Library and information services: reviewing Standard 6

BY VALERIE REMPEL

An early Peanuts *cartoon shows Linus displaying a new library card and proudly announcing that he has been given "citizenship in the land of knowledge." It seems a wise and wonderful description of how libraries serve to enlarge our communities of engagement by providing access to voices and perspectives we might not otherwise encounter.*

Theological libraries occupy a distinct region in this land of knowledge. As the opening paragraph of Standard 6 reminds us, "theological schools are communities of faith and learning grounded in the historical resources of the tradition, the scholarship of the academic disciplines, and the wisdom of communities of practice. Theological libraries are curated collections and instructional centers with librarians guiding research and organizing access to appropriate resources. Libraries and librarians partner with faculty in student learning and formation to serve schools' educational missions and to equip students to be effective and ethical users of information resources."

This particularity is what makes a theological library valuable to students, faculty, religious leaders, and scholars in search of specialized content and reliable data.

Purpose and role

Like many aspects of higher education, libraries have been impacted by the digital revolution. Sophisticated online catalogs and search engines have replaced card catalogs and paper indexes. Budgets have shifted toward digital subscriptions and e-book acquisitions. What has not changed is the purpose and role of the library. Theological libraries continue to serve "as a central academic resource that enhances the school's educational programs" (Standard 6.2).

Libraries are more than just physical spaces; they are access points to information and sites of engagement. The growing use of digital resources and online course delivery offers schools the opportunity to revisit the way their libraries serve the schools' educational programs. How will the necessary academic resources be evaluated, acquired, and made accessible? How will the expertise of librarians and information specialists be included in curriculum development and course delivery? What kind of space is needed to support a school's learning community?

These kinds of questions are relevant for brick-and-mortar libraries, and for those that operate primarily in the digital environment. It is another instance of how the *Standards* are "modality neutral."

Library staffing and evaluation

Even citizens in the land of knowledge can benefit from a guide when exploring a new place. Library and information services staff are specialist guides or, as the American Theological Library Association (Atla) describes them, "curators, disseminators, and aggregators" who help connect people to scholarly religion and theology content.

This is an especially critical role in the digital age. Greg Bekke, writing for *In Trust* magazine, reported that 328 zettabytes (equivalent to 328 billion terabytes) of data were expected to be generated by 2025, and noted that there are more than 3.4 million bibliographic records in the Atla database, alone. Wending a path through such an abundance of data is an increasingly complex task. Library and information services personnel can help make the invisible visible and thus accessible.

While staffing needs may change as a school and its programs change, the importance of a "sufficient number" with "appropriate qualifications and expertise…supported by adequate resources and opportunities for ongoing professional development" (Standard 6.3) remains. As the *Standards* suggest, the skills and knowledge of staff are relevant to a school's strategic planning and curricular decisions as well as its evaluation practices. Here again, library staff have needed expertise that can inform decisions related to the "adequacy and use of services and resources" to ensure they are "appropriate to the school's educational mission, degree programs, and educational modalities" (Standard 6.4–5).
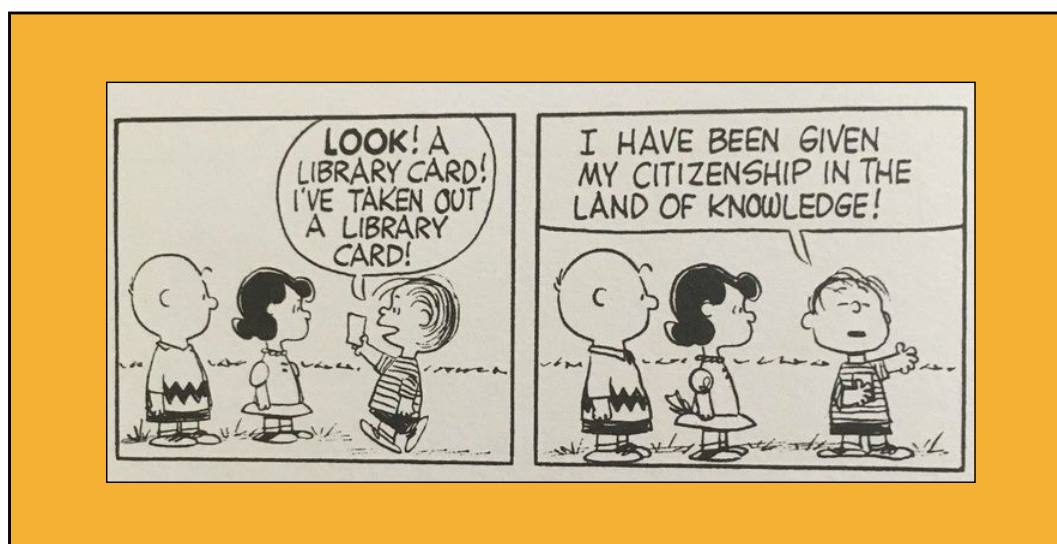
Library services and resources

Standards 6.6–10 serve as a kind of map to this region of the land of knowledge. They describe its essential features, the ecosystem of services and resources that "enhance student learning and formation" (Standard 6.6).

Standard 3 reminds us that schools are to attend to four specific dimensions of student learning and formation—the intellectual, human, spiritual, and vocational—as well as to academic rigor, intercultural competency, global awareness, and skills for lifelong learning.

A theological library supports this work as a partner to faculty "in teaching, learning, and research. Librarians provide reference services, help users navigate research resources, teach information literacy skills, support the scholarly and educational work of the school, and foster lifelong learning" (Standard 6.6). Libraries curate and organize their collection of knowledge, information, wisdom, and data with attention to the "school's courses and degree programs" but also to the diversity of perspectives that include theological and cultural diversity, as well as global voices (Standard 6.7).

The diversity of any school's collection and the specificity of its resources will reflect its own mission and

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2

theological tradition, as well as its degree programs and course offerings. Standard 1 affirms the importance of a school's specific mission, which is always expected to align with its context and constituencies. At the same time, libraries are especially well-situated to enlarge a school's community of engagement through their collection development and access policies. Rubbing shoulders with other "citizens of the land" helps students and others learn from diverse communities and multicultural perspectives, thus contributing to academic rigor and motivating for lifelong learning.

While the landscape of higher education may be shifting, a school is still expected to ensure that its library has "sufficient financial, technological, and physical resources to accomplish its purpose" and to provide an environment "conducive to learning and scholarly research" (Standard 6.9–10). The increasing use of online educational modalities does not eliminate the need for such an environment. Instead, it challenges schools to carefully consider how they might create and maintain digital spaces that are appropriately resourced and staffed.

In this changing context, it helps to remember that, in the words of the educational principles that have shaped the *Standards*, theological education is always meant to be contextually appropriate and to attend to the contexts, communities, and constituencies in which, and for which, it is offered. Most importantly, it responds to changing contexts with creativity and innovation.

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3