

Librarianship in 9-24 months!? A look at the relationship between degree length, work history and student satisfaction and preparedness

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December 5, 2003

Research Proposal - ILS680-70

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The master's degree for professional librarianship is one that has long been surrounded in debate. One aspect of this debate has been degree length. Programs vary greatly, with the majority being a 36-credit hour/12 month minimum program. However, there are those that take less, and those that take more. This study proposes to look at the relationship between degree length and perceived student satisfaction regarding the education they received. This satisfaction will be defined in part by a student's feeling of job preparedness, as well as their perceived quality of education received. This study will look at several factors that may contribute to student's perceptions of satisfaction and quality, including whether they were employed in a library before and/or while completing their degree – and if employed, for how long.

Introduction

The education of the librarian community has long been debated. Students attending library school are often asked by those outside the profession, “you mean you have to go to school to check out a book?” (Robbins, 1990). Librarianship is about more than checking out a book, and in the growing age of technology it has taken on a very new look and feel. As the field of librarianship grows and changes, there are numerous discussions and debates taking place in regards to how long a Master's of Library Science/Master's of Library and Information Science (MLS/MLIS/etc.) program needs to be. How long does it take to truly prepare a librarian for a job in today's complex information world – or is it more about “on the job training”? Currently the bulk of American Library Association (ALA) accredited library schools offer master degrees in 36 credit hours – or a minimum of 12 months. However, depending on the program, this minimum completion time can be as short as 9 months or as long as 24

months. For a profession that has always struggled with being seen as “professionals” this varying degree length could be seen as a problem (Rapple, 1996).

This study will examine several things. First it will examine the relationship between the length of degree and students’ perceived satisfaction with the education received. Satisfaction will be defined in part by perceived quality of education received. The study will also examine whether participants felt they were prepared for the profession at the end of their schooling. Finally, this study will also take into account whether and for how long the participants worked in a library before or during their library studies and how this may impact their satisfaction.

Literature Review

While no studies were found that looked directly at a correlation between degree length and student satisfaction and job preparedness, much has been written in regards to library school curriculum and the changes it has undergone over the decades (Berry, 1998; Robbins-Carter, 1986). The topic is discussed and debated at length in library literature and on library listservs. These topics range from debating how and what core competencies should be taught (Margolis, 1999; Quattrocchi, 1999) to the discussion of generalization versus specialization (Mulvaney, 1992; Rapple, 1996; Robbins, 1990) within the degree. Others feel the degree simply does not address the needs of the job adequately (Berry, 1999; Fallis, 1999; Gabehart, 1989; Olesh, 1998), with libraries doing much of the “training” of new hires that some feel library schools should be doing (Fallis, 1999). Tangled into many of these debates is the underlying discussion of degree length. If people do not feel the degree is preparing librarians for their career – is this due to inappropriate curriculum, a lack of quality faculty, or is the program length simply too short to teach a librarian of the 21st century everything they need to know? Is a 36 credit hour, one-year minimum program long enough to train the librarians of today, let alone those of tomorrow?

Rapple (1996) speaks most strongly of the need for a two-year program. His argument stems from a previously mentioned and well-debated topic, that of a broad-based curriculum, or a specialized track. He contends that a two-year program would give the perfect balance of both. The first year being

core coursework, the second, something more specialized and/or diversified. There is direct opposition to a belief in specialization by some who feel that you want to train for a career, not for a narrowly defined area (Robbins, 1990). Therefore the function of education should be to teach broad skills and theory.

Those not directly questioning length of library education offer other suggestions to help new librarians. Hepburn (2001) discusses the benefits of having residency programs for new librarians. As many feel a new librarian learns just as much during their first few years of actual work as they did during their formal librarian education, residency programs provide a great way of introducing new librarians to a wide range of experiences on which they can build a career, while at the same time being mindful that they are new. This then begs the question, if their MLS program had been two years, would there be less of a need for these types of programs? This does not invalidate the benefits of the program, but in times of economic budget crunches, are they able to be maintained?

In terms of librarianship being a “profession” – it has been debated whether a one year program is long enough to be seen by the outside world as truly “professional”. Rapple (1996) reports that most other professional degrees take at the minimum two years of full-time study to obtain. Is the library profession undermining its ongoing battle of being seen as “professionals” by doing this? Robbins (1990) is quoted as saying, “Without exception, the idea of a profession is explicitly connected with a program of study of substantial length in a higher education institution.” However, there is no definition of what is considered “substantial” in today’s world. Others argue that one cannot require more schooling if the salaries are going to continue to be low. While this argument has some merit, one only need examine the professions of social work and teaching to find that the library profession is not alone.

It must also be noted that the majority of library school students (those reporting estimate anywhere from 50-80%) currently work in or have worked in libraries (Berry, 1994, 1999, 2003; Paris, 1999; Van House, 1988). Often, library schools are not recruiting them; in fact library schools are known for their passive recruitment efforts. Instead a potential student’s coworkers or boss may encourage them to enroll in the program as the next step of their career. These library workers bring a perspective of

current library practice and experience to the library school program. This can be a double-edged sword. Are library schools adequately challenging these students that come in perhaps “knowing too much”?

Variables

Operationally, length of program will be measured in total credit hours needed to achieve an MLA degree. Perceived satisfaction of education received will initially be ranked on a scale of 1 to 10 – ten being very satisfied with education received, 1 being not satisfied at all. Participants will be able to expand on the ranking during the interview process.

In terms of job preparedness, did students feel prepared for their future careers at the end of their program and did this feeling change or stay the same if and when employment was found. The inclusion of this variable will allow one to see if students in longer programs have a greater feeling of job preparedness – both coming out of school, and once in the position. Longer programs allow students to widen their scope, while at the same time being grounded in fundamentals of librarianship.

Another important variable is whether the subject worked in a library previous to, or during their library school program. In what capacity did they work, and for how long? As stated previously, many students in MLS programs have worked in libraries for many years – they have a great deal “on the job” training under their belts, and feel that the MLS degree is simply a piece of paper they need to advance. Does this then change the perception of the education? Does a student who has worked in an academic library for ten years feel they are learning much, or does it feel like busy work? It may be assumed that somewhere in the course of the program they will learn skills or study topics that they have not been exposed to in their everyday work, but how does this translate in terms of perception of education.

Population to be investigated

The field of librarianship is changing rapidly. To keep the research most relevant – the population studied will be those librarians who have received their library degree in the last five years. Only graduates of library programs accredited by the American Library Association will be examined.

Proposed methodology

This study will be done in two parts. First, a preliminary survey will be sent to MLS graduates from accredited institutions. Via the survey, the participant will be asked if they would be willing to take part in a fuller interview, to be conducted either in person or on the phone, regarding their answers and opinions. At this time, a fuller scope of information will be gathered, as well as any clarification from answers previously given. The first survey will serve partly as exploratory research to gather a larger dataset from a wide range of people. The interview will be used to gain a richer dataset from a smaller group of people.

Alumni lists will be gathered from each institution and surveys will be sent to all graduates. In order to encourage participation, marketing of the survey will be done on various professional listservs, at conferences, etc. The questions will gather data regarding participants' educational background and library school educational experience. By looking at educational background, one may be able to see trends in satisfaction of education received. For example, someone who has multiple advanced degrees may be a bigger critic of their MLS program than someone for whom the MLS is their first advanced degree. The interview will give allow for a more detailed look at these experiences and opinions. As these could be complex questions to answer, people may not wish to take the time to write out their answer, but would be willing to speak to someone about it.

A sample of proposed questions

Preliminary survey – exploratory in nature

Background

1. Age:
2. Gender:
3. Where and when did you complete your undergraduate degree?
4. What was your undergraduate major/minor?
5. Excluding your MLS degree, do you hold any other advanced degrees? If so, please list degree(s), institution, and year completed.
6. Did you work in a library prior to or during your education? Yes or No. If yes, for how long and in what capacity.
7. Did you work full-time or part-time while completing your degree?
8. Did you complete your degree on a part-time or full-time basis?

Library School information

1. Where and when did you complete your MLS/MLIS/etc. degree?
2. Did you complete your degree on a part-time or full-time basis?
3. Did you work full time while a student? Part-time?
4. How long did it take you to complete your degree?
5. How many credit hours was your degree?
6. In regards to your MLS degree, on a scale of 1 to 10 (1 being the lowest, and 10 being the highest) how would you rate the quality of education received?

Possible Interview Questions:

1. I see in the survey, you rated the quality of education of your MLS degree as __. Please explain/expand on your rating:
2. How did the quality of education compare to that of your undergraduate degree? To that of your other graduate degrees?
3. Do you currently hold a job that utilizes your library education? If so, what is your title?

4. Did your library education prepare you for the job you are doing now or wish to do? Please explain why or why not.

5. Are there courses you wish would have been offered that were not? Were there courses you were made to take that you found irrelevant to your future career?

6. In your opinion, was your MLS degree program a.) too short, b.) too long, c.) adequate in length? Please explain.

7. If you worked in a library prior or during your degree, do you feel it helped or hindered your education? Please explain.

Limitations of research

As with any research, there are limits. In terms of the first stage, surveys are problematic for several reasons. First, if they are voluntary, which these will be, you are already biasing your results in terms of people who are willing to reply. One may tend to get people who feel most strongly, one way or the other, and wish to be heard. In terms of the interview, there may be other factors influencing their response – ones that cannot be controlled. An example of this might be someone who is currently unhappy in his or her job. Their negative attitude towards their current job may color their responses in the interview in a more negative light than if they were happy with their job. Also, there may be other factors that played into the overall satisfaction with the program – such as juggling work and school, and previously held perceptions about other advanced degrees. It is the hope and belief that the interview process will allow for these various factors to be collected in a more complete way, therefore giving a much richer and clearer dataset. Another limitation is the economy; the economic climate of the profession cannot be predicted or controlled. This may lead some new graduates to accept positions that they do not feel are ideal.

The interviewer must be sure not to bias the participants' answers, and must not push answers in one direction or another. Participants must feel there is no right or wrong answer.

Significance of research

This study is important for several reasons. First, it gives a current critique to library science education – from the student perspective. These critiques and rankings of a school’s quality usually come from deans and faculty (Mulvaney, 1992). It allows us to discover what areas programs are lacking in, thereby helping with curriculum changes. This study will lead to a greater understanding of the MLS degree and add to the body of knowledge related to librarianship. Are the programs on a whole meeting the needs and expectations of the students? It will give employers a better understanding of the needs of their new librarian staff. If they aren’t learning something particular in library school, then they may need more “on the job” training in those areas. It will enable educators to begin looking at what affect having so many library workers as students has on a program. Library schools should be able to offer these students something much more than “a piece of paper” – whether it takes 36 credit hours of schooling, or 72. Programs should find a way to build on a student’s previous experience. This study will also give a better understanding of the profile of a “typical” library school student in this new era of librarianship. This will show possible gaps that may be helped with greater recruitment efforts by library schools in order to keep the profession diversified.

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