Student Perspectives of LIS Education in an Aging Society: Initial Findings

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ABSTRACT

The March 2020 declaration of Covid-19 as a global public health pandemic and the subsequent events laid bare the vulnerabilities that older adults (i.e., people 65 years and older) often experience. This conference paper explores perspectives of students and recent graduates of Master of Library and Information Science (MSLIS) and equivalent programs on the role of LIS in an aging society. Sixty-five participants were recruited through an online QuestionPro survey that was emailed to and distributed by representatives of 61 American Library Association student chapters. Responses indicated that older adults were considerably underrepresented in age specific courses within MSLIS curricula and that while participants reported believing that inclusion of youth (i.e., children and teenagers) was more important, participant interest in inclusion of older adults may increase with more exposure to the information needs of this population. The findings and limitations of this study emphasize the need for more related research.

ALISE RESEARCH TAXONOMY TOPICS

Curriculum; education programs/schools; political economy of the information society; social justice; students.

AUTHOR KEYWORDS

Aging society; Covid-19; library and information science education; older adults; youth

INTRODUCTION

On March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization announced that the coronavirus disease 2019 (Covid-19) had become a global public health pandemic (Cucinotta and Vanelli, 2020). Several trends emerged from the public response to the pandemic such as a surge of online education and the shift toward increased virtual interactions in general (Ali, 2020; Roose, 2020). An evaluation of the role of information in the public health crisis, however, found that many populations—including older adults—were left behind without the necessary skills or tools to join in as society shifted to a Zoom economy (Xie et al., 2020). Other research has found that older people—and particularly those of intersectional identities such as older people of color—face the brunt of the physical and emotional toll of Covid-19 through death, severe illness, and
social isolation (Chatters, Taylor, and Taylor, 2020; Heid et al., 2021; Lloyd-Sherlock et al., 2020; Mueller, McNamara, and Sinclair, 2020).

In response to the economic and social challenges raised or enhanced by Covid-19, educators, practitioners, and researchers have begun asking what the discipline of library and information science (LIS) will look like and how it will function post-pandemic (ALIA, 2020; Gibson et al., 2020; Poon, 2020). While there are and inevitably will be multiple perspectives on how LIS should move forward, the tragedies of the pandemic require the centering of the reality that “the information society is also an aging society” where the population growth of older people (i.e., people 65 years and older) is outpacing that of youth (i.e., children and teenagers) in many of the earth’s nations (He and Kinsella, 2020; Lenstra, 2016, p. 1). The aging information society requires not just a doubling down on digital divide scholarship but a systemic evaluation and understanding of the role that information and technology do and can play for older people in order to ensure their integration into our technologically advancing world (Muramatsu and Akiyama, 2011; Winberry and Mehra, In Press; Xie, 2003). In order to understand how LIS curriculum can change and prepare both its students and communities for meeting the information and technology needs of older adults, this conference paper describes initial findings from an ongoing study into student perceptions of LIS education in an aging society and asks the following research questions:

1) How inclusive of older adults are the curriculums of MSLIS granting (and equivalent) programs in comparison to the inclusion of youth?

2) How important do MSLIS students and recent graduates feel inclusion of older adults in their program’s curriculum is in comparison to the inclusion of youth?

METHODS

The decision was made to survey current students and recent graduates (i.e., those who graduated within the previous calendar year) of Master of Library and Information Science (MSLIS) or equivalent programs. In February 2021, the researcher contacted the student leaders and faculty advisors of the 61 American Library Association (ALA) student chapters (whose information was found via: http://www.ala.org/aboutala/affiliates/chapters/student/studentchapters1) in order to seek their help in distributing the survey given their role as gatekeepers to students (Namageyo-Funa et al., 2014). These gatekeepers distributed the QuestionPro survey to students via email, list servs, and personal communications. Prior to completing the survey, participants were asked to watch a brief recording which described the author’s experience applying what he had learned as an LIS student to an information problem of older adults in his community (URL: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=a4Su3AkCPHQ&feature=youtu.be)(Winberry, 2020). The survey included two sections. The first section asked questions about the students’ MSLIS or equivalent program as well as their own perceptions about their program’s curriculum as it related to age specific courses (i.e., courses whose content focused on a particular age demographic such as youth or older adults); the second section asked participants to consider the opportunities for expanding the curriculum and other offerings of their programs around the information needs of older adults. This conference paper focuses on the first section of the survey results.
One month and two weeks after the initial and second respective requests to the gatekeepers, the researcher closed the survey portal. Ultimately 66 participants began the first part of the survey and 65 completed it for a completion rate of 98%. Once the survey portal was closed, the researcher began qualitatively evaluating and coding the 65 responses from the first section of the survey (Auerbach and Silverstein, 2003). The qualitative evaluation process for this study involved reviewing the topic based responses, coding the responses, and grouping the responses where possible into themes (Braun et al., 2020). Previous studies in numerous disciplines have utilized content analysis of qualitative survey data (Azorina et al., 2019; Corner et al., 2013; Potnis et al., 2020).

FINDINGS

Analysis of the first section of survey results identified 3 themes which help answer the research questions.

RQ1

The first theme is the disparities among age specific courses. Ninety-one percent (N=59) of participants reported that their programs did not have any classes focused on older adults. In sharp contrast, only 5 percent (N=3) of participants shared that their program did not have any classes focused on youth. This represented an 86 percent disparity in favor of youth related classes in the experiences of the participants. The titles of all the classes named by the participants were screened for duplicates, grouped and named by the author, and the groups were given definitions adapted from existing sources. Sample course names include Library Services for Older Adults, Gender Construction in Children's/Adolescent Literature and Media, and Teen Services. The full list of grouped courses is showcased in table 1. The disparities among age specific courses helps answer the first research question as they indicate that older adults are considerably underrepresented in the participants’ MSLIS curricula in comparison to youth.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Class Type</th>
<th>Definition</th>
<th>Youth Oriented Class Name</th>
<th>Older Adult Oriented Class Name</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Collections</td>
<td>Refers to both the acquisition and management of library materials as well as the materials themselves (Johnson, 2018).</td>
<td>• Collection Development for Children</td>
<td>• N/A</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>• Early Childhood Literature</td>
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<td>• Literature for Children</td>
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<td>• Materials for Adolescents</td>
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<td>• Materials for Children</td>
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<td>• Multicultural youth literature</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Category</td>
<td>Examples</td>
<td>N/A</td>
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<tr>
<td>School Librarian Education</td>
<td>The process of imparting the skills, experiences, and competencies necessary for the recipient to become an effective school librarian (AASL, 2019).</td>
<td>K-12 School Librarianship, Pedagogy for School Librarians, School Library Management, School Media Center Field Experience</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Programming</td>
<td>The activities of planning, providing, and assessing library programs (ALA Public Programs Office, n.d.).</td>
<td>Engaging School Age Children, Programming for Children and Young Teens, Storytelling</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
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<td>Reference &amp; User Services</td>
<td>Focused on continually improving the direct assistance that information professionals provide to patrons (RUSA, n.d.)</td>
<td>Library Services for Young People, References Sources and Services for Youth, Services for Early Learners, Teen Services</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
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<td>Other</td>
<td>Classes which did not fit into one of the other categories and due to a lack of comparable courses did not warrant their own category.</td>
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</tr>
</tbody>
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RQ2

The second theme is participant perceptions of the importance of age specific courses. When asked how important they thought it was for their program to offer classes focused on older adults, a combined 62 percent (N=40) felt that it was either very (39 percent, N=25) or extremely (23 percent, N=15) important. However, when asked the same question about classes centered on youth, a combined 83 percent (N=54) felt that it was either very (49 percent, N=32) or extremely (34 percent, N=22) important. This amounted to the inclusion of youth focused courses being viewed as 21 percent more important than the inclusion of older adult focused courses among the participants. This would seem to suggest that the answer to the second research question is that at least among the MSLIS students and recent graduates surveyed, the inclusion of older adults in the curriculum is viewed as less important than the inclusion of youth.

The third theme, however, complicates the answer to this research question. The theme is increased exposure appears to create greater interest. As the answer to RQ1 suggests, older adults are considerably underrepresented in the curricula of MSLIS programs as presented by participants. It is assumed that older adults are underrepresented in the discussions of research, practicum, and career opportunities as well. But the underrepresentation is not necessarily a byproduct of student disinterest: 62 participants reported watching the recording that accompanied the survey. When asked how the recording influenced how they felt about the importance of including older adults in their MSLIS curriculum, a combined 80 percent (N=52) said it increased their support either somewhat (58 percent, N=38) or greatly (22 percent, N=14). Ultimately, this finding suggests that with more exposure to the information needs of older people, MSLIS students may view the inclusion of older adults as—or near equally as—important as the inclusion of youth in LIS curricula.

DISCUSSION

The theme of this year’s conference is “crafting a resilient future: leadership, education, and inspiration” (ALISE, 2021). As members of the LIS profession examine and learn from the lessons of 2020, they must be prepared to ask how they can meet the challenges of a rapidly evolving information society in order to ensure their own continued credibility, relevance, and sustainability. The offerings of the discipline’s educational programs must be examined with a critical lens in order to ensure that its curricula, practica, and culture are cultivating information professionals with the resiliency, leadership skills, and penchant for justice necessary to meet the information challenges of the twenty-first century (Cooke, Sweeney, and Noble, 2016; Gibson, Hughes-Hassell, and Threats, 2018). Part of this process includes pondering over the future of LIS education as well as the initiatives, research, and innovations necessary to achieve and maintain its credibility, relevance, and sustainability. The opportunities and challenges of an aging society offer a conduit for crafting a resilient future for LIS in which researchers, practitioners, and students can create value for older adults and their support networks by considering the related information, technology, and justice needs (Potnis and Mallary, 2021).

This conference paper demonstrates that older adults are often considerably underrepresented in the curricula of MSLIS and equivalent programs as reported by survey
participants and has important implications for the future of related research, practice, and education. The findings from the second section of the participant survey will be analyzed and published in the future and will provide additional insights into how students believe MSLIS programs and their equivalents can prepare related professionals to work in an aging society. But if LIS is going to evolve in order to meet the challenges and opportunities of an aging society, there is no time to delay. By 2030, all Baby Boomers—currently the second largest population cohort after Millennials—will be over the age of 65 (US Census Bureau, 2018). Students will need rapid introduction to the information and technological needs of older adults in order to understand how they can apply the training, skills, and values developed while obtaining their education to meet the needs of this growing and diverse population (Winberry, 2018).

Part of this consideration must involve asking difficult questions about the near absence and marginalization of older adults in LIS curricula—which is often even worse than initial appearances suggest. For instance, a closer review of table 1 indicates that two of the three classes cited by participants as focusing on older adults were instead centered on adults in general which in turn further dilutes the emphasis on this fast growing population in age specific coursework. It is likely that some of the reasons older people are mostly absent from the participants’ curricula is due to the overarching ageism in our society which cannot be eradicated by the information professions alone (Chang et al., 2020). Nevertheless, LIS should actively contribute to such an effort. Beyond ageism, there are likely structural reasons as to why youth are centered in LIS curricula such as the role that LIS programs serve—as pipelines—for school librarian training and jobs (Michie and Holton, 2005). However, even in these jobs, practitioners are increasingly likely to be interacting with grandparents raising grandchildren, so these students still require increased engagement with older adults and their information needs in the MSLIS curriculum, practica, and culture (Dunn and Wamsley, 2018).

LIMITATIONS AND AREAS OF FUTURE RESEARCH

There are limitations to this conference paper. First, the researcher focused on the existence of age specific courses rather than on the inclusion of older people in the foundational classes of MSLIS and equivalent programs; it is possible that there is better representation of older adults in introductory reference, accessibility, and user experience courses among others. Second, when applicable, the participants were not asked to explain why they perceived the inclusion of age specific courses on youth as more important than courses on older adults. As such, there is less data around why participants perceived the inclusion of youth related courses as more important than the inclusion of older adult related courses. Also, since this was an exploratory, qualitative study and not a quantitative experiment, the specific impact of the recording that almost all of the participants watched prior to completing the survey is difficult to ascertain. These limitations will be addressed in future research. Also, while most of the world is currently experiencing a considerable rise in the number of its older residents, the decision to focus this study on the perceptions of students and recent graduates affiliated with ALA student chapters limits the results of this study to mostly North American perspectives of these issues. However, the QuestionPro software indicated that 4 of the responses were completed outside of North America, suggesting that even though these respondents might have had their perceptions shaped by North American educational institutions, at least some element of international perspectives were included in the results.
CONCLUSION

The information society is an aging society, but MSLIS students might not realize that by examining their curricula. The findings of this conference paper suggest that much work is necessary in order to increase MSLIS student exposure to the information, technological, and justice needs of older people. This can be accomplished in part by increasing the number of classes that engage with the goals and perspectives of this population. If the information profession is going to emerge triumphant from the ashes of the Covid-19 pandemic and move forward towards a resilient future, they will do so by learning from, serving, and partnering with the populations who shouldered much of the burden of this crisis—including older adults.

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