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Rebooting the Guidelines for the Education of Library Technicians

Relancer les Lignes directrices pour la formation des bibliotechniciens

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Article abstract

The Canadian Federation of Library Association's (CFLA-FCAB) Guidelines for the Education of Library Technicians were last updated in 2011 and in need of a reboot. These guidelines have helped to establish a national standard for the education of library technicians in Canada and provided a framework for the development of skills, knowledge, and abilities of library technicians to provide job-ready, and highly skilled graduates. As much has changed in the library and information landscape in recent years, we instigated a substantial update to the Guidelines in 2021. The update was completed and approved by the CFLA-FCAB in July 2022 and is a guide for library educators, library administrators, supervisors, and practitioners. This paper details the research process undertaken to update the Guidelines that reflect the core competencies of library technicians in Canada.

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Rebooting the Guidelines for the Education of Library Technicians

Relancer les Lignes directrices pour la formation des bibliotechniciens

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Abstract / Résumé

The Canadian Federation of Library Associations' (CFLA-FCAB) *Guidelines for the Education of Library Technicians* were last updated in 2011 and needed a reboot. These guidelines have helped to establish a national standard for the education of library technicians in Canada and provided a framework for the development of skills, knowledge, and abilities of library technicians to produce job-ready, highly skilled graduates. As much has changed in the library and information landscape in recent years, we initiated a substantial update to the *Guidelines* in 2021. The update was completed and approved by the CFLA-FCAB in July 2022. The document provides guidance for library educators, library administrators, supervisors, and practitioners. This paper details the research process undertaken to update the *Guidelines* to reflect the core competencies of library technicians in Canada.

Les Lignes directrices pour la formation des bibliotechniciens de la Fédération canadienne des associations de bibliothèques (FCAB) ont été mises à jour pour la dernière fois en 2011 et avaient besoin d'être réactualisées. Ces lignes directrices ont

contribué à l'établissement de normes nationales pour la formation de bibliothécaires au Canada et ont fourni un cadre pour le développement des compétences, des connaissances et des habiletés des bibliothécaires afin de former des diplômés hautement qualifiés prêts pour le marché du travail. Le paysage des bibliothèques et du monde de l'information ayant beaucoup évolué ces dernières années, nous avons entrepris une mise à jour substantielle des Lignes directrices en 2021. La mise à jour a été complétée et adoptée par la FCAB en juillet 2022. Ce document guide les formateurs, les administrateurs, les superviseurs et les praticiens. Cet article explique la recherche entreprise pour mettre à jour les Lignes directrices afin de refléter les compétences de base des bibliothécaires au Canada.

Keywords / Mots-clés

library technicians, library technician education, core competencies, guidelines, diploma programs

bibliothécaires, programmes de bibliothécaires, compétences essentielles, lignes directrices, programmes collégiaux

Introduction

Reboot (definition): "to start anew: to make a fresh start" (Merriam-Webster, n.d., para 4).

The *Guidelines for the Education of Library Technicians*, created by library technician educators and adopted by the Canadian Federation of Library Associations (CFLA-FCAB), have helped to establish a national standard for the education of library technicians across Canada. Since 1967, when the *Guidelines* were first established in Canada, a two-year diploma credential for library technicians has been recognized and consistently followed by the library industry. In the absence of an accreditation framework for library technician education, the *Guidelines* provide a consistent standard to which educational programs are developed. They can also help employers to recognize common competencies to expect of graduates.

We are educators in the Library and Information Technology (LIT) program at MacEwan University in Edmonton, Alberta, and, along with other LIT programs across Canada, have regularly used the *Guidelines* to update program outcomes and course descriptions and inform curriculum content. However, we began to recognize that the *Guidelines* no longer accurately reflected the work of library technicians nor the learning objectives for our program. The goal of updating the *Guidelines* was to provide a more accurate framework for the development of skills, knowledge, and abilities of library technicians to produce job-ready, highly skilled graduates. We also recognized the value of reconnecting with other educators across Canada; the dissolution of the Canadian Library Association (CLA) in 2016 had halted many existing connections.

Library Technician Education in Canada

The first *Guidelines for the Education of Library Technicians* in Canada were developed in 1967 under the guidance of the CLA, and they were subsequently updated in 1974, 1982, 1991, and 2011. Updating the *Guidelines* was overseen by the CLA; however, the document was researched and written by the National Library Technician Program Chairs/Coordinators Group, a now-inactive group of library technician educators in Canada. In 2016 after the CLA was dissolved, the CFLA-FCAB assumed responsibility for the *Guidelines*, reposting the 2011 *Guidelines* but not initiating a revision. When it became apparent that the existing *Guidelines* were no longer useful for educators, we, as instructors and course coordinators for the MacEwan University LIT program, initiated a project to rewrite the document. The 2022 *Guidelines* were approved and published by the CFLA-FCAB in July 2022 and are available on the CFLA-FCAB website.

Although master's programs in library sciences have long been accredited by the American Library Association, the approach to standards guiding the education of library technicians is less formal (Nettlefold, 1989). In 1962, the CLA assumed responsibility for creating guidelines that would help to provide some consistency amongst educational programs in Canada regarding the competencies required by technicians (Montgomery, 1982). The various renditions of the *Guidelines* have not strayed far from the original direction of providing a list of competencies that focus on technical skills acquisition (Jacobs & Raju, 2008).

In recent years, researchers have investigated the expanding knowledge set required of library technicians, including greater emphasis on public service work and the soft skills required in such positions (James et al., 2015). Further, as technology assumes some of library technicians' traditional duties, there is an opportunity (and a necessity) to develop new skill sets (Bradley-Ridout & Epworth, 2020; Farnel, 2016). Since the last update to the *Guidelines* in 2011, several professional studies have identified the need to develop an educational program that addresses the more complex skill set required of the 21st-century library technician in Canada (see, for example, DeLong et al., 2015; Erickson & Shamchuk, 2017; James et al., 2015). It became evident that a new version of the *Guidelines* was needed that could help educational programs develop curricula that addressed these newly identified skills.

Updating the Guidelines: The Process

Because these *Guidelines* would be used across Canadian LIT educational institutions, the data collection and analysis procedures needed to be as thorough as possible. We investigated Canadian English-language library technician programs and obtained input from members of the library industry. This helped to provide a complete picture of the current state of library technician education, along with desired competencies identified by industry leaders and practicing library technicians. Five French-language programs exist in Quebec, but due to differences in program structure and a language barrier, these programs were not included in the research project.

English-language LIT programs are available throughout Canada: Six programs are located in Ontario (some jointly through OntarioLearn), two in Alberta, two in British Columbia, and one each in Nova Scotia, Quebec, Saskatchewan, and Manitoba. We conducted a thorough document analysis of the 14 LIT program websites, focusing on current program structure and content. We investigated areas such as program admissions, program descriptions, course comparisons, practicum requirements, and transfer credit options. This information provided a broad overview of how programs are structured in Canada and was used to update specific informational sections in the *Guidelines*. To obtain further detailed input from the 14 programs, a survey was distributed to program heads and chairs of LIT programs across Canada. The survey allowed respondents to indicate which competencies from the 2011 version of the *Guidelines* were still included in their curriculum and provided an opportunity for respondents to list any additional updated learning outcomes that were included in course content but not reflected within the *Guidelines*.

A non-anonymous survey was then distributed to representatives of the library and information technician profession across Canada. The target population of this survey were supervisors or managers of libraries or units that employ library technicians. A representative sample of all types and sizes of libraries across the provinces was gathered from the survey responses. A subsequent survey was sent to those participants to obtain information about the roles and responsibilities library technicians have in the workplace, as compared with and in addition to those in the 2011 version of the *Guidelines*.

In addition, an anonymous survey was sent to library technicians in Canada through listservs and associations. The target population of this survey were individuals who currently worked as library technicians and held two-year library technology diplomas from recognized Canadian institutions. Respondents were asked to indicate their roles and responsibilities, again as compared with and in addition to those in the 2011 version of the *Guidelines*.

In total, nine responses were received from the 14 LIT programs, 38 responses from supervisors and managers, and 276 responses from library technicians. For additional data, we analyzed industry job advertisements posted between 2019 and 2021 from across Canada that required a two-year LIT diploma. We examined the data and coded them for themes by performing a cross-comparison of all data sources in order to provide an accurate reflection of current library technician core competencies and workplace (or soft) skills.

Updating the Guidelines: What was Changed

In the process of comparing the 2011 *Guidelines* to our data—collected from current LIT program descriptions, results of the surveys, and workplace skills identified through investigation of job advertisements—it became apparent that there had been significant changes to library technicians' core competencies and required skill set in just one decade.

For example, in the 2011 *Guidelines*, the library technician's role was defined in relation to the worker's status in a hierarchical organization. The 2011 *Guidelines* described library technicians as "[playing] an important role on a library staff, occupying a position with a level of responsibility between that of a clerk and a librarian" (CFLA-FCAB, 2016, para. 4). Minimal emphasis was placed on the unique contributions library technicians make to the library environment. Their primary role was as a support or assistant to the librarian. There was some recognition that a library technician may be in a position of legitimate power in the organization, indicating they "may be responsible for a section or department of the library" or may be "in charge of a small library" (CFLA-FCAB, 2016, para. 4). In contrast, the 2022 reboot of the *Guidelines* emphasizes the versatility of the library technician's role, describing the library technician as a "key member of a library team" who "works in various library and information management environments performing essential day-to-day operations" (CFLA-FCAB, 2022, para. 3).

A description of key educational requirements was added to the 2022 *Guidelines* to provide a broad overview of the pedagogical structure of a library technician educational program. The 2011 *Guidelines* advised a combination of "technical and academic courses" (CFLA-FCAB, 2016, para. 8) but placed priority on technical and did not elaborate on the meaning of academic. Workplace (soft) skills were not emphasized. The new educational requirements section in the 2022 *Guidelines* emphasizes the importance of incorporating both theory and practice in the curriculum and gives equal significance to interpersonal skill development. Through our investigation of LIT program outcomes and descriptions, we noted the acknowledgement of the library technician's role in social responsibility, ethics, and the ability to work with and respect diverse communities and interests. These descriptions, absent from the 2011 *Guidelines*, reflect the expansion of the library technician's role in the past decade.

The 2022 *Guidelines* also contain specific guidance on LIT program composition, including educational and admission requirements, field-placement structure, alternative program delivery and continuing education options, supporting facilities, and administration and staffing recommendations. There were minimal changes in this part of the *Guidelines* from the 2011 version because not a lot has changed in program structure within institutions, but the updated *Guidelines* affirm the nature of the 14 English-language programs in 2022.

The most noteworthy change in the 2022 *Guidelines* is the section that describes the core competencies in detail. The 2011 *Guidelines* were organized by responsibilities delineated primarily by key library functions: Acquisitions, Cataloguing and Indexing, Selection, Circulation, Reference, Interlibrary Loans, Library Programs, Library Promotion, and Technology Skills (CFLA-FCAB, 2016). These categories, while mostly still relevant to library organizations, were limited. Two new sections were added to reflect additional competencies required by library technicians today: Library Profession, Library Knowledge, and Issues; and Library Management and Supervision (CFLA-FCAB, 2022). Two sections were renamed: Library Promotion became Programming, Community Engagement, and Outreach; and Technology Skills became Technological

Literacy. In addition, Archives and Records Management were added under the heading Additional Competencies, based on consultation with program heads and chairs. Some programs offer these additional curricular areas, but others do not.

Each section of these key library competencies contains a broad description and multiple bullet points that detail the specific learning objectives. For example, under Library Profession, Library Knowledge, and Issues, the overarching objective is to “demonstrate understanding of the different types of libraries and analyze ethical, social, moral, and legal issues as related to library and information management environments” (CFLA-FCAB, 2022, para. 9). More specific benchmarks are then given, including to “Analyze, evaluate, and articulate the concepts of intellectual freedom, censorship, and privacy of information within the library and the broader scope of access to information and knowledge” (CFLA-FCAB, 2022, para. 10). The descriptive nature of the Core Competencies section provides purposeful and concrete direction for education programs and can further demonstrate to industry what may be expected of library technicians in the workplace.

In addition to these core competencies, the 2011 *Guidelines* provided a list of 12 workplace skills, more commonly thought of as soft skills. The 2011 list included skills that may have been critical to develop in the early 2000s, but in 2022 these skills seem limited and prescriptive in nature. For example, some of the categories were Analytics, Computer Literacy, Detailed Work, and Following Instructions (CFLA-FCAB, 2016).

From our perspective, the most important contribution of the new 2022 *Guidelines* is how they demonstrate the breadth and depth of the role of the library technician. Given the transformative nature of libraries in the past decade (Thong et al., 2022), it was imperative that the description of core competencies and workplace skills emphasize the growing complexity of the library technician’s role. Each broad heading includes more specific learning objectives; for example, under General Emotional Skills, the objective is to “demonstrate flexibility and adaptability, reliability, and the ability to self-reflect and be self-motivated and proactive” (CFLA-FCAB, 2022, para. 21). The headings of Workplace Skills are General Emotional Skills, Interpersonal, Cultural Sensitivity, Teamwork & Collaboration, Communication, Creativity, Independence, Organizational, and Critical Thinking.¹

Looking Ahead: A Fresh Start

Amidst the rapid technological innovation and societal development that affects library work, library technicians must develop specific core competencies yet remain nimble in responding to these constant changes. It follows that educational programs have a responsibility to develop these required competencies. As educators in a LIT program, our hope is that the *Guidelines for the Education of Library Technicians* continue to be updated on a regular basis.

¹ Each heading has further description that can be read in the full Guidelines document available on the CFLA-FCAB website.

Formerly, at the CLA annual conference, a National Library Technician Program Chairs/ Coordinators Group, composed of the program coordinators and instructors of the various LIT programs, would meet to network, and discuss various library education topics. When the CLA was dissolved in 2016, these meetings ceased. In 2023, during the Ontario Library Association Super Conference, a virtual meeting was held to revive the connection between the various LIT program educators. Collaboration between library technician education programs is vital. By collectively maintaining the *Guidelines*, we can provide a meaningful document that reflects curriculum across Canada and accurately represents the core competencies of library technicians.

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