

WHAT'S SPECIAL ABOUT SPECIAL LIBRARIES? - SLA AND THE CONTINUOUS EDUCATION CHALLENGE*

By David Bender

This is a challenging time for librarians. There are many changes taking place in the field. These changes include accelerated growth of new knowledge, new technology, and shifts in the provision of library and information services. All of these changes happening at the same time make continuous education one of this field's top priorities.

The Special Libraries Association (SLA) is dedicated to serving information professionals in their specialized information-dependent environments. And part of our job is to help increase and strengthen our membership's professional competencies.

Within the information profession, special librarians face some unique challenges. They say time is money, and in the corporate marketplace, this cliché holds true. These professionals must respond to the time-critical information needs of their clients and employers. This increases the scope of traditional library services and requires these special librarians to perform a variety of tasks like:

- analysis, interpretation, packaging and dissemination of information;
- design, development and delivery of new services and information products;
- database and index construction; and
- selection, configuration and evaluation of individual systems.

All of these tasks serve to meet the ultimate needs of the client.

Given the rapid changes in technology, our members look to us for continuous education programs to keep them abreast of the latest developments. We are finding that competency in systems analysis, design, and advanced computer applications is critical. Today's special librarian must be able to plan and implement technical solutions that effectively solve the information problems of his or her organization.

In results from SLA's 1996 Super Survey of members and nonmembers, when

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asked about continuous education and the most relevant and important topics to be covered in the future, respondents rated courses on "new technologies" and "advanced technology for planning and development" as the ones they would most likely attend. Potential continuous education topics on intermediate and advanced applications of library technology received the highest "most important" ratings.

SLA has found that special librarians are also looking for continuous education in the area of management. Information professionals are often placed in management positions early in their careers. When this happens, not only are they needing to master their recently learned information management skills, but they require a firm foundation in business management skills.

This compels special librarians to acquire knowledge in areas such as communications, human resources, budgeting and finance, marketing, cost-effective performance, productivity, profitability, organizational behavior and politics, and leadership. Though some of these topics are touched upon in library schools, these information professionals are looking for a more in-depth study of these important areas.

Since the special library or information resource center is user-driven, constant assessment of client needs is vital. Being able to do this effectively requires the use of non-traditional information sources and then packaging or re-packaging that information based upon a client's needs. Once seen as „value-added services“ such as information product analysis and evaluation are now considered basic tools. Special librarians are looking for ways to improve upon these services.

SLA's Information Resources Center provides an additional services with a host of topic-segmented electronic information packets. These EIPs are available on SLA's Web site at www.sla.org. These EIPs are tools that can be used by special librarians to find out more about the cutting-edge trends and shifts in the information industry. With this knowledge, information professionals are empowered to more carefully monitor the course of their professional development.

SLA has produced a document entitled: „Competencies for Special Librarians of the 21st Century.“ This document has merged and built upon earlier efforts by the Special Libraries Association to describe the specific knowledge, understanding, skills and attitudes needed by special librarians. It was developed by the Special Committee on Competencies for Special Librarians in 1996 and it focuses on the need for continuous competence in the library and information science profession.

This competencies document highlights the changes within the profession and our information-dependent society. These changes include:

- global competition;
- new computing and communicating technologies; and
- the perceived need to measure the productivity of knowledge and service workers.

These changes are causing three paradigm shifts:

- the transition from paper to electronic media as the dominant form of information storage and retrieval;
- the increasing demand for accountability including a focus on customers, performance measurement, benchmarking and continuous improvement; and
- new forms of work organization.

These shifts are happening at a time when the workforce is aging, thus making the need for continuous education even more vital. This document also details the personal competencies needed to be an effective special librarian.

The audience for the competencies document includes various groups who are stakeholders in the library and information science profession. One of the primary audiences is library and information science educators.

Upon its completion, SLA sent this document to all library school deans throughout the world. It is our hope that these library schools will base their information science curricula on these competencies to better prepare information professionals for the needs and demands of the real world of information work. We believe prospective students will find use of the piece as a guide to the content and approaches that they should look for in a library and information science curriculum. We also hope that prospective students will use the document as a guide to the content and approaches that they should look for in a good library and information science curriculum.

In the information age, special librarians are essential -- they provide the information edge for the knowledge-based organization by responding with a sense of urgency to critical information needs. In order to fulfill this key role, special librarians require two main types of competencies: professional and personal.

Professional competencies relate to the special librarian's knowledge in the areas of information resources, information access, technology, management and research and the ability to use these areas of knowledge as a basis for providing library and information services.

Personal competencies represent a set of skills, attitudes and values that enable librarians to work efficiently; be good communicators; focus on continuing

learning throughout their careers; demonstrate the value added nature of their contributions; and survive in the new world of work.

The document is assisting the information professional in meeting the strategic information needs of the individual or group being served. The more established special librarian has found this document to be a critical component in the field to help them define their professional development needs and goals. SLA uses this document as the basis for all of our continuous education programming.

At last year's Annual Conference in Seattle, Washington, the Association adopted a new Strategic Plan. SLA's mission is stated: to advance the leadership role of SLA members putting knowledge to work for the benefit of decision-makers in corporations, government, the profession and society as well as to shape the destiny of our information and knowledge-based society. This is a big job!

This document further outlines our Association's priorities which are:

- competency;
- value of the profession; and
- access to the Association.

Of these three, the one that seems to be a natural fit for today's discussion is our focus on Competency.

SLA's Professional Development Program shines as it works to ensure that our members have opportunities to develop the professional and personal competencies and skills of the special librarian. The program provides many activities designed to empower members to stay up-to-date with changes in the field. Our job is to provide them the tools to position themselves as key players in their organizations. In conjunction with another SLA priority -- access to the Association -- more of our Professional Development programs are being made available to the members virtually. These include online programs and satellite video conferences at locations throughout the world.

Our Professional Development staff works closely with a volunteer committee of Association members to plan the topics and details of the program. The committee:

- analyzes and recommends policies for the program;
- advises and assists the department in their planning of educational programs and career services; and
- reviews the programs developed by staff.

The SLA Board of Directors recently approved a committee-developed vision statement which currently serves as a working model for career advisory services

and continuous education. The committee is busy working with staff to develop tools that will assist members in evaluating their core competencies as well as designing an Association-wide mentorship program.

The Professional Development Program widely covers two areas: continuous education and career and employment services. Through various activities and programs, SLA takes pride in offering specialized information for information specialists. I would like to touch on several of these activities, the first of which is our Annual Conference -- now just a few short weeks away.

SLA's „main event“ is the Annual Conference which is held each June. Upwards to about 6500 information professionals gather together to take advantage of myriad educational programs and networking events. With more than 30 different continuous education courses at varying levels, Annual Conference guarantees a program to meet everyone's needs. Annual Conference is also the perfect venue for professional networking. Whether it's joining a local chapter member for a leading thinker presentation, or participating in round table discussions with division peers, the SLA Annual Conference expands professional circles to increase learning, collaboration and innovation in the work place. Our next SLA Annual Conference starts three weeks from Saturday -- June 6-11, in Indianapolis, Indiana.

Another offering is our Middle Management Institute, which was designed to bridge the gap between library school and the challenges of a mid-level position in library and information management. Consisting of five individual units that are offered at various times throughout the year, the institute provides practical training in the fundamentals of management and assists in the development of skills associated with effective administration.

In today's environment, information professionals move rapidly into demanding positions, often without the benefit of management education. Topics include:

- analytical tools of the trade;
- human resources issues;
- marketing and public relations planning;
- mastering technology and applications; and
- basic management skills.

One of our newest annual continuing education offerings is the Knowledge Executive Institute. Developed to serve the interests of our more seasoned information professionals, the Knowledge Executive Institute is specially crafted to teach more senior moving information professionals how to build the visioning,

leadership, and communication skills that are critical to success in any senior level position. The institute is held prior to SLA's Annual Conference.

SLA offers the latest in distance learning programs to keep special librarians aware of new developments in the field, while earning continuing education credits, without having to travel to special conference locations.

In this same vein, SLA offers two satellite video conferences each year -- one in the spring, and one in the fall. Available to any information professional in the USA, Canada, Europe, and Asia, these continuous education programs focus on the latest issues affecting the international library community. Topics have ranged from electronic copyright, to knowledge management and Intranets.

Likewise, our multimedia courses, offered in conjunction with the Pace University School of Computer and Information Systems, will make you a Web-site wizard in only five weeks. Consisting of online, textbook, and video-based instruction, these highly interactive courses are offered each spring and fall. This feature's course list currently includes:

- The Seven Keys to Highly Effective Web Site;
- Creating Your Own Homepage: HTML Essentials;
- Advanced HTML; and
- Writing Java Applets.

Currently, SLA has a variety of self-study programs available in workbook format. This program is being „virtualized“ into an online interactive format beginning July 1. This program, The Self-Paced Distance Learning Program, will allow members to brush-up on professional skills in a flexible, affordable, and convenient format. These Internet-based courses make it easy for information professionals to take advantage of continuing education programs without having to spend precious time and money. As the name states, it is at your own pace -- whenever and wherever it's convenient for you. A few of our titles are:

- The Complete Intranet Source for Information Professionals;
- Analyzing Library Costs for Decision-Making and Cost Recovery;
- Winning Marketing Techniques: An Introduction to Marketing for Information Professionals; and
- Legal Research for Non-Lawyers.

Coming soon to a desktop near you, SLA's newest distance learning program -- Real-Time Desktop Courses -- combines the interactive qualities of audio-conferencing, with the hands-on learning experience of the Internet. Each 90

minute course is led by an industry leader and explores current issues affecting the information community.

Offered each November, the SLA State-of-the-Art Institute is the premier forum for information professionals concerned with keeping on the cutting-edge of information management and business trends. Leading thinkers from around the world join together in Washington, DC to explore crucial industry issues such as the virtual workplace, the information age in Southeast Asia, and the idea of knowledge management as a new competitive asset.

In a focused attempt to reach our non-North American members, SLA is hosting a worldwide conference on special librarianship -- Global 2000 -- to be held October 16-19, 2000 in Brighton, England. This conference will focus on the Information age and its challenges and opportunities for the international information professional. Beginning in 2000, this global conference will replace the aforementioned State-of-the-Art Institute.

Designed specifically for SLA's chapter, division, and board leadership, SLA's annual Winter Meeting provides the perfect forum for leadership training, networking, and the opportunity to learn more about what is in store for the coming Association year. Planned to begin at the conclusion of the Winter Meeting, SLA's three-day Winter Education Conference includes a variety of half-day and full-day courses, an exhibit hall devoted to the latest information technology products, and the opportunity to network with other information professionals interested in staying on top of the information technology industry.

In addition to these excellent continuing educational opportunities, SLA has many career and employment services. SLA Online Job Search is an employment service designed to assist information professionals seeking new positions. Members can visit the SLA On-Line Job Search on our Web site to find timely job openings on-line.

The Employment Clearinghouse is a yearly networking opportunity offered at the SLA Annual Conference. The clearinghouse provides job seekers and employers with an opportunity to exchange information and meet face to face. For those unable to attend conference, a compilation of job openings is sold at the close of the event. Employment Clearinghouse application forms are available to all attendees in the preliminary conference program mailed to members each March.

The Career Advisory Service is also offered in conjunction with the Annual Conference. This service provides attendees an opportunity to discuss career goals with an experienced information professional.

We are all faced with challenge and change in our professional lives. This transition to a more information dependent world doesn't have to be an uphill battle. Through development, use and constant revisiting of our continuous education programs, SLA is dedicated to easing the journey and helping to increase and strengthen our membership's continuing education opportunities and professional competencies

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