

“The real library world is dirty and you don't learn that at all in schools”

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Abstract. This poster presents findings of a content analysis based on survey responses collected from 51 librarians who provided vehemently critical feedback on the disconnection between their job realities and their library and information science (LIS) education. The study aims to understand why these librarians are vehemently critical in hopes of seeding an honest conversation about how to improve future LIS education. This is also part of a larger research project based on a survey among 759 currently working librarians and information professionals. Through this study, we found that real-life situations of librarianship, such as challenging social work, security concerns and job prospects, are very important, but they are usually not frequently talked about in LIS programs, which left students unprepared for their real jobs. This poster sheds light on this problem and provides suggestions on how to enhance the effectiveness of education of LIS programs through joint efforts of educators and students.

Keywords: Education in Library and Information Science, Librarianship, Public Library.

1 Introduction and motivation

On October 24, 2018, Emergent BioSolutions, a biopharmaceutical company, announced that it would start offering free anti-overdose drugs to over 16,000 public libraries in the United States [1]. This news story may sound surprising to many students currently enrolled in library and information science (LIS) programs who are not expecting social work and security concerns to be part of their future jobs as librarians. In fact, public libraries have been fighting drug use and overdose on the front line for years [2]. Additionally, BuzzFeed recently published an article addressing the actualities of library work and how librarians are constantly surprised by the work and especially their patrons [3].

Through our literature review on LIS education, we found that although the gap between theory and practice, has been discussed in many papers [4][5][6][7], there is much less emphasis placed on the disconnection between students' expectation and the job reality. One previous study found students who went to work without such sense of

reality found “*too much distance between themselves and what brought them into the profession*” [8]. The present work aims to highlight what LIS education is missing in connecting students’ expectation to job reality through a study on how working librarians feel about their LIS education.

2 Method

For this study, we surveyed currently working librarians and information professionals regarding their education and current jobs. Respondents were recruited through convenience sampling and snowball sampling, starting from email invitations sent to 2631 registered alumni who had graduated from a LIS school in the US from the early 1950s to 2013. Respondents were invited to share the survey link with other relevant professionals. In the end, 759 valid responses were collected. This large dataset has already led to interesting findings about the relationship between LIS education and different kinds of information work, including social media [9], archives [10] and records management [11]. However, this present work is the first to focus on LIS education and library, specifically one open-ended question, “What advice, if any, would you provide to a degree program that educates future librarians who want to do the kind of library work you do?” This question was answered by 383 respondents. The average length of a response is 41 words, while the shortest response is one word and the longest response was 264 words. Two researchers coded these responses independently based on their familiarity with librarianship and LIS education. Then the codes were compared and a coding consensus was reached [12]. Our analysis found 51 responses coded as “vehemently critical” that stand out for two reasons. First, they were particularly vehement, with strong language and a clear negative sentiment. Second, they brought up topics that we could learn from about the shortcomings of current LIS education. Therefore, these responses are the focus of this work.

3 Respondent Profiles

The 51 librarians whose responses were coded as “vehemently critical” work in a variety of library types (see Fig. 1): public libraries (44%, n=23), academic or higher education libraries (33%, n=17), hospital and health libraries (8%, n=4), government libraries (6%, n=3), school libraries (6%, n=3) and a synagogue library (2%, n=1). Their working experience is also varied. 21 of them (42%) are very experienced librarians who have been doing librarian work for over 10 years, of which 15 (31%) people have been working in librarianship for over 15 years. For the rest of librarians, 11 (21%) have been working for 5-10 years and 19 (37%) librarians have been working for less than 5 years. In terms of workload, on average, the majority (76%, n=39) work at least 40 hours per week.

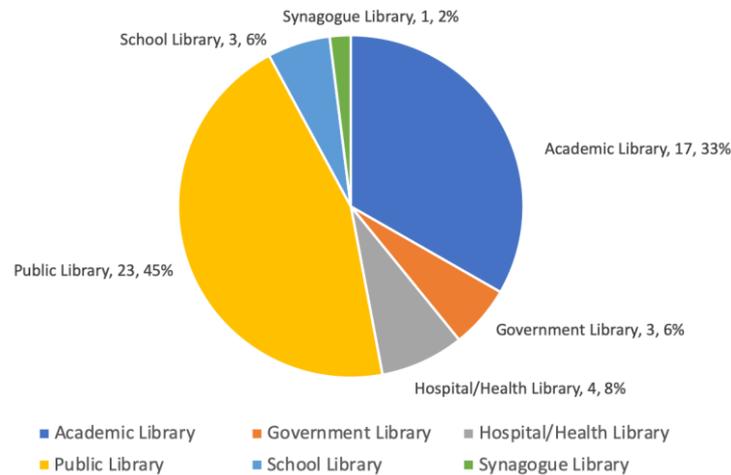


Fig. 1. Different types of respondents' working places.

It is important to note that these librarians are not disgruntled workers who are complaining about their jobs. In fact, most of the respondents (80%, n=41) are satisfied with their jobs and 2/3 of them (n=34) would recommend their job to the others. We believe their responses were vehement because they wanted to draw attention to the gap between the realities of their jobs and their expectations set at school. Additionally, when comparing our sample to the whole sample, we found that they are very similar based on the demographics we collected. For example, 44% of our sample worked in public libraries and 33% in academic libraries, while in the whole sample 38% worked in the public libraries and 35% worked in academic libraries.

4 Findings

After a second round of coding, the 51 responses were grouped into three topic areas which we labeled as (1) *social work and safety concerns*; (2) *job prospects*; and, (3) *real-world experiences*. In addition, we identify several solutions emerged from the responses to handle these problems.

4.1 Social Work and Safety Concerns

Sixteen (31%) respondents compared their jobs to social work because of the large amount of work they devoted to patron services. Librarians need to communicate with patrons at all levels, including “*suburban mom, gangbanger with tear tracks tattooed on his face, the homeless schizophrenic* (Respondent 15).” Respondent 51 claimed that “*Given this economy and the political situation in the country, realize that more than you ever thought possible, your job is social work, not strictly professional information skills.*” As is summarized by Respondent 11, “*Public library work requires empathy and is closely related to social work. We have many patrons with mental illness, poverty*

issues, drug use, developmental disabilities. We are also actively involved in outreach to community organizations.” This argument was supported by other librarians. For instance, Respondent 16 noted that “the statistics class I had to take as a prerequisite for my program was a waste of time. A psychology or social work class would be much more useful for a public librarian.”

Related to the social work theme, 10 (20%) respondents highlighted safety concerns as well as the importance of self-protection since in many libraries “issues in violence and safety have become a recent concern (Respondent 27).” Situations with problem patron at public libraries can be very challenging and even dangerous (Respondents 15, 16, 23, 24, 27, 28, 36). As Respondents 15 stated, “We need to know when to call the police. We need to know what kind of body language soothes and how to defuse a potential situation before it happens.” A self-defense course was also suggested for people considering public librarianship (Respondent 16).

4.2 Job Prospects

A great concern shared by 16 (31%) unhappy librarians is the challenge of becoming professionally employed. For instance, Respondent 45 told students that “Do not get a library degree to work in a traditional library. There are no jobs.” Similarly, Respondent 8 complained that “There are too many professionals seeking too few jobs. The dollar amount expended on a graduate library degree is not worth the pay received.” Respondent 31 expressed even more negative views about the job prospects, “Don’t go into Library Science, it is a shrinking field.”

Multiple responses (Respondents 7, 9, 31) shed light on the reasons for such gloomy prospects. For instance, Respondent 9 described the trend in libraries as “Positions are frankensteined because a library can only hire one person to do what was previously done by three people, plus the library wants to pursue other initiatives.” Correspondingly, Respondent 31 put forward:

Staffs are being cut or made part time or yearly contract. No security. Fewer retirees replaced. Less tax money spent on libraries. Trend is to staff libraries with volunteers as much as possible, or part time-no benefits. But then there are no secure careers anymore, so you may as well go where your heart is as long as you can.

Respondents also suggested that the instructors of LIS programs should be frank with students about their job prospects, instead of promising that “students would find a job immediately upon or soon after graduation” (Respondent 14). For instance, Respondent 47 advocated that:

You need to be realistic with students about job prospects. We were told that this was a graying profession, that jobs would be plentiful. The truth is, 1) this is a job in which most people weren't paid enough to have a substantial retirement fund so people have to work longer, and 2) it is the type of job that is very easy to do until a very advanced age.

Drawing lessons from their own experience, respondents gave two tips to students for earning an edge in the job market. First, choose tracks wisely by taking multiple factors into consideration, such as trends in job market. Respondent 14 warned that *“The medical library profession is becoming moribund. The kind of library work that medical librarians have done in the past is really not valued by users, and medical libraries are struggling to find a niche of relevance.”* Secondly, cultivate comprehensive skills for various positions in order to *“be ready to fill in gaps, do jobs you didn't expect, to provide support where there was none before”* (Respondent 48). Such flexibility is essential because there might be a huge gap between job expectation and reality. As Respondent 18 told us:

Keep reminding students that what they study at the iSchool may not be what they get into -- I took 4 classes related to healthcare (because I am still interested in health sciences librarianship), but I've fallen into digital preservation librarianship, where I use exactly zero of that. Reinforcing our need to be flexible is crucial.

4.3 Real-world Experience

In addition to the problems and advice discussed above, four suggestions for generally addressing these problems were identified from 20 (39%) respondents. They aim at increasing students' practical skills and working experience.

First, respondents urged the LIS programs to provide more information on what actually goes on in libraries (Respondents 15, 28, 36, 41, 44). This is related to what was pointed out in section 4.2. However, different from the previous suggestion, the focus here is on “being practical” instead of “being frank.” Instead of theory, our respondents preferred to hear more practical content in class. They requested LIS programs to *“stop all the nonsense about information theory”* (Respondent 29) because they felt *“Not one single thing that we talked about in class at the iSchool has been relevant to my job”* (Respondent 29). Here is another example:

As a recent graduate of a School of Information (less than 5 years ago), I was woefully unprepared for the first librarian position I was placed in. Consistently across the curriculum I was taught theory. This did nothing to prepare me for the practical aspects of my position (Respondent 19).

Secondly, librarians put demands on good instructors who are both experienced and candid. They suggested hiring *“professors who have actual experience working instead of people who go straight through and have limited amounts of time working in the ‘real world’ of librarianship”* (Respondent 20). They also required the professors be up to date on current library materials and practices. They insisted that if a program fails to have instructors who are currently working in this field, at least current librarians should be invited to speak honestly to the students about their job (Respondents 34 and 46).

Thirdly, respondents suggested changes in curricula and teaching methods for improving LIS programs. For example, they thought topics such as current trends and issues as well as crisis management (Respondent 26, 33 and 39) should be covered in school. They also suggested that professional content should be taught in a critical way which encouraged students to relate theory and values to the social-technical environment, for instance:

While the ischool exposed me to some of the philosophy behind information, it was a bit too positivist. I would have preferred a more critical approach to concepts like information, literacy, publishing, organization, etc., one that examined how socially, historically, and culturally contingent our institutions and ideas are. Also, librarianship is a precarious profession: our values, working conditions, and even reasons for being, are often challenged by the market, by politicians, by administrators, citizens. Therefore, it's important that we develop the capacity to critically reflect on big, long-term decisions concerning information access, the role of the state in public life, the future of the commons, the purpose of research and who it serves, etc. (Respondent 1).

Last, but not least, 10 (20%) respondents talked about gaining hands-on experience beyond class. Respondents argued that practice is the best way to bridge the gap between students' expectation and on-site job. In the scenario given by Respondent 46:

Students learn lots of theories in their studies which is a great thing to learn. However, theories don't help when you have to ban a patron for looking at porn for the third time, cleaning poop off books, or trying to explain to someone how to use a mouse.

To handle these problems, the best way to prepare is “*actually volunteering at a library and seeing things first-hand*” (Respondent 6).

5 Conclusions and Future Work

In conclusion, by analyzing deeply critical responses, we identified the main concerns and suggestions shared by librarians: (1) *social work and safety concerns*; (2) *job prospects*; and, (3) *real-world experiences*. Our findings suggested a disconnection between students' expectation and job reality, which is insufficiently talked about in scholarly literature on LIS education. While there is no way that a program can cover every possible problem that could arise in a librarian's career, these three issues should be openly discussed. Therefore, we encourage educators to be honest with students about current practice, challenges and prospects. We also strongly advise students to prepare themselves for future career through on-site practice, especially gaining experience in patron services.

As is mentioned above, this study is part of a larger research project. For future work, we will extend our analysis to a larger dataset to perform a more in-depth and

comprehensive re-examination of the disconnection between students' expectation and job reality. We also plan to deep-dive into the potential correlation between respondents' feedback and their demographic as well as geographic features to further investigate this problem.

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