

## PROFESSIONAL CERTIFICATION AND THE AMERICAN LIBRARY ASSOCIATION: Q & A

**Background:** *While the American Library Association has a long history in accreditation, the Association has historically not been involved with the certification of individuals, either at the point of initial entry into the profession (receipt of MLS) or at any subsequent (post-MLS) point. The question of certification has surfaced periodically. In 1996, the Executive Boards of two ALA divisions, PLA and LAMA, approved a proposal to develop a “Certified Public Library Administrator” program; that proposal was also subsequently adopted by the ASCLA Executive Board. Adoption of such a proposal has brought the issue of certification forward.*

*The following document is divided into four sections:*

- I. Questions Related to Process*
- II. Questions Related to the Certified Public Library Administrator Proposal*
- III. General Questions on Certification (including legal issues)*
- IV. Other Questions (including questions about cost)*

### **I. Questions Related to Process**

#### **Q1. Can you recap the history to date of this project?**

A1. At the Midwinter Meeting, 1996, the Executive Boards of PLA and LAMA reviewed a proposal to establish a “Certified Public Library Administrator” program. It was approved “in concept” and staff were asked to develop detail plans. The two boards voted at the Annual Conference, 1996, to move forward. File copies of the original proposal exist.

Following the 1996 Annual Conference, Mary Ghikas, AED, Member Programs and Services, began (a) compiling background information and (b) forwarding information and questions to the ALA Executive Board and, through staff liaison, the Committee on Education. The intent in forwarding documentation to COE was to generate broad discussion within the Association on the merits of proceeding with such a program. At no time during this period was the ALA Executive Board asked to take any specific action. Rather, guidance was sought on such issues as whether or not this should be pursued and how best to move the discussion forward through the Association, involving other key stakeholders, within a “reasonable timeframe.” File copies exist of the following documents:

- Discussion Documents – Post-MLS Certification, 18 September 1996 (Ghikas)
  - Included with above: Key Issues in Credentialing, 9 September 1996 (Dalrymple)
- Update: Discussion on Post-MLS Certification, 13 December 1996 (Ghikas)
- Attached questions/responses: accreditation, certification, evaluation of foreign credentials, 1 May 1997 (Ghikas, including responses from ALA legal counsel)

At the Annual Conference, 1998 (Washington DC), as part of continuing series of Board “briefings” on ALA Key Action Areas, a briefing on “Continuous Education and Lifelong Learning” was presented. Darlene Weingand participated, along with staff. Voluntary, post-MLS certification was one of the recommendations made. Following the briefing, representatives of PLA and LAMA, now joined by ASCLA, presented their proposal formally to the ALA Executive Board. The ALA Executive Board supported the proposal in concept and asked ALA Management to return at the 1998 Fall Board Meeting with a business plan for establishment of the Section 501(c)(6) organization to enable implementation of the PLA/LAMA/ASCLA program. A file copy of the briefing document prepared for the ALA Executive Board exists.

The Committee on Education held hearings during the 1998 Annual Conference.

At the Fall Board Meeting, 1998, the Board received an update. The Committee on Education was also specifically asked to recommend process/criteria for evaluation of future certification proposals and to recommend any basic “ground rules” for such programs. Work was subsequently delayed by efforts on the 1<sup>st</sup> Congress on Professional Education, which required significant attention both from staff and from the Committee on Education. A file copy exists of the following document:

- Review of project status; approval of general direction and next steps

**Q2. What are the next steps?**

A2. ALA Management is completing work on a technical/business plan for a possible Section 501(c)(6) organization, allied to ALA. Without such an “enabling” mechanism, ALA cannot be involved in certification and cannot, therefore, support the program being requested by PLA, LAMA and ASCLA. The business plan will be presented through the normal (FY2002) budget process.

The Committee on Education is continuing its consideration of the “policy framework” for such a possible entity. [January, 2001: COE gave a preliminary report to Council in 2000 and will move for Council approval at the 2001 Midwinter Meeting.]

PLA, LAMA and ASCLA are responding to issues raised by ALA Management during the course of this continuing development and to questions raised by the Committee on Education in recent weeks. [January, 2001: Responses from PLA, LAMA and ASCLA are incorporated in the recommendations being moved forward by COE.]

## **II. Questions related to the Certified Public Library Administrator Proposal**

### **Q3. What have PLA, LAMA and ASCLA proposed?**

A3.. They have proposed creation of a program for voluntary, post-MLS certification of public library administrators, in order to enable public library administrators to (1) further their professional education and development, (2) move to a higher level of practical professional expertise, (3) improve career opportunities through professional contacts, and (4) demonstrate to colleagues, trustees and boards of directors, patrons and the wider information community that the certified person has acquired a professionally recognized body of knowledge and expertise in public library administration.

### **Q4. What are the proposed requirements for certification?**

A4. The original proposal requires completion of seven of the following nine courses: (1) Budget/Finance, (2) Fundraising/Marketing/Public Relations, (3) Library Buildings, (4) Personnel Issues, (5) Technology, (6) Building Alliances, (7) Leadership Issues, (8) Safety/Security, (9) Serving Diverse Populations. In addition, candidates must demonstrate that they have five years of full-time public library supervisory experience at time of final application for certification. Candidates must be active professionally, as demonstrated by other courses taken or given, papers written and professional association activities.

The divisions are currently reviewing these recommendations to address two issues: (1) Demonstrable relevance to the specialization for which certification is sought. (2) Broad, potential access to the program. Delivery of relevant coursework on the web is being considered. An examination model, initially rejected in favor of a requiring applicants to take PLA/LAMA/ASCLA-offered courses, is being reconsidered, as it would open opportunities for applicants to utilize coursework from university-based LIS programs, chapters and other associations. The original proposal requires a candidate to complete work toward certification within five years of announcing intent to be certified.

### **Q5. For what length of time would a candidate be certified?**

A5. The original proposal requires recertification every three years. To maintain certification, the certified public library administrator must remain active in the profession, continuing both personal professional development and contribution to the professional body.

### III. General Questions on Certification

**Q6: What is certification?**

A6: Certification attests to the possession by an individual of a specified body of knowledge and/or skills. Certification can occur at entry level, as part of career development, or as recognition of career achievement.

**Q7. How does certification relate to accreditation and licensure?**

Q7. A school or educational program – in ALA’s case programs (not schools) in Library and Information Studies – are accredited to deliver a particular education program. Certification and licensure attest to an individual’s possession of a specified set of knowledge and skills. Both accreditation and certification are voluntary. Licensure is mandatory and governmental. Some professions (e.g. medicine) use all three: accreditation, certification and licensure. LIS has historically, generally, used only accreditation. There are, however, examples of certification-like programs within the field of library and information studies: the Medical Library Association’s Academy of Health Information Professionals and the Special Libraries Association’s Management Institutes.

**Q8. The American Library Association has not, historically, engaged in individual certification. Can it do so?**

A8. ALA itself cannot be an instrument for certification of librarians at either the entry point or a subsequent stage in professional development because it is a Section 501(c)(3) – educational – organization. The IRS considers certification to be a proper activity for a Section 501(c)(6) – professional – organization.

A Section 501(c)(6) affiliate organization could be established to run a certification program for librarians. Such an organization could be legally tied to ALA through an interlocking board. It could be housed at ALA headquarters (if desired) and could (if desired) use ALA staff. ALA would have to recover from the Section 501(c)(6) organization the cost of space, staff time and any other ALA resources used. A Section 501(c)(3) organization may not give funding to a (c)(6) organization, but may make a “fair market” loan.

**Q9. Can an ALA-tied certification body require an MLS from an ALA-accredited program (or other program recognized in ALA policy) as a pre-condition for certification?**

A9. Yes. In fact, it would be important that an ALA-tied certification body only grant certification to persons with degrees recognized within ALA policy.

**Q10. Would such certification be a statutory requirement for a particular job?**

A10. No. It would be an additional piece of information that the employer could utilize in determining the relative qualification of candidates. It would be a means by which librarians in particular specializations might seek to demonstrate their preparation.

**Q11. Could an ALA-tied certification body require ALA membership as a pre-condition for certification?**

A11. No. Certification bodies generally avoid requiring membership in any particular organization as a pre-condition of certification, as that could possibly constitute an anti-trust violation.

**Q12. Is there any necessary connection between certification by an ALA-tied certification body and licensing, certification or certification-like practices in various states?**

A12. No. States may adopt certification by trade or professional societies as evidence that the states' requirements have been met; this is the choice of the state. The existence of state certification procedures does not in any way prevent a professional body from certifying its practitioners. ALA would have no obligation to state certification bodies.

**Q13. PLA, LAMA and ASCLA have proposed post-MLS certification of a particular specialization – public library management. Could an ALA-tied certification board certify a specialization without certifying librarians at the point of entry into the profession? Is there any problem with certifying some specializations and not others?**

Q13. The fact that there is no certification at point of entry into the profession does not in any way prevent certification at a later point in professional development. Further, there is no legal barrier to certifying only some specializations. Law and dentistry, for example, certify some specializations and not others.

**Q14. Does certification raise concerns of legal liability for ALA?**

A14. While certification does raise legal liability concerns, liability is limited by using a separate entity for certification. Further, it should be noted that thousands of non-profit organizations certify without significant liabilities. There are some key questions to ask during the establishment of such a program: (1) Are the criteria for certification carefully matched to legitimate professional goals? (2) Are the criteria for certification pro-competitive (vs. anti-competitive)? (3) Is the analysis thorough and objective?

**Q15. Can the ALA set the standards for certification?**

A15. Literally, no. Setting standards for certification is part of the certification process. However, the ALA/ALA divisions can properly establish standards for professional practice within certain specializations; these standards may be licensed to/adopted by the ALA-tied certification board.

**IV. Other Questions**

**Q16. Why might we want to do this?**

A16. Having noted the legal requirements and cautions under Section III, there are several reasons why we might want to proceed with this program:

- (1) The Executive Boards of three ALA divisions have voted for this program, on the grounds that it will provide an important and useful service to their members.
- (2) Career development certification (the type proposed) attests to acquisition of a specialized body of knowledge that was either not available at the entry level or not accomplished at the entry level.
- (3) It provides a systematic approach to career development, along with outside validation.
- (4) The prestige of the profession as a whole is enhanced by a good certification program.

**Q17. Why should ALA as a whole be involved with this, rather than leaving it to the individual specialty groups?**

A17. ALA divisions are not legal entities separate from ALA; any action by an ALA unit necessarily involves ALA.

Further, it may be preferable for the profession as a whole to maintain accountability between specialty groups and a body charged with stewardship of the profession as a whole. {Dalrymple}

**Q18. What might this cost?**

A18. The business plan for the proposed 501(c)(6) professional affiliate is still in development and the business plan for continuing education courses is being reviewed and, possibly, revised at this Midwinter Meeting. Based on work-in-progress:

(1) Pricing for intensive, two-day workshops (or the web-delivered equivalent) is typically set at \$250-\$400. This is well-within the range of pricing for similar offerings.

(2) The current model for an affiliated professional organization assumes a \$100,000 up-front investment in the development of the 501(c)(6) organization, with interest to be paid beginning in year one and principal to be fully repaid over a defined number of years. It is projected that the organization will require 4-5 years to become self-sustaining. A \$350 application fee is assumed in the current model.

**Q19. How would governance be structured?**

A19. The 501(c)(6) would operate under separate bylaws. The governing boards could be interlocked and could give ALA effective control over the affiliated professional organization. While the (c)(6) organization could have a broadly or narrowly-defined mission, a narrowly-defined mission is proposed, with all activities and roles which can legally occur within ALA being retained by ALA.

**Q20. Is this issue related to foreign credentialing?**

A20. This is a separate issue. A Task Force on Foreign Credentialing (ad hoc) is currently preparing recommendations on foreign credentialing for Council consideration. [Approved]