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On the Controversy Regarding Proposed Changes to ALA Standards

Quite a bit of online discussion has occurred recently regarding a report of the ALA Presidential Task Force (TF) on Library Education, submitted to the ALA Executive Board on January 13, 2009 (www.oa.ala.org/accreditation/?page_id=44). That report recommends a variety of major changes to the current Standards for Accreditation of Master's Programs in Library and Information Studies. The TF recommendations were not circulated for comment prior to their presentation to the ALA Executive Board, which is why the discussion of them has been taking place this spring.

Several of us on the ASIS&T Board of Directors were concerned about the nature of these recommendations. On April 13th a letter, over my signature, was sent to the ALA Committee on Accreditation (COA) and copied to various other interested parties, pointing out the problems we saw in the TF's suggestions (www.asis.org/news/ALA_COA_response.pdf). Our letter highlighted four specific concerns:

1. The proposed changes represent a narrowing of scope for the LIS field, which tends to work against diversity of ideas.
2. A requirement that the majority of faculty teaching in LIS programs be "grounded in librarianship" might also restrict the diversity and interdisciplinarity of school faculties.
3. The recommendations are highly prescriptive ("mandates" is the word ALA used) regarding the curricula of programs.
4. Other stakeholders in the LIS programs that ALA accredits, such as ASIS&T, ALISE and ACRL, were not involved in developing the recommendations.

ALISE and the iSchools have also voiced concerns to COA.

Now, no one doubts the good intentions of ALA and the members of the task force nor that the majority of graduates of LIS programs continue to be employed in libraries nor that the ALA made efforts to include a variety of voices in the proposed changes (for example, the task force did include several LIS educators who were members of ALISE and ASIS&T, although they did not represent those organizations). However, given past dissatisfactions with accreditation and limited success in involving other organizations such as ASIS&T in that process, a reservoir of strong feelings remains about the topic. Consequently, online discussions on lists like JESSE tend to generate more heat than light, and I am as guilty as the next person in having fanned the flames. One positive outcome is that more people outside of ALA are now aware of the proposed changes – although many voices, such as those of LIS deans, have been conspicuously absent.

The ALA TF report uses phrases such as "perceived gap" and "perceived inadequacies"; however, it is unclear whose perceptions these are and what observations they are based on. Thus, in my view the wisest response thus far is found in Illinois dean John Unsworth's letter on behalf of the iSchools (www.oa.ala.org/accreditation/?page_id=61). Unsworth suggests that changes to the standards ought to be based on empirical research regarding the needs of the profession and a subsequent determination of whether those needs are being met by existing LIS programs. In other words, more facts and fewer opinions are needed to inform change.

The TF's recommendations are now in the hands of COA, which will collect opinions and respond. For those of you who want to comment, the COA has set up a moderated blog for that purpose: www.oa.ala.org/accreditation/.

Should the TF recommendations be enacted, I am sure that we will hear a great deal about them in future years. ■