

The Importance of Young Adult Services in LIS Curricula

Abstract

This White Paper discusses the importance of educational programs for training young adult librarians within schools of library and information science (LIS). It describes the evolution of library services to young adults as well as education for young adult librarians. It identifies the various competencies needed by young adult librarians in the 21st century, and situates these competencies within the larger context of LIS curricula. Finally, it concludes by emphasizing the value of young adult library services courses both for professionals-in-training and for young adults.

Background

American libraries have a long and proud tradition of providing services to young adults (defined by the Young Adult Library Services Association as young people ages 12 to 18). The Brooklyn Youth Library opened in Brooklyn, New York, in 1823, nearly 75 years before psychologist G. Stanley Hall introduced the concept of “adolescence” into the popular parlance (Bernier et al., 2005). In the twentieth century, the profession saw a burgeoning in young adult services in libraries, particularly in the period following World War II. As a result, in 1957, the American Library Association established the Young Adult Services Division (now the Young Adult Library Services Association) as a separate entity from the Children’s Library Association (Bernier et al., 2005). Over the years, the profession has produced a number of outstanding librarians and advocates for young adult services, among them Margaret Edwards, the young people’s librarian at Enoch Pratt Free Library in Baltimore (Bernier et al., 2005), and Michael Printz, a school librarian in Topeka, Kansas (“Who Was Mike Printz?” n.d.), both of whom now have young adult book awards named for them.

Concomitant with this growth in library services for young adults has been a growth in programs for educating young adult librarians. Some of the earliest of these included the Pratt Institute in Brooklyn, Case Western in Cleveland, and the Carnegie Library of Pittsburgh’s Training School for Children’s Librarians (Jenkins, 2000). Now most schools of library and information science offer at least one course in young adult resources and/or services, and many offer multiple courses. A search of the Association for Library and Information Science Education (ALISE) membership directory reveals that approximately 13% of ALISE members identify “young adult services” as one of their teaching and/or research areas (ALISE, 2007).

And, indeed, the need for young adult services in libraries is greater than ever before.

According to the U.S. Census, the number of young people ages 10 to 19 increased from approximately 35 million in 1990 to over 40 million in 2000 and to nearly 42 million by 2007 (U. S. Census Bureau, 2008). In addition to the increasing numbers of young adults, there has been an explosion in information technologies, a proliferation of resource formats (and user preferences), and a growing emphasis on the importance of information literacy (Jones et al., 2004), all of which have presented both exciting opportunities and formidable challenges for librarians who serve young adults.

Position

The Young Adult Library Services Association (YALSA) is committed to the philosophy that “young adults deserve the best.” Recognizing the varied knowledge and skill sets needed to provide exemplary services to young adults in the 21st century, the division works to promote a rich and diverse educational experience

for students preparing to become young adult librarians as well as other information professionals who will work, at least in part, with young adults.

Toward that end, in 2003 the division adopted a set of core competencies for young adult librarians, in which seven areas of competency are identified: Leadership and Professionalism, Knowledge of Client Group, Communication, Administration, Knowledge of Materials, Access to Information, and Services (YALSA, 2003). LIS schools can foster these competencies through various means: by offering courses devoted specifically to young adult resources, services, and programming; by incorporating discussion of young adult users and their information needs into other courses, such as reference services, media production, research methods, and information policy; and by encouraging students to gain valuable experiences outside of the classroom, through such things as internships in young adult services and membership in professional associations like YALSA and the American Association of School Librarians (AASL).

The most important competency, because it is that from which the other competencies follow, is knowledge of young adults, and LIS curricula should incorporate that topic into various courses. Knowledge of young adults includes understanding the developmental needs of teens and recognizing that these needs can be different for different teens. It also includes an understanding of the diversity among teens and an appreciation of the information needs of teens from various cultural and ethnic backgrounds. And it involves a recognition of the special needs of “extreme teens,” i.e., those teens who do not fit the mold of the “typical teen” perhaps because of their educational situation, their living situation, and/or their sexuality (Anderson, 2005). Knowledge of young adult users and their information needs is complemented by an understanding of how to conduct user needs assessment, so research methods should be an integral part of education for young adult librarianship.

LIS curricula should also provide education in the myriad resources that are available to today’s young adults. Libraries traditionally have promoted reading, and that is still a core mission. But it is also the case that teens now engage with various forms of media in addition to print: movies, television, games (especially computer games), music, and, of course, the Internet. Young adult librarians should be conversant with the seemingly infinite variety of materials now available in order to meet the needs and preferences of the clients they serve.

Today’s young adults are not only consumers of media, but also producers. Most are avid computer users, engaging in social networking, creating their own digital videos, participating in gaming, texting, instant messaging—and often doing several of these things at once! Young adult librarians certainly should be trained in the use of information technology to create and deliver information services, but they should also be educated to understand the broader cultural implications of how and why teens use technology and how this is changing the way teens interact with and process information.

Closely related to the use of technology as a way of accessing and interacting with information is the concept of information literacy. Young adult librarians should be educated to understand what information literacy is and how to promote information literacy skill development among teens. Information literacy, which may be defined as the ability to access, evaluate, and use information ethically and effectively, has received much attention both in the K-12 and higher education environments in the 21st century (see, for example, the standards developed by the American Association of School Librarians, 1998, and the Association of College and Research Libraries, 2000). Such skills are seen as increasingly necessary for success in school, the workplace, and life. The teenage years are a crucial time in the acquisition of the numerous complex skills related to information literacy, and young adult librarians can play an important role in ensuring that teens are successful in developing these abilities.

Designing effective programs to promote resources, technology, and information literacy among teens provides a way to bring together these three pillars of young adult services. LIS schools should offer courses in various types of programming as well as the marketing of services to teens. After all, today's teenaged library users will become tomorrow's adult library users—and, hopefully, library supporters. Some will even become tomorrow's librarians.

Conclusion

For these reasons, the Young Adult Library Services Association affirms the value and importance of young adult services in LIS curricula. Educating young adult librarians for the 21st century represents a commitment to helping young adults become lifelong readers, lifelong learners, and lifelong library users.

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