971 the MLS year was added as a second degree. In 1976 the BLS degree was dropped and the MLS became the first professional degree in concert with the North American pattern of accredited library education. This brought the program directly under the regulations of the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research. The School became the Faculty of Library Science in 1975 with Betty Henderson as its first Dean. In 1988 there was a name change to reflect the new technologies of information organization and management. The program was now identified as the Faculty of Library and Information Studies with an MLIS degree. In the same year Dianne Oberg, responsible for the School Library Program in the Faculty of Education, became the Faculty's first candidate for an interdisciplinary doctoral degree. At that time Dianne held a joint appointment with the Faculty of Library and Information Studies. Part-time joint appointments to maintain liaison with the School Library Program in Education have remained a continuing policy from the beginning of the program.

Library and Information Studies was one of several smaller units within the university, about which there was a concerted

move, largely prompted by administrative and financial concerns, to combine into one larger unit or to re-establish them within other units. The President's Advisory Committee on Campus Reviews, better known as PACCR, undertook a status review of all faculties and departments beginning in 1989. In 1991 the library and information studies program was restructured and, after negotiations to ensure its independence to meet accreditation requirements, the Faculty of Education became the administrative body. The program became once more the School of Library and Information Studies with former Dean Sheila Bertram as its continuing Director. The Accreditation report of 1992 recognized the outstanding leadership of Dean Bertram in a well-managed transition. The School retained its separate quarters within the Rutherford Library.

Recruitment

The initial announcement of the opening of the school in 1968 attracted a wide sampling of candidates from the three Prairie Provinces, and the Director made the original selection process a demanding one. Each candidate had to have an entering four-year degree (with at least a B standing) including courses in English, history, and science, a second language, preliminary supervised library work experience, three letters of recommendation from previous employers, and a rigorous personal interview with the Director. Forty-two candidates were finally admitted, nine of them male.

It is no wonder that the first class always considered themselves "special" – and they were reminded frequently during that first year that the successful accreditation of the program depended much on their performance! Sarah Rebecca also taught the initial reference courses and proved a demanding instructor. Her reference "run-arounds" were given top priority by every student to matter what other assignments might be pressing!

In comparison with many professionals, librarianship seems to attract smaller numbers of those who make it their "first choice" as a career. In practice, however, entering candidates with varied education and work experiences, enhanced competencies, and a strong orientation to serving people have always proved beneficial to the profession. How do they make this choice?

A survey of Alberta graduates in preparation for its third accreditation visit in 1985 indicated that as many as 55 percent were influenced by individual librarians, 49 percent by means of the University Calendar, and 34 percent as a result of discussions with alumni and faculty members. Lacking were any references to career day events, circulated brochures, or specially planned career programs. Those opportunities are now more readily available, such as the present annual Professional Development Day, arranged by the students and

followed by a reception sponsored by the School's Alumni Association. The School's Web site is now used frequently for such information.

A review of enquiries at that time revealed a high proportion of students from general arts programs that did not lead to specific professional employment, and a smaller number from those seeking added specialization within their current careers, such as school teachers or musicians. It is now evident that more students are entering the program with graduate degrees at both the master's and doctoral levels.

In the 1980/81 term, an unusual student, one "Joe Farmer," showed up unexpectedly on the Academic Libraries class list and submitted witty and brilliant assignments, although the instructor never actually met him. Unfortunately, news was received of this death by accident in Saskatchewan just prior to convocation! His picture, however, is included in the class photograph hanging in the School's hallway.

Admission

Entering candidates had more hurdles to jump for the BLS than were faced after the two-year MLS became the first professional degree. At that point prior library experience was dropped as a requirement, and some years later the personal interview was also dropped. Because the library degree is basically an academic experience, the requirements of the university's Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research became the norm. Academic standings for the entering undergraduate (or graduate) degrees are considered better indicators of performance within the program, and the School enjoys a high reputation for its entering standards. Knowledge of a second language is considered an asset, and an English language proficiency test for students with other than English as a first language is required.

Initially, the School had an enrolment limit with required full-time attendance. At present, approximately thirty-five to forty full-time students continue to be admitted each year along with extra part-time students. The total enrolment at any one time, including second year students, might be ninety, with about 70 percent or more registered for full-time attendance. The average entering age is 30.5 years. Enrolment is always realistically affected by the number of faculty members available and qualified to teach the courses offered and, at the graduate level, seminar sessions with smaller numbers of students per class are preferred. Now anticipating eight full-time faculty members plus a varying number of sessionals, the Alberta School still remains a small academic unit within the larger university community.

Although students occasionally emerge from across Canada, the United States, the United Kingdom, Europe, Asia and Africa, by far the largest number of candidates is admitted

from the province of Alberta, followed by Saskatchewan and British Columbia. The same pattern exists for entering degree backgrounds. Background studies within the student body vary enormously, with the largest concentrations from English, History, and Education. About 20 percent may have had significant prior library experience. Presently, a high percentage signs up for the Practicum course, while others take on part-time library positions during their studies. The predominant ratio of females to males has not appreciably changed.

Influenced by the radical student movements across North America, the class of 73/74 refused to have a student president or vice-president. Because they considered such a structure as too hierarchical, they elected a seven-member group (The Group of Seven) as a governing committee. It created some confusion since responsibilities were not easily assigned to any one member. There was further confusion in the Registrar's Office when a number of married students decided to revert to their maiden names!

Financial Assistance

Scholarships, bursaries, fellowships, and prizes are not merely reflections of corporate munificence, but also reflect the commitment of the library profession's involvement in the process of 'becoming' a librarian. In its earlier stages, librarianship did not offer the same degree of support that other professions provided. Scholarship assistance is still noted in the accreditation process.

The largest single benefactor at the University of Alberta is the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research, which annually funds Graduate Assistantships (GA) for eligible graduate students who apply for them. Presently every full time faculty member has a GA for research assistance, and GA positions outside the School are also available for students who seek them. A Gold Medal in the name of Sarah Rebecca Reed is offered annually to the candidate with the highest academic standing; the Alberta Library Association offers two Bulletin prizes; and the Association of Professional Librarians of the University of Alberta offers book prizes. There is now over \$45,000 available each year in some twenty awards and prizes, including scholarship and continuing education grants, conference travel grants, and conference registration grants. The Lesley Heathcote scholarship awards \$6,500 for each of an entering and a continuing candidate. Several annual scholarships are offered by the H.W. Wilson Foundation, and the Canadian Library Association also offers scholarship assistance. Two scholarships are supported by the School's Alumni Association.

Curriculum

During its BLS phase the School offered an intensive four-week orientation program preceding the opening of regular classes. It took the students on bus visits to libraries

throughout the Prairie Provinces, with stopovers along the way for special lectures and workshops. It proved exhausting for both students and faculty, although it was rated highly by the students for its opportunities of seeing a variety of libraries in actual operation. This program added the course time required by the accreditation process based on the American semester sessions. It was dropped when the two-year MLS program came into effect.

Stories about these trips multiplied: the time when the students spread themselves on the lawn of the University of Calgary waiting for the bus to come, and the sprinklers came on; when one professor locked himself out of his hotel room and wandered down the hall in his striped pajamas; when the bus drivers diligently attended every lecture and library tour and we afterwards discovered they were high school teachers with summer jobs; when one of the joyful sing-song and story telling sessions in Jasper Park YWCA Camp, waxing long into the night, abruptly ended when Sarah Rebecca appeared to protect the reputation of the School!

When prior library experience was also dropped as a requirement, a three-week practicum at the end of the second year was added. It was designed to give students an opportunity to put their newly developed skills and learning to work. While it was widely appreciated by both the students and the library community, funding was not available to support the costs of supervision. The number and kinds of libraries matching student preferences were not always available or able to be readily evaluated as to the quality of the experience provided. It too was eventually dropped as a requirement, but has remained as a popular single-course option.

For the MLS degree, there was both a thesis and a non-thesis route. For the non-thesis route, a three-credit research project was required to demonstrate valid research techniques and to test the application of library principles. Although it did delay the graduation of some students, the overall experience was considered beneficial by the students themselves. The non-thesis route has now been replaced by sixteen single-term courses plus a "capping" exercise. This requires a student in the last term to submit a major paper or project originally written for a course assignment, which is then revised by the student in terms of its meaningfulness to the library program, to the library profession, and to personal career goals. The re-evaluation must be submitted as a Web page, which can then be made accessible to the wider public (with the student's permission). The School must also approve it for publication. One purpose of the requirement is to demonstrate the candidate's competencies with Web site manipulation. There has always been less interest in the thesis route, now consisting of thirteen courses plus a thesis, partly because of

practical future employment concerns. A year of full-time attendance is also required for the thesis route.

A unique feature of the Alberta program has long been its relationship to the school library program offered by the Faculty of Education. When the School first opened, John Wright, the school library specialist, held a joint appointment with the Faculty of Education and taught in both faculties. The Dean of Education's suggestion that the school library program be transferred to the library school was rejected because the Education context was felt to be essential for school librarians. The Faculty of Education currently offers an internet- based post-baccalaureate Diploma program, and a MEd in school libraries.

Students registered in the Elementary and Secondary education programs also sign up for the library school's courses in children's literature, storytelling, and young adult literature in large numbers. Undergraduate survey courses in these areas, as well as in comic books and graphic literature and Canadian literature for children, are now open for students in all other degree programs. Similar courses are reserved at the graduate level for MLIS students.

The number and range of the library school's courses reflect the shifting developments within the profession itself. The first year's program of 23 courses emphasizing a traditional bibliographical context has given way to over 50 courses that recognize information technology and global information resource management. An introductory course in automation was offered from the beginning as an option, but is now a requirement. Presently, there are courses in management, marketing, information technology, digital reference and retrieval, globalism, and feminism as well as elective courses in archives and records management, and in specialized types of libraries and materials such as government documents, health and science materials, and law librarianship.

A criticism often levied at library school programs is their lack of connection with the wider university. To counteract this, the School offers a range of courses open for all undergraduate students, and the faculty is involved in graduate supervision in other departments such as English, Sociology, Human Ecology, and Secondary Education. Another interesting and recent effort is the provision of an undergraduate course highlighting critical strategies for accessing the information universe and exploring the challenges of acquiring, evaluating and communicating information. It is open to second, third, and fourth year undergraduate students in all faculties, and is sometimes taken as a tentative exploration of librarianship as a career.

Since 2003, the Faculty of Arts has offered an interdisciplinary master's program in Humanities Computing (HuCo) in which the students must have a 'home

department'. The School of Library and Information Studies is so far the only such 'home department' outside of the Faculty of Arts. This shared interest is also recognized in a new three-year joint master's program in which a student can earn both an MLIS and an MA in Humanities Computing. Both the School and the HuCo are very satisfied with this association.

Although the University Library's major reference and bibliographical collections are immediately accessible within the Rutherford Library's north and south units, the program was in the past supported by a library-laboratory that housed course reserve materials, supporting collections of children's and young adult reading materials, reference materials, periodicals, and nonprint materials, and for a number of years a staff member was appointed as its coordinator. It now functions as a study hall and as a computer laboratory with some twenty computers for student searching and assignment exercises.

Placement

Upon graduation, when the formal links between the student and the School are dissolved, there is a dramatic shift from the academic to the professional world. Although students are prepared, in a general way, for positions in all types of libraries, the School plays only a marginal role in placement. Individual faculty members may, if requested, choose to endorse a student's application for a position. The School maintains the usual Job Board with advertised positions, and a Job File for students seeking such information, although the students report their most frequently used resources are on-line job files. A student 'Jobs Committee' also offers seminars on interviewing, writing curriculum vitae, and on alternative librarianship. The once popular invasion of the School in January and February by library employers has now disappeared, but such interviews can be arranged if requested.

The faculty were always amused at the sudden transformation in polish and dress when student interviews were being conducted, and they still wonder why so few employers ever requested transcripts of academic performance, or even checked for pertinent course work On a recent visit to a branch public library, a practicum student, dressed in blue jeans and t-shirt, was observed serving the public from the front desk – a contrast from earlier days!

Up to 80% of graduates take employment within the province of Alberta, most of them in academic and special/government libraries, followed by public and then by school libraries. A more recent trend reveals some students taking positions in the United States. The job market is a volatile one, and there are numbers of students who do not find immediate full-time employment at a professional level, although the record for initial employment of some kind is high. A review of library

advertisements frequently reveals the special qualifications sought, but very few positions are advertised specifically for new graduates.

Continuing Education

Accreditation standards are mandated for the “first” professional degree, and the implications for continuing education are not addressed. Several library schools offer doctoral degrees, which are more likely to attract candidates for university teaching positions in library education rather than for practicing librarianship – even in the largest libraries. The University’s interdisciplinary doctoral degree has so far resulted in two successful candidates in library and information studies.

The major impetus for continuing education comes from the library profession itself, and forms a major component of its conferences and special programs. Faculty members are frequent participants in these programs, and also sponsor them, often when there is a visiting lecturer. The library school has been able to access the university’s Distinguished Visitors program that brought in Margaret Beckman from the University of Guelph, Frances Halpenny associated with the University of Toronto and the *Dictionary of Canadian Biography*, Herbert S. White from Indiana University, Henriette Avram from the Library of Congress, and David Jenkinson from the University of Manitoba’s Education faculty. Presently there is another application for a distinguished visitor.

The School has always had visiting lecturers whose presentations are advertised to the wider university community, and the School also sponsors annual Research Seminar sessions.

Alumni may remember the year 1984 when Wilfred Lancaster from the University of Illinois was invited during the same term (but not at the same time) as Maurice Line, Director of the British Lending Library Division. They each took diametrically opposing views on the future of the profession – Professor Lancaster forecasting the demise of the book as we know it, and Professor Line supporting continued reliance on the printed text, and they did not hesitate to decry one another’s positions. As usual, they both had a point – but the resulting debate was exhilarating. And after the visit of the energetic and ebullient Herbert White, the students found themselves suffering from ‘White-out’!

One of the strengths of the School is its cordial relationship with the local library community. Staff from the University Library, for example, regularly teach as sessional lecturers, and the Director of Edmonton Public Library teaches an advanced management course. An annual event each term is Partners’ Day arranged by the local librarians and the student

organization. It enables students, under the supervision of the library staff, to spend a day in a library viewing the variety of its programs and services. There may even be more libraries available than students seeking this opportunity in any one term, but the program is greatly appreciated by both the community and library school. The day culminates in a reception at the library school organized by the Partners. As well, Professional Development Day is annually organized by the students themselves to showcase student research and to present speakers on current library issues. It is always well attended by local librarians.

Conclusion

Now some 36 years later, the opening optimism still remains, and there is both awareness and willingness to continue to meet the changing challenges of an ever-changing profession. The School is an established part of the university community, highly regarded by the Faculty of Graduate Studies and Research for its academic standards, comfortable in its relationship with the Faculty of Education with which it shares curriculum connections, warmly appreciated by the surrounding Alberta library community, and anticipating two new faculty members in the coming year. There is a growing alumni association whose newsletters and activities always reach a responsive audience, and frequently celebrate ‘old-timers’ reunion events. In a recent review of visioning for the School, Acting Director Anna Altmann emphasized these strengths as the basis for the next Accreditation visit in 2006.

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***Nota Bene**

This article was written by John G. Wright, (an original faculty member, former Dean, and the School's first joint appointment with the Faculty of Education in school librarianship), in consultation with Anna Altmann (Acting Director who obtained her first library degree from the School in 1974 and who joined the Faculty in 1987), Robert Brundin (who joined the Faculty in 1975 in the areas of reference services and academic librarianship, and who wrote the School's first history in 1995), Shirley Wright (a beginning faculty member in 1969 and pioneer of the public library and children's librarianship program), Sheila Bertram (our first Ph.D. faculty member in 1970 and former Dean who pioneered special librarianship, science & technology literature courses, and computer courses), and Dianne Oberg (our first Ph.D. graduate, and currently Chair of Elementary Education in the Faculty of Education)

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Published in ELAN (Ex Libris Association Newsletter), Summer 2004.