

Critical Perspectives on Professionalism

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ABSTRACT

According to various research studies, employers in the field of library and information science, like those in most other fields, seek a range of “soft” or generic skills and qualities, such as flexibility and interpersonal skills, along with domain-specific knowledge and skills when hiring new employees (Gerolimos, Malliari & Iakovidis, 2015; Pradhan, 2015; Saunders, 2019; Saunders & Bajjaly, forthcoming). Certain generic skills, including writing skills, time management, conflict resolution and skills associated with job-hunting such as resume-writing and interviewing, are often grouped together as “professional skills.” Studies have suggested that LIS employers might put more emphasis on generic and professional skills than domain-specific knowledge, and where those skills were not explicitly included in a study, the respondents often supplied them spontaneously (Partridge, Lee & Munroe, 2010; Saunders, 2019). Further, some employers have indicated that they have a hard time finding job applicants who adequately demonstrate these professional skills, essentially describing a “soft skills” gap (Saunders & Bajjaly, forthcoming), and often leading to calls for university programs and faculty to better prepare students with these skills.

Historically, it has been a relatively unchallenged assumption that such professional skills are crucial to keeping institutions running smoothly and thus also to the professional success of individual employees. More recently, however, some have begun to push back on such skills as being encoded in whiteness, noting that an emphasis on such skills can ignore the realities of and place at a disadvantage already marginalized people. Gray (2019) contends that skills and competencies that set the standard for professionalism are “defined by white supremacy culture” and, by centering whiteness, “discriminates against non-Western, and non-white professionalism standards.” Gray lays out the ways in which whiteness is reflected in professionalism standards related to spoken and written language, dress codes, and timeliness, and notes that people of color, women, and people with disabilities are more likely to be disadvantaged by such standards and more likely to be denied jobs and promotions and face discrimination and microaggressions because of them. Race Forward (2019) describes how industries such as healthcare and the tech sector tend to view professional skills through an individualistic rather than a systemic frame, such that if an individual does not meet certain predetermined professional standards it is viewed

as an individual failing or deficit, rather than the result of oppressive systems whereby some communities have less access to the means of developing or meeting professional standards, including access to education, transportation, and social or community support.

This tension between employers' expectations for professional skills and emerging recognition of the ways in which standards for professionalism might be biased and marginalizing puts LIS faculty in a challenging position. On one hand, as instructors in professional degree programs, we have an obligation to our students and their future employers to adequately prepare them for the workplace, but on the other hand, we do not want to endorse and perpetuate problematic systems. What is our responsibility to students and employers with regard to instruction in professional skills? What are our current understandings of these skills both as workplace standards and as potentially oppressive systems? Are some skills more important or more problematic than others? To what extent can we balance our obligations to prepare students with our obligations to critically reflect on and perhaps challenge some of these standards? The purpose of this panel is to raise questions about instruction for professional skills in LIS programs and to initiate a critical conversation about our understanding of these skills and how we might approach instruction in these skills in more empathetic and equitable ways.

The panel is composed of four full-time faculty teaching a variety of LIS courses in three different programs. The panel will examine professionalism through a lens of equity, diversity, and inclusion, including discussing what is meant by professionalism, and how some conceptualizations might disproportionately disadvantage already marginalized communities. Panelists will then examine the areas of professional writing, flexibility, time management, and communication in more depth, including how they function in the workplace and the critical questions or challenges raised about how these skills might be disadvantaging or inequitable. These areas were chosen both because they emerged in previous research as areas of concern among LIS hiring managers (Saunders & Bajjaly, 2022; Saunders, 2019) and because they are areas to which the panelists have given considerable attention in their own courses. The panelists will discuss how they have approached these skills in the classroom, including questions or concerns they have about teaching to these skills, and ways in which their approaches have changed over time. The panel format allows for each presenter to give in-depth attention to one skill area, including offering detailed reflections on how they have addressed this skill in their classes, and what concerns or questions they have about emphasizing that skill as an area of professionalism. The panel presentation will conclude with a set of reflective questions for an interactive discussion with the audience. Audience members will be asked to reflect on their own experiences with professional standards and teaching to these skills, and to share questions, concerns, and classroom approaches. This interactive panel is meant to model a community of practice approach, with both attendees and panel members sharing expertise and experiences.

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ALISE RESEARCH TAXONOMY TOPICS

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AUTHOR KEYWORDS

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