Has this ever happened to you? You’re trying to explain your work to a friend, and you find yourself struggling to find the right words. Or perhaps you’re lobbying your manager for a new position or working with your human resources department to draft a job description for an information professional, and you’re having trouble finding the right vocabulary to describe the necessary competencies and qualifications. Maybe, if you’re a current library student or recent graduate, the challenges of making sense of your school’s curriculum and selecting the right courses to develop your skills will still be fresh in your mind.

If you can identify with any of these scenarios, SLA’s newly revised Competencies for Information Professionals may be just what you’ve been looking for. Approved by SLA’s Board of Directors in April, the revised competencies were developed during a year-long process by a task force appointed by 2015 SLA President Jill Strand. The task force followed an open process with multiple opportunities for member input, thereby ensuring that the final product represented the insights of the full membership of SLA.

The result is a resource that every special librarian can use, no matter what career stage you’re in, what industry sector you work in, or what type of responsibilities you have.

The competencies are posted on SLA’s website at http://www.sla.org/about-sla/competencies/. They’re divided into two main groups, core competencies and enabling competencies.

The relationship between these two groups is shown in the accompanying image. The inner circle shows the core competencies, which are unique to information professionals. These competencies answer the question, “What do librarians and information professionals do better than anyone else?”

The core competencies are critically important, because they differentiate information professionals from other types of professionals. By applying our core competencies to the needs of our organizations and communities, information professionals create value—value that we alone are capable of creating.

As the image shows, the competencies document spells out the following core competencies:

- Information and knowledge services;
- Systems and technology;
- Information and knowledge resources;
- Information and data retrieval and analysis;
- Organization of data, information, and knowledge assets; and
- Information ethics.

Of course, it’s unlikely that any one of us will possess all the competencies to the same degree. Some of us will be especially strong in certain areas, others in different areas. But each of us will find one or more competencies that set us apart within this framework.

For example, if you’re a student or prospective student, the competencies describe what you’ll learn in an academic program in librarianship, information science, or a related discipline. If you’re a professor in the library and information science field, the competencies provide a framework to help shape the curriculum—they define what your program teaches that other departments and disciplines do not. If you’re a working professional, the competencies are a guide to your professional development, helping you determine whether to explore new areas or build on your current strengths. Finally, we can all use the competencies to explain to our managers, human resource professionals, and others what librarians and information professionals do and why they need to hire us!

The outer circle in the image shows enabling competencies, which aren’t unique to information professionals. These competencies don’t differentiate us from other professions; others possess them just as we do. That’s why they aren’t “core” competencies.

Enabling competencies are, however, essential for our success. If we don’t possess and apply them, it’s unlikely...
we’ll be able to use our core competencies effectively. Take one example: marketing. We can hardly claim to have unique competence in marketing. Many organizations—not only for-profits, but also nonprofits, universities, and government agencies—maintain marketing functions in-house and/or contract for marketing services. (And it’s also true that information professionals often participate in marketing teams.) But more broadly, we know that regardless of which organizational needs or functions we address, we’ll probably need to apply effective marketing strategies in order to succeed.

So, be sure to read the competencies statement carefully, with your own needs as well as those of your organization in mind. Use the competencies to plan your own professional development. Use them on the job, with your managers and HR staff. Use them to talk to your friends. As you’re using them, adapt them to your own situation.

Our professional competencies have evolved rapidly in the two decades since the first SLA competencies statement was published. We can be sure they’ll continue to change in the years ahead. This is a living document, so be ready to contribute to it in a few years when it’s time for the next revision.

**Competencies of Information Professionals, 2016**

- **Core competencies**
  - Services
  - Systems & Tech
  - Resources (Content)
  - Retrieval and Analysis
  - Organization (of Content)
  - Information Ethics

- **Enabling competencies**
  - Critical thinking
  - Initiative
  - Communication
  - Relationship building
  - Marketing
  - Leadership & Management
  - Life-long learning
  - Teaching
  - Business ethics

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