The Research Imperative: Medical Library Association policy and the curricula of schools of library and information science

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INTRODUCTION

Ten years after the Medical Library Association (MLA) adopted its first research policy, the 1995 Using Scientific Evidence to Improve Information Practice [1], MLA President Joanne Gard Marshall, FMLA, appointed a task force to research and publish a new official statement [2]. The resulting MLA research policy statement, The Research Imperative, was approved by the MLA Board of Directors in 2007 and "challenges MLA members to build a supportive culture that values and contributes to a research base that is recognized as an essential tool for future practice" [2]. It describes domains of research as well as basic, advanced, and specialized research skills sets.

The Research Imperative encourages health sciences library and information science (LIS) practitioners to take advantage of different educational opportunities to acquire and build on that skills set. Specifically, it recommends, "4. MLA will provide and promote education and training to support health sciences information research. To accomplish this recommendation, MLA will work with academic programs to ensure that opportunities to develop quantitative and qualitative research knowledge and skills appear throughout the curriculum, provide a complete range of basic and advanced courses in quantitative and qualitative research methodology through MLA’s continuing education (CE) program, and encourage graduate LIS schools to require master’s degree students to undertake a research project in information science" [3].

Curricular decisions for programs leading to the LIS master’s degree (MLIS) are shaped by many factors, not the least of which is the very wide variety of careers that holders of such degrees can expect to have. Many will undoubtedly work in school, public, academic, or special libraries. Many others will be information professionals in archives, museums, corporations, and other organizations. In any case, a major driver for MLIS curricula is program accreditation by the American Library Association (ALA). The ALA Standards for Accreditation do not specify exactly what courses should be taught, but the accreditation seeks evidence of various curricular elements. In particular, the standards require that a program’s mission, goals, and objectives include: "the importance of research to the advancement of the field’s knowledge base…the importance of the contributions of library and information studies to other fields of knowledge [and]…the importance of the contributions of other fields of knowledge to library and information studies." Furthermore, they seek evidence that the curriculum of an accredited program "emphasizes the evolving body of knowledge that reflects the findings of basic and applied research from relevant fields" [4].

Do MLIS academic programs "ensure…opportunities to develop quantitative and qualitative research knowledge and skills?" Do they "require master’s degree students to undertake a research project in information science" [3]? Evidence of such opportunities would include (but not be limited to) courses and evidence of whether research projects are required for graduation from such programs.

In a comparison of LIS research course requirements with those of other master’s level programs in related disciplines, Park studied the 2002 graduate catalogs of fifty-two of the then fifty-six ALA-accredited MLIS programs as well as the catalogs of master’s of business administration, master’s of social work, and master’s of education programs at some of those schools. She found that all but three of the MLIS programs offered research methods courses, but only twenty required such a course for graduation [5]. Park reported that "LIS does not use consistent terminology across schools to identify what constitutes a ‘research methods’ course’ and that the courses ‘vary from comprehensive coverage of both quantitative and qualitative methods to superficial inclusion of simple survey methods.’" Park discussed aspects of the MLIS degree that related to research "at the consumer level" and "at the contributor level" [5].

Evidence-based LIS (and other types of evidence-based practice) are examples of the use of the consumer level of research expertise. Practitioners in many fields can confuse the two functions, especially when the word "research" is taken to include searching literature for published scientific studies, as opposed to actually carrying out such studies. The Research Imperative quite rightly calls for health sciences librarians to practice as consumers of and contributors to research in the discipline.

This study seeks evidence of the current availability of required or elective research methods courses and research projects as a graduation requirement in
Table 1
Graduation requirements beyond coursework for 57 American Library Association–accredited master’s in library and information science programs

| Requirement                                      | Number of programs |
|--------------------------------------------------|--------------------|
| Comprehensive examination                        | 6                  |
| Thesis or examination                             | 4                  |
| Both an examination and a thesis                  | 2                  |
| Examination plus a thesis or a special project    | 1                  |
| Portfolio                                         | 4                  |
| Portfolio plus optional thesis                    | 5                  |
| Choice of internship, examination, portfolio,    |                    |
| project, or thesis                                |                    |
| No requirement, but thesis as an option           | 9                  |
| No requirement at all                             | 3                  |
| Required research project                        | 1                  |
| No graduation requirements on the website         | 16                 |

ALA-accredited masters’ programs in library and information science.

METHOD

To determine if ALA-accredited MLIS programs included research methods courses, if such courses were required, and if a research project in information science was required, the researchers gathered and analyzed data from the websites of all fifty-seven ALA-accredited programs in the first four months of 2008. Information available from the websites included course descriptions and graduation requirements. Some LIS school websites included links to course syllabi as well. Because some of the LIS schools also had research doctoral degree programs, it was necessary to exclude any courses limited to or primarily for doctoral students. The data from the websites were collected into a spreadsheet listing all such courses from the schools, whether or not the courses were required and, if available, any skills included in the course syllabi that appeared to correspond to the basic, advanced, or specialized skills listed in MLA’s The Research Imperative. Other educational activities required for graduation were also noted.

RESULTS

The researchers identified at least one research methods course available to master’s students at all of the schools, except one (Pratt School of Information and Library Science). They found syllabi for research methods courses from twenty-four of the schools. About half of these programs (twenty-nine out of fifty-seven) had no indication on the website that a research methods course was required for master’s students. Graduation requirements are reported in Table 1. These results would suggest that there has not been significant change since Park’s study of catalogs in 2002.

DISCUSSION

In an ever-changing discipline, the content and courses of any given program change frequently. The documents available on the schools’ websites may not have always been up to date. Sometimes a particular research course name and number had more than one course description or syllabus.

The nature of course requirements also varied. Many programs had tracks and specializations with varying graduation requirements. Some tracks, for instance, one for school media specialists, included courses required for state certification. Instead of requiring specific courses, some LIS schools had tiered requirements. That is, very few courses were absolutely required, while other courses must be chosen from sets of courses. For instance, a graduation requirement might be to take two courses from a group of three or four and another two courses from another group of three or four courses. Thus, some courses might be “first tier” requirements and others in the “second tier” or some other course requirement configuration (possibly reflecting the profession’s fondness for hierarchical classification).

Some courses appeared to be introductions to what research is and how it is done rather than practice in doing research. In a sense, some could be understood as “research appreciation” courses, which, like music appreciation or art appreciation courses, are not intended to include all the necessary preparation for a high level of creative activity. A few courses dealt strictly with methods of statistical analysis or other specific research techniques. Some sites had many syllabi for the same course, and the course content clearly varied with the instructor and the semester. In some cases, different instructors taught somewhat different courses with the same title and course number during the same semester. The researchers had to abandon an initial attempt to map course elements to the basic, advanced, and specialized skills delineated in The Research Imperative because, as Park found earlier, there were great variations in terminology.

Advisors of students interested in health sciences librarianship should encourage such students to take a research methods course, even if the program does not require it for graduation. Such a course will enable them to understand the literature for clients engaged in various kinds of evidence-based practice and for their own practice of evidence-based librarianship. Most of these courses can equip them with at least the basic skills listed in The Research Imperative, if not also one or more of the advanced specialized skills.

LIS schools that offer a research methods class only as an elective for master’s students may offer such courses less often than required courses, and thus some students may not have a chance to schedule such a class. Even those who take such courses may need education to review and expand their skills throughout their careers. The Research Imperative wisely calls for continuing education activities related to both the skills needed to use published research (as a consumer) and the skills to carry out new research (as a contributor) because few students could acquire all of those skills in the brief time it takes to earn an MLIS.
Other opportunities for acquiring research skills and concepts exist throughout the MLIS curriculum. For example, any ALA-accredited program must have a critical mass of full-time doctoral prepared faculty. Not only do such faculties have strong educational backgrounds in research methods, but they are also required to continue as research contributors throughout their academic careers. Some students have the opportunity to participate in faculty research as graduate assistants. Also many health sciences librarianship courses cover evidence-based practice. It would be interesting to find out what research skills MLA members generally have and how they obtained them.

CONCLUSION

Almost all MLIS students have the opportunity to take a one-semester research methods course. About half of the ALA-accredited programs require such a course, but because of the brevity of such programs and the variety of careers on which such graduates embark, it is not reasonable to expect them all at graduation to be highly skilled in both using published research and conducting original research. The MLA research policy statement, *The Research Imperative*, wisely emphasizes both MLIS education and professional continuing education to strengthen knowledge and skills to be an effective research consumer and contributor. Indeed, the MLA *Code of Ethics for Health Sciences Librarianship* mandates that “The health sciences librarian advocates and advances the knowledge and standards of the profession” as an ethical responsibility [6].

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