

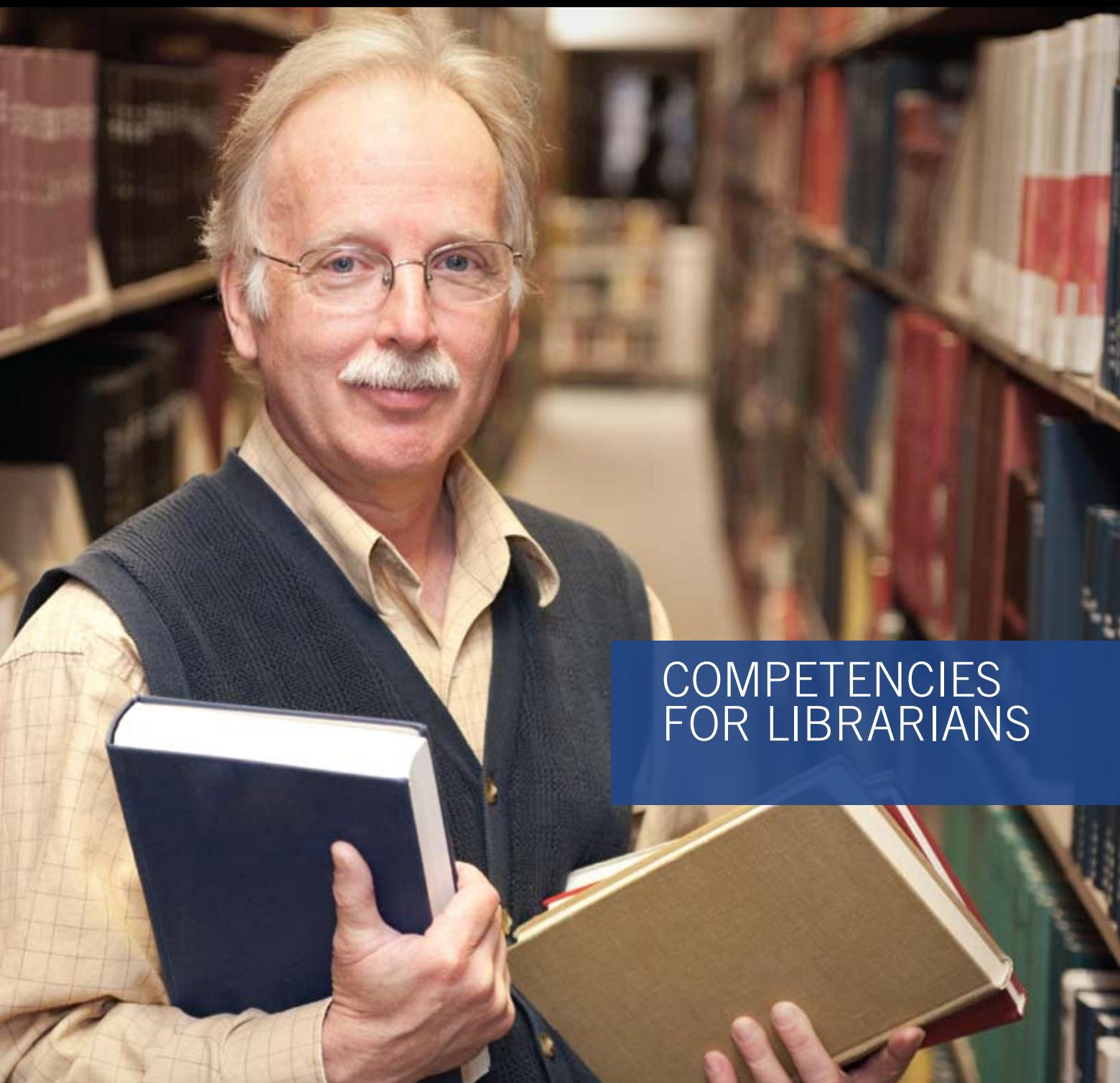
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COMPETENCIES
FOR LIBRARIANS

Preparing Future Professionals through Broad Competency Planning

COMPETENCIES TAUGHT IN LIBRARY SCHOOL MUST PREPARE STUDENTS TO ADAPT TO DIVERSE EMPLOYMENT ENVIRONMENTS AND CHANGES IN THE PROFESSIONAL LANDSCAPE.

BY SANDRA HIRSH, MILS, PHD

In today's environment of rapid technological changes, competitive job markets and evolving job roles, it's critical to examine the competencies needed to succeed as an information professional. In our profession, competencies are used for different purposes. For example, when library leaders develop a new job description or evaluate an employee's performance, they may rely on a set of competencies developed by a professional association to guide their actions. When an organization plans its continuing education offerings, it may turn to a list of professional competencies for guidance as it chooses the focus of its training program.

In these examples, competencies are used for a narrow purpose—hiring for a particular position, building a training program for a specific group of practitioners, or evaluating employee performance to make promotion decisions. A list of professional competencies, like those established by SLA, guide library leaders as they assess the skills, knowledge, experience, and abilities of current personnel and future employees (Gonzalez 2010). The Library Leadership Administration and Management Association developed a list of competencies for library leaders aimed at providing a common language to guide leadership development (Ammons-Stephens et al. 2009).

Competencies also play a role in library school education. However, when library school faculty plan learning outcomes for students, they must think more broadly about the issue of competencies. Rather than thinking about how competencies can be used to assess a specific group of employees in one setting, educators need to prepare graduates for a wide range of professional roles (Lester and Van Fleet 2008). Students, meanwhile, need to master the competencies necessary for the first job they'll take after graduation as well as the foundational knowledge they'll need to adapt to changing roles throughout their career.



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Choosing Competencies for Graduate Programs

Like many other graduate programs, the San Jose State University School of Library and Information Science (SLIS) uses a set of competencies as program learning outcomes for all students in its Master of Library and Information Science (MLIS) program. From the first day students begin their courses, and throughout their program, faculty guide students as they focus on understanding and mastering each competency.

In developing its list of competencies, SLIS faculty reviewed competency lists published by professional associations to ensure that the school's learning outcomes align with professional standards. As examples, the American Library Association (ALA) lists 41 competencies for graduates of ALA-accredited master's programs, and SLA offers its own list of 2 core competencies, 23 professional competencies, and 15 personal competencies for information professionals. Professional associations regularly update their competencies to reflect changes in the field: ALA updated its competencies in 2009, and SLA is currently revising its competencies, which were last updated in 2003.

After reviewing competency lists published by professional associations, SLIS faculty then distilled those lists into 15 competencies required for all of its MLIS program graduates. The competencies, which are listed in the accompanying sidebar, represent transferable skills and knowledge that can be used in a wide range of information settings. Regardless of the environment in which they may work or the specific career pathway they may pursue, MLIS program graduates need to know how to apply the 15 competencies in the myriad situations they will encounter.

In developing its 15 competencies, SLIS purposefully crafted them to allow for adaptability to diverse employment environments and future changes in the professional landscape. For example, technology is rapidly evolving. Rather than focus on how students can use current technology to organize information, one SLIS competency focuses on

learning how to organize information, regardless of the tools used to accomplish this task.

How Competencies Guide Curriculum Planning

After establishing the competencies required of all its graduates, SLIS faculty use those competencies as the building blocks for curriculum planning. The competencies are integrated throughout the curriculum, with each course carefully designed to address a specific group of competencies.

A faculty committee reviews the entire curriculum to ensure that each competency is adequately covered. MLIS students must complete six required courses and can choose from more than 50 electives to develop a program tailored to their interests. A combination of required courses and electives provides students with a broad exploration of the various competencies in diverse contexts. If the committee identifies any competencies that are not adequately represented in current course offerings, new courses are developed and added to the curriculum.

The competencies are used to assess individual student learning as well as the overall MLIS program. They are an important part of the program's ALA accreditation review process, wherein program leaders demonstrate that professional competencies are integrated throughout the curricula. In addition, competencies are part of the ongoing program assessment for the university's regional accreditation process with the Western Association of Schools and Colleges.

SLIS students are introduced to the MLIS program's competencies in the four core courses they take as they begin their studies. They learn why they need to be competent in each area, rather than focusing on mastering just a few of the competencies.

In those first classes and throughout the program, each course syllabus lists the competencies that are emphasized in the class, allowing students to focus their learning activities on an in-depth exploration of two or three competen-

cies. In addition, each assignment is linked to at least one competency, so students can recognize how the activity prepares them to master specific knowledge they'll need after graduation.

MLIS students also have the option to complete an internship, where they can connect learning to practice in an employment setting. They spend a semester focusing on identified learning objectives, which students choose in consultation with a faculty advisor and internship site supervisor. Although all MLIS courses explore ways to apply learning to practice, internships provide a hands-on approach to applying competencies under the guidance of a practitioner.

The final step in the MLIS program is the culminating experience: Students have the option to complete a thesis or an e-portfolio. Students who choose to complete an e-portfolio must reflect on why each competency is important and how they will use this knowledge in the future. They must present convincing evidence of their ability to apply each competency. In addition, they must present their understanding of how the competencies are connected, reinforcing the need to have a well-rounded approach to service as an information professional.

As one student shared in an exit survey, "An e-portfolio gives students a rare opportunity to reflect holistically on their education. Classes become important collectively rather than just individually. Producing the e-portfolio gave me the chance to review my entire graduate education."

While the e-portfolio is not intended to be an employment dossier due to its substantial length and academic tone, faculty advisors encourage students to select portions of their e-portfolio to highlight their achievements and speak persuasively about their accomplishments during employment interviews. Instructors remind students that their e-portfolios serve multiple purposes. They are a reflective learning experience, as students decide which artifacts to include in their e-portfolios and determine how to best organize this

collection of information. They are also a showcase of student achievement, which can be useful when seeking employment.

The Competitive Edge for New Graduates

By focusing on competencies during graduate school, students are well prepared to articulate what they know to a potential employer. They can demonstrate their mastery of the knowledge and skills employers look for when making hiring and promotion decisions.

In response to a recent SLIS survey, employers cited the following top skills they want employees to demonstrate:

- Effective written and verbal communication skills;
- A passion for continuous learning and adaptability to new technology; and
- Proficient use of current and emerging information technologies.

MLIS students must demonstrate these competencies to earn their degree. For example, one competency focuses specifically on communication skills, including the ability to work collaboratively with peers. Another competency focuses on emerging technology use in libraries and other information organizations.

SLIS leaders frequently reach out to employers to garner their input about the knowledge and skills they seek when making hiring decisions. School leaders also regularly review job postings for LIS positions to ensure that the school's faculty and students understand the competencies today's employers seek in new employees. In addition, the school relies on several advisory committees, composed of practitioners and other experts, to inform curriculum planning and ensure that the school continues to offer relevant coursework built upon the foundational knowledge required of all information professionals.

As with the competency statements of professional organizations, the school's set of core competencies is a living document, which is continuously refined.

When ALA, SLA or another professional association updates its competency statements, SLIS faculty review those changes to determine whether the MLIS program competencies should also be refreshed.

In fact, the ability to adapt to change is perhaps one of the most important competencies a new graduate can bring to today's work environment. New graduates should demonstrate a positive attitude in the face of change, emphasize their ability to anticipate and flexibly adapt to change, and showcase their willingness to engage in lifelong learning in response to a changing work environment. **SLA**

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Statement of Core Competencies

Each graduate of the San Jose State University Master of Library and Information Science program is able to...

- A. articulate the ethics, values and foundational principles of library and information professionals and their role in the promotion of intellectual freedom;
- B. compare the environments and organizational settings in which library and information professionals practice;
- C. recognize the social, cultural and economic dimensions of information use;
- D. apply the fundamental principles of planning, management and marketing/advocacy;
- E. design, query and evaluate information retrieval systems;
- F. use the basic concepts and principles related to the creation, evaluation, selection, acquisition, preservation and organization of specific items or collections of information;
- G. understand the system of standards and methods used to control and create information structures and apply basic principles involved in the organization and representation of knowledge;
- H. demonstrate proficiency in the use of current information and communication technologies, and other related technologies, as they affect the resources and uses of libraries and other types of information providing entities;
- I. use service concepts, principles and techniques that facilitate information access, relevance, and accuracy for individuals or groups of users;
- J. describe the fundamental concepts of information-seeking behaviors;
- K. design training programs based on appropriate learning principles and theories;
- L. understand the nature of research, research methods and research findings; retrieve, evaluate and synthesize scholarly and professional literature for informed decision-making by specific client groups;
- M. demonstrate oral and written communication skills necessary for group work, collaborations and professional level presentations;
- N. evaluate programs and services on specified criteria; and
- O. contribute to the cultural, economic, educational and social well-being of our communities.