

# Innovators and maintainers: Musings on library competencies

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**Abstract:** Our current political climate has certainly reignited a debate over what constitutes professional competence. Having held no political office and an undergraduate degree in economics from the University of Pennsylvania, President Donald J. Trump became the 45th President of the United States on January 20, 2017. Though there is no paucity of essays and articles dedicated to the core and functional competencies necessary to hold “the most powerful office in the world,” competence is ultimately decided by our electoral system, not a set of standards. Eager to prove his business acumen and project the idea of progress, Trump recently issued a presidential memorandum creating the White House Office of American Innovation, aimed at applying a business mentality to the federal government. As a corollary, Trump hopes to prove his competence by hastening growth and innovation in every sector of the American economy. Having just co-founded a micro-funding campaign focused on innovations in libraries, reading this presidential memorandum made me pause and reflect on how the profession of librarianship defines core competence and, perhaps inadvertently, tends to value innovation over maintenance.

**Keywords:** *library competencies, innovation, maintenance, american library association*



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## **Innovators and Maintainers: Musings on Library Competencies**

Our current political climate has certainly reignited a debate over what constitutes *professional competence*. Having held no political office and an undergraduate degree in economics from the University of Pennsylvania, President Donald J. Trump became the 45<sup>th</sup> President of the United States on January 20, 2017. Though there is no paucity of essays and articles dedicated to the core and functional competencies necessary to hold “the most powerful office in the world,” *competence* is ultimately decided by our electoral system, not a set of standards. Eager to prove his business acumen and to project the idea of progress, Trump recently issued a presidential memorandum creating the White House Office of American Innovation, aimed at applying a business mentality to the federal government. As a corollary, Trump hopes to prove his competence by hastening growth and innovation in every sector of the American economy. Having just co-founded a micro-funding campaign focused on innovations in libraries, reading this presidential memorandum made me pause and reflect on how the profession of librarianship defines core competence and, perhaps inadvertently, tends to value innovation over maintenance.

### **The Magnificent 8**

*“You read those in a book, or do you make ‘em up as you go?”* – Josh Faraday

For last 50 years, librarians have been debating, developing, and discussing what it means to be *competent* in the field of library and information science. A rudimentary search for the term in *Library, Information Science & Technology Abstracts* results in no fewer than 1,941 articles discussing competencies across the spectrum of information literacy, technology, digital curation, reference, cataloging, outreach, and curriculum. Needless to say, librarians are heavily invested in instilling, embedding, teaching, and professionally embodying library competence. In 2009, during the Midwinter Meeting in Denver, Colorado, the American Library Association (ALA) Council adopted as policy the definitive eight areas of competence possessed by a graduate from an ALA-accredited master’s program in library and information studies (American Library Association, 2009):

- Foundations of the Profession
- Information Resources

- Organization of Recorded Knowledge and Information
- Technological Knowledge and Skills
- Reference and User Services
- Research
- Continuing Education and Lifelong Learning
- Administration and Management

In addition to the core competencies developed by ALA, 18 specialized library organizations created their own statements of knowledge and skills. Unfortunately, if you're a librarian who works at Los Alamos National Laboratory's (LANL) Research Library, you may find yourself at a competency crossroads between the Special Library Association competencies (SLA), American Society for Information Science and Technology (ASIST) competencies, and the Federal Library and Information Center Committee (FLICC) competencies.

### **The Librarian**

*Charlene: "What makes you think you could be the Librarian."*

*Flynn Carsen: "I know the Dewey Decimal System, Library of Congress, research paper orthodoxy, web searching. I can set up an RSS feed..."*

As most librarians know, the American Library Association was formed in 1876 and Melville Dewey established the first library school in 1887 at Columbia University. However, the University of Chicago, alma mater of newly minted Librarian of Congress, Carla Hayden, would be the first university to grant a master's degree in library science. Hayden is the first woman and African-American to lead the world's largest library, and the first *nominated* Librarian of Congress to hold an MLS (David S. Mao, acting Librarian of Congress from 2015-2016, earned an MLS from Catholic University of America). Hayden's academic credentials are significant because the locus of defining competencies for the library profession can be traced back to Franklin D. Roosevelt's 1939 appointment of Archibald Macleish as the Librarian of Congress.

As the United States of America entered into World War II, President Franklin D. Roosevelt would look to his friend, Supreme Court Justice Felix Frankfurter, to help find a suitable replacement

for Hillary Putnam, creator of the classification system which would later influence the development of the Library of Congress Classification system (Mayer, 2016, para 6.). In a letter dated May 3, 1939, Roosevelt wrote:

*“I have a bad time picking a Librarian to succeed Putnam. What would you think of Archie MacLeish? He is not a professional librarian nor is he a special student of incunabula or ancient manuscripts. Nevertheless, he has lots of qualifications that said specialists have not.*

*What do you think? You might consult with Sam Morison and any other Twentieth Century minds you think useful. I assume you not revert to the Nineteenth Century in making your recommendation” (Roosevelt, 1939)?”*

In response, Frankfurter recommended Archibald MacLeish, a Harvard educated lawyer, writer for *Fortune Magazine*, and accomplished poet. Roosevelt would nominate MacLeish on June 6, 1939, proudly proclaiming that the Librarian of Congress required not a professional librarian but a “gentleman and a scholar” (Library of Congress, 2010, para. 2). The American Library Association, defending both the profession and professional competencies, adopted a resolution opposing the nomination and even sent representatives to testify against MacLeish in Senate hearings (Thomison, 1972, p. 392). However, on June 29, 1939, MacLeish was confirmed as the ninth Librarian of Congress, a position he would hold through the duration of the War.

Over the next few decades, the American Library Association sparked discussions and interest in developing a formal set of competencies for the library profession. In 1962, the American Library Association Commission on a National Plan for Library Education (mouthful) was charged with exploring how the current MLS structure contributes to the development of professional competencies in the field of librarianship. The report states,

*“It is believed that the quality of such services will be related directly to the competence and performance of the personnel available at all levels of responsibility. The education to be provided will, of course, be a principal influence in establishing appropriate competence levels” (American Library Association, 1967, p. 419).*

However, in 1983, at the Special Library Association Conference, Jose-Marie Griffiths would expose the continuing gap between education and practice in a paper entitled, “Competency

Requirements for Library and Information Science Professionals.” His paper reported the results of a study conducted by the University of Pittsburgh and King Research attributing the lack of professional competencies in the profession to a lack of communication between library and information science schools and those who employ information professionals (Griffiths, 1983, p. 2). This paper also developed one of the earliest frameworks for library competencies by creating three simple categories:

- Knowledge
- Skills
- Attitudes

Griffiths’ paper also popularized the notion of competencies based on job function, and contributed to the professional borders that continue to permeate library organizations to this day: user-oriented functions (reference, instruction, circulation), technical functions (cataloging, classification), and support functions (administration) (Griffiths, 1983, p. 8).

Though various permutations of library competencies would be developed by scholars in the field of library and information science, as well as professional organizations, it wasn’t until 1999 that the ALA created the Core Competencies Task Force — a direct result of ALA’s 1<sup>st</sup> Congress on Professional Education. Over time, this task force evolved into the Library Education Task Force and submitted their draft of core competencies to the ALA Executive Board in 2008. Almost nine years into the new millennium, the aforementioned *ALA Core Competences* were adopted.

### **Innovation vs. Maintenance**

*“Entire societies have come to talk about innovation as if it were an inherently desirable value, like love, fraternity, courage, beauty, dignity, or responsibility.”* – Andrew Russell & Lee Vinsel

In 2013, Michael Kelley, then editor-in-chief of *Library Journal*, wrote a provocative editorial entitled, “Can We Talk About the MLS?” In the editorial he questioned the prowess, and even necessity of the MLS degree to the profession. Musing over the lack of substance in the degree, Kelley quips, “But I learned almost nothing in library school that I did not already know or that I did not honestly feel I could have learned just as easily on the job or on my own. Coding? Ever hear of Lynda.com or w3schools.com” (Kelley, 2013)? In 2015, the Annoyed Librarian wrote a similarly damning piece

entitled, “You and Your Obsolete Degree.” Decrying the emphasis on theory over technical skill, the Annoyed Librarian writes, “If you just learned HTML but not CSS or JavaScript, you’re behind the times”(Annoyed Librarian, 2016). Both Kelley and the Annoyed Librarian speak to the ever-present gap between the skills taught in library schools and aptitude desired by hiring libraries. It should be noted that this debate heated up recently as the American Library Association opened up a discussion about the educational requirements for Executive Director.

Since this gap was identified by Griffith back in 1983, Tim Berners-Lee, among others, ushered in an information revolution in the form of 1s and 0s. The creative explosion unleashed by the World Wide Web and the Internet would ripple across the every sector of society, including education and librarianship. This disruptive influence is apparent in books such as Anya Kamenetz’s *DIY U: Edupunks, Edupreneurs, and the Coming Transformation of Higher Education*, Richard Florida’s *The Rise of the Creative Class: and How It’s Transforming Work, Leisure, Community And Everyday Life*, and Daniel Cohen and Tom Scheinfeldt’s *Hacking the Academy: New Approaches to Scholarship and Teaching from Digital Humanities*. All three texts underscore a growing ethos of *automation and innovation*. Because libraries now compete with the information industry for employees, territory on the information landscape, and sometimes even funding, the job descriptions for 21<sup>st</sup> century library jobs are becoming indistinguishable from those posted at Automattic, BuzzFeed, and even ProQuest. Though the average library won’t advertise for a “happiness engineer,” many library job ads are a myriad of coding languages coupled with an emphasis on innovation.

Though anyone who has actually worked in a traditional library knows that, as incubators of knowledge from incunabula to e-books, libraries are just as much about maintenance as innovation. Librarians maintain “legacy systems” in all forms, from an old version of Aleph to a medieval manuscript. And herein lies the tension: the library has been and always will be a necessary balance between *innovation* and *maintenance*. ILS systems, metadata, and circulation desks all need maintenance. That really new and innovative digital curation center still needs people to maintain its staffing and infrastructure if it’s going to be successful, much like innovation and business growth in the United States of America is inextricably linked to the roads and bridges supporting the transportation of goods and services.

Taking aim at innovation as the dominant ideology of our era, Andrew Russell & Lee Vinsel

wrote a compelling essay for *Aeon* entitled, “Hail the Maintainers.” Illuminating the devaluing of maintenance they write, “The most unappreciated and undervalued forms of technological labour are also the most ordinary: those who repair and maintain technologies that already exist, that were ‘innovated’ long ago” (Russell & Vinsel, 2016a, para. 5). This ideology permeated the 2016 election. It’s also echoed in the endless articles questioning the relevance of libraries in an age of Google Scholar, an innovative system built on the development and maintenance of bibliographic descriptions from librarians long since passed. Moreover, as you read this, libraries across the country are maintaining *Sierra*, a library workflow program developed by a company appropriately called *Innovative*. Underscoring the importance and existence of the many who toil in obscurity, Russell and Vinsel write, “We can think of labour that goes into maintenance and repair as the work of *the maintainers*, those individuals whose work keeps ordinary existence going rather than introducing novel things,” (Russell & Vinsel, 2016a, para. 12).

As much as librarians innovate in the field of data curation and digital humanities, they also maintain a multitude of systems, archives, and legacy collections. Therefore, our models of competencies should be careful not to simply reflect the ideology of business principles, predicated on *growth* and *innovation* for its own sake. Though necessary, innovation without maintenance is not sufficient. To their credit, Vinsel and Russell actually put their philosophy into action with the development of *The Maintainers Conference* at Stevens Institute of Technology. As a playful counter to Walter Isaacson’s recent book, *The Innovators: How a Group of Hackers, Geniuses, and Geeks Created the Digital Revolution*, the conference is called, *The Maintainers: How a Group of Bureaucrats, Standard Engineers, and Introverts Made Technologies That Kind of Work Most of the Time* (Russell & Vinsel, 2016b).

Perhaps our professional competencies could be as succinct as:

- Stamina for meetings and committees
- Predilection for standards and interoperability
- Inexhaustible energy to troubleshoot scalable technologies, from copiers to servers
- Innovate whenever possible

Future Headline: “The American Library Association is Pleased to Announce the 2025 Class of Emerging Maintainers.”

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