

Collaborating for Information Access and Stewardship:

My Revised Professional Values Statement

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INTRODUCTION

Before I was a librarian, I was a geek. To be clear, I mean that I was an information geek rather than a computer geek, although the latter eventually came to apply as well. Like many aspiring librarians, I was always obsessed with collecting books. Living in San Francisco in the 1990s, though, I was able to watch the early development of the internet—and even to be a part of it, in my own small way. To me, it was a dream come true; not just a place to socialize or be entertained, but a place for me to get my hands on documents, photos, and other materials I might otherwise never have been able to see. The online world was second nature to me before many of my peers had even discovered it, and it quickly became just as important as my books.

In fact, it was my longstanding obsession with researching urban geography and history online that ultimately led me to the MLIS program at UNCG. As I found myself spending more and more time browsing online projects and sites such as the [Internet Archive](#), [Historic Pittsburgh](#), and the [California Digital Library](#), it eventually occurred to me that I'd finally figured out what I wanted to do with the rest of my life. I wanted to work on projects like these. With some definite opinions, ten years of web design experience, and many years in retail service management behind me, I hoped I might have something to offer the profession. So in 2007, I entered library school, determined to digitize everything immediately and place all those hidden photos, documents, and other treasures online for the world to see. In retrospect, it seems almost inevitable that I should have moved in this direction.

CORE VALUES

My original professional values statement, completed during my first semester in the MLIS program, was organized around the concepts of user focus, information stewardship, and working relationships. These three concepts still form the basis of my professional philosophy, although my interpretation and practical assessment of each has changed considerably in the past two years.

User Focus

My original professional values statement in 2007 was framed in terms of S.R. Ranganathan's *The Five Laws of Library Science*, particularly with respect to the idea of user focus. As a new student of library and information studies, I was excited to read this book; he was funny and he was expressing thoughts that mirrored my own, even though when I'd had them I was thinking about retail customer service. Ranganathan, I believe, did for our profession what Jane Jacobs did for urban planning thirty years later with her 1961 classic *The Death and Life of Great American Cities*: he challenged the professional orthodoxy in a humorous and accessible manner and reminded practitioners that the needs of our patrons are much more important than our own convenience and preferences. Jacobs' cry that cities are for people echoes Ranganathan's insistence that books (and by extension, libraries and the resources that they contain) are for users.

My favorite of Ranganathan's anecdotes was his tale of the library official who, when confronted with the need to react to a dramatic increase in circulation, asked when the biggest daily rush of users came. When told that it occurred between 4:00

and 6:00 in the afternoon, the official's counterintuitive suggestion was "Close the library at four instead of six. That will end the bother" (1931, p.19). This is the library official I never want to become. Systems should bend to the needs of the user, not vice versa. Similarly, technology should be evaluated in terms of its need and appropriateness, and how it impacts the *user*, rather than on how "cool" we think it is or how convenient it makes certain tasks.

Also related to user focus is the concept of access to information. This is particularly important to me because my whole motivation for entering the program centered around making available those "invisible" collections that most people previously would never be able to see or use. My coursework and experience have tempered my belief that everything should be made available—this is neither realistic nor particularly desirable—but my core conviction is unchanged. And access means access for everyone. As information professionals, we have the responsibility to close all information divides, digital or otherwise.

During my time in the LIS program, I have become more attuned to the notion of information professionals as intermediaries or moderators rather than merely as disseminators of information. In a new era of technology and increased access I see our role more as that of instructors, teaching people to find the information they need and helping them to evaluate it, rather than finding and evaluating it for them. I believe this defines our user focus today and is what will distinguish librarianship and keep it relevant in the future.

Information Stewardship

Perhaps because of my archival orientation, information stewardship is an extremely high priority for me; digitization and preservation and intellectual property issues are key parts of information stewardship and are some of my “pet causes”.

During my time in the LIS program, I have come to realize the importance of preservation of physical documents and the extreme urgency of preserving digital and other electronic artifacts. I believe that digitization can and should foster both preservation and use, making more materials available to more users. At the same time, however, I have come to realize that collection management principles must apply; preserving everything is not realistic, nor is it even advisable in some cases. Thus, the 1922 Jenkinsonian ideal of the archivist as custodian, merely maintaining (and never weeding nor evaluating) the material he receives, has given way to Schellenberg’s call for “moderation and common sense” (1956, p. 68) and a more analytical approach. Our challenge is to act as mediators, to set priorities, and to provide context, but to do so with current and future users in mind rather than our own agendas.

With all preservation activities, we must remember that use is still the ultimate goal and that

concern for the future cannot be allowed to exclude current usage. The present generation is the heir to those who undertook preservation in the past precisely so that the heritage would be made available. Their work is being nullified if access is prevented” (Feather, 2004, pp.7-8).

Access is key, and anything that hinders it should be viewed with suspicion. If a processing backlog keeps archival collections from researchers who need them; perhaps it is time to consider “more product less process” (Greene & Meissner, 2005).

If special collections are so restricted that they are not being used, is there really justification for maintaining them to begin with? And as technology is more a part of collection development, it is important to remember that the materials and the ability of users to access them are more important than a “cutting edge” orientation that comes at the expense of content and use.

I also feel strongly about the need to defend the concept of “fair use” with respect to intellectual property all the while maintaining the rights of creators to profit from and maintain reasonable control over their work. Without the latter protection, there is little incentive to create the new works that are the basis of our profession. Without the former, access to information is impeded.

Working Relationships

As I have progressed through the LIS program at UNCG, I have become more and more conscious of the need to develop strong working relationships at both the personal and institutional level. I have been the beneficiary of a strong and supportive mentoring environment, and I believe that it is my responsibility to help provide such an environment for those who follow me as well.

One of the best ways to accomplish “pass on” to the next generation as well as to stay informed about current issues and trend in my field is through involvement in professional organizations. Membership is not enough; it provides only personal benefits, and perhaps not even many of them. By volunteering, participating in programs, and playing an active role, I will learn more about my profession while

simultaneously contributing to it. I will also develop professional networks in the process.

Collaboration is essential for information and cultural heritage organizations, and this includes within the organization as well. As a professional, I must try to foster collaboration and cooperation and avoid territoriality, minimizing the emphasis on hierarchies that tends to occur. The most successful projects I have worked on have been collaborative in nature, and the most successful managers and leaders I have worked with have recognized this fact and encouraged an atmosphere that promotes it. That said, it is necessary to remember the critical difference between leadership and management (Riggs, 2001), particularly in an inherently hierarchical and bureaucratic environment such as a large academic library. In my view, leadership is visionary, while management is administrative; each is necessary, but they are not interchangeable.

Obviously, it is essential to promote cultural diversity in all that we do as professionals. However, I believe that intellectual diversity is equally important; a learning environment cannot thrive amid intellectual inbreeding and scorn for all new ideas. This is something I hope I will remember when I am no longer the idealistic newcomer but a member of "the establishment".

APPLICATION AND PRACTICE

Foundations, History, and Reference

There is no understanding of a discipline without an understanding of its theoretical and historical underpinnings. Studying the foundations of librarianship and the history of libraries and of the profession allowed me to understand what makes the profession so important and to recognize my relationship to it. By starting with a broad overview of concepts such as information theory, ethics, and behaviors, I was able to see where my goals fit into the overall picture. I learned more about how people acquire and use information. And studying the “dead Germans” (Pierce, 1992, p. 641)—the theoretical history of the profession—I was able to associate the past and the future and find context on the ways that user focus, information stewardship, and working relationships have evolved over time.

In LIS 600 (Foundations of Library and Information Studies), I addressed information stewardship through [a paper on current issues surrounding paid search engine placement](#). My [action research project on selection criteria for digitization projects](#) addressed information stewardship and user focus, while my [initial professional values statement](#) addressed all three aspects.

In LIS 604 (History of the Library), user focus was a theme of my reviews of books on the [Carnegie library program](#) and on [library services to immigrant populations](#). Reviewing [a biography of Melvil Dewey](#) provided insight into the use—and abuse—of working relationships.

LIS 620 (Information Sources and Services) was perhaps the most user focused of all my courses; locating information and understanding the sources was the theme

of all the class exercises. In my final project, an [extensive pathfinder bibliography](#), I was able to play the role of both information provider and information consumer.

Collection Development

Upon entering the MLIS program, I suffered under the delusion that librarians and archivists were essentially passive information packrats trying to accumulate as much as possible, more concerned with organizing and distributing what they had than pondering what they *ought to* have. Even worse, I didn't think this was necessarily a bad thing; it hadn't really occurred to me that there were other options. Therefore, learning about the art and/or science of collection management in libraries and archives (and the difference between the two types of institutions) was something of a wake up call, and probably one of the most important aspects of the program for me.

In LIS 615 (Collection Management), I learned that it is essential for libraries to have a focus and plan, to articulate that focus and refine it as needed, and not to be shy about eliminating materials that dilute or detract from that focus. I also studied the application of this concept to digital materials, and I began to process the idea of digital libraries and digital projects as two distinct entities. In this course, I completed a [bibliography and presentation on the preservation and digitization of historical document collections](#) as well as a [detailed collection management plan for a theoretical visual materials collection](#). These materials related primarily to information stewardship and user focus, but the collection management plan also

touched on working relationships, both because it was a group project and because it involved analysis of a library's position within a larger institution.

In LIS 505 (Introduction to Archival Management), I encountered the somewhat different perspective of the archival profession: the less moderating and interventionist role of the archivist in information stewardship and its relationship to a focus on user needs. I completed reaction papers on archival collection management principles including [appraisal](#), [processing](#), and [ethical concerns](#).

Technology

Familiarity with current technologies is a necessity for all information professionals today, but in my planned career path, a considerably more intensive and focused study of certain technologies was essential.

LIS 630 (Computer-Related Technologies for Information Management) afforded me the opportunity to experiment with Web 2.0 technologies I might otherwise have ignored, while also providing me with an introduction to library-specific technologies, including integrated library systems (ILS) and others. I also completed an [interview with a library IT administrator](#), which provided firsthand information about the realities of IT in the field. I also completed a study of [scanning, digitization, and imaging](#) from a more technological point of view.

LIS 631 (Emerging Trends) broadened my awareness in this area and introduced me to more library-specific technologies, including discussions of specific [ILS packages](#), [link resolvers](#), [Web 2.0 integration](#), and [digital reference](#). My final project in this course will be a [survey of open source website content management systems in](#)

[library settings](#). The timing of this course has been particularly fortunate, as I am participating in it just as I have begun my first job working in a library IT department.

Technology featured prominently in several of my other courses as well. My [action research paper](#) in LIS 600 was on the subject of digitization, as was my [bibliography](#) in LIS 615. In LIS 505, I completed an [EAD-encoded finding aid](#) as my final project as well as a [digital project review](#). I am also currently enrolled in a geographic information systems (GIS) course that bridges my undergraduate major with the MLIS program.

Most of my technology-related coursework was primarily related to information stewardship and user focus, but there were also discussions of staffing, departmental cooperation, and other working relationships.

Management

The study of management and administration caused me to evaluate my own interpersonal skills, and impressed upon me the importance of networking, collaboration, and cooperation. These were important lessons for me, as I tend to be somewhat introverted and these things do not come naturally to me. There was also considerable focus on creating user-centered environments for customers, clients, and patrons, including needs assessments and evaluation. This related library service back to my customer service background, which I felt was a natural fit, and I was particularly impressed with the book *Creating the Customer Driven Library* by Jeanette Woodward.

In LIS 650 (Library Administration and Management), I explored working relationships more than in any other course. In this course, I [interviewed a library administrator](#), completed an [“ideal vision” of a perfect theoretical library](#), wrote a [treatise on management](#), and also completed the first draft of a [needs assessment on library education](#) that would later become the focus of an independent study as LIS 690 (Library Management).

Cataloging and Metadata

Cataloging and metadata will be at the heart of most of my work on digital projects and initiatives, as they become even more important in the case of virtual materials that cannot be easily browsed. This is increasingly technological work, more about data structures and interoperability than mere copy cataloging, but it is still necessary to have a grasp of the fundamentals in order to correctly describe materials; this speaks both to user focus and information stewardship.

In LIS 640 (Organizing Library Collections), I studied traditional cataloging and classification through various exercises, and learned the structure of MARC records and construction of call numbers and subject headings. In LIS 505 (Introduction to Archival Management), I studied controlled vocabularies and other metadata schemes, including Dublin Core and EAD. I also attended a continuing education course on the relationship between MARC and EAD formats taught by the Society of American Archivists.

In addition, I completed a semester long independent study on digitization and metadata in which I helped evaluate course materials for an upcoming course on the

subject, which resulted in a [bibliography](#) containing my evaluations of many of the readings.

“Real World” Experience

During my time in the program, I was fortunate enough to participate in a variety of internships, student work and volunteer opportunities.

Being a graduate assistant in the LIS department allowed me to work on collaboration and interpersonal skills and to get a better grasp on the consensus-based operation of an academic unit, as opposed to the top-down corporate model I was used to. I also got valuable experience working on the [departmental website](#) in a manner that was much more team-oriented than my previous freelance work had been. Working on this site also provided a much different perspective on user needs and accessibility than my work on corporate sites had offered.

I served as a volunteer on a digitization project at the Greensboro Public Library for several months, which provided my first actual work in a library and on a digitization project. Shortly afterward, I was hired as an intern on the [Civil Rights Greensboro](#) project at UNCG’s Jackson Library, where I digitized materials, created metadata, did some design and programming work, and was involved in the planning of the project; this was invaluable experience which was relevant to all three aspects of my philosophy, and actually led to my first full-time professional position.

In addition, I served as an intern at the Greensboro Historical Museum during which I processed and created a [finding aid](#) for an archival collection. This “hands on” experience was extremely useful as it allowed me to observe and understand the

workings of an archival repository and to complete a project on my own. Like the digitization internship, this position provided context on user focus, information stewardship, and working relationships.

CONCLUSION

Librarianship, like any service profession, is primarily about people—colleagues and clients—and while my own focus may not or may not include significant time spent at a traditional reference desk, I hope that I can always remember that my focus should be on the needs of the user, no matter what my current project may be. I must also remember that I cannot do it all alone, no matter how tempting that may seem to an introvert like me.

All the information of the world is of little value if it is not maintained and made available in a way that makes it discoverable and useful, no matter what the format. As a librarian, I plan to work toward this goal through my core priorities of access, information stewardship, and the development of satisfying and beneficial working relationships. That's why I came into this profession, and I very much hope that it's why I'll stay here as well.

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