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In 2010 due to decreased enrollment and university-wide budget cuts, the University of Kentucky School of Library and Information Science made the decision to suspend admission to the School Library Media Certification program. The Kentucky librarian community responded with a campaign to request that this program be reinstated since the University of Kentucky is the only university in Kentucky offering a school library media preparation program within an American Library Association-accredited master's program. As a result, a committee of experts was formed to examine the status of the school library media profession in the state of Kentucky, collect and analyze data of perceptions of differing stakeholders, and make a decision in regards to the future of the School Library Media certification program. This paper presents the study conducted by this committee, the findings, and the implications for the future of the School Library Media certification program at the University of Kentucky.

Keywords: LIS education, school librarian preparation, technology integration, leadership, survey, focus group

Introduction

The School of Library and Information Science (SLIS) is one unit in the College of Communications and Information Studies at the University of Kentucky (UK), and offers a Master of Science in Library Science (MSLS) and a Master of Arts (MA) degree, as well as School Library Media Certification for students holding a teacher certificate. UK is the only university in Kentucky offering a school library media preparation program within an American Library Association (ALA) accredited master's program; three other universities within the state also offer school library media certification, but are not accredited by the ALA. In 2010 University-wide budget cuts and declining admissions to the School Library Media Certification program led to suspending admission to this program. This decision evoked a strong response from library professionals state wide and from alumni across the country, resulting in this research to examine the status of the school library media specialist profession in the state of Kentucky and to determine the future of the school library media preparation program at the University of Kentucky.

Background

In fall 2009, the University of Kentucky announced plans to implement a two percent recurring budget cut beginning fiscal year 2010. For the School of Library and Information Science, this translated into reducing its recurring budget by approximately $25,000. The School's operating budget had already been depleted by previous recurring budget cuts and therefore, the School was faced with the need to cover the cut with funds from a faculty line. At that time, the only open faculty line not responsible for covering the School's required courses was the line devoted to School Library Media Certification.

The University of Kentucky is one of four institutions in the state that offer School Media Certification programs, and as a result of this competition, enrollment had been declining for several years. Although this portion of SLIS's enrollment had once accounted for the greatest number of students, it accounted for less than 20 percent (n = 43) by fall 2009. In January 2010, in light of the pending budget cut and after much discussion, the faculty voted to use funds from the faculty line devoted to School Library Media Certification to cover the budget reduction. Ultimately, the faculty determined this to be a better solution than not filling a faculty line responsible for covering at least one required course or eliminating an occupied faculty line.

This decision came with much controversy, and the Kentucky librarian community was called to action. School librarians, were joined by others state wide, including public and academic librarians and University of Kentucky alumni, as a campaign emerged to express concern regarding the decision to eliminate the School Library Certification program from the state's flagship university, leaving no school library media specialist preparation program within an ALA-accredited master's program in the state of Kentucky. The immense outcry from the professional community was voiced in many venues (Whelan, 2010) and was heard by decision makers at the University, therefore warranting an examination of the School Library Certification program.

Process

In response to concerns, the College of Communication and Information Studies, the College of Education, and the Kentucky State Librarian and Commissioner, began researching the status of school library media specialists in Kentucky, their contributions to schools and K–12 students, and perceptions among K–12 school administrators in order to determine the future of the University of Kentucky's School Library Media certification program.

A committee of experts, which consisted of representatives from the College of Communications and Information Studies, the College of Education, the Kentucky State Librarian and Commissioner, and SLIS graduate students, was formed. The committee began an investigation of the current and future market for school library media specialists (SLMS) in Kentucky, perceptions of the SLMS themselves, the contributions of the SLMS to schools and K–12 students of Kentucky, and the perceived value of the SLMS to K–12 school administrators.

As a starting point, the emails and other correspondence received in response to the announcement that admission to the school library media program was being suspended were analyzed through content analysis. As a result of this analysis, six areas of concern emerged as key themes: (1) that there is a research based correlation between student academic achievement and a highly qualified school library media specialist; (2) that an ALA-accredited master's program allows for broader more diverse employment opportunities for graduates; (3) that all stakeholders were not considered in the decision; (4) that this demonstrated a lack of respect and value

of the school library media specialist profession on the part of the University of Kentucky; (5) that SLMS serve as needed technology experts in the school setting; and (6) that possible school library media students would now have to go outside of the state to seek an education from an ALA accredited program, which could deprive Kentucky school library media centers and the students they serve of the benefits of a well prepared certified SLMS. These concerns became the foundation for this investigation and drove all aspects of the research.

Review of Existing Research

In the initial step in this investigation, the Kentucky Department of Education was contacted to determine if any data had been collected on SLMS and/or school library media centers that would be beneficial in addressing the research concerns. It was discovered that while the Kentucky Department of Education collects data on teachers and administrators, it does not collect data on SLMS or their impact on student success rates. It was found that there is limited data related to Kentucky SLMS, and most stemmed from survey research conducted by the University of Kentucky School of Library and Information Science from 2000–2007. This research focused on the job market and other issues of the SLMS profession in the state of Kentucky (Allard & White, 2001; White, 2009). One other study that examined the status of Kentucky school library media centers and the level of achievement of state media center standards to identify significant characteristics of media center practices in high achieving primary and secondary schools was also reviewed (Houston, 2008). The committee examined the existing research, the national preparation standards from the American Library Association (ALA) and American Association of School Librarians (AASL) (2010) that present the role expectations for SLMS. Finally the committee collected information on the other school library media certification programs in the state of Kentucky and examined scores on the PRAXIS school library media certification test.

Method

This research utilized an embedded mixed method design, beginning with informal focus groups that provided further insights into the perspectives of multiple stakeholder groups (Creswell & Plano Clark, 2011). Then the information garnered from the focus groups was utilized to inform survey construction. The focus of this study was the quantitative survey conducted with K–12 school administrators in the state of Kentucky.

In order to gain perceptions from SLMS and other library professionals in the state, three informal focus groups were conducted: Group One for public librarians, Group Two for graduates of the UK SLIS program who are school librarians, and Group Three for non-UK SLIS graduate school librarians. The convenience sample participants for these focus groups were recruited through postings on statewide library discussion lists and direct contact by SLIS faculty.

These informal focus groups were conducted at the annual Kentucky Library Association Conference in September 2010. An experienced facilitator from the UK Department of Communication conducted the three focus groups in order to provide additional insights and information into the status of school library media in the state of Kentucky. Group One consisted of six participants; Groups Two and Three each had eight participants. Each focus group lasted approximately one hour. Focus group discussions were recorded and transcribed by the project research assistant. The transcriptions were reviewed for common themes. These focus groups provided valuable information on the skill sets that school library media specialists need, explained the benefits of an ALA-accredited Master's of Library Science for

school library media specialists, provided insights on the present state of school libraries and school librarians in Kentucky, and defined areas of need for the future. The information gained from these focus groups contributed to the understanding of the committee in gaining perspective from SLMS out in the field and contributed toward the survey construction.

A survey was developed to address the specific concerns of the stakeholders and provide the data needed to determine the future of the University of Kentucky's School Library Media Certification program. Following the tailored design method (Dillman, Smyth, & Christian, 2009), questions were constructed to assess administrator perspectives and knowledge in regards to school library media specialists. Initial questions were utilized to gain baseline data on the administrator's knowledge of their school librarian's education and preparation; the second set of questions was based on the *ALA/AASL Standards for Initial Preparation of School Librarians* (2010), which describe the expectations for school library media specialist candidates, and principals were asked to rate the frequency that the SLMS at their school demonstrated each competency. After the committee drafted and revised the survey questions multiple times, instructors from the field of school library media and education reviewed the questions.

After Institutional Review Board exemption was granted, an invitation to participate and a link to the online survey was posted on the state listserv for school administrators and other various Kentucky educator and librarian discussion lists. The survey was open for respondents for one month and during this time several reminders were posted to the various discussion lists. This resulted in a convenience sample of 388 participants.

Results

The survey (Appendix) consisted of six questions addressing the presence and cer-

tification of the SLMS, followed by five multi-part questions that asked the school administrators to rate their SLMS in regards to the preparation standards, two questions relating to their own education of the role of the school librarian, and finally, open-ended comment questions. Responses were analyzed by examining frequency of occurrences utilizing the Statistical Package for the Social Sciences (SPSS), and open-ended comments were analyzed by conducting content analysis.

The preponderance of administrator respondents (96%, n = 375) stated that they have a certified SLMS in their school that is full time (91%, n = 325) and 72% (n = 259) stated that the SLMS has a master's degree in Library Science. Also 65% (n = 188) of respondents found it very important that the SLMS have a master's degree in library science to meet student information needs, but yet over half (54%, n = 158) of the respondents said they had never had any formal courses or training in regards to the role of the SLMS or the school library media center.

Examination of the results of the questions that addressed the roles and competencies of the SLMS showed that these administrator respondents frequently noted the need for SLMS to act as leaders in technology integration efforts and to work with others in order to prepare students for utilizing digital resources and tools in their learning. Specifically, administrators most frequently (74.8%, n = 228) noted that SLMS "advocate for 21st century literacy skills by using emerging technologies to support students' conceptual understanding, critical thinking, and create processes" and "design and adapt relevant learning experiences that engage students in authentic learning through the use of digital tools and resources" (69.5%, n = 207).

Implications

As a result of this research, the School of Library and Information Science was

able to establish the need to continue the School Library Media Certification program at the University of Kentucky. First, the extreme volume of correspondence from the professional community statewide provided valuable insight, established community support for the continuation of the SLMS certification program, and raised awareness for UK decision makers. The additional information gained from the focus groups and from the administrator survey responses presented a picture of 21st century SLMS that are on the forefront of technology and information literacy experts. One administrator respondent stated, "school media specialists are more necessary now more than ever in helping students and teachers navigate the ever-changing information highway."

Leadership was another common theme in participant responses—"[SLMS] have to be leaders in technology and run a program that supports that daily learning in the classroom" and the SLMS must be a "leader in research and information." The valuable data gained through the correspondence, the focus groups, and survey responses not only established a need for the continuation of the SLMS certification program, but also provided direction for the future of the program—a focus on technology and leadership.

The partnership established with the College of Education in order to investigate the state of SLMS within Kentucky schools proved to be beneficial as SLIS searched for solutions to continue the SLMS certification program. In February 2010, the University of Kentucky announced the launch of *Kentucky P20 Innovation Lab: A Partnership for Next Generation Learning* housed in the College of Education. In a technology-driven world, the partnership aims to transform public education and enhance Kentucky students' ability to thrive in higher education and, ultimately, the workforce. Additionally, the College of Education recruited the Center for the Advanced Study of Technology Leadership in Education

(CASTLE) to move to the University of Kentucky. This research center partners with regional educational organizations and schools to implement technologies and educate technology-savvy school administrators.

Given these new UK initiatives and the need to educate future Kentucky school administrators about the role of the SLMS identified in this study, the College of Communications and Information Studies viewed this as an opportunity to partner with the College of Education and propose a joint faculty appointment, thus strengthening the relationship between the two colleges and promoting future research collaborations. Furthermore, survey results indicated the need to refocus the SLMS curriculum to emphasize leadership where the application and integration of technology is concerned. It was determined that the entire curriculum of the School Library Media certification program needed to be updated to reflect the current role expectations of the SLMS, including the infusion of technology as a core component throughout all courses and a focus on teaching how to lead in the area of integrating technology for instruction and learning.

As a result of these findings, in February 2011 the Dean of the College of Communications and Information Studies presented a proposal to UK's Provost outlining the need to reinstate the faculty line devoted to School Library Media Certification. The proposal described a joint College of Communications and Information Studies/College of Education faculty appointment with an emphasis on leadership and integration of technology in the school setting. The Provost approved the proposal and a search was launched to fill the position effective fall 2011.

The implications for future research in the area of the school library media in the state of Kentucky and the role of the SLMS are great. As identified in this study, research examining the roles of SLMS, their place in education, and the

impact they can make is extremely lacking in the state of Kentucky. The joint appointment with the College of Education and its research-focused initiatives also presents the added advantage of enhancing research opportunities focused on the School Library Media Specialist. The findings of this study will serve as the basis for a research agenda focused on the role of the SLMS as a leader in technology integration in Kentucky schools. This research also has implications for other school library preparation programs; it provides a systematic method for program review and the findings serve to provide evidence that illustrates the need for curriculum review in programs that strive to effectively prepare school library media specialists for practice in the ever-changing information environment.

Appendix—Administrator Survey: School Library Media Specialist Fall 2010

1. Does your school have a state-certified library media specialist?
2. Does your school library media specialist have a Master's degree in Library Science?
3. Does your school library media specialist have a Master's degree in any other field(s)?
4. Does your school library media specialist work full time at your school?
5. Approximately what percentage of time does your school library media specialist work at your school?
6. How often do you talk to your school library media specialist?
7. The American Association of School Librarians (AASL) has identified five core standards for school library media specialist preparation. The following sections will help us determine if current school library media specialists are meeting these competencies. Please rank as Often, Occasionally, Never, or Uncertain. STANDARD 1: TEACHING FOR LEARNING. To the best of your knowledge, does your school library media specialist . . .
   a. demonstrate knowledge of learners and learning, including learning styles and cultural influences on learning?
   b. support the learning of all students and other members of the learning community, including those with diverse learning styles, physical and intellectual abilities and needs?
   c. contribute to an active, inquiry-based approach to learning, by using a variety of instructional strategies and collaborating with other teachers and educators?
   d. act as a collaborative partner with other educators by participating in collection development and engaging in school improvement processes?
   e. advocate for 21st century literacy skills by using emerging technologies to support students' conceptual understanding, critical thinking, and create processes?
8. STANDARD 2: LITERACY AND READING. To the best of your knowledge, does your school library media specialist . . .
   a. promote reading for learning, personal growth, and enjoyment?
   b. maintain awareness of trends in children's/young adult literature?
   c. provide reading and information materials in print and digital formats that support the diverse developmental, cultural, social, and linguistic needs of students and their communities?
   d. collaborate with classroom teachers to reinforce a wide variety of reading instructional strategies?
9. STANDARD 3: INFORMATION AND KNOWLEDGE. To the best of your knowledge, does your school library media specialist . . .
   a. model and promote multiple strate-

gies to locate, evaluate, and ethically use information for specific purposes?

b. support flexible, open access for library services?

c. design and adapt relevant learning experiences that engage students in authentic learning through the use of digital tools and resources?

d. collect, interpret, and use data to create new knowledge to improve practice in school libraries?

10. STANDARD 4: ADVOCACY AND LEADERSHIP. To the best of your knowledge, does your school library media specialist . . .

a. establish connections with other libraries and cooperate among library colleagues for resource sharing, networking, and facilitating access to information?

b. advocate for dynamic school library programs and positive learning environments that focus on student learning and achievement by collaborating and connecting with teachers, administrators, librarians, and the community?

c. demonstrate a strong commitment to the library profession and professional development through membership in library associations, attendance at professional conferences, reading professional publications, and exploring Web resources?

d. effectively communicate ways in which the library program can enhance school improvement efforts by utilizing evidence-based practice and information from education and library research?

e. work with stakeholders within and outside the school community who impact the school library program?

11. STANDARD 5: PROGRAM MANAGEMENT AND ADMINISTRATION. To the best of your knowledge, does your school library media specialist . . .

a. manage a quality library collection

designed to meet the diverse curricular, personal, and professional needs of students, teachers, and administrators?

b. practice the ethical principals of librarianship, for example by advocating for privacy, and by educating the school community on the ethical use of information and ideas?

c. apply best practices related to planning, budgeting, and evaluating human, information, and physical resources?

d. align the school's library media program (resources, services, and standards) to the school's mission?

12. Did you learn about school library media specialists/school library media centers in your education and/or administration classes? Or have any professional development courses or trainings you have taken address the school library?

13. In your opinion, how important is it for a school library media specialist to have a library science master's degree in terms of meeting students' information needs? Please answer: Very Important, Somewhat Important, Not Important, or Uncertain.

14. We are interested in your thoughts and opinions on the role of school library media specialists and their job market in K–12 schools. How does your school library media specialist assist students in gaining information literacy? Or, in other words, what is your library media specialist's role in instruction at your school?

15. How does an American Library Association (ALA) accredited degree impact school library media specialist hiring decisions?

16. How has the market for school library media specialists changed in the last 10 years? How do you see it changing in the next 10 years?

17. (OPTIONAL) If you are interested in being contacted for additional informa-

tion and follow-up, please provide the following contact information.

18. Would you like to receive a copy of the survey results? (If yes, be sure to include your email address above)

19. Thank you for your time. If there are any other comments you would like to add, feel free to do so at this time.

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