Helping LIS Faculty Know What it's Like to Work in a Library

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ABSTRACT

The current study is a follow-up to a 2019 study that found that practicing librarians viewed the MLIS as irrelevant and outdated. Focus group transcripts from that study were analyzed to uncover additional questions, potential solutions, and suggestions for further study. Participants were concerned that faculty were disconnected from the library as a workplace. The current study suggests the use of faculty development workshops, led by practicing librarians, to help keep faculty current on library practice.

ALISE RESEARCH TAXONOMY TOPICS

education; curriculum; students; teaching faculty

AUTHOR KEYWORDS

faculty development; MLIS; LIS education; public librarianship; academic librarianship

INTRODUCTION

In 2019, practicing public and academic librarians gathered in focus groups (FGs) to discuss curriculum changes to the MLIS at the University of South Carolina (Freeburg & Vera, 2020). This was part of a larger effort to solicit the input of stakeholders regarding proposed revisions to the curriculum. Significant portions of these FGs included conversations about the value of the MLIS. Participants completed the MLIS at different institutions, but they agreed that the MLIS is mostly irrelevant to the practice of librarianship.

The current paper details the attempts by the author to further analyze FG data from the 2019 study in an attempt to uncover additional questions, potential solutions, and suggestions for further study. FG conversations revealed a concern that faculty are not staying up to date with developments in library practice, and that faculty are unaware of the changing realities of the library as a workplace. This led the author to consider questions about what and how much LIS

faculty should know about the workplaces into which they are sending graduates. This was particularly relevant for the author, as they teach MLIS students but do not themselves have an MLIS or experience working in a library. Rather than engage in a discussion of the role of graduate education or the validity of student expectations, the author took these criticisms as valid and, in the current paper, proposes a solution in the form of faculty development (FD). Further research is suggested into models of FD led by practicing librarians that update faculty on changes in the profession, e.g. library practice, technology, and organizational culture.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Student Criticism

A well-documented divide exists in librarianship between what is taught in library school and what professionals do in practice. Students often feel ill-prepared for library practice and ill-equipped to meet employer expectations (Caspe & Lopez, 2018; Thomas & Urban, 2018). Specific student criticism of the MLIS includes a perceived overemphasis on theory (Newhouse & Spisak, 2004), outdated technology instruction (Goodsett & Koziura, 2016), and a failure of the degree to recognize the need for courses on pedagogy (Saunders, 2015). A criticism of higher education more broadly is that while students often feel prepared for the workplace, employers disagree (Jaschik, 2015).

While the disconnect is clear, however, there has been little research into ways to overcome the disconnect. Instead, this is too often disregarded as some unchangeable precept of graduate education, i.e., "students hate theory" or "instructors are out-of-touch." The current study seeks to uncover the presence and extent of this divide in a sample of practicing academic and public librarians, using this analysis to propose a way forward.

Student criticism of the MLIS highlights several questions for the discipline to consider, including how to effectively teach theory and how to get students involved in libraries during their education. A full review of these questions is beyond the scope of the current paper. Instead, the current paper considers how LIS faculty can stay current with changes in library practice. As faculty stay current, they will be in a better position to improve the alignment of curriculum with current practice, thereby addressing a prominent student criticism.

Up to Date Faculty

Not every LIS faculty member has experience working in a library, and though faculty stay current in many areas, they face several obstacles in their attempts to stay current with the day-to-day work of a librarian. For instance, research agendas keep faculty connected to recent literature and new data. Unless a faculty member's research area relates directly to the library as a workplace, however, it does not serve as a good source of information on changing library practice. Conferences are another way for faculty to stay current with the work of their peers.

Unless faculty attend professional conferences, however, these conferences keep faculty current in research trends rather than practice trends.

FD is yet another way for faculty to stay current. It is becoming more critical in higher education as a way to increase faculty awareness of new educational technologies that support their teaching, expose faculty to different disciplines in an increased call for interdisciplinary research, and increase appreciation for the expectations and unique skills of younger faculty (Austin & Sorcinelli, 2013). Yet, FD within LIS is not typically associated with increasing faculty awareness of the jobs their graduates will occupy. Instead, FD most often includes new faculty orientation, informal mentoring, and instructional development (Hahn & Lester, 2012)— none of which is sufficient for keeping current with changes in the profession. The one-shot nature of faculty orientation means that they are typically overwhelming and less than helpful. There is reason to doubt the effectiveness of informal mentoring given that less than 8% of the respondents reported a process for mentor training, an assessment of mentors, or a reward for mentors' time (Hahn & Lester, 2012). And instructional development is focused on how faculty can better leverage pedagogical tools to make an impact in the classroom.

Perhaps most importantly, these existing ways for faculty to stay up to date involve connecting with other faculty. For FD to meet the criticism of out-of-touch faculty, it must include a connection to libraries and practicing librarians. Faculty more generally have been called to work more closely with employers to learn about the realities of the workplace (Fadulu, 2018). Lenox and Ezell (1988) offered one model for this type of FD in LIS, called Internship for an Instructor. Noting that LIS faculty rarely have the time for direct experience in a library, their approach put faculty to work in libraries. These faculty members were "exposed not only to the procedures inherent in the world of library work but also to day-to-day emerging problems" (Lenox & Ezell, 1988). The current paper suggests that a similar approach can be used to help faculty stay up to date with the profession.

METHODOLOGY

In 2019, faculty and staff at the University of South Carolina, SLIS, embarked on a multi-pronged effort to revise its curriculum in conversations with its stakeholders. The goal of this effort was to inform these stakeholders of a proposal for a revised curriculum, seeking to elicit their thoughts and opinions to further revise this proposal. The study used an interpretivist approach to identify what librarians want from new hires, how they view the profession, and the concerns they have regarding curriculum. It included several FGs, surveys, and social media discussions with students, alumni, and employers in areas where SLIS has a significant presence.

The current study reports on findings from a secondary analysis of FG transcripts. FGs match the interpretivist aims of the study as it allowed the researchers to collect data from group conversation, rather than the isolated opinions of individual actors (Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2011). In the 2019 study, six FGs were conducted face-to-face with practicing academic and

public librarians across five states. Each participant had obtained their MLIS from different LIS institutions and were currently working in a library. There was an average of 8-10 participants at each meeting. Each FG was 90 minutes, and participants received a small gift certificate for their time. Following a semi-structured FG guide, the moderator guided participants in discussions of why the profession exists and what librarians need to be able to do. The moderator also explained the proposed revised curriculum to participants and asked for participant thoughts and opinions.

In the current study, the author engaged in a secondary analysis of this FG data, coding for potential ways to address this criticism. Transcripts were coded in Nvivo, and two primary coding categories emerged (Table 1). The first category was *out-of-touch faculty*. This included discussions of curriculum that did not match the lived experience of the profession, the extent to which participants felt faculty stayed current with changes in the profession, and the extent to which they felt the degree could be practically applied. The second category included participant suggestions about how to overcome this problem, including connections and relationship development among librarians and LIS faculty. This led to the proposal of FD as a potential solution. The third category included specific areas where participants thought faculty to be out of touch, which suggests initial topics for FD.

Category	Subcategory
Out-of-Touch Faculty	Up to date faculty, outdated curriculum, doesn't match lived experience of the profession, lack of practical application
Faculty Development as Solution	Faculty connected with librarians, relationships, collaborations
Topics for Faculty Development	Socio-cultural realities of the workplace, Socio-political realities of the workplace, Routine realities of the workplace, New processes for library services, socio-economic realities surrounding libraries

Table 1. Overview of coding categories

FINDINGS

The analysis from 2019 revealed an agreement among participants that the MLIS is largely irrelevant to library practice. Most participants noted at least some level of dissatisfaction with the relevancy of the MLIS to the profession. Many agreed that "[The MLIS] is the ticket that you get punched in order to get a job." They lamented that the degree did not expose them to "the realities of working in an organization and what that entails." Foundations courses, in

particular, were described as a "huge waste of money and time." One public librarian noted, "There was so much of what I did in library school that is completely irrelevant to what I do now."

Out of Touch Faculty

A consistent theme that emerged in this secondary analysis was the need for faculty to stay current with the realities of the profession. One public librarian cited this as the reason for their positive experience: "I actually had an instructor who was really good . . . And part of what she talked about was that reference was changing and I think she was up on that." Noting a negative experience, another public librarian suggested that the reason coursework seems overly academic and less practical is that "that's all [faculty] knows." Participants agreed that faculty are largely unaware of the realities of working in a library: "The very notion that we are talking about the real world assumes that folks in education aren't existing in real world experiences."

Faculty Development

To counter this lack of real world knowledge, several participants suggested that faculty stay connected to libraries: " I think constantly being in touch in these different areas so that the faculty and staff understand them and then can be reflective in terms of what they offer and expose the students to is very important." Academic librarians suggested developing relationships with library school faculty through "meet-and-greets" and research collaborations. Public librarians suggested that faculty work closely with practicing librarians in the classroom: "The instructor could have brought in individuals to critique our materials because they are actually in the field." FD provides an opportunity to connect with the profession and develop relationships as faculty learn about changes in library practice. Thus, FD emerged as a potential way to address student criticism of out-of-touch faculty.

Analysis also revealed three specific topics that FD could address. These are the topics most often noted by participants as being outdated and where faculty had the most to learn from practicing librarians. First, participants felt that faculty should know the socio-cultural realities of the library workplace. This included a lack of diversity in the profession: "If [a prospective student] were a person of color or a queer person, I would ask them to really consider the emotional labor that they want to go through in a field that doesn't represent or respect them." This also included navigating "difficult exchanges" and "dealing with people." As one public librarian noted, "We're no longer getting the easy questions . . . we're getting people who have never touched a computer." Academic librarians pointed to the realities of working with the faculty community: "It can hurt you on the level of collaborating or connecting with faculty if you don't feel as professional as them, or don't feel like you understand what they do."

Second, participants wanted faculty to understand the new and revised processes in place for library services: "There is no reference happening in our library. I mean not in the way that I was taught." Participants wanted the curriculum to reflect the new skills that these new processes

require. This included technological skills: "I want [students] to manage our webpages, our intranet and internet, and it's just not coming through in the [job] applications." This also included pedagogical skills as "librarians end up being accidental teachers." Participants agreed that "we're not adequately preparing our librarians how to teach, or [use] those instructional design strategies."

Third, participants felt that the MLIS should expose students to the socio-economic and socio-political realities that surround the library. Participants pointed to the challenge of homelessness that "is in society and it's right in our spaces." One public librarian noted the increased need for employment centers in libraries: "The economy is getting better, but people still have to apply for those jobs." Changing demographics require libraries to ensure that "the materials that you have [are] reflective of your community." To adequately respond to these changes, students needed to understand how to advocate within shifting socio-political realities: "I have a friend who is a public librarian right now, who the county keeps cutting her budget every single meeting." One public librarian recalled their experience immediately after graduating with an MLIS, during the recession, being asked questions about the budget and grant-writing: "They hadn't told me how to do that. I never had any course work on that."

DISCUSSION

The 2019 study (Freeburg & Vera, 2020) found that practicing librarians do not have a very favorable opinion of the MLIS, viewing it as mostly irrelevant to the practice of librarianship. The current study found that one significant reason for this view is a perception that LIS faculty do not keep up with changes in the profession. This suggests that LIS institutions need to find ways to keep faculty apprised of the changing realities in the work of a librarian. Because participants discussed the need for faculty to connect and build relationships, the current study suggests that librarians and LIS faculty collaborate on FD. The current study makes no suggestions about the exact process for FD, but the author suggests a series of workshops led by practicing librarians with topics chosen by these librarians. The specific areas of concern for participants, in terms of faculty staying current, reveal initial topics that such FD could address. Faculty could learn directly from practicing librarians about the socio-cultural, socio-political, and socio-economic realities of the library as a workplace.

The use of FD to keep faculty up to date is supported by the success of FD in other areas, e.g. keeping up with changes in pedagogy. With a mere change of focus, FD can also begin to address the frustrations voiced by participants over the irrelevancy of the MLIS to the practice of librarianship. So long as librarians direct any such FD, in consultation with LIS faculty, it can initiate positive and significant changes in MLIS curriculum.

Future study

As a function of qualitative research, the nonprobability sampling in this study limits the study's generalizability. Although not a limitation per se, it does suggest the need for additional research to identify how widespread this view of the MLIS is. This study did not ask participants when they received their MLIS, so it is possible that these findings are reflective only of past iterations of the MLIS that are now fixed. It seems unlikely, however, that the degree has self-corrected in a way that would resolve these criticisms entirely.

Furthermore, the study did not directly ask about ways for faculty to stay current. Thus, there are likely several ways to do this outside of FD. However, FD offers a recognizable format for keeping faculty current with a proven track record of success. It also helps overcome many of the barriers keeping faculty away from library practice, e.g. research agendas and academic conferences. Yet, barriers still exist for FD. For instance, research would need to consider ways to make FD within LIS a formal and recognized part of the tenure process. The goal of this study is not to add something else to the plates of faculty, but to streamline a process that improves curriculum.

CONCLUSION

In the current study, graduates of MLIS programs who now work in libraries expressed frustrations over the perceived irrelevancy of this training to their current practice. Participants wanted the curriculum to reflect current and specific challenges, which assumes that faculty are up to date with changes in these areas. Participants outlined several areas where faculty needed to stay current. Rather than engage in a discussion of the role of graduate education or the validity of student expectations, the researcher took these criticisms as valid and offered a solution in the form of FD. In this FD, faculty would learn about the realities of the library workplace from librarians. The library workplace is rapidly changing. To continue to offer a curriculum that prepares students for the library profession, all faculty must stay current—not only with their research and teaching—but with the realities of the workplace.

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