



THE CANADIAN ASSOCIATION OF PROFESSIONAL ACADEMIC LIBRARIANS
L'ASSOCIATION CANADIENNE DES BIBLIOTHÉCAIRES EN ENSEIGNEMENT SUPÉRIEUR

The Canadian Association of Research Libraries (CARL) recently released the 2019 draft list of Core Competencies for CARL Librarians. The Canadian Association of Professional Academic Librarians (CAPAL) thanks the CARL Competencies Working Group for the consultative approach and appreciates the opportunity to provide feedback on the draft.

The proposed draft is a considerable improvement from the 2010 competencies which are preoccupied with professional skills, versus steeped disciplinary knowledge, that position academic librarians more as expert technicians rather than academic professionals.

The elevated language of the 2019 draft Competencies arguably places more emphasis on disciplinary knowledge. The competencies are also more comprehensive and broader in scope reflecting the evolving nature of the profession and discipline. However, the over-emphasized use of phrases such as “Ability to,” “Understanding how,” “Provide and support,” and “develop,” to name a few, betrays an ideological framework that forefronts the library as a hierarchical organization versus an academic unit. Within such a framework the librarian’s main purpose is to advance the mission/ vision of the organization that is the library. Within such a framework the rights and responsibilities of academic librarians as professionals with commitments to professional ethics, values, and autonomy are subverted. Not to say anything of the rights and responsibilities of academic librarians as academic staff relating to academic freedom and collegial governance.

While there is specific mention of internal and external collaboration competencies there is no mention of knowledge or understanding of a collegial governance system where decision making is a shared responsibility.

The reification of the library is standard and typical practice within public, academic, and professional discourse. In Canada, for example, there exists approximately 33 different library associations and only one association of librarians: CAPAL/ACBES. The inevitable result is the invisibilization of librarians’ labour. CAPAL/ACBES suggests that statements such as the following within the Competencies are problematic:

“THE CANADIAN RESEARCH LIBRARY OF THE 21ST CENTURY IS AN OPEN AND EVOLVING ECOSYSTEM of learning and innovation”

as they transfer agency to the Library. It is important to remember that without the people, a Library is only a building. If in the term Library is replaced with Building in the example above the absurdity becomes more evident. CAPAL/ACBES suggests that in order to make the Competencies more relevant and meaningful to librarians statements such as the above must be re-examined.

The library and institutional-centric language of the Competencies further promotes a world of knowledge and knowing that is limited to print or digital and available via or within the Library. Alternative ways of knowing and discovering including the oral

cultures and knowledge that is embedded in the land is not contemplated at all. Broader issues of social and information justice as relevant to our user groups are equally ignored. In a document that is almost 3000 words, students are mentioned twice, almost incidentally. Academic libraries are primarily and overwhelmingly used by students. The de-emphasis of students specifically, and librarians' necessary and meaningful engagement with diverse populations including international and indigenous populations is disconcerting.

Equally disconcerting is the noticeable absence of a requirement of a disciplinary relevant graduate degree: namely the MLIS. Academic libraries, particularly in large research intensive institutions, are complex entities that employ and require skills and expertise outside the disciplinary boundary of library and information studies. CAPAL/ACBES is not objecting the rationale or need for such skills, but rather CAPAL/ACBES strongly objects to the unsettling practice of referring to individuals without an MLIS as librarians. It seems the 2019 draft Competencies tacitly endorse such a practice.

Signed by the CAPAL Board of Directors

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