

Office for Accreditation
American Library Association
50 E. Huron St.
Chicago, Illinois, 60611

This letter is being written in support of positions communicated to you by the American Society for Information Science & Technology (ASIS&T) and by the Association for Library and Information Science Education (ALISE) in response to the January 2009 report of the ALA Library Education Task Force. It is also intended to communicate the particular perspective of the deans of the iSchools (www.ischools.org) and members of the iCaucus.

The **iSchools** currently include 25 schools in North America, Europe and Asia, 15 of which offer graduate professional programs accredited by the ALA. The foundation of common interest among the iSchools lies in our shared interest in understanding the evolving relationship between information, people and technology. This is characterized by a commitment to learning and understanding the role of information in human endeavors. The iSchools take it as given that expertise in all forms of information is required for progress in science, business, education, and culture. This expertise includes understanding the uses and users of information, as well as information technologies and their applications. As such, each of the iSchools engages in exploratory research and curricular innovation and brings a set of unique strengths to the advancement of graduate education in the information professions. It is against this backdrop that we, the deans of the iSchools, have reviewed the January 2009 report of the ALA Library Education Task Force.

The task force report advocates a shift towards a prescriptive core curriculum, linked to accreditation, as a means of assuring that graduates share a common and well-understood set of knowledge and skills. While we understand the appeal of a process that makes it easier for ALA to assess programs, we observe that the task force recommendations introduce collateral problems. Stability of any "core curriculum" is infeasible during such a period of rapid change as we are currently witnessing. In addition, the diversity of professional goals among the current generation of LIS masters students requires curricular flexibility, particularly in light of the relatively short duration of a masters program. Unless the substance of the core curriculum, and its articulation, are annually revisited and subjected to debate among educators, researchers, and practitioners, the curriculum will become outdated, and will act to retard the timeliness and relevance of the courses in which it is instantiated, and the programs in which they exist.

The current "descriptive" method of accreditation strikes a balance between the need of the accrediting body to assess and the need of the educational program to be responsive to its clientele and responsible for its curriculum. It reflects an appropriate division of responsibility. Moving to a prescriptive curriculum shifts an inordinate amount of responsibility to the ALA, requiring it to make curricular decisions for many from afar. The ALA is not an educational institution; it is a professional association.

Caution is further suggested from the outcomes of other prescriptive learning initiatives. The Standards of Learning imposed by many state governments on public education, for example, were motivated by similar ideals as those espoused by the ALA task force. Frederick Hess ("Reform, Resistance, ... Retreat? The Predictable Politics of Accountability in Virginia" *Brookings Papers on Education Policy* 2002, 69-122) provides an insightful view of the complex interactions among Virginia's educators,

politicians, and the public that should humble anyone considering a mandated curriculum coupled with a high-stakes accreditation process.

Few educators in LIS professional programs and library practice would dispute that some things are "core" and others are not, and the individual lists would surely overlap substantially. The question raised by linking a specific curriculum to accreditation, however, is whether the uniformity of a mandated common core would be worth the price, and whether it would (in practice) eliminate peripheral variation that enables innovative responses both to regional needs and to changing circumstances. Again, we encourage the ALA to consider the experience of Virginia with the Standards of Learning.

As deans of the iSchools, we suggest that the most efficient means of achieving the outcomes that you desire would be to conduct empirical research leading to a genuine understanding of the needs of the profession and to consider how those needs are, or are not, being met by programs such as ours. We envision this work being conducted in an atmosphere of mutual respect between those who teach and those who practice, and would willingly engage the expertise and resources of the iSchools in the achievement of such an outcome.

We note that the recommendations of the task force focus on programmatic inputs (LIS PhD requirements for faculty, for example). We suggest that ALA accreditation focus rather on programmatic outputs (quality of students, placement, faculty research publications, etc.). By emphasizing the empirical checking off of inputs, accreditation processes become distracted from the qualitative evaluation of output. Evaluation is more difficult, and perhaps therefore more important..

Our schools take pride in the leadership roles we exercise in the education of information professionals, and we value highly our relationships with ALA and the other professional associations with whom we work. Appropriately conceived, accreditation provides a foundation of quality assessment we value, as it provides an objective, independent, and critical assessment of the outcomes of our programs. We also appreciate the effort and dedication invested by those engaged in these processes. We are not, however, persuaded that the kind of accreditation program recommended by the Library Education Task Force will serve either our institutions or our profession well.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'John Unsworth', written in a cursive style.

John Unsworth, iCaucus Coordinator
& Dean of the Graduate School of Library and Information Science
University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign,
on behalf of the Deans of the iSchools

The iSchools are:



University of California, Berkeley
School of Information

University of California, Irvine
The Donald Bren School of Information and
Computer Sciences

University of California, Los Angeles
Graduate School of Education and Information
Studies

Carnegie Mellon University
School of Information Systems and Management,
Heinz College

Drexel University
College of Information Science and Technology

Florida State University
College of Communication and Information

Georgia Institute of Technology
College of Computing

Humboldt-Universität zu Berlin
Berlin School of Library and Information Science

University of Illinois
Graduate School of Library and Information
Science

Indiana University
School of Informatics

Indiana University
School of Library and Information Science

University of Maryland
College of Information Studies

University of Michigan
The School of Information

University of North Carolina
School of Information and Library Science

University of North Texas
College of Information

The Pennsylvania State University
College of Information Sciences and Technology

University of Pittsburgh
School of Information Sciences

Royal School of Library and Information Science,
Denmark

Rutgers, the State University of New Jersey
School of Communication, Information, and
Library Studies

Singapore Management University
School of Information Systems

Syracuse University
School of Information Studies

University of Texas, Austin
School of Information

University of Toronto
Faculty of Information

University of Washington
Information School

Wuhan University, China
School of Information Management

<http://www.ischools.org/>