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WHO STUDIES THE STUDENTS? THE CHALLENGES OF DOING RESEARCH ON CANADIAN LIS PROGRAMS (Lightning Talk)

Abstract or Résumé:

While little is known about how LIS programs prepare students for careers as data-related academic librarians, trying to research those programs is challenging, from ethics approval to contacting potential participants. In this talk, we share our experiences in conducting such research from an autoethnographic methodological approach and some preliminary findings.

1. Background

In the context of academic librarianship, research data management (RDM) and data librarianship are in-demand fields requiring data analysis skills and competencies. Library and information studies (LIS) programs are expected to prepare their graduates for these careers by offering relevant courses and training. However, little is known about how LIS programs are planning their curricula to address these topics, and there is some debate on whether LIS programs are useful preparation for these kinds of positions or whether other degrees and/or on the job training is necessary and/or better preparation (e.g., Andrikopolou et al., 2022; Fuhr, 2019, 2022; Rod, 2023). In this talk, we share our own experiences and challenges, from an autoethnographic methodological approach, in conducting a study that aims to approach this question from two perspectives:

- that of program representatives from the seven English language LIS master's programs in Canada about their RDM and data-related course offerings,
- and that of students enrolled in those programs, about whether they feel their training is preparing them for those types of positions.

2. Challenges

Our study faced several obstacles from the start, making it difficult to obtain the data we needed and to compare across programs. Some of the difficulties we encountered were:

- Obtaining permissions from research ethics boards (REBs) as external researchers. To be able to interview program representatives at other institutions, we had to submit to their

REBs. Some institutions had more stringent requirements than others, which delayed our approval process.

- Finding the contact information of program representatives and course instructors (for student recruitment) from the program websites. We had to search through various web pages, directories, and faculty profiles to find the names and emails of the program directors, coordinators, or chairs. Some programs did not have a clear point of contact at all, which made it hard to know whom to approach.
- Soliciting responses from program representatives via email, which often resulted in no reply. We sent multiple emails to each program representative, and in some cases to multiple program representatives, following up with reminders. It took over four months to secure interviews with representatives of five of the programs; as of this writing (April 2024) we have still had no response from anyone at the other two programs.
- Small sample size and lack of incentives to participate leading to a low survey response rate. The inclusion criteria for this study, regarding student participants, is defined by enrollment in a data-related LIS course. Based on discussions with the program representatives, the typical enrollment for these courses is between 10-40 students. Thus, the potential population for this study is relatively small. As of this writing, having reached out to the instructors of 15 classes at five schools over five months, we have only received 6 survey responses.
- Ensuring participants cannot be re-identified. Given both the small number of LIS schools and the small number of students participating, we have had challenges in assuring the ethics boards, the program representatives, and the instructors who are sharing our recruitment materials with students that our respondents will not be re-identifiable.

3. Discussion

While we have managed to interview representatives from 71% of the LIS programs we targeted ($n = 5$), it took a disproportionately large amount of work. In terms of student participation, it is unclear whether having local research team members and/or offering incentives would have helped increase the response rate; however, at this stage, our project will have to proceed without either of those things.

We are nevertheless encouraged by the positive responses of the LIS program representatives we have spoken to. Based on our early thematic analyses, LIS programs recognize the importance of incorporating RDM and data-related opportunities into their curricula, and believe our results can help them both in advising students and in advocating for changes. Thus, while we still believe that this kind of multi-jurisdictional project can achieve its goals and be useful to the library and LIS education communities, we caution that advanced planning, moderated expectations, and a great deal of patience are necessary to undertake this type of work.

References

Andrikopoulou, A., Rowley, J., & Walton, G. (2022) Research Data Management (RDM) and the Evolving Identity of Academic Libraries and Librarians: A Literature Review, *New Review of Academic Librarianship*, 28(4), 349-365. DOI: 10.1080/13614533.2021.1964549

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