

# Online Graduate Career Changers: Motivations and Use of Academic and Career Advising Services and Resources

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*This work expands the literature and research focused on career change students enrolled in an online master's program by examining the literature regarding transitions, motivations, and advising support for career changers. Also studied are the motivations of career change students enrolled in two different online, synchronous graduate programs. The study outlined offerings to this special population in terms of full-time primary role academic and career advising. It was found that participants utilized personalized communications and orientation programming provided by academic and career advising.*

[doi:10.12930/NACADA-21-36]

KEY WORDS: career changer, advising career changers, online career changers, career advising for career changer, graduate career changers, graduate students

## Introduction

Understanding the broad and diverse resources available for undergraduate and traditional-aged students, this work aimed to shed light on graduate students, specifically online graduate students who are career changers. To date, literature around career changers focuses on their motivations for a career change *after* they have completed their career change. The presented research focuses on students currently enrolled in an online master's program to aid in fulfilling career changes. Specifically, as they are enrolled in a synchronous, online master's program, this research investigates the support provided by full-time primary role academic and career advising.

The research on supporting graduate and professional students is minuscule compared with the literature on supporting undergraduate students. Though the methodology, findings, and recommendations presented in this article may seem straightforward to a practitioner, the literature does not reflect the current practices or needs of students enrolled in online master's or professional degree programs, specifically career change students. Additionally, as the practice of full-time profes-

sional advising grows, research and resources must also grow to document and reflect this practice.

Currently, 15%, or 3.1 million of all students, are enrolled in online programs (Ginder et al., 2019). Of those 3.1 million students, more than 860,000 are graduate students. Online graduate-level programs had a faster growth rate than online undergraduate enrollment from 2016 to 2017, 6.1% to 3.7%, respectively. Supporting this growth, 61% of human resources leaders polled said that online credentials are equal to or greater than in-person degrees (Gallagher, 2018).

Considering that the most up-to-date numbers regarding online education are pre-COVID-19, and the global pandemic increased the prevalence of online platforms, institutions, programs, degrees, and support, professionals must understand the needs of career changers who are *currently enrolled* in online programs, specifically graduate programs.

This work aims to understand the current literature on career changers and how this special population utilizes full-time primary role academic and career advising services. This case study focused on Library and Information Science (MS/LIS) and Human Resources (MS/HR) online, career change master's students in synchronous programs from the same, Research I institution.

## Literature Review

### Transitioning

In 1965, Nancy Schlossberg first outlined the idea of *transition* by researching “the experiences of adult men who wanted to change careers” (Barclay, 2017, p. 28). In 2002, Chickering and Schlossberg noted a person experiences a transition when something disrupts roles, routines, and relationships. Most transitions are related to a circumstance, not a person's age (Sargent & Schlossberg, 1988; Schlossberg, 1987). They are defined as “events (like retirement) or non-events (like being passed over for a promotion) that alter adult lives” (Schlossberg, 1981, p. 8). During a transition or a disruption, many people feel “as though they do not matter to others because of their changing role” (Barclay, 2017, p. 24).

Regarding career change graduate students enrolled in a new program, “practitioners must help transitioners gain a sense of mattering to others” (Barclay, 2017, p. 25). Schlossberg and Warren (1985) consistently found that when adult learners felt they mattered to an advisor or an institution, that sense of belonging kept them engaged in their learning. This sense of belonging, which could be achieved by orientation or support systems, made the student feel included (Kotewa, 1995). Kotewa (1995) suggested that full-time primary role academic and career professionals must look for more creative solutions to address adult learners’ needs.

### Defining a Career Changer

Many different definitions of career changer exist. Most definitions are based on research conducted with career changers as the focus: “An expression of an intention, along with preliminary action, directed toward entering an occupation of a type different from that of the present occupation” (Vaitenas & Wiener, 1977, pp. 293–294). “A student who has worked for at least three years in a career other than teaching, including full or part-time, paid or unpaid work, and/or parenting, prior to enrolling in their current teacher education course” (Williams & Forgasz, 2009, p. 97). “Career changes, or career transitions,” are “critical events in people’s lives since they may affect economic, familial, and psychological dimensions of the person” (Green et al., 2007, p. 21). There is no consistent definition of a career changer found in the literature; however, there are similarities to Schlossberg’s work on transition interwoven in the presented definitions.

In addition to various definitions, both Hiestand (1971) and Pascal (1975) outlined various degrees of career change. Hiestand (1971) noted a 45-degree career change is when there is a minor discontinuity with training from a former career, and a 90-degree career change has a major discontinuity. Pascal (1975) stated that some training from a previous career would be unnecessary and that a new career would require more training. Thomas (1980) wrote of the confluence of these two ideas, saying that a 45-degree career change is “[m]ovement to a career for which previous training was either unnecessary or insufficient (but not both)” (p. 175). A 90-degree career change would be one in which previous training was unnecessary *and* additional

training is needed for the new career (Thomas, 1980).

### General Motivations for Career Change

Vaitenas and Wiener (1977) hypothesized that younger career changers (i.e., under 35 years old) were influenced by vocational choice theory—namely, emotional problems, incongruity, and lack of differentiation and consistency. Motivations for older career changers were due to adult developmental theories that included generativity, “emerging concern for the care and development of others,” fear of failure, and lifestyle doubts (Vaitenas & Wiener, 1977, p. 292). When testing these two groups against noncareer changers, career changers of any age had lower congruity scores, lower scores in emotional stability (older career changers were higher in emotional stability than younger career changers), a higher percentage of emotional problems, lower consistency of interests, and higher percentage of fear of failure. The authors also noted no relation between age and fear of failure in the two career change groups, and both career changers noted more fear of failure when compared to the noncareer changers.

Thomas (1980) recognized that previous studies on voluntary middle-class career changers had been conflicting. Some of these suggested motivations included a rejection of societal values, such as work ethic (Krantz, 1977; Roberts, 1974), psychological and family considerations (Clopton, 1973; Oliver, 1971; Vaitenas & Weiner, 1977), and changing fields for prestige and advancement (Hiestand, 1971; Schlossberg, 1975). Thomas’s (1980) results contradicted these studies. His qualitative study involving 73 career-changing men found that previously identified motivations for career change were, in fact, on the low end of results: financial gain (11%), laid off (19%), health problems (8%), more family time (26%), increased time for recreation (23%), and better location (20%) (Thomas, 1980, p.176). The two most selected motivations for career change were “a better fit of values and work” and “more meaningful work,” at 60% and 76%, respectively (Thomas, 1980, p. 177).

### Career Change Motivation by Profession

Studies have been conducted on career changers’ transitioning into specific professions: teachers (Bauer et al., 2017); personal chefs (Hendley, 2017); community college presidents (McNair, 2014), and library science positions

(Moniarou-Papaconstantinou et al., 2015). Bauer et al. (2017) was not the only researcher to study career change teachers. Still, that article focused on professionals who had enrolled in a postgraduate program to complete their career change to teaching, aligning with this research concerning master's students in a professional program. Additionally, several articles addressed career changers going into the library science field, but they were narratives that talked about past experiences, not motivations or enrolling in a degree-seeking program.

When researching Australian secondary teachers, Bauer et al. (2017) discovered that these professionals decided to change careers because of changing economy, job loss, inability to find employment in the same field after a move, job dissatisfaction, looking for a challenge, desire to make a difference, a long-standing desire to be a teacher, desiring a social environment, wanting a work/life balance, perceiving a career fit based on personal ability, and prior career and personal experience.

Hendley (2017) studied those who changed careers to become personal chefs and identified motivations from a national survey for those whose careers changed to become personal chefs: "having a flexible schedule, following their passion, and having independence or being their own boss" (p. 307). The survey results and interviews' answers on motivations for one to become a personal chef (following their passion, doing what they love, job loss, barriers to mobility, and burnout) align with Bauer et al.'s (2017) findings regarding career change teachers. Additionally, these factors, combined with "critical events" (Kiecolt, 1994, pp. 57–58) in personal lives, encouraged professionals to change careers to become personal chefs.

In alignment with critical events as motivators for a career change, Delores McNair (2014) studied the effect of "tapping," or "an information recruitment that can help identify future leaders" (p. 190), as motivation for first-time community college presidents (45-degree career change). The presidents remarked that a "defining moment dramatically changed [their] professional path" (McNair, 2014, p. 185).

Moniarou-Papaconstantinou et al. (2015) wrote perhaps the most extensive piece of literature analyzing motivations for interest in library and information science (LIS) by "choice of LIS" for high schoolers, "choice of LIS specialty" for college students, and "career

change to LIS" for professionals (p. 602). The authors outlined pre-career change professions and motivations for their career change to a LIS profession in a diagram, which is written out here:

- **Insurance, Dentistry, Civil Service, Computing, Research Sectors:** Uncertainty, issues related with their previous career, family obligations, geographical position, nature of information work, desire to use transferable skills, wrong initial choice, personal value system, past working experience, context of life
- **Health Professionals:** Burnout from previous career, dissatisfaction from changes in the health care delivery system, love of books, interest in librarians, interest in computers and information retrieval, opportunities for teaching and research, communicating with clients and colleagues, possibility to use their knowledge and skills in the new working environment
- **Scientists:** Love of scientific literature, enjoyment of research, technology, the variety of the job, possibility to work in a team with academic staff and other researchers, dissatisfaction with their previous career
- **Marketing & Library Paraprofessionals:** Job function, love of the field, love of books, recommendation of significant others
- **Teachers:** Desire to follow advanced studies, challenges posed in a new working environment, appreciation of the LIS profession, use of transferable skills, uncertainty, issues related with their previous career, family obligations, geographical position, nature of information work, desire to use transferable skills, wrong initial choice, personal value system, past working experience, context of life, love of the field, recommendation of significant others, love of books, job function
- **Administration & Book Selling:** Uncertainty, issues related with their previous career, geographical position, nature of information work, context of life, desire to use transferable skills, wrong initial choice, past working experience, personal value system, love of the field, recommendation of significant others, love of

books, job functions (Moniarou-Papaconstantinou et al., 2015, p. 601)

This extensive work identified a list of motivations from those transitioning to librarianship from a variety of those who made a 45-degree and 90-degree career change.

### **The 3-I Process**

The 3-I Process is a framework that aids understanding in supporting students in transition (Gordon, 2019). Gordon (2019) noted three states that a student could be going through regarding academic and career concerns: inquire, inform, and integrate. When a student is career changing, they may have many questions, especially at first. In the inquiry phase, a career changer may still explore career and program options. Gathering such information would help in “identifying students’ academic and career concerns, clarifying their needs and making appropriate response that help them move to the information-collecting phase” (Gordon, 2019, p. 65). Academic and career advisors should help career changers make the most informed decisions when beginning a program. Without answers to aid in decision-making, career changers may decide the change is too risky and withdraw or not even begin the new educational program altogether because of unanswered concerns.

In the next phase, inform, a student who decides to enroll may search for information on “aspects of the career choice” (Gordon, 2019, p. 64). Once students have decided to enroll in a graduate program to work toward completing a career change, they may have questions regarding the best ways to gain experience or leverage their past experiences. Lastly, as students work with others to ask important questions and gather information, they may cycle back to the inquire stage for a new direction or career path. Or they can integrate this information as they look to progress through the program. A person could experience integration by looking at job descriptions for their desired employment and matching those skills to ones they already have or need to improve. Also, this integration could be in the form of balancing school with other adult responsibilities such as work, volunteering, and family (Council for Adult and Experiential Learning, 1999).

The following study aims to understand the perspectives of career changers during their enrollment in a program that will lead to career

change, namely their motivations for career changing and the role of academic advising services that support these career change graduate students. Surveys of students currently enrolled in the reviewed programs and interviews with those who directly supported the students enrolled in the two programs were used to answer the primary research questions:

- What are the needs of career changers enrolled in an online professional master’s program?
- What academic and career advising services are offered for career change graduate students in an online professional master’s program?
- What do career change graduate students in an online professional program still desire from academic and career advising services in a master’s program?

## **Methods and Analysis**

### **Setting**

The setting for the exploratory case study was a Research 1, Midwestern, public university. The targeted sample was online students in the MS/LIS and MS/HR programs. Both programs offer their MS programs in the modality of synchronous, online classes. As of Fall 2020, the online MS/LIS program had 367 students enrolled, and the online MS/HR program had 70 students enrolled.

### **Case and Participant Demographics**

The sampling for this study was purposeful and consisted of a two-tier sampling method. The first tier was interviewing subject matter experts—one professional/staff academic advisor and one career services personnel from each program. Table 1 provides the demographics for the four subject matter experts interviewed, who had 23 years of experience in total. The second tier collected responses from career changers in the MS/LIS and MS/HR programs. Table 2 provides the demographics for the surveyed MS/LIS and MS/HR student participants. The students interested in completing the survey were first asked to identify themselves as a career changer according to the definition put forth for this study: earned a bachelor’s degree and have been in a professional field for at least five years since earning a bachelor’s degree in an area not closely related to librarianship (or the

**Table 1.** Subject Matter Expert Participant Demographics

| Name*   | Program | Position                                       | Gender | Years with MS/LIS | Subject Matter  |
|---------|---------|--|--------|-------------------|-----------------|
| Emily   | MS/LIS  | Assistant Director of MS/LIS Advising          | Female | 13                | Advising        |
| Molly   | MS/LIS  | Assistant Director of Career Services          | Female | 6                 | Career Services |
| Rosie   | MS/HR   | Associate Director of Graduate Online Programs | Female | 2                 | Advising        |
| Heather | MS/HR   | Online Graduate Programs Career Consultant     | Female | 2                 | Career Services |

\*Name has been changed to ensure confidentiality.

corresponding HR program). The average student participant was female, White, and between the ages of 33 and 37.

**Consent and Privacy**

During the study, I adhered to the Institutional Review Board. To ensure participant privacy, I assigned pseudonyms at the interview’s conclusion to protect the interviewees’ identities (Creswell & Creswell, 2018). I did not collect identifying information on the student survey.

**Methods of Data Collection**

I utilized triangulation: conventional content analysis was completed by examining all academic and career advising services listed on the public websites of the two programs; semi-structured interviews were conducted, and a survey was used. The targeted students for the survey were enrolled career changer MS/LIS and MS/HR students.

**Transferability and Trustworthiness**

I ensured transferability through triangulation, member checking, researcher bias, and discrepant information in this study. To ensure trustworthiness in this study, I kept an electronic journal about details of the case study, including the IRB approval process, recruitment, participant participation, and data analysis.

**Findings**

**Career Changer Needs**

When asked what hesitations participants had or still have about career changing, they discussed issues of employment: finding desirable employment, finding employment during COVID-19, age as it relates to job prospects, finding a job that maintains their lifestyle, and jobs with flexibility to continue caring for family and other responsibilities. Other hesitations mentioned can be

categorized as opportunity costs: cost of attendance, pursuing another degree instead of staying in their current field, and “guilt of not using previous degree.” There were also several fears mentioned: “fear of failure in something new,” “afraid I won’t be able to find a comparable/better paying job,” “scared to walk away,” and “having to start my career again at the bottom.” Rosie, academic advising subject matter expert for MS/HR, corroborated these statements:

Career changers are a little more hesitant to commit to a graduate program. They kind of need more of the sell or the pitch as to why, you know, this program can help them with what their goal is. And they are usually a little more nervous because they don’t have that experience or background.

Several participants tackled the hesitation head-on by saying, “I find it intimidating to essentially start over a decade into my career” and “career-changing involves risk-taking. I feel safer and more secure when staying in the familiar area, and it makes [it] difficult to do something new.”

Emily, MS/LIS academic advising subject matter expert, added that “a lot of people get a little nervous once [the start of the program] becomes more real.” In addition to balancing responsibilities, career changers must also contend with a gap in their background on the program subject matter.

Participants noted that external motivations for their career change included continuing their education, salary, advancement, geographic location/flexibility, a new career over retirement, burnout, being able to “leave work at work,” and leaving the “politics” of past professions. Family concerns were mentioned several times by participants: “PR consulting was not conducive to raising kids and being there for my family

**Table 2.** Student Participant Demographics

| <b>Participant</b> | <b>Age</b> | <b>Gender</b>              | <b>Race/<br/>Ethnicity</b>      | <b>Bachelor's</b>  | <b>Past Professions</b>   | <b>Additional<br/>Degree(s)</b>  |
|--------------------|------------|----------------------------|---------------------------------|--|---|--|
| LIS1               | 48-52      | Female                     | Other                           | East Asian   | Public Relations><br>Various<br>Classroom<br>Roles>Co-<br>teacher Librarian | -  |
| LIS2               | 43-47      | Male                       | White                           | Marketing  | Data Analyst  | -  |
| LIS3               | 33-37      | Female                     | White                           | Political Science  | Legal Assistant/<br>Secretary   | -  |
| LIS 4              | 28-32      | Male                       | White                           | Philosophy   | Program Manager   | -  |
| LIS 5              | 38-42      | Female                     | Hispanic or<br>Latino           | Communication  | Post Production<br>Producer   | -  |
| LIS 6              | 28-32      | Female                     | White                           | Psychology   | Program<br>Coordinator  | -  |
| LIS 7              | 33-37      | Female                     | Black or<br>African<br>American | Early Childhood<br>Education                               | Early Childhood<br>Educator   | -  |
| LIS 8              | 33-37      | Female                     | White                           | Mass<br>Communications<br>(Print/Electronic<br>Journalism) | Director of<br>Communications<br>and Marketing                              | MA - Public<br>Relations   |
| LIS 9              | 33-37      | Female                     | White                           | Computer Science   | IT Project Manager  | MS - Information<br>Technology   |
| LIS 10             | 33-37      | Prefer<br>Not to<br>Answer | Black or<br>African<br>American | English  | Carpentry   | MS - Information<br>Science  |
| LIS 11             | 48-52      | Female                     | White                           | Organizational<br>Leadership                               | Education   | -  |
| LIS 12             | 33-37      | Female                     | Black or<br>African<br>American | Sociology  | HIV Prevention<br>Research Project<br>Manager                               | MPH -<br>Epidemiology  |
| LIS 13             | 38-42      | Female                     | White                           | Public Affairs   | Naturalist and Park<br>Assistant<br>Manager                                 | -  |
| LIS 14             | 33-37      | Female                     | Multiracial or<br>Multiethnic   | Law  | Attorney  | JD   |
| LIS 15             | 28-32      | Female                     | White                           | English  | Marketing and<br>Communications   | MA - English   |
| LIS 16             | 53-57      | Female                     | Asian                           | Earth Science  | Researcher  | PhD - Science<br>Education<br>MS - Applied<br>Cognitive &<br>Neuroscience<br>MS - Emerging<br>Media & Comm |
| LIS 17             | 33-37      | Male                       | White                           | Communication  | College Admissions  | MA - Higher<br>Education<br>Student<br>Personnel<br>Administration   |
| LIS 18             | 28-32      | Female                     | White                           | Applied<br>Communications                                  | Marketing   | -  |
| LIS 19             | 33-37      | Female                     | White                           | Elementary<br>Education                                    | Social Services and<br>Mental Health<br>Coordinator                         | -  |
| LIS 20             | 43-47      | Female                     | White                           | Aerospace<br>Engineering                                   | Military Pilot  | MS - Aeronautical<br>Science   |

**Table 2.** Student Participant Demographics (cont.)

| <b>Participant</b> | <b>Age</b> | <b>Gender</b> | <b>Race/<br/>Ethnicity</b>      | <b>Bachelor's</b>                                 | <b>Past Professions</b>  | <b>Additional<br/>Degree(s)</b>                             |
|--------------------|------------|---------------|---------------------------------|---|--|---|
| LIS 21             | 38-42      | Female        | White                           | Public Relations                                  | Communications<br>Coordinator  | -   |
| LIS 22             | 28-32      | Female        | White                           | Secondary English<br>Education                    | English Teacher><br>Learning Center<br>Director>Youth<br>Development<br>Program<br>Coordinator | -   |
| LIS 23             | 48-52      | Female        | White                           | Art History and<br>English                        | Art Museum<br>Registrar  | MA - Art History  |
| LIS 24             | 33-37      | Female        | White                           | History   | Healthcare Project<br>Manager and<br>Researcher  | MA - International<br>Relations                             |
| LIS 25             | 43-47      | Female        | White                           | Biology   | Ph. D. Student><br>Postdoc><br>Stay-at-Home<br>Mom   | PhD - Microbiology<br>and Molecular<br>Genetics             |
| LIS 26             | 33-37      | Female        | White                           | Acting/Education                                  | Education  | MA - Theatre Arts   |
| LIS 27             | 53-57      | Female        | White                           | English Literature                                | Administrative/<br>Freelance<br>Writing/Editing  | -   |
| LIS 28             | 33-37      | Female        | White                           | Music Therapy                                     | Music Therapist  | -   |
| LIS 29             | 33-37      | Female        | Prefer Not<br>to Answer         | Sociology;<br>Criminology,<br>Law and Justice     | Higher Education<br>Administration   | MA - Human<br>Services: Social<br>Service<br>Administration |
| LIS 30             | 33-37      | Female        | White                           | Political Science<br>and International<br>Studies | Humanitarian and<br>Development<br>Worker  | MA - International<br>Development<br>Studies                |
| HR1                | -          | Female        | Prefer not<br>to Answer         | English   | Healthcare Director  | MBA   |
| HR 2               | 23-27      | Female        | White                           | English Literature                                | Teacher>Flight<br>Attendant><br>Receptionist   | -   |
| HR 3               | 23-27      | Female        | Hispanic or<br>Latino           | Human<br>Development &<br>Family Studies          | Early Childhood<br>Education   | -   |
| HR 4               | 33-37      | Female        | Asian                           | Computer Sci &<br>Engineering                     | Business<br>Intelligence<br>Developer  | MS - Computer<br>Science                                    |
| HR 5               | 48-52      | Female        | White                           | Management &<br>Leadership                        | Finance  | MBA   |
| HR 6               | 33-37      | Female        | Black or<br>African<br>American | Psychology  | Case Management  | -   |
| HR 7               | 33-37      | Female        | Hispanic or<br>Latino           | Sociology   | Compliance<br>Specialist   | -   |
| HR 8               | 33-37      | Female        | White                           | Journalism  | Human Resources  | MSW   |
| HR 9               | 33-37      | Female        | White                           | Social Work                                       | School Social<br>Worker  |   |
| HR 10              | 28-32      | Male          | White                           | Psychology  | Zookeeping   | -   |
| HR 11              | 43-47      | Male          | Black or<br>African<br>American | Psychology  | Route Sales  | -   |

\* Participant LIS#, is from the MS/LIS program. Participant HR#, is from the MS/HR program.

because of the travel and long working hours,” and “I decided to have a family and with my husband’s job requiring so much travel I was worried my child might never see either of us.” Another factor that was mentioned several times was COVID-19. The impacts of COVID-19 motivated some respondents to career change: “discomfort with my employer’s approach to COVID-19 accelerated my desire to change careers” and “I was able to reflect on my next steps during my voluntary leave with [company]. Due to COVID-19, I was provided time to make a decision on a graduate program, apply and be accepted.”

Of note, some external motivations for career change were similar to those that respondents listed as internal. One reason for this could be that some respondents view a single element’s impact differently. For example, stability was mentioned as both an internal and external factor, but some categorized stability in terms of family as internal and economic stability as external. Regardless of the specific details of one motivational factor being internal or external, they all have an impact when a person takes steps to change their career.

### **Current Academic Advising Services and Usage**

MS/LIS and MS/HR programs offered a variety of academic and career advising resources and services. Table 3 outlines the offerings. For our purposes, participants were presented with an exhaustive list of resources and services available to them through academic and career advising. They were asked to select all that they had used since being enrolled. Then, they were asked to select a single resource or service they felt aided most in their success and continuation through their online, synchronous graduate program for academic advising and career advising. In the academic advising category, online career change students’ two most frequently selected resources or services were new student orientation and emailing specific questions. In the career advising category, online career change students’ two most frequently selected resources or services were emailing specific questions and one-on-one career advising appointments.

In asking participants to select the one academic advising resource or service they believe helped them most during the program, new student orientation, general academic advising appointments, and emailing specific questions were rated most important in both programs. The

most important career advising resources or services for both programs were one-on-one career advising appointments and emailing specific questions.

### **Academic and Career Advising Services Still Needed**

Respondents in the online MS/HR program identified general needs, such as job search resources, peer mentors, and online career fairs. Respondents in the MS/LIS program suggested these items in more detail. One respondent wanted to see a workshop where job titles were explained with details that someone new to the field might not know; others wanted more connections to alums. Likewise, several students wanted to see an alum panel with individuals who have changed careers and succeeded in the new field. Five respondents mentioned more ways to connect with peers. One specifically was interested if inviting back current students to campus for

more opportunities to connect with people interested in the same area of LIS as you are. I didn’t initially know what career path or type of institution I was interested in working at, and it’s only through my coursework that I am figuring this out. Having another opportunity to meet and network with my cohort would be valuable.

Other students wanted more practical opportunities, such as internships and practicums. A challenge noted by both programs, understanding lingo, was addressed:

A one-time, one-hour primer on the acronyms used in LIS! I found that for me and a couple of others who came from outside library science, the learning curve was very steep in the core courses because library basics like OPAC and MARC were tossed around, and it takes a brave soul to type “What’s an OPAC?” into the chat during your first semester in a class of 45 people. Seriously, a preview of some of the common terms and concepts would be fantastic! . . . A simple description with a promise that we will learn more depth in our courses would be fine!



**Table 3.** List of Academic and Career Advising Services Offered by MS/LIS and MS/HR Programs

| <b>MS/LIS Career Advising</b>  |  |
|--|--|
| Advising Appointment – Resume & Cover Letter   | Advising Appointment – General Career Services                   |
| Advising Appointment - Practicum   | Advising Appointment – CPT/OPT                                   |
| Alumni Panels  | Career Fair Prep Workshops                                       |
| Career Fairs   | Job Search Support Group (partnership with the graduate college) |
| Summer Workshop Series   | Student Showcase   |
| Mentor Match Program   | Career Services Wiki pages                                       |
| Career Services Recorded content (videos, workshops, etc.)                             | Career Opportunities Newsletter                                  |
| Virtual Networking 101 Series (to be held in January 2021)                             | Emailing Specific Questions                                      |
| <b>MS/LIS Academic Advising</b>  |  |
| General Academic Advising Appointment (not including required New Student Appointment) | Drop-in Phone Call   |
| Emailing Specific Questions  | Informal Goal Setting on Padlet                                  |
| Wiki Advising pages  | Advising Recorded Events (videos, workshops, etc.)               |
| New Student Orientation/Welcome Weekend  | Thesis, Independent Study, Practicum Workshop                    |
| Course Preview/Registration Refreshers Workshop  | IgNIGHTS   |
| Weekly Newsletter  | Cohort Connections/Community Connections                         |
| Courses & Coffee with [Advisor] & [Advisor]  | MS/LIS Student Course Info Share                                 |
| <b>MS/HR Career Advising</b>   |  |
| One-on-One Career Services Advising Appointment  | Group Workshops (Drop-ins)                                       |
| Alumni Panels – Live   | Alumni Panels – Recordings                                       |
| Plan to Attend Alumni Networking Trips/Meet-Ups  | Lunch with a CHRO  |
| <b>MS/HR Academic Advising</b>   |  |
| Academic Advising Appointment  | Emailing Specific Questions                                      |
| Calling with Specific Questions  | New Student Orientation  |

Even though students and staff want to be able to offer all programs and services to meet demands, evaluating current and needed services is necessary to maintain program efficiency. In this study alone, ten academic and career advising resources and services were listed as offered through the MS/HR program and 30 by the MS/LIS program. Both programs’ frequency of use was not spread evenly between all 10 or 30 resources and programs. There were programs selected by more than 50% of respondents and some programs that no one used. However, it is important to note that this study only looked at online career changers. These programs of lower frequency could be important to other demographics enrolled in the programs.

### Implications and Recommendations

Career change students have voiced what academic and career advising resources and services are most helpful, what they participate

in, and what more they would like to see offered. Findings determined that advising resources and services are known, utilized, and in demand by online career change students at the graduate level. Because results from the individual MS/LIS and MS/HR programs could be analyzed together, with minimal variance, I believe these findings are generalizable to both programs and other career changers in online, synchronous professional master’s programs. This conclusion is supported by the alignment of these career changers’ motivations with those discovered in the literature. Additionally, both programs are professional and have students seeking and utilizing similar academic and career advising resources and services. Even the needs that student participants voiced overlapped significantly. Lastly, when looking at all student participants, there is a large variety regarding prior professions and degrees. Knowing these variances, results in both programs were conclusive when students selected emailing, one-on-one advising appointments, and student

orientation as advising services they used and indicated as most important. The following recommendations are aimed to foster the success of graduate, career change students in an online, synchronous professional master's program.

### **Individual, Timely Responses from Advising Personnel**

When face-to-face appointments are not possible, timely responses to inquiries are essential. Students will have questions no matter the modality, resources, or program. These students might be in the inquiry phase of their exploration of a possible career change, according to the 3-I Process.

#### **Action**

This study does not suggest academic and career advising personnel be available around the clock. Instead, they should prioritize keeping up on email and phone calls throughout working hours. Regularly blocking time for this could be a good solution to be sure emails and phone calls are accounted for daily. A second recommendation to help graduate career change students understand response times would be for advisors to let students know when to expect a response. If an advisor is out of the office, an automated email reply should alert students to this and the advisor's expected return. When advisors are experiencing an increase in the volume of calls and emails, advisors should consider an automated email reply or voicemail message to alert students of the long wait times.

### **Appointment Availability with Advising Personnel**

The services that students indicated they used most and found most helpful to their success were variants of one-on-one appointments: academic advising appointments, general career advising appointments, and even resume/cover letter advising appointments. Even though the students were online, they still desired and used the one-on-one advising services. These students could be in the inform phase of their career change, according to the 3-I Process.

#### **Action**

It will be important for programs, units, colleges, and institutions to have a real-life person or team to whom students can reach out with questions or guidance. The responsibility for

staffing such a position might vary by institution or educational setting. If an individual department or unit cannot provide such services, such a role must exist at a higher level. While potentially difficult for a general advisor to advise on all programs or career pathways, it is understood in this research that such a resource is needed to aid in the student success of graduate career change students in online programs. It is also important to ensure students know how to connect and communicate with this person. These interactions might also happen in various ways: phone, Zoom, or face-to-face in a physical space.

### **Orientation**

Regardless of modality, orientation should be a requirement (as it was for both programs) for career changers entering a new online graduate program. This is an opportunity for advising personnel to highlight resources, answer questions, and outline the program in its entirety. It also allows students to begin connecting. These students might be in the integrate phase of their career change, according to the 3-I Process. They have decided to pursue a career change, have their questions answered, have met with a professional about the possibilities that lie ahead with this new degree, and are now learning how this program will fit into their lives.

#### **Action**

Like the recommendation of employing advising personnel, when possible, it is recommended that each unit or degree host its orientation. If this is not possible, the institution should host an orientation. But, as each unit is organized differently across institutions, this will not look the same for each institution. The modality and orientation schedule could also vary greatly as each unit works to meet its own goals and objectives. Expanding on hosting meaningful orientations is beyond the scope of this study; however, based on participant feedback, it should be noted that students highly enjoyed connection opportunities between faculty/staff/students, program overview, and the dissemination of important information that allowed them to get off to a successful start in their first semester.

### **Advising Services Program Evaluations**

It is important to have various services to meet the needs of all students, not just career changers, and to make sure each service, program,

workshop, and appointment serves a need of the program's student population.

### Action

Implement an evaluation of services, at minimum, at least once every time to degree. This means that if the average time to degree completion is two years, services should be assessed at least once every two years. More regular assessments could be completed annually and could be as simple as a survey asking students to select all the academic and career advising services they have used during their time enrolled. More in-depth assessments could evaluate demographics, motivations, needs, or interest in a focus group or individual interviews regarding program and service evaluations. However, lengthy, formal, in-depth evaluations happening too frequently could provide minor results that do not justify the resources put toward the evaluation and might receive a low response rate. It is important to not over survey the students if meaningful data is meant to be gathered. As resources and time are precious, this burden of creating and implementing an assessment should fall to the program director, who should set the goals for the survey. From there, tasks could be divided between institutional personnel to meet the goals and implementation of the evaluation.

### Limitations

This study only examines two programs at one point in time—albeit allowing for the creation of a benchmark. Future studies that can follow a cohort of career changers throughout their program could provide data on how their needs change, reasons for stop-out, withdrawal, or drop out; and other meaningful data. Another limitation is that both studied programs are from the same institution. There is no variance between the research level of the intuition, or the level of the program—both were MS.

### Future Research

This study briefly mentioned orientation's positive impact on career change for students entering an online professional degree. Further research could be done on the various modalities of orientation, the topics covered in orientation, and types of connections made or desired at orientation activities for career change students in an online program. Furthermore, additional information

could be gained in connecting these academic and career advising resources and services to the retention of career change online graduate students. Another extension of this work could review retention for those in online programs serviced by faculty advisors instead of full-time, primary role academic and career advisors. This study could be a starting point for research on internships or field work opportunities that a career changer might engage in. For a deeper understanding of such a case, this study could be replicated using programs of the same field of study but from different universities, or the same university, but a greater number of diverse online master's programs (such as health sciences or humanities) that enroll career changers in their online synchronous programs. Lastly, it could be important to replicate this study using asynchronous programs. Then, a comparison can be made between the needs of online graduate career changes and their motivations, needs, and desires enrolled in synchronous and asynchronous programs.

### Conclusion

This research study has provided brief overviews of student transitions, motivations for career changers, and the 3-I Process. This literature is integrated and supported by the findings in this study. From understanding the needs of career changers, their use of currently offered academic and career advising resources and services, and the desires of services to yet be offered, four actionable recommendations were outlined for those that advise career changers: individual, timely responses from advising personnel; appointment availability with advising personnel; holding an orientation; and evaluating advising services and programs.

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**Author's Notes**

*This work, in its entirety, was made possible by the guidance of Drs. Mary Kalantzis and Bill Cope of the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign. The guidance provided throughout the entire process was second to none.*

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