

“The Ticket You Get Punched”: The Divide between Academic and Public Librarianship and the MLIS

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Most professions experience at least some real or perceived divide among practitioners who engage in the work of the profession daily and those who train practitioners. As a result, practitioners question the value of this training. The goal of the current study was to learn more about this divide in Library and Information Science (LIS) and uncover potential solutions. In six focus groups (FGs), practicing academic and public librarians discussed curriculum in light of the requirements of the profession. Findings suggest that practitioners still perceive a divide among themselves and LIS educational institutions. Participants generally viewed the MLIS as little more than “the ticket that you get punched” to get a job. A consistent concern across participants was the irrelevance of skills training, suggesting the need for MLIS programs to engage often with local practitioners to identify workplace trends and required skills. Participants also noted that the communities served by the profession exist as an abstract idea in the MLIS, because students do not interact directly with the people who make up these communities. Findings suggest that the MLIS can reassert its value through a renewed emphasis on core values of the profession, which are not learned on the job. Therefore, while the divide persists, the conversation with practitioners outlined in the current study is itself a means of closing it. This study contributes to the literature on LIS education by highlighting the value of FGs as a method within this literature.

Keywords: curriculum, focus groups, librarianship, MLIS, practitioners

Most professions experience at least some real or perceived divide among practitioners who engage in the work of the profession on a daily basis and those who train practitioners. This is fueled by current conversations about the value of higher education more broadly. Pew Research Center found that only 14% of American adults with a four-year degree believe that a degree prepares someone very well for a good job (Parker, 2019). Growing student debt has led many to question the value of a graduate degree, and potential students are being advised to ask more questions about the payoff of such an investment (Powell, 2018). It is vitally important, then, that the Master of Library and Information Science (MLIS) continue to stay relevant to the library profession it is associated with. Preparing students for careers is, after all, the reason the program exists. This requires that institutions offering the MLIS regularly engage with practitioners to expose sources of potential divides and work together to fix them.

The goal of the current study was to learn more about this divide in Library and Information Science (LIS) from the perspective of practicing academic and public librarians. In seven focus groups (FGs), stakeholders of an MLIS program accredited by the American Library Association (ALA) discussed curriculum in light of the requirements of the profession. Findings suggest that practitioners still perceive a divide among themselves and LIS educational institutions. While voicing this divide, participants also brought up several elements of professional preparation that can inform LIS curriculum. Therefore, while

KEY POINTS:

- LIS educational institutions would benefit from establishing a rapid feedback loop with the library profession, learning what skills are prioritized by the profession and adapting curriculum to fit these changes in real time.
- Alumni of LIS educational institutions have well-defined expectations for library education, grounded in the day-to-day realities of the work of librarianship, that can inform curriculum development.
- Alumni of LIS educational institutions expect that new graduates will be able to articulate the purpose and values of librarianship, highlighting the need to weave this “story of librarianship” throughout the curriculum.

the divide persists, the conversation with practitioners outlined in the current study is itself a means of closing it. The current study is an important contribution to the continuing discussion of how to improve the MLIS and make it more relevant to the library profession.

The following research question was asked: How do librarians perceive the nature of the divide among academics and practitioners as it relates to curriculum?

Review of the literature

Criticisms of a disconnect between practitioners and academics are not unique to LIS and have been present for many years. For students, higher education is the place where they are *certified* in being ready, skilled, and able to perform what is expected of them by employers (McNatt, Glassman, & Glassman,

2010). However, instructors often find it challenging to fit theory into this realistic view. In nursing, for instance, instructors face difficulties trying to help students recognize theoretical foundations outside the classroom (Landers, 2000). Practitioners in applied psychology tend to dismiss the discipline’s quarterly journal as irrelevant to practice (Anderson, 2007). Facing a similar divide, public administration practitioners and academics began collaborating on research and working to create more open access journals (Bushhouse et al., 2011). This allows knowledge to flow more efficiently between researchers and practitioners and provides practitioners more representation in academic journals.

The LIS divide

The presence of this divide in librarianship is well documented as a disconnect between what is taught in library school and what professionals do in practice (Goodsett & Koziura, 2016; Inskip, 2016; Thomas & Urban, 2018). Students often feel that *their education failed to prepare them for the profession* (Casper & Lopez, 2018; Goodsett & Koziura, 2016). For some students, the theoretical focus of library school *overwhelms the practical focus* that they want (Newhouse & Spisak, 2004). For other students, the content in library school is out of touch with current trends, skills in demand, and employer expectations (Thomas & Urban, 2018). Likely, as a result, it can be challenging for recent graduates to find *entry-level positions* (Tewell, 2012). This section will highlight four areas from the literature that are contributing to the furthering of this divide: a lack of hands-on experience, out-of-date technological training, a lack of training in instruction, and insufficient preparation for community engagement. A full review of the skills and competencies expected from the MLIS is beyond the scope of the current article. Instead, this section highlights specific

skills and competencies with the most notable gaps between the expectations of the library profession and outcomes of the MLIS.

Experience

Goodsett and Kosturski (2016) found hands-on experience to be the most commonly identified gap in LIS education among MLIS students and library practitioners. Students want more time engaged in the library work they will perform after graduation, and employers want graduates with experience. However, too often, the responsibility for obtaining this experience is left up to individual students. This is problematic for low-income and working students, who experience this divide more acutely (Goodsett & Koziura, 2016). With course loads and job duties—especially when these jobs are not in librarianship—there is little time for additional practical library experiences (Kong & Marek, 2017). As a result, these experiences must be built into the curriculum rather than expected as an extracurricular activity that many students will not be able to complete. LIS programs have started incorporating experience into the curriculum itself. For Example, Dominican University partnered with Skokie Public Library to engage students in practice-based learning. Through this partnership, students work side-by-side with professional librarians for up to two years while completing their degrees, which offers students paid, practical experience for course credit (Kong & Marek, 2017).

Technology

New technologies play a central role in librarianship, and employers prioritize technology skills in new employees (Maceli, 2015; Maceli & Burke, 2016; V. Singh & Mehra, 2013). In particular, employers want new hires to be adept with social media and proficient in navigating the web (Saunders, 2015; Saunders & Ung, 2017; R. Singh & Vorbach, 2017). Recognizing this, the American Library Association (ALA) identified technological knowledge and skills as part of the core competencies for all graduates of an ALA-accredited master's program (American Library Association Council, 2009). LIS programs have also recognized this, as Hu (2013) found that over 33% of courses offered among the top 14 schools reviewed were related to information technology (IT), comprising of 20–30% of the total number of courses offered in their respective programs. However, Hu also noted that many of the non-IT courses offered in these programs did have IT-related content, such as courses on library management and reference services, thus insinuating that IT-related content may be embedded into courses without titles or descriptions specifically related to IT.

Nevertheless, given the increasing speed of technological change, it is difficult to codify technological skill requirements. There are still gaps in what is taught in these courses and how well it translates to work environments (Martzoukou & Elliott, 2016). Thus, recent LIS graduates feel ill prepared by their programs to work with newer technology (Goodsett & Koziura, 2016).

Instruction

Instruction has always been an essential part of librarianship, and employers value new employees with teaching skills and training (Goodsett & Koziura, 2016). In fact, among more recent reference job postings, instruction duties appear almost as frequently as general

reference duties. However, despite this demand from employers, especially within academic libraries, only 66% of MLIS students are exposed to instruction in their reference courses (Saunders, 2015). While some LIS programs do offer a limited number of instruction courses as a part of their degree program, these courses tend to focus primarily on one-shot instruction and course-level instruction, with little attention dedicated to other essential components of instruction, such as planning courses, classroom management, and information literacy (Saunders, 2015). Previous studies have identified several options for LIS programs to address needs for covering instruction and teaching methods in the curriculum. These suggestions include supporting courses that involve students in the teaching process (Saunders, 2015), immersing students in teaching roles, equipped with technology and literacy skills (Jaeger & Sarin, 2016), and providing course designs that facilitate hands-on learning (Goodsett & Koziura, 2016).

Community engagement

As the profession continues to extend into communities, LIS graduates are expected to know how to understand and leverage knowledge about diverse communities. Jaeger and Sarin (2016) suggested that all LIS students should be immersed in engaging community members to identify what they need and how librarians can help and advocate on their behalf. Many LIS programs have incorporated community and social informatics into the curriculum (Bishop & Bruce, 2005) as a way to address barriers to information, resources, and technologies that hurt community members (K. Williams, Durrance, & Rosenbaum, 2009). These courses offer students a unique perspective of working directly with public libraries and community stakeholders on community-based projects aimed at solving challenges experienced within a community, using fundamental LIS skills and knowledge (N. S. Williams, Bishop, Bruce, & Irish, 2012).

Soft skills

Lastly, soft skills or interpersonal skills, such as communication and adaptability and flexibility, emerged from the literature as essential skills for future practitioners. According to a study by Gerolimos (2009) examining the skills that LIS students should have upon graduation, hiring practitioners highly valued recent graduates with effective communication skills. Within the literature, practical communication skills consisted of varying abilities to communicate with stakeholders, both online and in person (Partridge, Menzies, Lee, & Munro, 2010). Adaptability and flexibility also complement communication skills, as practitioners desire graduates who are malleable with their communication skills in order to express their thoughts and ideas adequately. Although soft skills are a high priority for practitioners, there is a limited number of LIS courses that teach these skills, particularly in specialized courses (Gerolimos, 2009).

While the researchers identified these five areas as being complementary to the study and its findings, it is not an extensive review of all LIS literature. Therefore, it is worth reiterating that this selection of literature was purposeful and was intended to highlight the specific skills and competencies that are prominent to the gap experienced by the library profession and the outcomes of earning an MLIS. As will be noted throughout the current

study, these five areas are foundational in order to address how practitioners perceive this divide and its relationship to LIS curriculum.

Methodology

Research approach

The authors approached the current study through the lens of interpretivism, viewing reality as socially constructed (Berger & Luckmann, 1989) and knowledge as subjective (Walsham, 1995). This means that what librarians want from new hires, and how they view the profession, are group-level opinions influenced by socio-cultural contexts. Perceptions of the divide among practitioners and academics are also socially constructed. These opinions and perceptions represent a reality that is enacted collaboratively (Wilkinson, 2004). The specific method used in the current study—focus groups (FG)—fits within this interpretive aim as it allowed the researchers to facilitate and observe this social process. FGs elicit data that directly come out of this conversational process, rather than the isolated opinions of individual actors (Kamberelis & Dimitriadis, 2011). Though surveys are the most prominent method within curriculum research (Chu, 2006), FGs have also been used to elicit richer data (Curran, Bajjaly, Feehan, & O'Neill, 1998).

Sample and recruitment

The current study was part of a larger effort within the researchers' university to revamp their MLIS curriculum. While participants are stakeholders of this particular university, they represent the academic and public library systems in five states. This does not suggest generalizability in the findings but rather a relatively wide representation for a qualitative study.

This non-probability sample included two groups of public librarians, one group of public and academic librarians, one group of alumni from both academic and public libraries, one group of academic librarians, and one group representing the school's diversity council. The FG guide was pilot tested with one group of current students. These six FGs included alumni of various LIS programs, and all participants had the MLIS degree. There were approximately nine participants at each meeting. One representative at each location worked with the researchers to coordinate times and logistics to meet. Each FG was 90 minutes in length, and participants received a small gift certificate for their time.

Data collection

A semi-structured FG guide was developed to facilitate conversation while allowing flexibility in what each group considered important. This FG was first piloted with students and revised for clarity and intention. Table 1 outlines sample questions asked under two main topics. The first half of the discussion centered on the expectations of LIS professionals. Participants discussed why the profession exists and what librarians need to be able to do. Direct mention of curriculum was not included in these initial discussions, as the researchers did not want the discussion of skills and competencies to be bounded by what participants thought MLIS curriculum was capable of providing. In other words, if a

Table 1: Focus group topics and example questions.

FG discussion topic	Example questions
Expectations of the profession	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • What is the mission of librarianship broadly speaking? • What do you expect librarians are able to do? • What does a librarian need to know?
Expectations of the MLIS	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How well does MLIS curriculum prepare students to advance the LIS mission previously stated? How could it be changed to better accomplish this? • What do you expect that a recent graduate knows how to do? • Tell me about your experiences with new hires that have recently graduated with an MLIS.

participant did not think curriculum could prepare a librarian in certain areas, they would likely not mention it in a conversation about curriculum.

The second half of the discussion centered on the MLIS and curriculum. Participants were asked about their perceptions of the degree and its value. They were also provided with an overview of a hypothetical curriculum and asked to comment on what might be missing and what excited them most. This came out of early efforts from the authors' university to revamp curriculum. Grounding conversations in this hypothetical curriculum gave participants something to project their thoughts onto rather than directly commenting on MLIS education more broadly—uncovering deeper feelings and beliefs (Morrison, Haley, Sheehan, & Taylor, 2012). In this second half, participants also discussed more generally the nature of MLIS curriculum. Because participants had already discussed the expectations of the profession, they spent a significant portion of this second half discussing the inadequacies of the curriculum to prepare librarians.

Analysis

Transcripts were made immediately following each FG and imported into NVIVO for coding. Coding is a data-reduction technique intended to *chunk* these long transcripts into meaningful pieces for analysis (Miles & Huberman, 1994). Coding followed the process outlined by Corbin and Strauss (1990). First, the transcript was coded at the level of phrases and sentences. Every sentence was given at least one code, with some sentences receiving several codes. This *open* coding elicited 181 conceptual codes. The second round of coding, termed *axial* coding, identified commonalities among these codes and placed codes together into broader categories. The third round of coding, termed *selective* coding, identified core categories to help tell the story of the coding (Creswell, 2007). Three categories emerged from this coding: expectations of the profession, expectations of the MLIS degree, and what is learned outside of the MLIS degree. Table 2 shows an overview of these coding categories, the child nodes directly under these categories, the coverage of each category, and examples of specific codes included in each category. Coverage shows the extent to which a

Table 2: Overview of the coding scheme and example codes

Selective coding categories	Coverage	Child nodes	Example codes
Expectations of the profession	15%	Know-what	Community make-up, information needs, knowing yourself
		Know-how	Technological skills, interpersonal skills, budgeting, pedagogy
		Know-why	Passion, telling the story of librarianship, curiosity
Expectations of MLIS	38%	Know-how	Technological skills, project management, advocacy, pedagogy
		Know-why	Core professional values, service, social justice, literacy, equity of access
Beyond the MLIS	25%	MLIS inadequacy	Classroom is artificial, unprepared, crazy people, weird stuff
		MLIS redundancy	The ticket you punch, on-the-job training, YouTube, testing out of courses
		MLIS failure	Irrelevant foundations, useless technology skills, inauthentic exposure

particular category was discussed across the FGs. Because transcripts included introductory comments, rapport building, and other discussions not directly related to these codes, the coverage is less than 100%.

The first two categories—expectations of the profession and expectations of the MLIS—included codes representing different knowledge types. These came out of the data. Know-how refers to procedural knowledge about how to do something. Know-what refers to declarative knowledge stored in one's memory. Know-why refers to knowledge about one's purpose in life, and it informs and directs behavior. This final knowledge type was used to distinguish declarative knowledge about one's self from declarative knowledge about things, events, and other people. The know-what and know-how codes came mostly out of participant responses to questions (Table 1) about what librarians should do and know, and their experiences with recent graduates.

The know-why codes came mostly as participants answered questions about the mission of librarianship and how well MLIS curriculum prepares students for this mission.

The third category covered specific discussions of what is learned outside of the curriculum. These codes were broken down by the general reason participants gave for why something was beyond the scope of the MLIS. The first reason was MLIS inadequacy. Here,

participants discussed elements of the profession that *could not* be replicated and taught in the classroom setting. The second reason was MLIS redundancy. Here, participants discussed elements of the profession that *should not* be covered in the MLIS, available in many other, cheaper formats. The third reason was MLIS failure. Here, participants recalled their own MLIS experience and areas where that curriculum failed them. This included more direct and harsh discussions of negative experiences where curriculum itself was to blame but could be fixed.

Findings

Expectations of the profession

The first category of codes covered participant expectations of librarians, including know-what, know-how, and know-why. In terms of know-what, participants expected a librarian to know the make-up and needs of their community, gathering data “to understand your user population at a deeper level.” This included understanding community members’ information needs—both stated and “anticipated”—and the resources needed to fulfill those needs. The populations making up these communities were multiple and distinct: “We are definitely enriched by not assuming that there is *the* community. We have many.” To learn more about the community, it was important for participants that librarians engage in self-awareness to build the “capacity to confront your biases.” As librarians interact with the community, they need “self-awareness of what [they’re] bringing to the table.”

In terms of know-how, while participants expected librarians to have the necessary communication and technological skills, they also expected librarians to be capable of “understanding people and how they work.” This requires a more advanced interpersonal skill set that includes active listening, provision of excellent customer service, a “human-ness” in one’s interpersonal approach, and comfort with social interaction. One participant likened the librarian to a social worker, “because there’s so many people that come in that come from different backgrounds and different needs.” Know-how also includes day-to-day management of both people and projects. This includes budgeting, personnel management, writing reports, planning, evaluation, and marketing. As one participant noted, “90% of what you do, nobody ever sees it.” In addition, participants noted that a librarian must know how to teach. This was especially relevant for academic librarians: “If you’re an academic librarian who’s going through a tenure promotion process, you’re going to have problems successfully completing that [if you cannot teach].”

In terms of know-why, participants agreed that “you’ve got to be made for this [profession].” Participants expected librarians to have a passion for the core purposes and story of librarianship and be able to “tell the story and tell it well.” This know-why often comes from an unknown place: “I don’t know how you teach somebody to have that spark.” However, it has clear impacts on the commitment to continued growth for librarians who “have to be that ever learner” and “need to be intellectually curious.”

Expectations of the MLIS

The largest category of codes covered participant expectations of the MLIS degree. Participants discussed their expectations of the MLIS in terms of the know-how and know-why

that graduates would be equipped with. The declarative knowledge discussed by participants here referred to a student's internal purpose and drive. Thus, these discussions were coded as know-why rather than know-what.

Know-how

Although participants expected that MLIS curriculum would equip students with essential skills like writing, information management, and reference interviews, they spent the most time discussing managerial skills. Management was an expected skill set regardless of the intended position: "Even if a student isn't interested in management, I think having a required course where there is an explanation of not just management but working within an organization is important." This included skills in data analytics, technology acquisition and implementation, project management, process improvement, and meeting facilitation. An additional subset of managerial skills was expected in order to advocate on behalf of the library. This included grant writing, marketing, and working within the political landscape: "What are libraries for? What do libraries do? Why should you spend tax dollars on this?" Advocacy required the cultivation of confidence: "It's having the confidence to say, yes, I am the director of [this library] and here's what my professional opinion is. You can take it or leave it baby, but it's still a professional opinion."

Participants expected the MLIS to equip students with technological skills. This included troubleshooting the devices people bring to the library: "Do you have the skills to work with something that you've never worked before?" This also included the ability to work with different software tools, "empowering librarians to really take the time to learn the tools that they have in their building." This most notably included navigating various databases, including third-party databases devoted to genealogy: "If you're training people to do adult reference services, they've got to know how to use Ancestry."

Participants also expected teaching to be a central part of curriculum: "I 100 percent wish I had learned teaching skills in my MLIS." They agreed that "librarians become accidental teachers." While their MLIS prepared them to access materials, "It's not enough to just provide the access without teaching them how to use the research." Several participants already had a degree in teaching before completing their MLIS, and they noted how necessary that training was. These participants were keenly aware of the limitations of their MLIS: "You have to get up and teach a class in 10 minutes. It's very artificial to your colleagues, and I just always thought it was dumb."

Know-why

Outside of specific skill sets, participants expected graduates to enter the profession having internalized the core values and purpose of the profession: "We are contributing not only to some basic informational needs, but just the lifelong learning of individuals." This purpose was realized through service: "When thinking about the basis of the profession, I think of service before anything else." This service extended beyond the physical walls of the library as students were expected to "go outside the traditional space of what is considered to be a library" in order to "meet their community where it is and be willing to help move it into the future." Students needed to situate this service within the aims of democracy

itself: “I believe that the public library is the last bastion of democracy in the United States.” This allows students to see the full impact of their work as they help people “matriculate” through the many layers of society by using information to “find their path up.” Participants expected this purpose to inform the behavior of graduates as they combat fake news, fight for social justice, push for literacy, and advocate for equity in information access.

Beyond the MLIS

Participants discussed several areas where the expectations of the profession had to be developed outside of the MLIS degree. The need to go beyond the MLIS was seen either as a function of the topic—e.g., you cannot teach adaptability—or as a failure that participants perceived in their own MLIS experience that they thought could be fixed.

MLIS inadequacy

Participants highlighted several aspects of necessary student development that could not be achieved within the boundaries and limitations of the classroom: “Trying to teach that in a classroom didn’t do a lot for me, that was a more on-the-job kind of thing.” These boundaries were a function of the classroom’s-controlled environment: “A lot of what you get in school is controlled. But in the library, we’re not in a controlled environment, you’ve got the phone ringing, the chat going off, three questions you need to answer.” Coursework tends to include “artificial boundaries” around how you provide services to people, but on the job “you use whatever type of resource you need to accomplish what you’re trying to do.” This led to participants feeling ill prepared to deal with this reality: “What we thought we were going to be doing in the library and what we’re doing in the library are two completely different things.”

Some specific examples of the inadequacy of the MLIS included learning how to identify information needs when what a person asks is “not really what they even want to know.” The classroom could not replicate “difficult exchanges” with people who are upset. As one participant noted, “Weird stuff happens in libraries.” While most participants viewed management as a skill set they expected from MLIS programs, they also noted the inability to cover it in such a program fully: “Just trying to jam all that into one class, does anybody actually come out of that really knowing any management skills?”

MLIS redundancy

In addition to noting things that could not be learned in the classroom, participants discussed things that *should not* be covered in the classroom. Participants viewed the inclusion of these elements in MLIS curriculum as contributing to its expense and perceived irrelevancy, highlighted in the collective agreement that participants embarked on the degree merely to advance in the profession: “It’s the ticket that you get punched in order to get a job.” These students are not getting an MLIS to increase their impact as a librarian, but have said, “Oh, I need something to do and that looks good.”

Much of this redundant development is covered on the job. One library director recalled hiring a new graduate as a children’s librarian even though they did not cover this area in their MLIS: “We felt like we can train her do the children’s side.” The applicant’s

MLIS focused on reference, but what mattered to the participant was that this applicant “had strong interpersonal skills, because she had a job where she had to interact with students.” Another participant recalled telling someone that they “could become an archivist without going and getting training.” The reason the participant suggested getting the degree was that “if you don’t have the certification, will you even be considered [for a job]?”

Participants also noted that many students enter the program already knowing some of what is taught. A public librarian noted that many students “are already working in libraries. They went back to get the degree.” These students “already understand the workings of a library.” Coming into the MLIS with managerial experience, one academic librarian noted the redundancy of her management classes: “I can generally show I have professional experience. I’ve given performance reviews. I’ve managed people.” To avoid redundancy, participants wanted more options to test out of coursework and take more electives in areas they do not have experience in: “Can you replace it, and say ‘I’m gonna do grant writing instead, because that’s not something I ever did’?”

Participants also felt that many important professional skills could be acquired through informal channels: “There are enough YouTube channels.” Especially for entry-level librarian jobs, “They could just all go into a room, and get online, and learn by themselves.” Given that participants felt that many of the most important attributes of a librarian cannot be taught, many saw large portions of the degree as redundant: “Reality can’t be found in textbooks, but that’s a large part of training and development.”

MLIS failure

There were additional areas where participants looked beyond the MLIS because of perceived failures in their own MLIS. The MLIS was not inherently inadequate or redundant; rather, the MLIS was not doing what participants felt it could. For instance, participants generally felt that technological training in the MLIS failed them: “I remember my technology class. It was things like just making sure everybody knew how to use Excel.” Participants did not believe this experience was unique to them: “There are some who genuinely think, ‘This is all the [technology] they taught me in library school. So, this is all I need to know, and I don’t understand why no one will give me a job.’”

The most noted failure—coded across 11 separate discussions over the six FGs—centered on participants’ foundations or introductory courses. Participants viewed these courses as “not helpful” and “a huge waste of money and time.” They expected this course to help prepare them for the profession and expose them to something that “means something to what I want to do as a future librarian.” Instead, many “don’t understand what that [foundations] class is about.” Some participants noted the time spent discussing the history of the profession: “Given the short amount of time you have to get through this program to make sure you’re prepared, that’s maybe not good.”

Related to these thoughts of the introductory course, participants generally felt that the MLIS failed to expose them to the profession authentically. This exposure had both a cognitive and physical dimension. Cognitive exposure meant learning what the library profession is really like. Participants agreed that “learning [about] the realities of working in an organization and what that entails would be super helpful.” This included exposure to the

negative realities of the profession: “If a person of color or a queer person [was considering the MLIS], I would ask them to really consider the emotional labor that they want to go through in a field that doesn’t represent or respect them.” Physical exposure meant working in a library or completing an assignment that could easily be implemented in a library. An internship, for instance, was the “only way you’re assured that you’re getting some kind of interaction with patrons, researchers, the public.” Nevertheless, participants agreed that this exposure could occur through assignments: “Please, enough with the discussion board posts, like please give us practical assignments. I can’t go to my employer and show them my discussion board posts to get a job.”

Discussion

The current study sought to uncover more about the nature of the divide among academics and practitioners in LIS. A divide was clearly present, as participants were generally discontent with the MLIS. They saw librarianship as contributing to lifelong learning, service, and meeting the needs of communities. This know-why fueled participants’ passion for librarianship. Yet participants did not feel that the MLIS was informing this passion, noting the artificial boundaries of the classroom, the lack of relevancy to the profession, and outdated curriculum. Without know-how and know-what, it is impossible to further the know-why. Moreover, this know-why is often covered in foundations courses, about which participants were the most critical.

The first prominent divide was noted in participants’ perception that skills training in the MLIS was mostly irrelevant and outdated. This included both technological skills and management skills. Participants defined these areas similarly when discussing the expectations of the profession and of the MLIS. They expected both to include skills for day-to-day management and the ability to use newer technology. In these areas, participants tended to view the MLIS as old and stale, not reflective of a profession in constant flux. Essential skills had to be learned or relearned on the job. This is not entirely surprising, as know-how changes more rapidly than know-why or even know-what. In other words, while the core values of the profession may stay relatively stable, the technical skills and practices needed to advance these values in practice change continuously. Therefore, LIS programs need to establish a rapid feedback loop with the profession, learning what skills are prioritized by the profession and adapting to these changes in real time.

Participants wanted the curriculum to cover several areas in which the profession has changed, which assumes that faculty are up to date with these changes. To ensure faculty remain current, one potential solution is continuing education (CE) for faculty. Here, practicing librarians hold workshops showcasing trends in know-how and know-what. CE is typically reserved for practicing librarians, and it is often assumed that faculty are continuing their education all the time. Yet the current study’s findings suggest the need for two-way CE that does not merely flow from faculty to practitioners.

A second divide was noted in how participants talked about community. In the context of the profession, participants discussed community in terms of know-what; that is, librarians know the specific makeup and needs of their community. In the context of curriculum, participants discussed community in terms of know-why; that is, students know

that communities are important but do not know the specifics of any community. This suggests a perception among practitioners that the MLIS is incapable of helping students understand specific communities and is instead satisfied using the concept of community as part of a vague mission or purpose. Here, the MLIS risks graduating students who talk *about* community without talking *to* the members of communities. This could be partially avoided by continuing to expand the place of community and social informatics in the MLIS (Bishop & Bruce, 2005). Here, students are engaged in actual community analysis projects and meet with community members. These projects would also help overcome the perceived inauthenticity of student work.

The third prominent divide was noted in how participants talked about core values. While the first two divides tended to address perceived challenges in MLIS curriculum, this divide addressed perceived challenges in the profession—notably, the challenge of discerning the goals and purpose of the profession on the job. In the context of the profession, participants discussed core values vaguely, and as something that cannot be taught: that is, one is “made for this” profession. In the context of curriculum, participants discussed core values with specificity, highlighting several components. This suggests that practitioners view core values as something that can be taught, and the MLIS as the place where it can be taught. This reveals a space for the MLIS to reassert its value by placing additional emphasis on core values of the profession, making it an apparent central feature articulated throughout the curriculum rather than isolated in one or two introductory courses. Repetition and redundancy of core values throughout the MLIS should be a feature rather than a perceived waste. Participants wanted this from their MLIS, though it is not possible to know if they also wanted this as students or if this was a new desire that developed after several years of working in a library. Therefore, at the same time that programs reinforce these values, they need to explain why these values are so prominently featured. Programs could also use these findings to show students that experienced librarians wished they had focused more on these values.

The current study also sought to investigate the use of an interpretive methodology using FGs to uncover aspects of the divide among academics and practitioners in LIS. Participants routinely thanked the research team for listening to them, and many noted a general failure of LIS institutions to listen to and engage with practitioners. Thus, the process itself helped bridge the gap among academics and practitioners as it provided room for conversation and listening. This is noted in Table 3.

Some of the current study’s findings confirm the findings of previous research. These are the widely known challenges of LIS curriculum. They include the irrelevancy of skills training (Goodsett & Kozirua, 2016), the lack of pedagogical training (Jaegar & Sarin, 2016), and the inability to engage underrepresented communities (Donaldson, 2017). However, the FGs also uncovered challenges not highlighted extensively in previous literature. This includes the perceived irrelevancy of introductory coursework, the view of the MLIS as little more than a job advancement tool, and the inauthenticity of assignments perceived by faculty to replicate the *real world*. The value of the FG approach is in its ability to uncover these more context-specific challenges, such that the findings by one program will be unique compared to other programs. LIS programs can then make changes to meet the needs of their stakeholders better while also adhering to more universal competencies shared across programs.

Table 3: Challenges and suggestions for perceived divides among academics and practitioners

Area of divide	Challenge	Suggestion
Skills training	Curriculum is irrelevant and out of date.	Continuing education for faculty—from practitioners—on trends in know-what and know-how.
Community	Curriculum addresses the vague importance of community without noting the specifics of a community's population.	LIS institutions can engage students in hands-on community work and research, so students put specific faces to discussions of community.
Core values	Core values can be hard to learn on the job.	LIS institutions can more fully integrate core values throughout the curriculum, taking advantage of this divide to reassert the value of the MLIS.
Listening	Practitioners perceive academics as unwilling to listen to and implement curricular concerns.	LIS institutions can regularly discuss with practitioners, students, and alumni about curriculum and implement changes.

Limitations and future research

Discussions about the divide among academics and practitioners in the current study were limited to curriculum. There are undoubtedly additional aspects to this divide that do not center on curriculum. Given how prevalent these divides are across disciplines, future research should look to uncover additional ways to align academic institutions with the profession further. Participation in these discussions was also limited to academic and public librarians and students. Many graduates of the MLIS go on to work in areas outside of librarianship, and future research should consider the nature of this divide with other organizations, for example, school, business, government.

Additional research is suggested in the following:

- How these findings can and should be used by academics. The findings of the current study can be viewed as a wish list from the profession, and faculty must balance this wish list with the realities of higher education and the goals of individual programs. For instance, if sending out graduates with a deep appreciation for and understanding of theory is a core value of a program, they need not abandon it entirely if practitioners lament its inclusion. Instead, curriculum can attempt to always situate theory within clear discussions of practice. Additionally, faculty could consider one specific project a student can do better because they understand a theory and have students work together to complete these projects.
- Methods for connecting faculty with practitioners to learn about changes in the profession and change curriculum accordingly. The current study suggested workshops for faculty CE, but there are likely multiple ways to accomplish this aim. This could include faculty working 10 hours a month in a library, bringing librarians in as guest lecturers, or interviewing librarians regularly about changes in the profession.

- Additional pedagogical techniques to increase the perceived authenticity of MLIS curriculum. This could include alternative assignments that require students to go outside of the classroom, moving away from discussion board posts and toward the creation of products that students could show to potential employers, or having students develop case studies with local libraries that can be used in future classes.
- Ways of resituating core values as a component across curriculum, not isolated to one course. This would likely require aligning these values to specific learning outcomes across core curriculum.

Conclusion

In the current study, LIS practitioners discussed the library profession and the MLIS in 90-minute focus groups. Practitioners highlighted several sources of this divide—some expected by the authors and some unexpected. The MLIS was primarily seen as outdated and costly, but necessary for career advancement. Participants viewed skills training as irrelevant to the job and community engagement as vague. However, the MLIS was uniquely situated as the place where core values are learned. These discussions helped to uncover several strategies to help bridge these divides, and merely having in-depth and personal discussions was an essential first step. The goal of this study was not the articulation of universal basic requirements for all LIS programs. However, the design of the current study can be used by other LIS institutions to identify context-specific elements of the academic/practitioner divide and outline plans for overcoming it. Both the process and findings of the current study contribute to the continued discussions around improving the MLIS by making it more applicable to the library profession. A divide exists among academics and practitioners in several disciplines, and LIS is not immune to these challenges. It is incumbent on LIS educational institutions to regularly work and discuss with practitioners to uncover sources of this divide and work together to consider solutions.

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