Exploring LIS Research Education as Preparation for Practitioner Research

Nicole D. Alemanne, Changwoo Yang, and Xiaoai Ren

Valdosta State University, U.S.A.

ndalemanne@valdosta.edu, cyang@valdosta.edu, xren@valdosta.edu

ABSTRACT

This paper reports on continuing research into outcomes of teaching research methods to master's students in library and information science programs, expanding upon a project presented at ALISE 2018. Alumni of an ALA-accredited MLIS program were surveyed to explore their views of and engagement with research. Respondents reported comfort with important research methods concepts and activities after completing the research methods course, a generally positive attitude toward research, and the use of some research activities as practitioners.

TOPICS

academic libraries; curriculum; online learning; pedagogy; public libraries; research methods; special libraries

INTRODUCTION

This paper reports on continuing research into outcomes of teaching research methods to master's students in library and information science (LIS) programs. Alumni of the Valdosta State University (VSU) Master of Library and Information Science (MLIS) program were surveyed about their attitudes toward research and their use of research at work after taking the required research method course. The research expands upon a project presented at ALISE 2018 (Alemanne & Mandel, 2018). Approaching LIS from the global perspective and embedding cross-cultural understanding and respect for diversity into the curriculum demands supporting students in developing research skills so that they will be able to implement evidence-based practices as they move into professional roles.

BACKGROUND AND METHOD

LIS practitioners engage in research in multiple ways, such as being consumers of research, conducting research, and collaborating with academics. Research in the LIS field is important for creating new knowledge, connecting research and practice, and informing or improving practice (Powell, Baker, & Mika 2002). Studies such as Luo (2011) and Alemanne and Mandel (2018) report that LIS practitioners use research at work, although their research activities may focus more on activities such as reading research articles, applying research findings to improve work, and examining research articles to help patrons than on collecting, analyzing, and reporting on data. Research is important for LIS practitioners; Juznic and Urbanija (2003) report that US/Canadian LIS practitioners read research journals, apply research findings to their practice, and occasionally or frequently perform research. However, some studies have found a lack of practitioner publishing in peer-reviewed journals and distinct differences in research topics between practitioner and academic researchers (Clapton, 2010; Finlay, Ni, Tsou, & Sugimoto, 2013). Some studies have focused on analyzing existing MLIS research methods course descriptions, syllabi, and teaching methods across programs (Alemanne & Mandel, 2018; Mandel, 2017; Park, 2003). Despite uneven coverage of topics and course requirements across programs, findings show that MLIS research methods courses have outcomes related to practitioners consuming or conducting research (Alemanne & Mandel, 2018; Luo, 2011; Powell, Baker, & Mika, 2002).

Survey invitations were emailed to alumni of the VSU MLIS program in November 2018. The survey was adapted from Alemanne and Mandel (2018), with additional open-ended questions related to the VSU required research methods course. Respondents were also asked the type of library in which they work based on outcomes from Alemanne and Mandel. A total of 96 alumni participated in the survey and 64 completed the full survey, a 66.7% response rate. Alumni who work at academic libraries constitute the largest group of respondents (32), and 23 respondents work at public libraries. Nine respondents work in special libraries, archives, or other institutions.

FINDINGS

The survey explored respondents' view of research after completing the research methods course and their use of research as practitioners. Almost 100% report that research is important for the LIS field and 67% that it is important for their jobs (81% of academic librarians, 57% of public librarians, and 44% of special librarians).

Another aspect of respondents' views of research was determined through questions about their comfort in completing specific research tasks (Figure 1). When thinking about their comfort levels after taking the course, more than 50% of respondents feel very or somewhat comfortable in every research task. Most respondents are very or somewhat comfortable understanding the purposes of research (95%), reviewing the literature (94%), and research

ethics (94%). Respondents report being least comfortable with defining and operationalizing variables (55%), sampling (66%), and quantitative data analysis (66%).
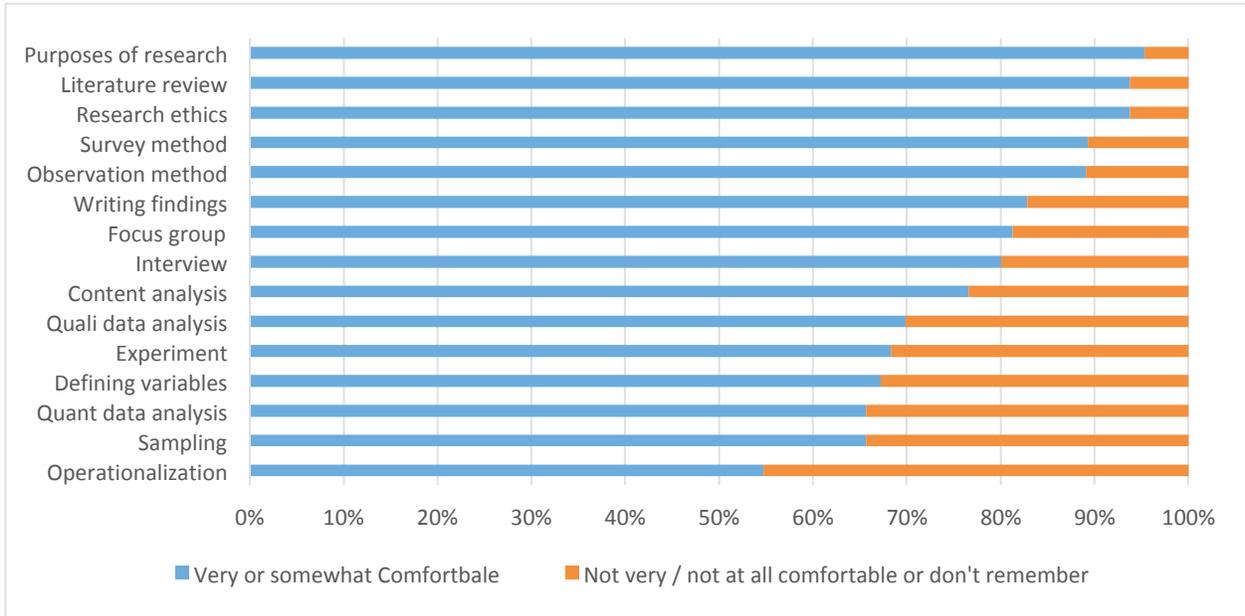

Figure 1. Reported Comfort with Research Concepts and Tasks after Taking the Research Methods Course.
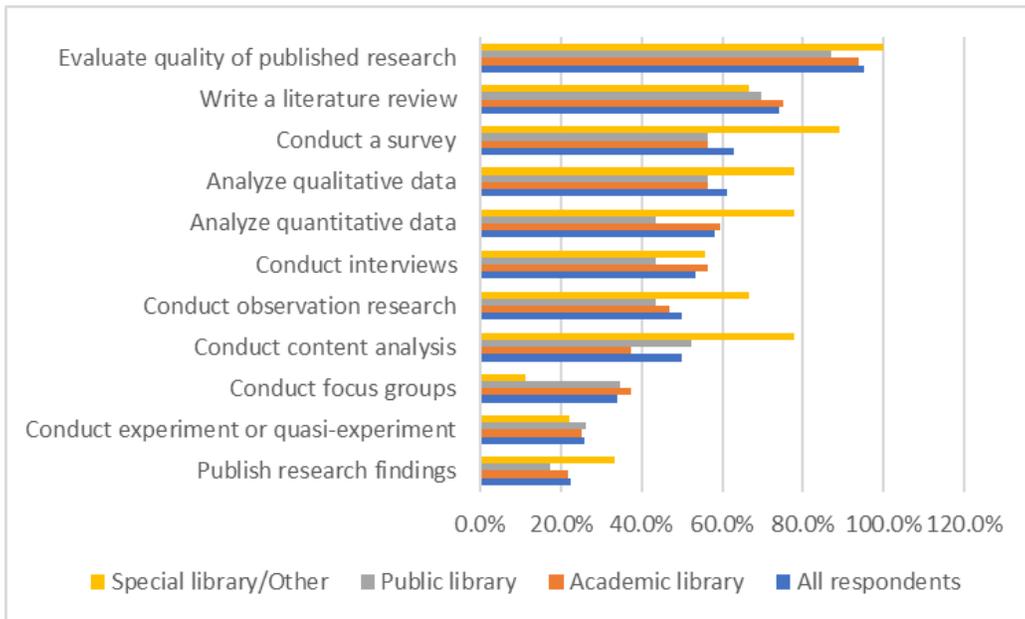

Figure 2. Percentage of Respondents Reporting Feeling "Very Comfortable" or "Somewhat Comfortable" With Completing Research Activities.

Respondents were also asked about their current comfort with typical research tasks. They report being most comfortable with evaluating the quality of published research and writing a literature review, and the least comfortable with publishing research findings (Figure 2). Those who work in public libraries were generally less comfortable with the activities; two activities with which public librarians appear to be relatively more comfortable (conducting experiments and focus groups) represent very few respondents.

In addition to research tasks, respondents were asked to report on their use of research-related activities at work (Figure 3). Accessing and reading articles are the top activities reported by both academic and public librarians. While respondents generally report comfort with many research tasks, actual use of research-related activities at work is relatively low.
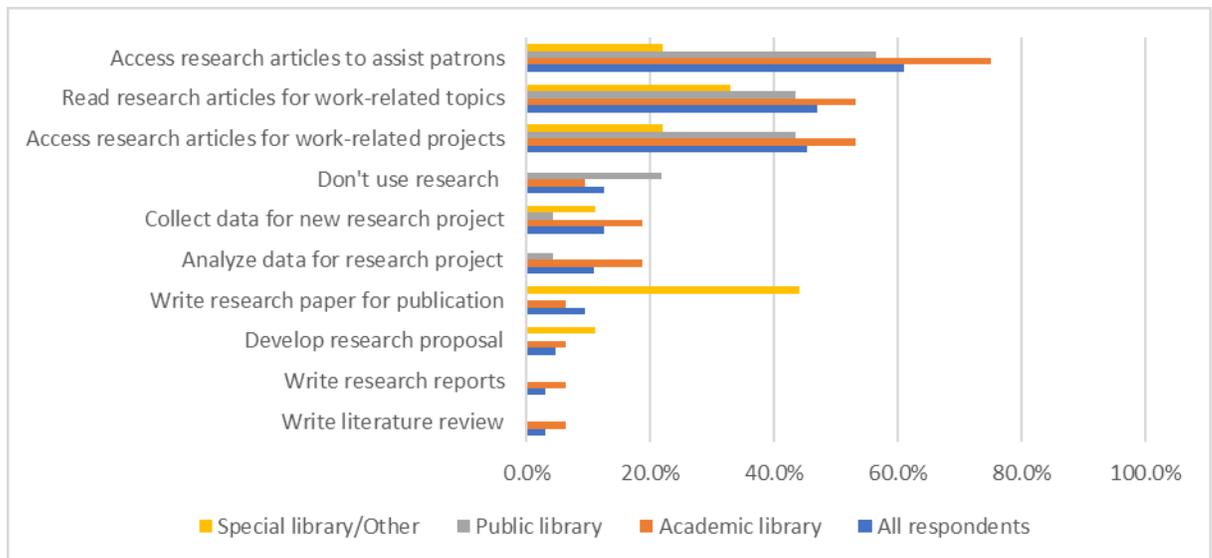

Figure 3. Respondents' Current Use of Research at Work.

Substantial numbers of respondents report that they do not participate in many of the activities at work, and public librarians were the least likely to report doing research activities (Figure 4). Almost 22% of public librarians report not using research at work (Figure 3), and collecting and analyzing data and writing up research was reported by few of the respondents. In general, respondents are more likely to be consumers of research than to conduct research activities.
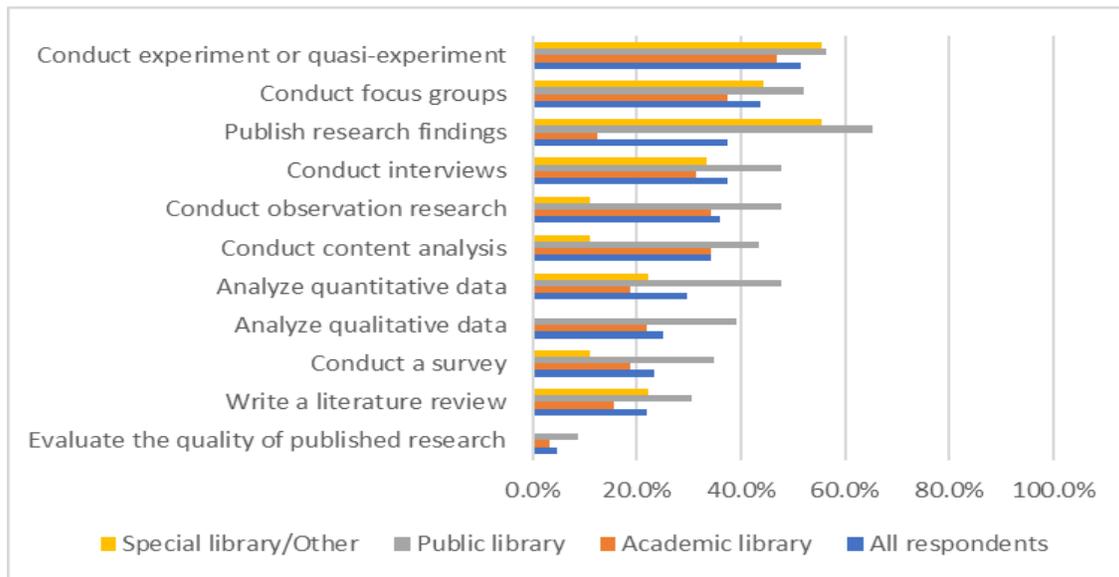
Figure 4. Percentage of Respondents Reporting "Do Not Do This" at Work.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The results of this research showed respondents reporting comfort with important research methods concepts and activities after completing the research methods course, a generally positive attitude toward research, and the use of some research activities as practitioners. The next stage of analysis will combine the results of this phase with those of the initial project (Alemanne and Mandel, 2018) in order to expand sample sizes and compare results between programs. Further research to understand the interplay of specific course delivery methods and pedagogical methods and to explore improvements in course delivery would substantially expand our knowledge about the best ways to prepare LIS students to become research practitioners.

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