

## The State of Serials and E-Resource Education: An Interview with Professor Sarah Sutton

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### **Abstract:**

In this column of Serial Conversations, Kate Hill interviews Sarah Sutton, assistant professor of Library and Information Management at Emporia State University and a main developer of the NASIG core competencies. In this interview, Sutton discusses her previous research concerning electronic resource and serials education, how she views the current state of education, and what the future might hold. She also discusses her views on the role of Master of Library Science (MLS) education versus continuing education and her role in developing the NASIG core competencies.

**Keywords:** core competencies | education | electronic resources | print serials | training

### **Article:**

#### **Introduction**

While cataloging and metadata have been staples of library school curriculum, other areas of technical services, such as acquisitions, serials, and electronic resources management, are not as well covered. The education available on these subjects shapes the future role of serials librarians, and understanding the current state of serial education and what can be done to improve it is essential to building a healthy profession. This is especially true given the ever-increasing amount of knowledge that librarians in these roles are expected to have, as seen in NASIG's "Core Competencies for Electronic Resources Librarians" (NASIG, 2013) and NASIG's "Core Competencies for Print Serials Librarians" (NASIG, 2014). For those who are not actively involved, it can be difficult to know the current state of serials and electronic resources education. The following interview was conducted to give the working professional an understanding of this state and what the future might hold.

In this interview, Kate Hill talked with Sarah Sutton, assistant professor at Emporia State University's School of Library and Information Management. Sutton is a main author of both of the NASIG's core competency documents, an electronic resources and serials education researcher, and a former serials librarian at Texas A&M University. During Sutton's time as a

doctoral student and through her professorship at Emporia, she has dedicated herself to examining not only what is currently expected of serials and electronic resources librarians but also how well existing education options prepare librarians for these careers. In addition to her research, she is active with the Association for Library and Information Science Education (ALISE), the Association for Library Collections and Technical Services (ALCTS), and NASIG, where she most recently was an executive board member at large.

## **Interview**

Kate Hill (**KH**):

Could you tell us a bit about yourself? What has been your career path up to now?

Sarah Sutton (**SS**):

I went to library school to earn my Master of Library Science (MLS) in 2000–2002 and took my first professional position about two months before graduating in June 2002. That position was as the serials librarian at Texas A&M University–Corpus Christi. In 2003, I was honored to receive NASIG's Horizon Award and attended my first NASIG conference. NASIG has been my professional home ever since; I have not missed a conference since that first one in 2003.

As the library subscribed to more and more databases and other electronic resources, I slowly took over their management. In 2004, my position was changed to incorporate both serials and e-resources work. This was a medium-sized academic library, so my position was the lead position, and only professional position, for e-resources and serials. My responsibilities included managing print and electronic serials as well as ejournal packages and Big Deals, negotiating license agreements for, managing access to, and, of course, troubleshooting e-resources as well as some cataloging, reference services, and bibliographic instruction.

I grew up on a college campus in St. Louis where my father was a chemistry professor and always dreamed of being a professor and working at a university. Working as an academic librarian fulfilled that dream to some extent, but while working as an academic librarian, I developed a strong passion for teaching. So in 2004, I applied to and was admitted to the doctoral program at Texas Woman's University School of Library and Information Science. As I worked through the program, I developed several areas of specific research interest, most of which stemmed in one way or another from my practice. These included e-resources assessment and evaluation, e-resources competencies, and scholarly communication in online environments.

**KH:**

What prompted you to start studying continuing resource education in MLS Programs?

**SS:**

My dissertation research focused on core competencies for e-resources librarians since, as it turned out, none existed at the time (late 2000s). The American Library Association (ALA) had just adopted its “ALA's Core Competences for Librarianship” (American Library Association, 2009) in which they refer readers who wish to specialize in a particular type of

librarianship to competency documents for those specialties published by professional organizations in those specialties. So it seemed like a natural fit to conduct research to lay a foundation for competencies for e-resources librarians. The original research I conducted included an examination of job ads for e-resources librarians between 2005 and 2009 in which I identified required and preferred qualifications and the context in which each qualification appeared, e.g., “knowledge of,” “experience with,” or “ability to.” That same research included an examination of where e-resources librarians were obtaining these qualifications. I wondered whether they were obtaining them on the job, via continuing education, or via their MLS work.

**KH:**

Could you provide our readers with a brief overview of the history of serials and continuing resource education in the United States?

**SS:**

My focus has been on e-resources education, which of course is related to serials education but for obvious reasons has a much shorter history. So my area of expertise is in recent history. Although there were a few studies of serials, continuing resources, and e-resources education since the early 1970s, about one every five years, most of the literature that I've come across that examines the extent to which e-resources competencies are or were being taught in MLS programs has been published since 2005. Given that relatively short time frame, it's a little difficult to identify trends. I would say that like serials education before it, e-resources education has more often been incorporated into broad courses like collection development and cataloging, as well as into courses related to academic librarianship.

Then, as now, a few MLS programs offer stand-alone elective courses dedicated to serials and/or e-resources. Although I haven't done a thorough count lately, currently I'm aware of at least four institutions that offer elective courses in electronic resources management, two of which are taught by full-time faculty members and two others of which are taught by adjunct faculty who are also practicing e-resources or continuing resources librarians. I'm not aware of any programs that are currently offering stand-alone courses in serials management, and I strongly suspect that serials management as a topic or module in topically broader courses are becoming fewer and further between (although I haven't looked into this thoroughly).

I can say with some certainty that there are fewer and fewer full-time positions dedicated strictly to serials management. The NASIG task force charged with creating core competencies for librarians who work with print serials (I was NASIG Board liaison to that task force) did a bit of research with job ads and job descriptions in the course of developing those competencies. If I recall correctly, they found few, if any, full-time, degreed librarian positions dedicated solely to serials. Also, I have continued to monitor the major sources of e-resources and serials job ads and can't recall seeing an ad for a serials librarian in recent years that wasn't combined with e-resource work.

One very interesting trend that I'm seeing in recent job ads is that there are a growing number of professional-level e-resources positions being advertised by public libraries. That was certainly

not happening back in the 2000s when I did my original research. It's important to remember that information about public libraries' staff is not as readily available as information about academic library staff, and that public library professional positions have historically not been advertised nationally, unlike academic library positions. My experience has been that professional positions in public libraries are more often advertised on a statewide level. I've continued to collect job ads for e-resources librarians as data sources but have not conducted a thorough analysis as yet. However, I think it's safe to say that there are more professional positions dedicated to e-resources in public libraries now than there were five years ago.

**KH:**

What have you found to be the current state of serials and e-resource education? Do you think this state is adequate?

**SS:**

Great question! I mentioned a bit about my take on the state of serials and e-resources education in MLS programs: A few offer dedicated, elective courses on serials and e-resources management; more offer an introduction to these topics as a module or section within a broader course. Emporia State University's (ESU) School of Library and Information Management (SLIM) has an e-resources management course that is taught about once every three or four semesters, and it always attracts a modest number of students. I'll also say here that it's sometimes difficult to identify these elective courses if they are not offered on a regular basis with an assigned course number but rather offered under the umbrella of "special topics."

If you'd asked me about its adequacy five years ago, I would have probably answered no and advocated for more and deeper focus on serials and e-resources in professional librarian education. But after having taught for a few years now, my answer is that, in my opinion, serials and e-resources education offered in master's programs, while not providing newly minted librarians with everything they need to know about serials and e-resources, does provide them with a solid basis for starting out in an entry-level position with serials and/or e-resources responsibilities. There's always been a certain amount of "what I wish I'd learned in library school" being published and presented. What I think many of those authors have missed is that, at least in recent times, professional education for librarians isn't meant to provide graduates with everything they'd need to know to be a successful professional. Instead, as the "ALA's Core Competences for Librarianship" states in its introduction, professional education is meant to produce graduates who have a basic set of skills and knowledge, one of which is a dedication to life-long learning. It's a combination of a good grounding in the basic skills and values of the profession as a whole, hopefully obtained in library school, and dedicated continuing education and professional development that makes a good serials and e-resources librarian. Certainly no one who understands the speed with which technology is changing and the impact of that on work with all types of information resources can doubt for a moment the critical necessity of continuing education.

**KH:**

You also led the taskforce to develop the “NASIG Core Competencies for Electronic Resources Librarians” (NASIG, 2013). Could you talk a bit about what these are and why they are important for serials education?

**SS:**

The “NASIG Core Competencies for Electronic Resources Librarians” project was a really delightful one to work on. The competencies are grounded in my dissertation work and built upon by a dedicated group of professionals who extended the research to job descriptions, not just ads, as a source for identifying the competencies required for work with e-resources. They are quite broad, extending from technological knowledge, to knowledge of the e-resources life cycle, to being skilled at communicating with a broad range of constituents from IT specialists to patrons with very little technological expertise. In fact, when the task force took the draft competencies to the NASIG membership for comment, the most often heard comment was that a single librarian couldn't possibly be an expert in all of these competencies. This also made it very difficult to prioritize the competencies that the task force identified. Quite a few people pointed out that the combination of competencies and the depth of understanding and application required would vary depending on the size of the library, the way in which responsibilities were organized there, and of course the needs of its patrons. As a result, the task force did not attempt to prioritize the final competencies and included a statement in the introduction that says that

competencies required for ERL positions vary greatly based on the type of institution in which the work is done and on the workflows within the organization [and thus] don't lend themselves well to organization on a scale of increasing experience. ... The competencies required of an ERL will encompass a subset of the following. (NASIG, 2013)

It was always my intention that the results of my dissertation research, and later, the “NASIG Core Competencies for Electronic Resources Librarians” would be used to inform the development of curriculum for e-resources education, both in MLS programs and continuing education. They certainly inform the structure and content of the e-resources management course that I teach at ESU SLIM and conference workshops that I have given. They have also been used for several years as a recommended basis for NASIG conference proposals.

It's been three full years since NASIG adopted the “NASIG Core Competencies for Electronic Resources Librarianship” and so about four years since they were developed. Given the rapid pace of change in our part of the profession and their strong uptake as a basis for education and continuing education, it's probably about time for NASIG to entertain the idea of revisiting and, perhaps, revising them.

**KH:**

In your dissertation, *Identifying Core Competencies for Electronic Resources Librarians in the Twenty-First Century Library* (Sutton, 2011), you looked at MLS class syllabi that included electronic resource and serials content and how they matched up to the electronic resource librarian competencies mentioned in job ads. There was quite a mismatch. Could you talk a bit about this mismatch and why you think it exists?

**SS:**

I think one reason for the mismatch might be related to something I mentioned earlier, that the purpose of MLS programs and curriculum is not necessarily first and foremost to train professionals in the specific tasks required of e-resources (or any other librarian specialty) but rather to develop professionals who will be capable of continuing to learn the skills and adapt their practices to a constantly changing array of responsibilities and required knowledge. Another possible reason for the mismatch is that there may be lag between the time a new competency is identified and the time education for that competency makes its way into MLS curriculum. By that logic, it would seem to be much quicker to incorporate a new competency into a shorter continuing education workshop or webinar. Finally, I would also say that, at least at the time that I was doing my dissertation research, it was much more difficult to obtain in-depth course materials from MLS programs in which to search for indications of a module or section on e-resources than it was to find syllabi. And, unfortunately, the syllabi at the time were not thorough enough to identify every course that contained a unit related to e-resources. As a result, it's a bit unclear to exactly what extent e-resources competencies were being taught in MLS programs.

As I conjectured in my dissertation, it would make sense that more e-resources competencies would be taught in continuing education, especially if the average shelf life of a MLS competency is still about five years, as it was in 2009. At that time there was little extant research on the topic, and although I haven't conducted a thorough search, I haven't seen any since then.

**KH:**

Where are the biggest gaps in education for continuing resource librarians at this moment? What do you think can be done to address these gaps?

**SS:**

The gap that sprang immediately to mind is MLS students' expectation that they're fully prepared to practice e-resources (or any other type of) librarianship upon earning their MLS.

I think it's always going to be difficult to persuade library school students that the focus of the MLS degree is learning to learn, particularly learning to learn what they don't know, and that most of the practical applications will be (should be) learned on the job. By the same token, I think it's also difficult for those of us whose focus is on teaching in MLS programs to keep up with the rapid pace of change in professional practice. In my opinion, one good approach to bridging those gaps is for full-time LIS faculty to partner with e-resources professional organizations, e-resources vendors, and e-resources practitioners to conduct research relevant to electronic resources, to create and deliver continuing education for electronic resources, and to teach specialized elective courses in MLS programs.

**KH:**

In your article “Formal Education in Work With Continuing Resources: Do Barriers Really Exist?” (Sutton, 2009) you mention that continuing resources seem to be taught more as a format across a curriculum than as a focus of one class. Jill Grogg's article “Continuing Education for E-Resources” (Grogg, 2008) in the *Journal of Electronic Resources Librarianship* mentions that currently most serials and continuing resources education is taking place in continuing education classes through groups like ALCTS. What do you believe to be the ideal form of continuing resources education? How do you see a route forward towards getting to that ideal?

**SS:**

I think I touched on both of these questions pretty well in my answer to the previous question, so I'll only add here that I don't think there is a single ideal form of continuing resources or e-resources education. As a teacher, I can say that there certainly isn't a single ideal form of learning for all of my students. As the NASIG E-Resources Competencies Task Force learned, there certainly isn't a single ideal priority to the competencies. I'm obviously very happy that so many professionals and professional educators have found the “NASIG Core Competencies for Electronic Resources Librarianship” to be a useful basis for continuing education. I hope that this will continue to be the case, although I'll mention again that the competencies will only remain a relevant basis for continuing education if they are maintained and revised as necessary.

Along those same lines, I think it is important to continue to provide practitioners with a variety of means of obtaining continuing education. Online continuing education courses—whether they are synchronous or asynchronous, massive open online courses (MOOCs), one-offs, short or long—provide the benefit of ease of access and relatively low cost (at least compared to conference attendance). But conference and other face-to-face attendance at continuing education opportunities provides time for casual conversation, networking, and serendipitous learning from colleagues. It seems to me that a combination of types of continuing education provided by a variety of educators, practitioners, and vendors would be the closest thing to “ideal.”

**KH:**

What are your plans for the future in continuing this work? Are there other initiatives besides the competencies out there we should be aware of that are working to improve continuing resources education and new professional readiness?

**SS:**

I remain interested in competencies for e-resources and continuing resources librarians. Eric Hartnett published a follow-up study to my dissertation research in 2014 in which he revisited job ad trends for e-resources librarians for a broader chunk of time (Hartnett, 2014). As I mentioned, I've continued to collect e-resource librarian job ads with the intention of a similar follow-up to look for changes since my original research and since Eric's fine work. I'm also becoming more and more interested in the role of e-resources and continuing resource work in public libraries.

With regards to other initiatives, to be frank, during the past year or so my focus has narrowed to my own work and teaching to achieve tenure, so it's quite likely that there are some out there that I'm not aware of. I will say that I think MLS programs in general are interested in being providers of continuing education in a variety of librarian specialties in their communities. Lots of programs have certificates that professionals can earn in a specialty by taking a series of three or four courses. Obviously the example with which I'm most familiar is the ESU SLIM program. ESU SLIM has certificates in archives, children's, and young adult librarianship, and leadership. I'm not aware of a certificate in e-resources or continuing resources librarianship, although that would be a great idea.

One of the things that makes our program rather unique is that the faculty travel to our distance sites in Colorado, Utah, Oregon, and Kansas to teach face-to-face MLS classes. But this travel also provides us with the opportunity to conduct continuing education workshops on a variety of topics for practitioners in those locations. Again, as yet we haven't developed and offered one in e-resources or continuing resources librarianship, but I think that there is a great opportunity for us to partner with local practitioners to do so.

**KH:**

How can continuing resource librarians and serials librarians working in the field help improve the readiness of future professionals?

**SS:**

Collaboration. Collaboration with educators and vendors to create and deliver curriculum in both MLS programs and continuing education. Provide practicum experiences for MLS students in which the students take part in the work of professionals. Talk honestly and openly about the challenges and rewards of the specialty with MLS students who are assigned to interview, shadow, or otherwise learn from practitioners in person and via online discussions (email lists, Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, etc.).

**KH:**

Obviously online courses have changed the MLS landscape quite a bit, but what forces do you see affecting the delivery and type of education offered for continuing resources in the next five years? What will education in continuing resources and serials look like in 2021?

**SS:**

I think it's pretty clear that technology will have the greatest impact on both the delivery and the content of education in e-resources, continuing resources, and serials in the near future. The improvements in communication technology that have occurred in the 15 years since I earned my MLS (in a distance program that made use of both learning management software and a video network for the delivery of content and class meetings) have been dramatic. I now take for granted being able to regularly meet with my students in my virtual office using video conferencing and screen sharing. Back in 2000 it was a struggle simply to connect one classroom to another via a statewide video network. Now we have access to MOOCs, webinars, and



podcasts, as well as virtual meeting spaces in which to conduct education, both formal and continuing. We educate via shared slide decks, video recordings of conference presentations, shared data sets, blogs, tweets, pre- and postprints, and digital learning objects. I can't imagine teaching and learning without these tools, and I don't think I will have to.

As I mentioned, I am certain that technology will also continue to greatly influence the content of education for e-resources, continuing resources, and serials, as well as its delivery. Technology is becoming central to librarianship in general and is arguably critical to working with e-resources, continuing resources, and serials. That makes it equally critical for us to focus on technology as a tool for work with information resources from their acquisition, to managing and delivering them, to assessing and evaluating them in all types of libraries. I fear for my students who, despite the warnings of educators and professionals, travel through our MLS program and into their first professional positions believing that, because they will/are working in a school library or a public library, they don't need to understand the importance of OpenURL standards, to know or be able to learn how to configure a proxy server or to implement or integrate a discovery platform, or to negotiate a contract for e-textbook access. Formal education in e-resources, continuing resources, and serials must include learning to develop the skill of learning new technology according to the values of our profession. Continuing education in e-resources, continuing resources, and serials must help professionals to practice that skill.

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