

The Government Needs More Librarians: The Applicability of an MLIS Education in a Public Sector Setting

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ABSTRACT

Despite seemingly aligned information-related objectives and geographic proximity, the employment intersection between graduates of the University of Alberta's ALA-accredited MLIS program and the Government of Alberta, a major provincial public sector employer, has been limited.

Seeing an opportunity for MLIS graduate employment with the GOA, this research builds from an analysis of recruitment postings complemented with survey and interview findings from MLIS graduates now working at the Government of Alberta. The information garnered addresses how their MLIS prepared them for their work, where there were gaps, and what, if anything, they would have done differently to prepare for a public service career. Discussion focuses on the education, experience, and competencies sought by this public sector employer.

Covering multiple job levels, Government of Alberta recruiters often expressed a preference for a "library education" but it was seldom a mandatory requirement, nor was a masters-level education. Every job required additional experience or expertise, indicating that MLIS graduates interested in public sector work may have to develop additional experience elsewhere or be prepared to accept a lower-level entry position.

Information work in a government setting is not fundamentally different from traditional librarianship focused on public or academic institutions where, at the core, the aim is to make information accessible for the public good. However, findings indicate that the government employee is often required to further analyze information to support decision-making, requiring skills and competencies that many reported underdeveloped in their MLIS education including project management; business analysis and writing skills; technology; and policy development.

TOPICS

education; information use; continuing education; curriculum; education programs/schools

INTRODUCTION

With a mandate to develop reflective and inquiring library and information leaders, the School of Library and Information Studies (SLIS) at the University of Alberta in Edmonton offers the only American Library Association (ALA) accredited Master of Library and Information Studies (MLIS) program on the Canadian prairies and the only purely online MLIS offering in Canada. Meanwhile, Edmonton is a major public sector employer and the Government of Alberta (GOA) struggles to recruit qualified candidates into information management positions to fulfill its information management mandate. Despite these seemingly aligned objectives, the employment intersection between these institutions has been limited with the number of MLIS graduates¹ attaining employment with the government low compared to more traditional sectors.

METHODOLOGY

This research builds from an analysis of recruitment postings in the period 2014 to 2018, complemented with survey and interview findings from MLIS graduates now working at the GOA. The information garnered addresses how their MLIS prepared them for their work, where there were gaps, and what, if anything, they would have done differently to prepare for a public service career. Discussion focuses on the education, experience, and competencies sought by this public sector employer.

FINDINGS

Covering multiple job levels, GOA recruiters often expressed a preference for a “library education” but it was seldom a mandatory requirement, nor was a master’s-level education. Every job required additional experience or expertise, indicating that MLIS graduates interested in public sector work may have to develop additional experience elsewhere or be prepared to accept a lower-level entry position.

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¹ For the purposes of this research, MLIS degrees is used in a broader sense to include a group of closely related degrees including: Master of Library and Information Studies (MLIS); variants such as Master of Information Studies (MAS), Master of Information (MIS, MIST, or MI); the sister degrees, Master of Archival (MAS) and Master of Museum Studies (MMSt); and combined degrees such as Master of Business Administration (MBA)/MLIS, Master of Arts (MA)/MLIS, and MPA (Master of Public Administration)/MLIS.

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RECOMMENDATIONS

The challenge and opportunity for LIS educators and students is to understand, identify, demonstrate and effectively communicate how what is learned in the context of traditional library skills can be strategically transferable to a government setting. Within MLIS courses, particularly required courses, curriculum needs to transcend ubiquitous attention to traditional librarianship and include holistic and alternative course content across information professions. The following suggestions, not intended as prescriptive but rather to foster further generation of ideas that are non-traditionally and practically focused, should be applicable to any ALA-accredited MLIS program.

Foundations of Library and Information Studies. “Familiarity with the history, philosophy, societal roles of librarianship” scored significantly lower in relevance than other learning objectives, therefore consideration might be given to shifting some of the focus from historical perspectives, such as the examination of the pioneers of librarianship, to something more contemporary and inclusive, such as:

- Consider the challenges/benefits of open data publication by a public sector body, or
- To what extent does the type of organization you work in impact how you enact your professional obligations as an information worker?

Incorporating a diverse composition of guest lecturers from a broad range of contemporary information sectors may also freshen perspectives and provide more robust exposure to the breadth of information-related opportunities.

Organization of Information. Expand the examination of controlled vocabularies beyond LCSH and CSH to consider a controlled vocabulary scheme or knowledge map from a private or public sector entity.

Reference and Information Services. The reference interview and ability to find information are core job components for many GOA employees in information-related roles, therefore exposure to these skills outside of traditional settings is desirable. A guest appearance demonstrating how someone uses reference interview or similar techniques in their job could be illustrative. An assignment choice might be to do an environmental scan on a relevant topic presenting the results as a business memo.

Management and Leadership. An optimal balance of theory and practical workplace practices and situations should drive curriculum choice. Examples or case studies from a range of information settings and judicious use of guest lectures to demonstrate leadership qualities could inject practical situations as well as exposure to various employment environments.

Advanced courses optionally made available inter-faculty² in specific areas such as human resource management, finance and budgeting, marketing, change management, business planning, and leadership are recommended to prepare students to optimal levels.

Introduction to Research. Respondents indicated that on-the-job sourcing information was different than LIS-based introduction to research, with less reliance on academic sources and a greater need to focus on experiential learning, human interactions, and collecting primary data to support decision-making. A relevant assignment might be to design, gather, and analyze information. For example, using a technology platform, a student group designs a survey around a given topic with members of another group taking the survey to provide data that can be analyzed. Being both administrator and participant of information gathering provides differing perspectives. Students would gain exposure to a technology instrument and statistical methods could be demonstrated using the data. Another assignment could be to write a funding application in real-time with local culture, politics and economics.

Capping ePortfolio. Enhancing the design, planning and creation of the e-portfolio of students' work as a project to be systematically managed using project management principles could layer-in required application of project management to the standard expectation of student reflection on program learning outcomes. More consciously using a project management technology platform would have the added benefit of adding to students' technology skill portfolio.

The theme of guest lecturers is prevalent amongst these suggestions – as part of a larger strategy of MLIS programs developing substantial, robust, and sustained relationships with diverse employers and alumni across the information professions and strategically inclusive of contemporary information-focused employers.

CONCLUSION

These suggestions are aimed at the mutual benefit of fostering raised employer awareness of the potential of MLIS graduates while strategically enhancing MLIS graduate preparedness for employment opportunities in the public employment sector that transcend traditional library settings.

² Such as the University of Alberta MBA/MLIS combined program