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## **Access Services in Library and Information Science Education**

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# Access Services in Library and Information Science Education

Michael J. Krasulski and David McCaslin

## INTRODUCTION

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Whether we had intended to become access services professionals is a matter of debate. However, our access services experiences early in our library careers are foundational to the library professionals we have become. As we entered the twenty-first century, we worked in access services while working toward our graduate degrees in library and information sciences, Michael at Drexel University and David at the University of Pittsburgh. More than three hundred miles separate Pittsburgh from Philadelphia, yet our experiences at two different institutions around the same time were similar. What we soon discovered was that the day-to-day library world we lived in was much different from the field of librarianship we were learning about.

Much of our academic coursework focused on the recognized traditional elements of the library and information field, with subjects such as organizing information, information-seeking behaviors, reference resources, and collection development. These concepts were not foreign to us because our



daily work involved identifying the parts of bibliographic records, creating abstracts, and understanding reference questions. We could find clear connections between academic work and real-world work. However, we also encountered many topics daily that the Master of Library and Information Science (MLIS) programs did not address. As we progressed toward our degrees, we became exposed to other library and information science concepts, such as digital libraries, emerging technologies, and government document resources. We continued to be disappointed when no course addressed the core concepts of access services that we experienced each day. If access services were addressed at all, it was an afterthought or an add-on to another topic. We expect that many reading this book will have had similar experiences while earning their graduate degrees.

As this book demonstrates, access services are a unique specialization within the librarianship profession. Each chapter details the knowledge and skills required to find success in the access services field. But where does that expertise come from? We learn a great many things in traditional library and information science (LIS) programs, including the foundations of information, reference, cataloging, and marketing. Some LIS programs have targeted courses on children's literature, government resources, and digital archiving. Yet any discussion of our field can be difficult to find. Why is this? How has the lack of formal education related to the field affected access services librarians? Where do these professionals ultimately receive their "access services" education? What would an access services course look like? This chapter seeks to explore possible answers to these questions.

## **WHERE DO ACCESS SERVICES LIBRARIANS COME FROM?**

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One popular misconception about access services units is that they consist of entry-level positions with paraprofessional tasks and responsibilities. As the contributors to this book indicate, a successful access services practitioner's skill set requires a variety of abilities and experience.

However, the composition of the typical access services unit generally follows a similar pattern: a director or head of access services, who is recognized as a librarian and holds a graduate degree in the field and some paraprofessional positions for which an LIS degree is not required. There are alternatives to this model where an associate or assistant head position or an Interlibrary Loan (ILL) position requires the master's degree, but generally, the field consists of non-MLIS staff. Large access services units could have supervisory-level positions responsible for units, such as circulation, ILL, reserves, or collection management.

If access services librarians are not learning access services skills in their graduate programs, then where are they learning them? A 2014 study on the education and training of access services librarians concluded that there was no one path to becoming an access services librarian.<sup>1</sup> Some begin their access services careers as paraprofessionals before and/or during their library graduate education or have professional library experience and then move into an access services role. Regardless of where one starts in one's access services career, the study makes clear where access services librarians learn their skills. Access services professionals learn access services skills on the job.<sup>2</sup> Who then is training access services librarians? Although the study did not answer this question, it can be inferred that frontline staff are training their managers or access services librarians learn on the job as they work their way up. It would seem a likely conclusion because who else within a library would have the working knowledge of the various access services processes? It is equally clear that library graduate programs need to do a better job of providing the training for access services practitioners.

## **SO, WHERE ARE THE ACCESS SERVICES COURSES? —**

Melvil Dewey established the first modern library school at Columbia University in 1887.<sup>3</sup> As technology and scholarly research have evolved, the term “library school” was replaced with “school of library and infor-

mation science” or “school of information science.” Graduate programs in LIS have been in existence for nearly a century, and the master’s degree has been the professional credential for several decades.<sup>4</sup> As the names of the library schools have changed so, too, have the names of the professional credential. A Master of Library Science (MLS) became a Master of Science in Library and Information Science (MSLIS). During the past decade, the MLS has shifted to a Master of Information (MI) at some institutions. At present, more than 60 American Library Association–accredited LIS graduate programs exist in the United States and Canada.<sup>5</sup> Subjects and courses have evolved and changed over time to embrace technology and cultural norms as well as growing fields. Yet the presence of an access services–centric course among these programs is lacking.

Why is a major specialization of academic librarianship lacking in our academic training grounds for future librarians? It seems odd that throughout this period, the recognition and inclusion of access services in these programs has not occurred. A 2009 study on access services within LIS degree programs found no dedicated access services course though evidence was presented of various access services topics discussed within a wide variety of courses.<sup>6</sup> The scope and coverage of access services was inconsistent and varied from program to program. It would be difficult to investigate all the schools to determine their rationale for not including a course on the fundamental tenets of access services in their program. However, we can identify the plausible reasons that serve as obstacles for the inclusion of access services into a LIS education. By acknowledging and addressing these possible barriers, we can remove them.

The length of an MLIS program is typically between 12 and 24 months. One of the attractions of a graduate degree in LIS compared with other professional terminal graduate degrees is that the program takes less time and can be done while working. Extenuating circumstances, such as full-time versus part-time student status and allowable courses per semester, can extend or reduce the period of time a student spends within a program. Regardless, whether it is 12 months, 24 months, or somewhere in between, this can be a short time in which to not only address the

foundational elements of many areas of library and information science but also give students the context and tools to understand the current and near future issues that they may confront in their career.

Those who enter LIS programs represent a wide spectrum of background and familiarity with the LIS field. As noted above, the authors worked in libraries while attending graduate school. Others may not have the luxury of being able to rely on real-world experience. MLIS programs must start from a zero-knowledge baseline to ensure all are treated equitably. This includes devoting considerable time to the basic building blocks of what information or recorded knowledge is, how we identify it, and how we organize it. Unfortunately, the conciseness of these programs leaves little room for flexibility. In some programs, there may be little opportunity for optional electives, such as a course on access services.

Although this is true, one could argue that some of the core elements of access services, such as circulation, ILL, and collection maintenance should be required for any future librarian to understand. Loaning materials, whether they are from a library's own collection or shared between libraries, is the basis of a library's central function. In addition, understanding how libraries approach physically organizing their collection should be a fundamental requirement for individuals new to the profession. Although the concept of "what is information" needs to be addressed early in an MLIS program, "how information is shared" should immediately follow. Such a discussion should include notions such as the first-sale doctrine, resource sharing, and information organization. It is common to encounter librarians who entered the profession with little to no understanding of these crucial elements in the operation of a library. This can cause miscommunication, confusion, and the necessity for on-the-job education.

Although there can be no argument that on-the-job experience is valuable to a professional's education, fully grasping the nuance of the field means that those who become librarians in any field must understand the various parts that make any library function. We took courses in cataloging, with no intention of becoming catalogers; we understood that a

working understanding of the core concepts of cataloging were important to be a librarian and being an access services librarian specifically. Not all library students may be interested in doing reference work on a daily basis, but all would agree that reference work should be an integral part of a librarian's education. How else to better understand the larger picture of a library organization?

The same can be said for an access services–focused course. For this reason, graduate programs could view the inclusion of access services–related topics as less worthy of attention because the bulk of the work performed in these areas does not require advanced training or education.

The final potential reason for no formal access services courses could be boiled down to something we were told early in my career: “All of that access services stuff can be learned on the job.” In a sense, this might be an underlying notion for all the previously discussed excuses. In short, if the field can be learned on the job, why include it in a formal program? The simple response to that question is *time*. Many who have led access services units did learn on the job, but it took time—considerable time—to learn all aspects of the field. We spent a couple of years in the circulation department before moving on to course reserves, where additional time was spent learning the nuances of copyright, electronic reserves, and loan guidelines. It was not until we'd worked several years at a library that we became familiar with interlibrary loan. At each step, we started with little to no knowledge. It took time to not only acquire expertise in that area but also understand how each area was related to the other access services areas.

## **RESPONDING TO ACRL'S STANDARDS: WHAT WOULD AN ACCESS SERVICES COURSE LOOK LIKE?**

At its spring 2020 meeting, the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) board of directors approved *A Framework for Access Services Librarianship*.<sup>7</sup> This three-year effort brought clarity to the field.

Consisting of four sections, the standards define access services and, more importantly, lay out core competencies for access services librarians. Before these standards were established, there was some debate over what was and what was not access services, which may account for MLIS programs' resistance to incorporating an access services–dedicated course. For several decades, what people thought of as access services was boiled down to a single term: circulation. Perhaps that oversimplification is the underlying reason why access services has struggled to find legitimacy among the other fields of librarianship. Fortunately, ACRL clarified these issues with the codifying of standards. The Framework provides guidance to any library graduate program looking to develop an access services course. Using the Framework, we identify and describe proposed components of an access services–centered course in a graduate library and information science program. We hope graduate programs will use our effort, in addition to this whole volume, as a springboard for developing an access services course within their respective curricula. Alternatively, many library graduate programs offer independent study courses in which students can research a specific topic or internship experience for course credit. Those students could use this effort to develop their own access services course or learning experience.

## **Part I: Goals of an Access Services Course**

The goals of an access services course should be centered on the following:

- understanding the philosophy and scope of access services;
- placing access services within the larger library organization;
- understanding the history and background of the individual services that make up access services;
- recognizing the current issues, including new technologies, that surround individual services;
- examining access services current practice and trends; and



- exploring the access services community of practice, which includes journals and conferences that help connect access services librarians to each other.

## **Part II: Circulation**

The terms “circulation” and “access services” are often used interchangeably and often for good reason because circulation is the heart of access services and is typically the hub of activity. With the advent of integrated library systems (ILSs), the circulation of library materials and the management of patron activity became highly technical. Who are the major ILS vendors to libraries? What skills do access services librarians need to manage these systems? With the advent of self-checkout machines or Radio Frequency ID (RFID) tags, is a circulation desk still viable? Has the experiment in combining circulation and reference desks been effective? Do library fines create equity issues for lower-income patrons? This module would seek to answer these questions as well as address current issues involved in circulation, such as the effect of Information Commons and circulation work beyond print materials. In addition, comparing libraries with different circulation policies serves the dual goal of exposing students to the wide debate in the profession as well as giving students an opportunity to learn how to write such policies.

Finally, the increased amount of electronic resources (e-resources) will affect the future of circulation. Circulation statistics decrease because of these new electronic forms, but the number of questions from patrons on how to access these items increases. Access services will need to instruct staff on how to provide customer service on these information resources.

## **Part III: Interlibrary Loan and Document Delivery**

As the discovery tools reduce the size of the information world, the need for support apparatuses to access this information has increased. No library owns all the material ever created, so libraries must rely on some

form of ILL to satisfy patrons' material requests. Technology has made the ILL process quicker, easier, and less cumbersome for the end user. This module of the course would analyze the software and systems that connect libraries together. Copyright, scanning, workflow practices, quality control, and consortia relationships issues and what is lendable from a preservation standpoint would be discussed as they pertain to particular libraries. As with the circulation module, the ILL module would examine interlibrary loan topics through the relevant literature.

Because ILL and document delivery share many of the same concerns and issues, combining them into one module in the course is appropriate. Electronic document delivery has become the standard method by which libraries send articles and chapter sections to other libraries, fulfilling ILL requests. In larger academic libraries, document delivery has expanded as a service for patrons, notably faculty and graduate students, to request material from their own library. For some academic libraries, particularly those with specialized collections, document delivery has expanded into a source of revenue that often offsets the costs of providing ILL and document delivery services to their own users. The electronic delivery of print materials raises concerns surrounding copyright, so the course must examine copyright practices and policies in document delivery.

## **Part IV: Course Reserves**

Academic libraries have long provided course reserves as a service to faculty and students. The increased use of electronic course materials has benefited students and faculty as important course materials can be accessed at any time, from any place, by any number of students simultaneously. Although the ease of access has increased, so has the confusion and debate over what is permissible through copyright, fair use, and myriad licensing agreements. *Cambridge University Press v. Patton*, the 2008 court case colloquially known as the Georgia State case, which clarified many fair use issues around course reserves, provides plenty of course discussion around these issues. The rise of course-management

systems complicate the course reserves process. In some cases, college and university libraries curate faculty content within the course management systems. In other cases, libraries partner with faculty to assist in the use of library materials in course-management systems. In yet others, the library may take a hands-off approach. Faculty are responsible for adding course materials to their courses within a course-management system. Accessibility to course content is, at its heart, an equity issue, so this portion of the course could examine how equity plays a role in providing access to high-priced textbooks or hard-to-find films.

## **Part V: Collection Maintenance and Stacks Management**

From a theory and classroom perspective, this module would be the most difficult to analyze, because libraries come in different shapes, sizes, and scopes. Collection development, a standard course offering/subject in any LIS graduate program, would play a large role in determining what might stay in a current collection, be discarded, or moved into remote storage. However, this part of the course would focus on real-life difficulties faced by libraries when dealing with lack of stack space versus study space or space for other activities, such as cafés. Public services issues, such as closed versus open stacks, compact storage options, and types of stacks would also be addressed. In addition, RFID technology affects the way libraries approach shelving and inventory. Finally, project management in terms of conducting a collection move or large weeding project could be used as case studies for the course.

## **Part VI: Personnel Management**

If access services are the original library user interface, a knowledgeable staff is needed to give patrons the best possible service. Whether an access services librarian supervises the whole unit or a supervisor/manager serves as an intermediary between support staff and

the department head, an access services librarian must understand the complexities in supervising a workforce in a high-traffic area. A management class is usually a key component in any LIS program. Nevertheless, identifying managerial approaches and current issues specific to today's access services support staff, including working within collective bargaining environments, would benefit LIS students. In addition, those who choose to continue down the access services path could benefit from a course that discusses the person-to-person management required for the field. There can be a distinct difference in approach to supervising librarians and paraprofessionals. As one rises in the field of access services, one moves further away from the front line, and the job becomes more about managing people and less about direct contact with patrons.

## **Part VII: Public Relations**

For patrons to acquire a book or article, use ILL, or review electronic reserve (e-reserve) material, they must be aware of these services and how they work. Therefore, public relations and marketing are relied upon to educate patrons about the tools and services available to them. Just as the term "information literacy" has been defined as having the ability to "...recognize when information is needed and have the ability to locate, evaluate, and use effectively the needed information,"<sup>8</sup> library literacy could be defined as having the knowledge base to recognize and use the services and tools offered by a particular library. These range from placing a book on hold to requesting an ILL to accessing e-reserve material. Navigating an e-reserve request form or creating an instructional webpage or video on using ILL are skills for an access services librarian. This module would focus on strategies of effective public relations and marketing techniques. In addition, this portion of the course could address how access services speaks internally to its library administration in terms of providing data or annual reports outlining the effect of access services on its user community.

## Part VIII: Access Services Community of Practice

A robust access services community of practice has developed in the past 20 years. The popularity of professional gatherings, such as the Access Services Conference, held annually at Georgia Tech University, has provided professionals in this field a platform from which to share research through presentations and posters. Sections or interest groups have a dedicated space within the American Library Association (ALA), which has provided opportunities for librarians to meet, discuss trends, and collaborate on access services–related topics. In addition, peer-reviewed scholarly publications, such as the *Journal of Access Services* and books (like this one) illustrate the technical, analytical, and academic expertise required to be engaged and successful in the field of access services. The final module of this proposed course would concentrate on the access services community of practice beyond one’s own library. More information about these resources can be found in the next chapter.

## CONCLUSION

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This chapter has demonstrated that access services is largely missing from the discussion in our library and information science programs. The presence of a course in MLIS programs would not only help in developing better prepared access services librarians but would also provide vital context for future librarians who intend to focus on a different field of librarianship. There can be a misconception among other library professionals that access services are just about checking books out, shelving books, and interlibrary loan. As this book illustrates, the field of access services involves a wide breadth of skills, knowledge, and experience. Having a course focused on this field would provide an avenue by which non–access services practitioners could better understand it.

A successful library requires staff from across all departments working cohesively and understanding how each unit of a library is interconnected

with the others. Issues can arise when library department staff work in silos and fail to appreciate the required expertise in those other areas. The size of a library organization may dictate how large or small this disconnect is. Smaller library systems may require more cross-training and reliance on colleagues to provide support whereas large systems could have individuals who rarely see or work with staff from other units in the library. Regardless, the presence of an access services course would provide future catalogers, archivists, and subject specialists a window into the access services field to understand the nuances, terminology, and knowledge required. Finally, the other side must also be addressed: Why there *should* be a course. Strong and rational reasons exist for the placement of such a course in MLIS programs. Its inclusion would not only have a positive effect on those who choose this field as a career path but would also benefit those who have a tangential interest in access services in their own libraries.

## NOTES

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