

The MLS Project: An Assessment after Sixty Years. By Boyd Keith Swigger. Lanham, MD: Scarecrow Press, 2010. 170 pp. \$50 (paper). ISBN 978-0-81-08-7703-0.

In *The MLS Project*, Boyd Keith Swigger has marshaled complex and detailed evidence to tell a simple story: that of the library profession's belief that accreditation for library education programs would necessarily improve the status, prestige, and income of members of the profession at large. Unfortunately, that belief has not proven true. Taking an outcomes-assessment approach, Swigger analyzes the long-term results of a process begun in 1951 when the American Library Association's (ALA) Council introduced new standards for programs' accreditation. That new standard limited accreditation to master's degree programs offering a master of library science (MLS), the first professional credential. What Swigger calls "the MLS project" refers to the development of professional education for librarianship following this redefinition of the initial credential for the profession. He accounts for the limited success of the MLS project by noting that "this model of professionalism led librarians to expect too much of a change in the credentialing process alone" (3). His examination of the development of curricula for library schools addresses the tension between teaching skill-based competencies for practice and research-based theory, the latter considered a necessary and distinguishing attribute of graduate education. Swigger notes that the absence of theory to support the assessment of the value and impact of library services is problematic as "libraries report data about their activities, but the data are not always reported in relation to any particular purpose" (74). A careful analysis of the 1992 and 2008 standards for accreditation indicates that while these standards favored an evaluation process based more on an assessment of goals than competencies, the focus on competencies remains strong, as reflected in actual library school curricula.

Swigger prefers the outcomes-assessment approach over the more quantitative tabulations of activities, thus moving beyond statistics quantifying library activity to external perceptions of the work of the profession. Many tables presenting information gleaned from sources outside the library profession help to characterize defining aspects of the library profession, with successive chapters discussing the evidence used to determine the standing of librarians, as measured by status, prestige, and income; techniques used to recruit new librarians; the intellectual foundation of library schools; and the changing definitions of the work of librarians. This last is particularly pertinent to the discussion of the library profession, given the ongoing public perception that anyone who works in a library merits the title of librarian. This evidence is well supported with a substantial number of references, including past statistical studies, both old and new literature on accreditation in academic environments, and current literature on the status and satisfaction of librarians. Considerable attention is paid to the development of the ALA policies that attempted to differentiate between the work done by library professionals from everyone else in the library, and the way in which these policies have resulted in a destructive caste system that marginalizes the work of “non-professional” support staff.

While examining the ALA’s rationale for using accreditation to standardize library education, the author also looks at librarians’ views of themselves, finding that they have accepted a simple trait model for their profession. In this model, individuals measure their success by comparing their traits with a list of ideal traits, believing that by changing their traits to conform to the ideal they will be recognized and rewarded as professionals. Simple identification with the values of these ideal traits and beliefs does not necessarily imply that the

believer possesses appropriate professional skills and knowledge, as Swigger repeatedly mentions.

According to Swigger, the question at the heart of the debate is not whether librarianship is a profession but “what are the functions of libraries as social instruments?” (129). Swigger identifies Melville Dewey’s self-serving need for status as the beginning of the assumption that there is a library profession, an assumption based in large part on the association of librarians with books and libraries, “as if the aura of libraries as emblems of culture or social justices would transfer to an aura for librarians” (135). Quoting the educator Pierce Butler, who first used the term “library science,” the librarian “has always been inclined to imitate the outward forms of the other professions before attaining the corresponding internal development” (111). This reminds us of the continuing concern for substance over form in the debate over librarianship as a profession.

In the end, Swigger’s story was not a simple one. As reasons for what he sees as the mixed success of the MLS project, Swigger offers “failures to follow through on academic curricular changes and theoretical challenges, changes in technology, and changes in the social context” (107). Overall, the tone of the work is doleful, tinged with regret at the lost opportunities for the adaptive changes required for a sustainable profession and the lack of a process to effectively evaluate the individual who earns the professional degree, rather than the school that grants it. Because of this, *The MLS Project* is an important cautionary tale, offering well-supported arguments that the current accreditation process for library education programs has stifled a much-needed reconsideration of the library profession itself. A new model is needed, one that acknowledges that technological and social changes in information creation,

delivery, and preservation should be reflected in the education of librarians and the consequent redefinition of the library profession.

Bernadette G. Callery, University of Pittsburgh