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One degree, two disciplines? Examining the presence of archival concepts in American library association accredited core courses

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Abstract

Introduction. A master's degree from a program accredited by the American Library Association has become the preferred credential for American archivists. Archival studies students graduate knowing library core competencies. But is the inverse true? This preliminary study examines the presence of archival concepts within core courses of ALA accredited programs in the USA.

Method. Using ALA's database of accredited programs, we identified the core courses for each program. We then searched for syllabi. If no syllabi were available, we analysed course descriptions, learning outcomes, and ALA accreditation self-study reports regarding core courses. This resulted in a data pool of 53 programs.

Analysis. Using an iterative approach, we analysed the data and created rating categories to indicate depth of presence of archival studies in core courses. Once the categories were established, we coded the data.

Results. Our qualitative analysis of the data reveals that archival studies topics are present in the core curriculum of 20 out of 53 programs analysed. However, the extent of this presence varies.

Conclusions. Archival concepts are being taught in ALA accredited master's programs, but there is room for growth in order to facilitate collaboration between archivists and librarians and promote better understanding of each other's disciplines.

Introduction

In the United States of America, the most common educational pathway for aspiring archivists is earning a master's degree in Library and Information Science (MLIS) or similar programs (such as MIS or MLS) accredited by the American Library Association (ALA). As Skinner and Hulbert point out in their report of the 2021 US archival field-wide survey, the A*CENSUS II, 60% of respondents had earned a MLIS/MLS, an increase from 39.4% in the 2004 A*CENSUS I. Furthermore, 73% of student survey respondents indicated they were currently enrolled in MLIS programs (Skinner and Hulbert), indicating that a MLIS or equivalent degree from an information school is likely to continue to be the education criteria of choice for professional archivists in the USA. There are no focused archival studies graduate programs in the USA, but archives education has become incorporated within MLIS/MLS programs within information science schools or departments, with the American Library Association accrediting over 60 programs. As of 2017, 40 of the ALA accredited programs are listed as offering graduate archival studies (Todd-Diaz, 2019, p. 17).

In their 2015 book, *Archives in Libraries: What Librarians and Archivists Need to Know to Work Together*, Bastian, Sniffin-Marinoff, and Webber note that while a master's degree from an information school is the most common educational credential for archivists and therefore archivist and librarian education can have an overlap in terms of required courses, there remains a gap in understanding between archivists and librarians in the workplace (pp. v, 45). Furthermore, academic archives, the largest employer of archivists in the USA (Skinner and Hulbert, 2022), are often located physically and administratively within libraries (Todd-Diaz 2023, p. 519). This relationship between archives and libraries and archivists and librarians is therefore a complex one, with abundant opportunities for collaboration between professionals and scholars across both fields. Despite this, collaboration and understanding between the fields of archives and libraries is often strained (Bastian et al., 2015 p. 5). This preliminary and exploratory study aims to examine whether there is a gap in education at the master's level within ALA-accredited programs that could explain the lack of knowledge of archival concepts by library students outside of an archival studies concentration or graduate certificate.

Problem statement and research questions

Archival education nested within ALA accredited master's programs in information schools require archival concentrators to complete core curriculum that tends to focus on general librarianship knowledge and skills. Core courses for ALA accredited master's programs are created, updated, and maintained in order to match the ALA Core Competences of Librarianship, which barely mention archives (ALA 2023). Therefore, while aspiring archivists are required to learn foundational library and information science theories and concepts, is the inverse true: are aspiring librarians taught core archival competencies as part of their required master's curricula? In other words, does this knowledge exchange go both ways? If archival concepts, theories, and examples of practice are not included in core courses that all master's students within information schools are required to complete, then students outside of archival studies may not necessarily understand the role of archives within information studies or how they, as future librarians, can effectively collaborate with archives and archivists. Given that archival studies fall under the ALA accreditation umbrella in the USA, why are librarianship and archival tracks being seen as separate and with minimal crossover from librarian concentrators to archival studies?

In order to understand this gap in mutual understanding, this paper investigates two research questions:

RQ1: Do archival studies topics appear in the core curricula of ALA-accredited master's programs?

RQ2: Of the programs that do include archival studies topics in their core, to what extent are these topics included?

Background of archival education in the United States of America

While a master's degree in library and information science or similar from an information school is currently the degree of art for archivists in the USA, this has not always been the case historically. With the exception of the first formal archival education program, established by Solon J. Buck and Ernst Posner at American University and running from 1939 through 1961 (Cox et al., 2001 p. 163), the majority of archivists held history degrees (particularly master's degrees in history) and were trained within history departments and through apprenticeships (Bastian et al., 2015 p. 42). The 1970s ushered in major growth in archival education in the United States, with the appointment of archival faculty and the Society of American Archivists (SAA) releasing the first formal guidelines for graduate archival education in 1977 (Li and Chiu, 2022 p. 1499). As Cox, Yakel, Wallace, Bastian, and Marshall state in the 2001 paper, 'Archival education in North American library and information science schools,' 'By the end of the 1970s, there were seven full-time archival educators in the United States, three in LIS and four in history' (p. 164). The departmental location of these appointments is important, showing that the disciplinary 'home' for archival education was in flux between library and information science and history.

Cox notes that between the 1970s and the 1990s, the disciplinary home for archival education remained a 'primary concern' in the field (Cox, 2013 p. 1). In the 1990s, archival-focused faculty appointments within library and information science began to outpace history (Cox et al., 2001 p. 166), with the firm establishment of the MLIS/MIS/MLS as the degree of choice for aspiring archivists coming in the 2020s (Skinner and Hulbert, 2022).

While not accrediting educational programs like ALA does, SAA continues to update and maintain their 'Guidelines for a Graduate Program in Archival Studies' (Li and Chiu, 2022 p. 1499). These guidelines are used by archival educators to guide curricular offerings, but they are not tied to accreditation the way the ALA Core Competences of Librarianship are.

Methodology

To answer our research questions, we conducted a qualitative analysis of data using Zhang and Wildemuth's (2016 pp. 320-323) approach which includes data preparation, unit of analysis, categorisation, testing, coding, validation, analysis, and finally reporting of results. Using ALA's database of accredited programs to delineate which programs to analyse, we identified the core courses for each. We then searched for syllabi for the core curriculum. If no syllabi were available online, we analysed course descriptions, student learning outcomes, and ALA accreditation self-study reports sections regarding the core courses. This resulted in 53 programs for which we were able to collect data to conduct an analysis. As this is a preliminary and exploratory study on the state of the field as a whole, we have chosen not to divulge identifying details about any individual program analysed. Using an iterative approach, we then started analysing the data to create the rating categories to indicate the depth of presence of archival studies in core courses. Once the categories were established, we started coding the data. As we moved along in our data set, we also went back to data we coded earlier to ensure that our ratings were consistently applied.

Results

Our qualitative analysis of the data regarding the ALA accredited core reveals that archival studies topics are present in the core curriculum of 20 out of 53 programs analysed. However, the extent of this presence varies. To understand this variation, we utilise a rating scheme that places each program into one of four categories: high, moderate, low, and none. Table 1 provides a breakdown of each category.

Rating	Definition	Example	Number of programs (N=53)
High	All students are required to engage with fundamental archival studies concepts.	Archival studies are a topic area focus on a fundamentals class with multiple readings assigned in the area.	11
Moderate	All students are introduced to archival studies concepts.	While not a focus, one or two archival studies readings are required for a fundamentals course.	4
Low	Archival studies are acknowledged in the core curriculum.	A syllabus mentions archives as a type of information organisation without the topic given other coverage in readings or assignments.	5
None	No evidence of archival studies found in core curriculum materials.	No mentions of archival studies topics in syllabi, course descriptions, student learning outcomes, or self-study data regarding core courses.	33

Table 1. The presence of archival concepts in core courses for ALA accredited master's programs.

Our results revealed that of the 53 schools analysed, 11 included archival studies to an extent that they met the 'high' threshold. These schools included core courses that ask students to reflect on readings authored by archivists and archival scholars, with a focus on archives and archival work. These courses may also have course modules that feature archiving concepts, or they may include mastery of archival skills as course-level student learning outcomes. Each of the 11 programs that earned the 'high' rating include enough of an emphasis on archival studies that all students in the program are required to engage with fundamental archival studies concepts at least once.

Four programs were assigned the 'moderate' rating. These programs introduce students to archival studies concepts in core courses but do not require that all students seriously engage with these concepts at least once. For example, one program includes an assignment in which students choose one of three case studies to analyse; one of the three is focused on an archival setting and archival issues. While students who choose the archives-focused case study engage with archival studies as part of their core, students who choose another case are not required to work towards any mastery of fundamental archival concepts.

Additionally, five of the programs analysed were assigned the rating of 'low' engagement with archival studies in core courses. While the core curriculum does acknowledge archivists and archives for each of these programs, it does not actually teach students archival studies concepts. For example, two of the five programs include courses which describe preparing students for work in information organisations and include archives in the list of information organisations. However, none of the assignments, course readings, or other syllabus materials include a focus on archives or archivists. These courses do include extensive materials on issues in library settings.

Unsurprisingly, the majority of programs analysed, 33 out of 53 were assigned a 'none' rating, meaning that we found no evidence of archival studies in their core curriculum materials. It is important to note that of these programs, only seven included fully accessible syllabi which were analysed and found to not include any archive-related concepts. Data analysed for the other 26

included course descriptions in graduate catalogs, course-level student learning outcomes, and self-reports submitted by each program to ALA for re-accreditation purposes. While none of these sources for the 26 programs in question included evidence of archival studies, it is possible that students were introduced to some aspects of archival studies through assigned readings or other course materials that went unmentioned in the available data. Nonetheless, the lack of archival studies in any of the available data indicates that the core courses for these programs do not make archival studies a focus or require that students engage with archival studies topics.

Discussion

This study highlights a structural asymmetry in how ALA-accredited master's programs distribute disciplinary literacy across tracks. While archival studies students routinely encounter core librarianship competencies, most future librarians are not consistently exposed to archival fundamentals in their required core. The finding that 20 of 53 programs include some archival presence, with only 11 meeting a 'high' threshold of engagement is indicative of how archives are often positioned as a specialisation rather than a coequal domain within information studies (Todd-Diaz, 2019). This positioning has consequences for professional identity and interprofessional collaboration (Todd-Diaz & Mello, 2024). Graduates who lack foundational knowledge of provenance, description, appraisal, privacy, and preservation may be less prepared to collaborate effectively with archivists or to design services, systems, and policies that reflect archival realities (Bastian et al., 2015). Given that academic libraries frequently house archives and that many information problems traverse library and archival contexts, curricular asymmetry risks perpetuating siloisation at precisely the moment when integrated practice is most needed.

The implications extend to workforce readiness, particularly in digital stewardship. Core archival competencies map directly onto contemporary LIS challenges, including research data curation, web and social media archiving, born-digital collections, metadata interoperability, and rights and ethical frameworks for sensitive materials (Skinner & Hulbert, 2022). Introducing archival concepts to all students, not only archival concentrators, can improve cross-department workflows and user experiences while supporting agile reskilling as organisational needs evolve. Importantly, programs rated 'high' demonstrate the feasibility of meaningful integration without expanding credit hours, often by embedding targeted modules, assigning archival scholarship as required readings, and assessing archival outcomes within fundamentals courses. These exemplars provide actionable models that other programs can adopt or adapt.

Accreditation and competency frameworks are a pivotal lever. Because programs align cores to what accreditation expects and measures, the limited treatment of archives in the ALA Core Competencies of Librarianship dampens incentives for systematic integration. Revising competency language to explicitly include archival concepts central to LIS practice would catalyse curricular redesign and facilitate more robust reporting of archival integration during re-accreditation. In the interim, programs can implement low-friction strategies: require at least one assessed archival learning outcome in a core course; structure 'choice' assignments so every student completes at least one archives-focused case; and share openly licensed syllabi and assessment rubrics to accelerate diffusion of effective practices.

Limitations and future work

As this study is limited to North America, it cannot generalise to regions with different accreditation regimes, institutional arrangements, or disciplinary histories. Future studies of programs in the global iSchool network could provide deeper insights into these issues. Additionally, data sources were heterogeneous across programs: for some courses we analysed full syllabi (including outlines and assigned readings), while for others we relied on course descriptions, learning outcomes, or accreditation self-studies. This variability may bias ratings toward programs with greater transparency and may under-detect archival content not

documented in public materials. The analysis represents a snapshot in time; curricula evolve, and public-facing documents can lag behind enacted practice. Further work is necessary to introduce longitudinal updates; incorporate faculty interviews, direct syllabus audits, and assignment-level assessments; triangulate with student learning evidence and employer expectations; and extend the analysis to international contexts for comparative insight.

Conclusions

This preliminary study demonstrates that archival core concepts are penetrating ALA accredited core courses, but the extent varies. Given the past and present of archival education in the USA and the ever-increasing focus on collaboration between libraries, archives, and museums (Li and Chiu, p. 1498; Bastian et al, pp.116-119), the need for understanding and cross-training between librarian and archivists is more relevant than ever.

As Conway stated in his 1988 piece, '*Archival education and the need for full-time faculty*,':

I am convinced that archival theories and practices, especially in the areas of documentation strategies, preservation management, and reference service, have real value for the library profession. Similarly, archivists can benefit from the experiences of the library community with automated access systems, descriptive standards, and community service (p. 255).

The siloisation of archivists and librarians and the need for greater understanding between these linked disciplines is an old one, but this preliminary study approached this issue in a new way by positing that the gap in understanding between the information professions may be linked to the content of core courses in ALA accredited master's programs.

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