How MLIS Programs Prepare Students to Serve Diverse Populations

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ABSTRACT

According to the American Library Association (ALA), organizational sustainability requires social equity. Preparation to serve diverse and marginalized populations is a key ingredient to creating the type of resilient leaders needed to promote and sustain systematic and lasting changes in LIS. This study analyzes courses that prepare students in ALA-accredited Master of Library and Information Studies (MLIS) programs to serve diverse populations. All programs' websites were examined to identify relevant courses and 28 syllabi were analyzed for the study. The authors employed descriptive statistics and content analysis to describe course offerings and identify themes emerging from the syllabi. Overall, the study found that course rotations vary considerably across programs and more than half of the codes emerging from the content analysis focus on access, equity, and diversity and professionalism in LIS. The findings from this study add to previous research on MLIS curricula on diversity.

ALISE RESEARCH TAXONOMY TOPICS

specific populations; curriculum; education programs/schools.

AUTHOR KEYWORDS

diverse populations, syllabi, LIS education, descriptive statistics, content analysis.

INTRODUCTION

In 2018 American Library Association (ALA) Annual Conference, the ALA Executive Board accepted the final report of the Special Task Force on Sustainability. In the report, the task force adopted the "triple bottom line" framework of sustainability which specifies "To be truly sustainable, an organization or community must embody practices that are environmentally sound AND economically feasible AND socially equitable" (ALA Special Task Force on Sustainability, 2018, p. 4). ALA has always believed that libraries and librarians must recognize and help solve social problems and inequities. To accomplish this, MLIS students, the future librarians, should be well prepared to serve diverse populations that include users with various ethnic, cultural, differently abled, and gender and sexual identities, especially those are traditionally non library users, or underrepresented and marginalized

population groups. They hold the key to creating the type of resilient leaders needed to promote and sustain systematic and lasting changes in LIS.

The push to create a pipeline of culturally competent librarians is not a new one (Cooke, 2017; Overall, 2009). Efforts have been devised on many fronts but ultimately are rooted in the need to diversify the field, though such efforts have resulted in marginal success (Overall & Littletree, 2010). In the 2018-2019 academic year, white students accounted for 60% of the total ALA accredited master's degrees awarded (ALISE, 2020). Josey's speculation from 1993 may still be operative:

> One possible hypothesis is that there are some people in our library organizations and library schools who are members of the majority white population and who believe that racism or discrimination has been eradicated in the workplace; therefore, further effort at achieving diversity is unnecessary. (Josey, 1993, p. 303)

To combat this mindset much has been written about the role a diverse faculty plays in the recruitment of minority students to library and information science (LIS) programs (Abdullahi, 2007, 2008; Adkins & Espinal, 2004; Balderrama, 2000; Bonnici & Burnett, 2005; Jaeger et al., 2010; Josey, 1993, 1999; Kim & Sin, 2006, 2008; Neely, 2005; Randall, 1988; Subramaniam & Jaeger, 2010; Wheeler, 2005; Winston, 1998; Winston & Walstad, 2006). But how does this translate to where we are now? And, what happens when we manage to recruit students from diverse backgrounds and mindsets? Some point to programs, such as Spectrum Scholars and Knowledge River, which specifically target the recruitment and retention of BIPOC (Black, indigenous, people of color) students as shining examples of recruitment and retention (Overall & Littletree, 2010).

What do we have to offer the rest of the students who do not have the benefit of the lived cultural experience students from diverse backgrounds bring within them in library school to help navigate the ever-increasing multicultural populations they are tasked to serve? Diversity in the LIS curricula have been discussed for many years, from whether the content should be contained in standalone courses, or be infused across the curriculum, or a mixture of both to how the courses should be named (Alajami & Alshammari, 2020; Al-Qallaf & Mika, 2013; Cooke 2017, 2018; East & Lam, 1995; Irvin, 2016; Pawley, 2006; Subramaniam & Jaeger, 2010). But the bottom line is that LIS programs must support students in obtaining the knowledge and skills they will need to develop inclusive library collections, services, and programs that reflect diverse patrons' lives and needs and help them understand the experiences of people whose lived experience differs from their own (Cooke, 2018).

Alajmi and Alshammari (2020) note the increase in the number of ALA-accredited schools offering courses on serving diverse populations. But will a sprinkling of elective courses that focus on serving marginalized and overlooked groups lead to the type of resilient and robust librarians, and by extension resilient and robust library organizations, that acknowledge patrons as whole beings with complex interests and needs of their own? The study reported in this paper aims to add to the conversation by exploring the offering status, frequency, and content coverage of such courses with an eye to what this will mean for LIS educators and for the future landscape of libraries with addition of more culturally competent information professionals amongst their ranks.

METHOD

This exploratory research was designed to answer three research questions:

RQ 1. To what extent do MLIS programs offer courses on services to diverse populations?
RQ 2. What are the characteristics of MLIS courses on services to diverse populations?
RQ 3. What topic areas do MLIS courses on services to diverse populations cover?

To answer the research questions, the websites of the 64 ALA-accredited MLIS programs in North America were examined in early 2019 to identify courses that prepare students to serve diverse populations. Forty-five courses (from 37 programs) were identified mainly from examining the course titles and descriptions that cover at least one of the following topics:

- Information services and/or resources to diverse populations
- Multicultural resources and services
- Library services to marginalized, and traditionally underserved population
- Library services to users with disabilities

Because this study is focused specifically on courses on services to diverse populations, several types of topic-adjacent courses were out of scope for this study and were excluded: those that specifically focus on introducing the multicultural materials, services, and programming for children and young adults to promote their understanding and respect for diversity and inclusion; courses on special needs students in K-12 Libraries; courses that generally focus on diversity in the profession; and courses that focus specifically on social justice but not services to diverse populations.

The syllabi for the 45 identified courses were collected during the period from August 2019 to April 2020. A number of the syllabi were available through the program websites. For those that weren't, emails were sent to the instructors; when the instructor was not identifiable the program head was contacted. Thirty-three syllabi were obtained. After a careful examination of the 33 syllabi, 5 courses/syllabi were excluded from the study for not focusing on services to diverse populations directly. This is not surprising because the original selections were made based on reading only the course titles and descriptions. At the end, 28 syllabi from 23 MLIS programs were determined to be germane to the study objectives. Table 1 lays out the types of courses examined based on the keywords in the course title, the distribution of the course syllabi by those key concepts, the number of collected syllabi, and the number of syllabi for further analysis.

Table 1
Course Categories by Key Concepts in Titles

Categories	Counts	Collected	Included
Services for diverse populations	17	14	13
Multicultural resources and services	14	8	8
Services for people with disabilities and critical disability theories	4	3	3
Services for marginalized, underserved, impoverished communities	3	3	3
Special topics (Cultural competencies for information professionals)	2	1	1
Service for immigrant and migrant	2	1	0
Social justice in information services	2	2	0
Multiculturalism, information, and social integration	1	1	0
Total	45	33	28

Two methods were employed to analyze the syllabi: descriptive statistics and content analysis. Descriptive statistics were utilized to build an overall picture of the situation, including the following factors: if the course is required or an elective, whether the course has prerequisite, whether the program resides in an iSchool, course delivery mode (online, face-to-face, or hybrid), and how often the course is offered. The content analysis was utilized to understand the focus of the courses. To that end, course descriptions, student learning outcomes, and course topics were examined. The authors employed an inductive thematic analysis method to develop a codebook and coding procedures (Charmaz, 2014; Strauss and Corbin, 1998). The codebook and coding procedures were developed over three rounds of coding (Dickey et al., 2007; Kazmer et al., 2016). A random sample of syllabi was developed for the first round of coding with two coders assigned to each syllabus; the coders used open coding rather than starting with pre-defined categories. Codes that emerged from this round were compiled into an initial codebook and additional syllabi were randomly selected for the second and third rounds of coding (with two authors coding each syllabus). After each coding round the authors met and employed an inductive process to resolve disagreements about the use and definitions of the codes. A fourth round of coding was then employed to calculate intercoder agreement. The goal of an interrater agreement between each pair of the coders of 80% or higher was reached with both Cohen's Kappa and Krippendorff's Coefficient, and all syllabi were then coded and analyzed using an inductive process to identify categories that emerged from the data.

FINDINGS

Program and course description

Among the 23 programs, 15 are housed in North American schools that are members of the iSchools Organization (https://ischools.org) and 16 programs are offered completely online. Listed below are some of the features identified from the 28 courses examined:

- The courses are predominately electives, with only one listed as core eligible. Three quarters of the courses (21) are offered online, six are offered face-to-face, and one course is offered face-to-face in fall semesters and online in spring semesters.
- Half of the courses (50%, 14 courses) have prerequisites.
- One quarter of the courses were special topics courses that change the offering of topics based on resources and demand.
- Course rotations vary considerably. Thirteen courses (46.43%) are offered at least once per year: One course is offered in every semester (spring, summer, and fall), two are offered twice a year, and 10 courses (35.71%) are offered once a year. Four courses (14.28%) are offered every other year. On the other hand, eight courses (28.57%) are offered irregularly, and four of these have not been offered for at least two years although the courses are still listed on the departmental website. Information was not available to determine the frequency of three courses.

Content analysis

Over the 28 syllabi analyzed, 504 instances of 45 codes emerged during the coding process. Of the 45 codes, more than 15 emerged from 11 syllabi, 10 to 15 emerged from 13 syllabi, 5 to 9 emerged from 15 syllabi, and fewer than 5 emerged from 6 syllabi (Figure 1). Slightly more than half (53.33%) of the 45 codes were found in 10 or more syllabi.

Figure 1

Distribution of Codes Across Syllabi
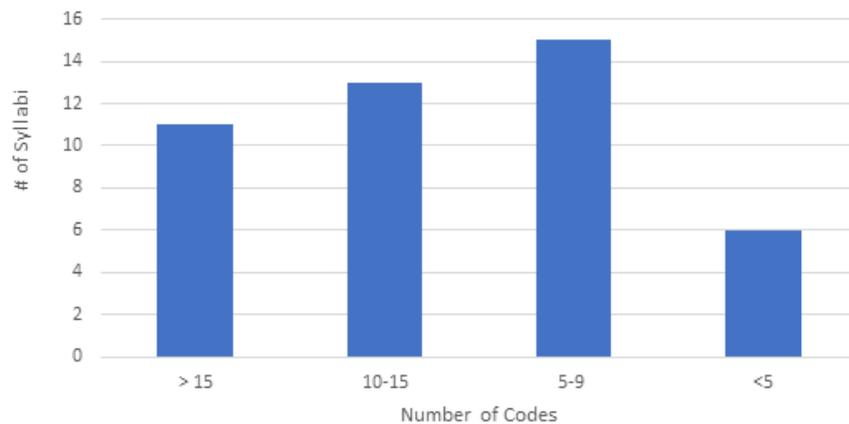
Three themes emerged from the content analysis: access, equity, and diversity and professionalism in LIS; information organizations and library services and programs; and diverse users, information needs, and outreach. The access, equity, and diversity and professionalism in LIS theme represents more than half of the codes (51.11%), the information organizations and library services and programs theme represents slightly more than a quarter of the codes (26.27%), and the balance of the codes fell into the diverse users, information needs, and outreach theme (Table 2).

Table 2

Distribution of Codes by Category

Category	# of Codes	% Codes (n=45)
Access, equity, and diversity and professionalism in LIS	23	51.11%
Information organizations and library services and programs	12	26.27%
Diverse users, information needs, and outreach	10	22.22%

The themes can be broadly described in this way:

- Access, equity, and diversity and professionalism in LIS: Focuses on cultural competence; access and inclusion; policy, power, and structural issues; and how diversity affects LIS organizations.
- Information organizations and library services and programs: Focuses on how information organizations support diverse users, including developing and evaluating library services and programs and collection development activities.
- Diverse users, information needs, and outreach: Focuses on a wide range of diverse populations and their information needs, and on outreach to communities and community organizations.

This analysis suggests that, while it is important to understand the demographics covered by such courses (Alajmi & Alshammari, 2020), course content speaks to broader areas on which scholars of diversity in LIS focus.

DISCUSSION

The study found that the glass is half full (or half empty depending on one's philosophical orientation). More than half of the ALA-accredited MLIS programs in North America (37) offer one or more elective courses that prepare MLIS students to serve diverse populations. Most of the courses cover collection development, programming, and services for a wide variety of population groups, although only a small number focus on a specific or distinct population groups such as people with disabilities, immigrants, or indigenous people. While most of this is good news, a large percentage of courses analyzed for this study are offered irregularly, with some last offered five years ago (according to the program websites). There is a clear need for future research in this area, including further exploration of the competencies librarians in all types of libraries and information centers need to successfully support the needs of diverse patrons.

This study has a number of limitations. The course title and description from the websites of ALA accredited MLIS programs or departments were used to determine the courses that should be included for analysis. It's possible that some courses that cover serving diverse populations were not selected either because they were not listed on the websites or because the coverage was not reflected directly in the title and the course description (such as special topics or seminar courses). The content analysis relied on the coders' interpretation of syllabus content and the intent of syllabus items (such as course topics) was not always clear. A future survey of the MLIS programs on their course offering on this subject will provide more comprehensive descriptions of the courses preparing MLIS graduates to serve diverse populations and more clarity on course content.

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