

## Preparing the Academic Library Workforce to Support 21st Century Learners: New Approaches from Canada

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# PREPARING THE ACADEMIC LIBRARY WORKFORCE TO SUPPORT 21ST CENTURY LEARNERS: NEW APPROACHES FROM CANADA

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## Abstract

CARL has invested significant energy over the last 20 years in building workforce capacity across Canadian academic libraries. The Association has consistently focused its attention on areas where demand felt greatest and where collective, national action made sense. The “CARL approach” has been strategic, focused on community building and reflective of a peer-to-peer model.

Much progress has been made in recent years to help the nation’s academic library workforce develop their professional expertise and, in doing so, better meet the expectations of 21<sup>st</sup> Century learners. Most notably, Canadian research libraries are drafting a contemporary slate of competencies for librarians; enhancing their focus on diversity, equity & inclusion; and shaping new leadership development opportunities for the most senior staff.

**Keywords:** Workforce, Skills, Competencies, Diversity, Leadership

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The face of work in Canadian research libraries has changed dramatically over the last few decades. The volume of repetitive, transactional work has diminished. The new work demands deep technological expertise, rich interpersonal skills and a strong grasp of the larger university research and teaching missions.

In response to these changes, the Canadian Association of Research Libraries (CARL) has invested significant energy analyzing and building workforce capacity across Canadian academic libraries. The Association, which serves as the voice for Canada’s largest research libraries and two federal libraries, has consistently focused its attention on areas where demand felt greatest and where collective, national action made sense.

The present paper, which builds upon the Lewis & McColgan 2017 IATUL conference presentation “New Skills for the Academic Library Workforce,” begins by identifying the core components of what could arguably be described as the Canadian approach to workforce development. [Lewis & McColgan, 1] The paper then goes on to document new activity in three critical areas: drafting a contemporary slate of competencies for librarians; enhancing the Canadian research library focus on diversity, equity & inclusion; and shaping new leadership development opportunities for the most senior staff.

## **A View from the Balcony: Key Attributes of the CARL Approach to Continuing Professional Development**

Canadian research libraries have been actively engaged in collective efforts to analyze and enhance employee expertise since the early 2000's. As noted in the 2017 study, the following attributes are arguably descriptive of a "CARL approach" to workforce capacity development:

1. **Reflective of a National Agenda:** CARL has consistently taken a long-range and national approach to building workforce capacity. Leaders recognize the importance of focusing the Association's energies on areas where collective action truly adds value. Some kinds of general training (for example, project management training) are easily found locally on individual members' campuses. Other very specialized kinds of training might be best supported at the provincial or national level.

The Librarians' Research Institute is a perfect example of this national approach: the first offering of this popular professional development experience was opened up to one individual from each CARL library in an attempt to ensure that the research skills and networking opportunities were shared across the country.

2. **Competencies Based:** CARL has placed significant attention on identifying and describing the competencies required to be successful in the Canadian research library context. The concept of codifying expertise, as was done in the 2009 *Core Competencies for 21<sup>st</sup> Century CARL Librarians*, creates a roadmap for individual librarians, their employers and for the profession as a whole. [CARL, 3]
3. **Shared Responsibility:** Those active in CARL workforce initiatives have historically viewed continuing professional development as a shared responsibility. Library workers hold significant personal responsibility for their own development. But they share that responsibility for ongoing post-degree development with their employers, with their library schools and with their national and provincial associations. (Note that this concept is in full alignment with the International Federation of Library Association's *Guidelines for Continuing Professional Development*.) [Continuing Professional Development & Workplace Learning, 8]
4. **Peer-Driven:** Over the last twenty years, CARL has learned that the most effective training and development opportunities are often led by experts drawn from the community itself. These individuals have credibility with their colleagues and a clear understanding of the environments within which these colleagues work. Parachuting in a recognized global leader may have a short-term impact on a small number of participants – but lacks the long-term impact of growing and showing local expertise.

The Canadian Library Assessment Workshop reflects this peer-driven philosophy very well. The workshop was designed by and for the assessment librarians themselves rather than crafted by others. The program committee and workshop leaders are drawn from the assessment community. The small group atmosphere ensures that participants leave, not just with new knowledge, but also with new colleagues and potential partners.

5. **Levering the Good Work of Others (and Not Re-Inventing the Wheel):** The CARL approach puts heavy focus on the avoidance of duplication. If another group is already doing good work in a particular area and the topic is geographically-agnostic, the Association will not waste limited

resources recreating it. Instead, CARL leaders will encourage their staff to participate in another organization's offerings or offer to partner with that group to leverage strengths and share costs.

For example, Canadian libraries have not tried to recreate the ARL Leadership and Career Development Program for individuals from historically under-represented groups. Instead, CARL libraries support staff members to participate in these programs. When the numbers warrant, libraries often come together to invite the instructors to a central location to deliver customized versions to a CARL audience.

## **Current Areas of Focus**

The remainder of the paper will present some areas of current focus with some reflection on how these initiatives align with the Canadian model.

### **1. Reimagining Core Competencies**

In 2009, a small team drawn from CARL's Education Working Group was tasked with preparing a carefully crafted slate of the key competencies required for success in the Canadian academic library workplace. Competency models, which define the expertise required for "satisfactory or exemplary job performance within the context of a person's job roles, responsibilities and relationships in an organization and its internal and external environments", have been written for various professions for over 35 years. [Megahed,105] Many other library organizations have written their own competency statements. Some, like the American Library Association, have attempted to document the requirements across multiple sectors. [ALA] Others, such as the Special Library Association, have taken a more specialized approach to competencies, but for a very specific sector of the library workforce. [SLA]

The original CARL document presented its own unique perspective: it aspired to "reflect the unique composition of competencies required by academic librarians working in an intense, 21<sup>st</sup> Century academic research environment." [CARL, 3] The lens was distinctly Canadian and academic in focus, but with an expectation that the basic concepts could be applicable in other technology-rich countries.

The authors imagined the CARL Competency statement being used in a variety of ways. The document would help individual librarians manage their own careers: it would be used as a checklist against which Canadian librarians could benchmark their own development. What were their strengths? What development goals should they set for themselves to further their careers? For library directors and HR managers, the document would assist with drafting job postings and shaping new staff training opportunities. Finally, the statement would help CARL libraries as a collective "market the library profession and recruit new talent."

Early on, the group decided to take the approach of documenting "core" rather than job-specific expertise. The authors asserted that, while individual librarians will choose to focus more or less attention on specific clusters of competencies based on their specific role and the focus of their individual institutions, *all* librarians should aspire to a basic level of expertise across the full spectrum of domains. The competencies were written, as a result, at a relatively high level; all librarians should aspire to "understanding best practices," to a "basic understanding" or a "foundational knowledge" of multiple areas of librarianship.

The culminating document, released in 2010 as the *Core Competencies for 21st Century CARL Librarians*, identified seven key areas of expertise:

- 1. Foundational Knowledge** (a clear understanding of librarianship and professional practice, the library system and the larger institution within which they work, the higher education environment at multiple levels)
- 2. Interpersonal Skills** (a broad spectrum of writing, presentation, negotiation and collaboration expertise)
- 3. Leadership and Management** (a basic understanding of key leadership skills, financial and human resource abilities)
- 4. Collections Development** (a foundational knowledge of basic scholarly publishing, collections management, digital preservation and records management)
- 5. Information Literacy** (a strong understanding and commitment to critical thinking and lifelong learning and basic information literacy principles)
- 6. Research and Contributions to the Profession** (knowledge and commitment to ongoing research and professional development, presentations, formal study, etc.)
- 7. Information Technology Skills** (strong knowledge of ILS, IR, LMS, etc.)

Since the Core Competencies document was released, several other library competency documents have emerged. The Australian Library and Information Association released their own slate in 2014. [Australian Library & Information Association] The Joint Task Force on Librarians' Competencies in Support of E-Research and Scholarly Communication released one set of expertise requirements for scholarly communication and open access and another set specifically for research data management, both in 2016. [Coalition for Open Access Repositories] CAVAL, a consortium of Australian universities, released their own competency statement as a derivative of the CARL 2010 statement. [CAVAL]

As time passed, the CARL community realized that the Core Competency document needed to be reviewed. CARL directors were particularly interested in the more technology-focused competencies. Were the 2010 statements still valid or were adjustments required?

As a result, the Strengthening Capacity Committee struck a small working group in April 2017 to review and revise the 2010 publication to better reflect the current state of libraries and librarians. The team was led by a prominent Associate University Librarian with a focus on human resources and included a small number of CARL directors plus one librarian with less than three years since graduation, one librarian with 4-10 years (and not in a management role) and one librarian in a manager or AUL role.

Securing deep involvement and engagement from CARL librarians across the country was critically important. With that in mind, the team held three in-person focus groups across the country and met with a small group of library school and iSchool deans. These in-person experiences were followed by four virtual focus groups (organized by region and primary language) as well as an online survey distributed through the directors to librarians and HR professionals. The results were transcribed and coded using commercially-available qualitative data analysis software.

Once done, the group began the difficult task of analyzing the feedback and preparing an initial draft of the statement for review by the CARL directors at a face-to-face meeting. Although the final document is still in progress, some general statements can be made:

First, the revised framework is expected to be built around a core set of values. Values are defined as beliefs and opinions that people hold regarding specific issues or ideas, and are ultimately internal, subjective and malleable. These values include a commitment to intellectual freedom, privacy and respect for individuals.

Second, the new document will draw greater distinction between knowledge, skills, competencies and mindsets. Knowledge is defined as the facts or information required for success in a role. Knowledge can be acquired through a variety of means (reading a book, attending a lecture). Skills are the learned proficiencies required to carry out a particular task (like mastering a specific piece of software). They can

be learned through formal training and repetition. Competencies are the higher-level clusters of expertise – like geospatial competencies or financial competencies. Mindsets are the collection of attitudes, inclinations or habits of mind that predetermine how an individual will respond in a given situation. Mindsets, like curiosity or flexibility cannot be taught – although behaviors associated with them can be practiced (e.g., a staff member can learn strategies for thinking broadly about complex problems but cannot *learn* to be curious). The expectation is that the final report will draw more focus to the higher-level aspects of expertise – the competencies and mindsets.

Third, the competencies will feature far greater attention on equity, diversity and inclusion – topics that were admittedly not front of mind when the document was being drafted ten years ago.

Finally, it is expected that the technology expertise, which comprised a separate section of the original document, will be framed out more broadly and distributed across the entire statement. The new sense is that technical expertise is ubiquitous rather than confined to a single specific domain.

As of publication of this paper, work on the CARL competencies continues. Readers are encouraged to watch for the new document in late 2019.

## **2. Sharpening Our Focus on Diversity, Equity and Inclusion**

Creating a more welcoming and inclusive environment for staff and users is becoming an issue of increasing importance in Canadian research libraries. Historically, for reasons associated with privacy, most Canadian universities did not gather diversity data. As a result, their libraries did not have an accurate understanding of how many staff they had within various equity-seeking groups. Attitudes toward diversity data have changed and many Canadian universities are now actively gathering the statistics for current and prospective staff in the hopes of making dramatic improvements.

The high-level data is not encouraging. Based on statistics collected in the 2015 *8Rs Redux*, a large-scale survey of librarians and staff in Canadian research libraries, only 11% of librarians identify as visible minorities, versus 19% of the general population. The proportion of other employee groups is somewhat better (13% for other professionals and 16% for support staff). The number of librarians has doubled since 2003, but we still have a long way to go. [8Rs Redux, 42]

The number of library staff self-identifying as indigenous is especially troubling. The *8Rs* study suggests that only 1% of all staff in Canadian research libraries identify as indigenous, versus 5% of the general population. [8Rs Redux, 42]

The numbers of staff reporting disabilities is even more concerning. Only 1% of all library staff report having a disability, versus 22% of the general population! [8Rs Redux, 42]

Canadian libraries are moving aggressively to create more welcoming environments. Many, including the author's own institution, are forming equity groups to affect change on a variety of fronts. The groups discuss a wide spectrum of issues – collections, spaces, service, recruitment, retention, etc. On virtually every campus, library staff are participating in unconscious bias training, bystander training, etc. Many are actively changing hiring practices to gather more diverse pools of candidates and to be more welcoming during the selection and onboarding processes.

Given CARL's inherently collaborative approach, the Association has recently struck a national Equity, Diversity and Inclusion Working Group and appointed a Visiting Program Officer. The team, led by a University Librarian with expertise in EDI and with members drawn from research libraries across the country, is mandated to look at:

**Recruitment:** How can CARL support expanding the pool of individuals from diverse backgrounds entering the profession?

**Retention:** How can CARL libraries create welcoming environments to support ongoing retention of staff from diverse backgrounds?

**Staff Learning:** Can CARL facilitate educational opportunities to better prepare staff to support a diverse workforce and a diverse student population?

**Services and Spaces:** What are successful practices for creating welcoming and inclusive services and spaces in Canada's research libraries?

The focus on indigeneity has been particularly profound. The Truth and Reconciliation Commission, a royal commission struck to document the history and lasting impacts of the residential school system on indigenous people, released their *Executive Summary* and *94 Calls to Action* in June 2015. The calls included clear instructions for museums and archives to ensure their compliance with the UN Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples and to guarantee that holdings related to residential schools are accessible to the public. [TRC]

Since then, Canadian libraries have been looking deeply at their practices in terms of spaces, services, staffing, collections and metadata standards. The Canadian Federation of Library Associations (CFLA) is leading in this work. The *CFLA-FCAB Truth & Reconciliation Committee Report & Recommendations* has become the key document for galvanizing libraries in Canada to respond to the *Calls to Action*. That document incorporates a medicine wheel structure to help libraries think about their work in terms of four categories: physical (black), mental (white), spiritual (red) and relationships (yellow). [CFLA, 5]

Many libraries are making dramatic changes to their spaces and wayfinding. Work on subject headings and metadata practices is proceeding. Some libraries, led by those in areas with large numbers of indigenous users, are exploring changes to subject headings and database metadata. Many of these systems are derivatives of the classification system developed by Brian Deer (National Indian Brotherhood) in the 1970's.

The failure to attract and retain indigenous candidates is, in some ways, the most challenging problem to solve. Canada is failing to attract large numbers of aboriginal students to its library schools and college library technique programs. Some universities, especially those hosting library schools, are exploring internship programs for indigenous students.

When libraries do hire, they sometimes discover that the individuals are overworked because they are called upon to speak to all indigenous issues. They are routinely called upon to serve on every library and university committee associated with indigenous topics. The work can be mentally and physically exhausting and divert them from other important aspects of their work.

Where libraries *are* finding good success is with training non-indigenous staff to create a more welcoming environment for indigenous staff and students. Most Canadian research libraries, including the author's own, are delivering blanket exercises and various cultural sensitivity training experiences focused on indigenous populations. They are bringing staff to the sites of former residential schools and engaging in challenging conversations about what reconciliation could mean in a library context.

Work in both Equity, Diversity and Inclusion AND indigenous matters will continue to be a primary concern for Canadian research libraries for many years to come. Leaders look to other parts of the world for best practices to inform decision-making.

### **3. Delivering New Leadership Programming to our Most Senior Staff**

As reported in the 2017 Lewis & McColgan IATUL presentation, Canadian research libraries have long relied on a blend of resources to support the leadership and management training of their current and future leaders. Generic leadership and management skills (delegation, performance reviews, strategic planning, etc.) are often readily available on university campuses through their continuing education units or business schools. Many CARL libraries supplement these opportunities by sending mid-level managers to Library Management Skills Institutes (offered by a highly regarded library consulting company in partnership with one or more library associations). Librarians aspiring to step into the University Librarian's jobs gravitate to the ARL Leadership Fellows Program.

In recent years, CARL libraries realized that they had a training gap in relation to their most senior staff – the Associate University Librarians who are responsible for implementing large portions of their library's strategic agendas (and for leading the library in the absence of the Director). These talented individuals, who spend much of their time supporting the professional development needs of the staff reporting to them, need their own forum to hone their skills - without the expectation that they are aspiring to the Director's chair.

With that idea in mind, CARL asked two Associate University Librarians to lead a conversation with their fellow AUL's at a national meeting in fall 2018. The response was very clear. This critically important group want training in two broad areas of their work. First, they want high-level training in core management skills, beyond what they would learn in a generic management course – more specific to leading a large division in an academic library environment. Second, they desire customized training in key leadership skills, again specific to the research library environment. The group asked for assistance with thorny, often politically charged areas such as fundraising, budgeting, and relationship building with senior academic leaders, etc.

CARL is now moving ahead to create a tailored program for the AUL group. A small team has been struck, co-led, fittingly, by a University Librarian and an Associate University Librarian. The group is exploring the creation of an institute to be followed by a one-year program of webinars, discussions and mentorship opportunities. The concept is borrowing liberally from the LIBER Emerging Leaders Program and some previous program conducted by the Association of Research Libraries a decade ago. The response from the AUL group to initial plans has been positive. Work will continue over the coming months to model and deliver a pilot program.

### **Conclusion**

CARL has invested significant energy over the last 20 years in building workforce capacity across Canadian academic libraries. The Association has consistently focused its attention on areas where demand felt greatest and where collective, national action made sense. The "CARL approach" has been strategic, focused on community building and reflective of a peer-to-peer model.

Much progress has been made in recent years to help the nation's academic library workforce develop their professional expertise and, in doing so, better meet the expectations of 21<sup>st</sup> Century learners. Most notably, Canadian research libraries are drafting a contemporary slate of competencies for librarians; enhancing their focus on diversity, equity & inclusion; and shaping new leadership development opportunities for the most senior staff.



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