Developing a Master in Library and Information Science (MLIS) Curriculum for Central Asia: Integrating Kazakh, Russian and North American concepts of libraries and librarianship

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Abstract

This paper reports the process of creating a new graduate level degree program in Library and Information Science in Kazakhstan. The goal is to produce practitioners who will also become the educators of future generations of Central Asian librarians. An analysis of discussions about the program curriculum reveals apparent consensus about fundamental topics, e.g. the organization of information and knowledge. However, there are significant differences in cultural understandings of concepts such as "information" and "knowledge", their conceptual relationships to each other, and their proper places in library science, as different library science curricula are products of different social, economic and political realities. Suggestions are presented for developing a curriculum that both integrates understandings from the international library community and is appropriate to local circumstances.

Introduction

In this paper we report the process of creating a new graduate level degree program in library and information science (LIS) in Kazakhstan. The motivation for the new program is to offer Central Asians an education in library and information science at an internationally recognized level of quality--the program will meet accreditation standards of both the Kazakhstan Ministry of Education and Science and other quality assurance bodies such as the Russian education ministry and the American Library Association (ALA). The goal is to produce practitioners who will be able to meet regional library needs and participate in global information exchange, and who will ultimately become the educators of future generations of Central Asian librarians and information professionals.

We describe the ongoing development of the curriculum for the program. Our focus here is on the core courses that all students will be required to take (the development of electives and of different specializations for the program will be described in future papers). The program designers are mid-career librarians and educators trained in the former Soviet Union and in North America. The process of developing the curriculum has included comparison and discussion of required courses in existing programs in Kazakhstan, Russia, the United States and Canada, and comparison and discussion of the government standards of the Kazakhstani and Russian education ministries with the accreditation standards of the American Library Association. Our focus on Russia and America is practical, and is not meant to imply that these countries' programs are better than other library and information science programs around the world. Russia, as the Soviet Union, was the source of current Kazakhstani education standards and library practices, and it remains the nearest realistic destination for Kazakhstani librarians to receive graduate level training in information science. We are concerned with the standards of the American Library Association, which accredits both American and Canadian programs, because we are developing this curriculum for an institution that is currently pursuing university accreditation from an American accrediting body. Our ongoing discussions of these existing programs and standards are informed by recent publications on libraries and curriculum development for higher education programs in library and information science. (Dillon and Norris 2005; OECD 1999; Richardson 2003; Shakhanova and Documbekova 2005; Stoffle and Leeder 2005)

We have found general agreement that professionally qualified librarians should understand certain basic concepts (information and knowledge, documents and records, preservation and transmission and access or use) and have certain basic competencies (the ability to select, acquire, organize, store, retrieve, and disseminate information, as well as to manage and evaluate knowledge institutions). There is less agreement about about what librarians should do with their understanding and competence—to what extent do libraries exist to preserve knowledge? to disseminate information? to educate patrons? to serve customers? We recognize that different views of the roles of libraries in social life reflect different cultual, economic, and political circumstances; and so we comment throughout where appropriate on the social histories and conditions that motivate and constrain libraries and the education of librarians in these countries. We end with suggestions towards a graduate curriculum best suited to regional conditions and expectations.

The Data

What should professionally qualified librarians know? We examined lists and descriptions of required core courses that are currently available online for the three[1] existing library degree programs in Kazakhstan, for Russian programs in St. Petersburg, Moscow, Kazan, Ulan-Ude, and Khabarovsk, and for twenty programs in the United States and Canada. We also looked at the required subjects that are listed in government standards for the Kazakhstan baccalaureate degree in library science and bibliography (specialty 050418), and the Russian baccalaureate and master's degrees in library-information resources (standard 531000). We also looked at transcripts of courses of study from librarians who earned library science degrees in Kazakhstan, Russia and the United States during the past 25 years, and we talked to them about their educational and professional experiences. We have also begun a review of recent textbooks available in Almaty (Vaneev and Minkina 2003).

For readers unfamiliar with the different systems of higher education in these countries, we note here that the Soviet library science degree was a five year undergraduate degree (Diplom), with further graduate study made available to a qualified few as dictated by calculations of state employment needs. The U.S. library science degree developed as a one or two year graduate degree (Master) with a prerequisite of completion of a four year undergraduate degree (Bachelor) in some other academic discipline (Weiner). Today, Russia offers both undergraduate and graduate degrees in library-information resources (see Richardson 2003 for a description of the Russian system of higher education and degrees). Recently, some U.S. institutions have begun to offer undergraduate degrees. Canada offers library technician training programs to high school graduates as well as library science graduate programs to holders of undergraduate degrees. (Ingles et al 2005) Kazakhstan has long had an undergraduate program in library science and bibliography; the first graduate program in library science and bibliography opened at one institution in 2004.

A First Proposal

A first review of the course lists suggested apparent consensus about fundamental topics across cultures and countries. Based on this review, the suggested content for our institution's required courses included

- resources and collections of information and knowledge/literature;
- services in libraries and other knowledge/information organizations;
- organization of knowledge and information;
- technologies of information (and knowledge);
- management of libraries and knowledge/information organizations

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[1] This is a reasonable number of programs given the size of Kazakhstan's population. Kazakhstan has the highest number of programs per capita, at approximately 1:5 million; Russia, with 26 programs, and America/Canada, with 56 programs, are nearer 1:6 million. More meaningful statistics (numbers of students enrolled in and graduated from the programs; numbers of employed librarians/information professionals) are being compiled and will be reported later.

- practice of library and information science theory in internships or apprenticeships

In general, Kazakhstani and Russian programs have more required core courses (e.g., "base discipline") than American and Canadian programs. For example, Kazakhstan requires two information resource (literature) courses[2] and an information services course, while some U.S. programs cover both resources and services in a single course. Kazakhstani and Russian programs also require an introductory course (general library science) that some Canadian and American programs do not. These differences may be partly because of the Soviet tradition of undergraduate degrees noted above, and partly because of cultural differences in the philosophies of higher education. In Kazakhstan and in Russia, higher education (indeed, all education) is governed by a national ministry that exercises centralized control over curricula and all other aspects of the educational process, with the goal of ensuring the desired quantity of uniformly qualified workers. In the U.S., higher education is decentralized and self-governing, and may be said to permit the market of supply and demand to produce employees of sufficient quantity and quality.

A commonly required course in the U.S. that is not required in Kazakhstan is research methods in library and information science. Again, this may be partly due to the status of the library degree as an undergraduate vocational qualification.[3] Russian standards state that scientific research is a required component of all courses.

The Differences

When we began to discuss the contents for each of these courses, many questions appeared. Here are a few examples:

- To what extent are information resources the same thing as knowledge collections? Are subject literatures information resources? Are subject-based "branch" bibliographies information resources?
- To what extent is the construction of subject bibliographies best taught as an information service? as a method of knowledge organization?
- To what extent is bibliology (history of the book) a course in knowledge technology?
- To what extent is library management an exercise in the preservation of knowledge? in the dissemination of information?
- To what extent is the practicing librarian an educator? a service provider?

These and many other questions will have to be answered as we prepare our summary descriptions and syllabi for these courses. In the remainder of this paper, we consider differences in the understandings and approaches to the concepts of "information" and "knowledge", and "preservation" and "dissemination."

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[2] a general literature course (Introduction to Literature) and a subject literature course (Russian, Kazakh and Foreign Literature)
[3] Kazakhstan specialty 050418, section 7.

Knowledge and Information

In North America and in Russia, recent library school graduates are familiar with the theoretical debates about "knowledge" and "information", and with the expanding evolution of library practices from preserving scarce knowledge, through selecting appropriate resources for educating patrons, to providing useful access to abundant information. Libraries as knowledge organizations have become responsible for selecting quality resources for the education of their patrons; libraries as information organizations have become responsible for retrieving resources requested by their users, and increasingly, for training users in "information literacy" so that users can access information to create knowledge. The expansion of library theory and practice to include "information" in addition to "knowledge" is clear in Russia's 2002 adoption of a revised degree standard in library-information resources, and in the various titles of the American and Canadian graduate degrees (Master of Library and Information Studies; Master of Library and Information Science; Master of Information Science; and Master of Science or Arts in library and information fields).

In Kazakhstan, the concept of "information" is also beginning to appear in the library science curriculum: courses in "information resources" and "automated information-library systems" are required for the library science and bibliography degree, and Shakhanova and Documbekova (2005) report that revised standards will include courses on information technologies (these may be required or elective courses). In current practice, libraries appear to be still primarily oriented towards knowledge. Practicing Kazakhstani librarians reported that the courses they have found most useful in their careers were in bibliography and literature (especially subject or "branch" bibliographies and literatures); [4] and when we asked them to describe "the modern librarian," they suggested the librarian should have "great erudition." [5]

The current situation in Kazakhstan is an example of a wider tendency to treat knowledge and information as different kinds of resources that require separate management techniques. "Knowledge" suggests a need for subject classification and organization (and protection and preservation), while "information" requires computer technology for access (and dissemination). Certainly courses in "information technology" that produce competence in computer use and online use are necessary—cf. Canada's library technician certificates, for example. It is hoped that a graduate degree in library and information science implies an integrated understanding of these concepts, their embodiment in records of all formats, and their integrated management.

It appears, then, that a graduate level curriculum for Kazakhstan would benefit from the inclusion of an "information" perspective in every core course—not just in "information technology" courses—at least for comparative purposes.

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[4] followed by courses in classification, processing and cataloging, and management
[5] Most of the Kazakhstani librarians we talked to also reported that their pursuit of library degrees was "accidental"—for example, the result of a failure to pass entrance exams for other degree programs. The image of the "erudite librarian" appears to form only after years of professional practice.

Preservation and Dissemination

What should libraries do? Long before librarianship became a profession that requires a university education, libraries were institutions responsible for the <u>preservation</u> of scarce records of valued knowledge. This concept of the library continues to resonate. In Kazakhstan (as in much of Europe and Asia), the modern, erudite librarian is a guardian of knowledge records, to the point of being held personally responsible for the security of library collections.

By the end of the 19th century, when university education in library science began in the U.S., books were no longer so scarce, public libraries were growing in number, and a need was recognized for educated librarians who could guide the reading habits of their patrons. (Wiegand 2000) In similar fashion, in the early 20th century the new Soviet Union recognized a need for professional librarians to serve and educate the proletariat. (Richards 1998, Richardson 2000) <u>Dissemination</u> of authoritative knowledge became an important library function. At the end of the 20th century, this function has expanded to include the dissemination of uncensored information as a "customer service" of the library, at least in the U.S. This use-oriented philosophy has become an important component of western library science courses, as indicated in the American Library Association accreditation standards that require degree programs to cover

> the essential character of the field of library and information studies; that is, recordable information and knowledge, and the services and technologies to *facilitate* their management and *use* [author's italics] (American Library Association 1992)

The emphasis on knowledge and information use, and the accompanying professional ethic of service to the user, is less central in Russian and Kazakhstani curriculum standards.

A graduate level curriculum for Kazakhstan would benefit from the incorporation of a "dissemination" perspective in core courses.

Suggestions for Development of an MLIS curriculum for Kazakhstan

In the effort to bring international library and information science theory and practice to Kazakhstan and Central Asia, what can the U.S./Canadian curriculum offer that is useful and sustainable?

1. Build on existing programs. Expand the current curriculum focus on knowledge and preservation to include information and access/dissemination. Offer graduate level training in affordable formats--e.g., short-term, sequential certificates.

2. Incorporate an international comparative perspective into every core course. Focus on the cross-cultural understandings of concepts, not on imposing one understanding over another. Make explicit multilingual, multiethnic, multinational issues.

3. Teach information dissemination as a desirable outcome of knowledge organization and resource management.

4. Encourage a professional service ethic centered on the user as well as the collection.

5. Integrate training in technology, but in meaningful contexts.

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