Evidence Based Library and Information Practice

Evidence Summary

Library School Curricula in the US Should Address Liaison Responsibilities for Students Interested in Academic Librarianship

A Review of:

Attebury, R. I., & Finnell, J. (2009). What do LIS students in the United States know about liaison duties? *New Library World, 110*(7), 325-340.

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Abstract

Objectives – The two main objectives of this study were to determine the level of prevalence of liaison work in academic library job advertisements and to investigate whether the current library & information science (LIS) students are aware of liaison duties.

Design – The mixed methods used in this study are job postings analysis and online survey.

Setting – The research settings were the following:

(1) Online academic job advertisements published between November 15, 2007 and January 15, 2008 and collected from *Chronicle of Higher Education*'s Web site and lisjobs.com;

(2) Fifty-three electronic mail lists of ALA-accredited library schools in the US.

Subjects – The subjects of the study were 313 online academic job advertisements and 516 LIS students.

Methods – The sample size and methodology for the first part of this study were based on four previously published studies. Duplicated job postings were removed and the remaining were organized into 15 categories of access/public services, reference, instruction, bibliographer/subject specialist, combination (instruction and reference), archives/special collections, special libraries, director/dean, department head or coordinator, interlibrary loan (ILL), systems/web development, cataloguing, outreach, and

acquisitions/collection-development. Only those job ads containing the term "liaison" were included in the analysis.

For the second part of the study, the authors conducted an online survey. They attempted to investigate the knowledge of LIS students on liaison librarianship, to measure the level of exposure to liaison responsibilities in their course work, and to gauge the confidence of the individual in their ability to become successful liaison librarians. The survey was distributed among 53 LIS school electronic mail lists, resulting in 516 respondents.

Main Results – The job ad analysis revealed that 29% of job postings were directly related to liaison duties. The liaison component of the positions related to access/public services, instruction, bibliographer/subject specialist, special, and outreach were the highest (50% or more). The liaison activities described in the job ads related to reference, a combination of reference and instruction, ILL, department head/coordinator, and system/Web development were also high (29% to 50%). The positions categorized as librarian, archives, director/dean, cataloguing, and collection development/acquisitions had less liaison responsibilities (<29%) (p. 331).

According to the survey results, LIS students are negatively affected by limited training for liaison work. Only 16.8% of students were introduced to liaison responsibilities through a required class and 16.5% heard about it in an elective class. When these results were limited to those who were interested in academic librarianship, the numbers improved somewhat to 20.8% and 23.9% for each group, respectively (p. 332).

The survey compared the degree in which those students who showed interest for academic librarianship, with or without exposure to liaison training, were aware of some fundamental aspects of liaison work. The first group provided better responses on a different range of liaison activities, appropriate communication methods, and confidence level. Among them only 1.3% responded that they had never considered liaison activity. On the other hand, more people in the second group (enthusiasm for academic librarianship with no exposure to liaison activity) provided the same responses (16.2%) (p. 332).

Similar results were obtained when they asked about communication methods that are appropriate for liaison librarianship. Self-confidence in the respondent's ability to become a successful liaison librarian was also determined. Overall, the self-assessment indicated that 42.5 % of LIS students could see themselves in the position of a successful liaison librarian. The authors argued that this technique was not the best method to assess the level of self-confidence without taking into account personality characteristics and previous library work experiences.

Conclusion – The authors concluded that the liaison component of academic library positions is noticeable. The survey results showed that the liaison training has a considerable positive impact on students' knowledge and confidence level (pp. 333-334).The library schools in the US need to undertake curriculum redesign to address different components of liaison responsibilities to LIS students interested in academic librarianship. The study did not present a specific liaison training model but some broad recommendations were provided.

Commentary

This study raises some useful points about the current state of liaison duties associated with academic librarianship. However, greater care should have been applied for selecting the most appropriate and relevant studies as models for job postings analysis. Three out of four studies cited here (Chaudhry and Komathi, 2001; Croneis and Henderson, 2002; White, 2000) have collected the job ads over the period of nine or ten years (1990-1999) (p. 329). One could argue that 313 academic job ads are not representative of all academic job postings in this current study. Due to

inappropriate sampling method and size, they have reported that only 50% of outreach library positions require liaison responsibilities. This is because there were only two job postings in this category during two months of data collection (Attebury, 2009, p. 331). The sample size should have been based on statistical methods and the total number of library job ads posted annually. The authors should have conducted a random sampling for the longer period of time to reach a more adequate sample size. In addition, the authors did not provide any rational for selecting Chronicle of Higher Education's Web site and lisjobs.com as the two resources for data collection (p. 329).

They applied a very rigid coding scheme by including only those job ads containing the term "liaison" (p. 329). While this approach increased the intercoder reliability, the content validity of analysis suffered. There were only two job ads that contained the term "liaison" in the title. This shows that the employers view liaison responsibilities very differently. Therefore, a different coding scheme to support a higher content validity should have been applied.

They have stated the limitation of their survey instrument in the second part of the study clearly. The students were not asked how many courses they had taken in their program nor whether they had prior experience working in the library. The geographical location of the students was not identified either. Since the authors have relied on convenience sampling, the 516 survey responds might not be representative of the entire population (p. 330).

There is an inconsistency on how many library schools participated in the survey. In the abstract section, the authors report that 52 library school electronic mail lists were contacted while on page 330, they report 53 schools. Also, four or five schools were not contacted at all, but the authors did not provide any explanation as to why this occurred. One could assume that Canadian schools listed in the ALA website were not contacted but this is not clear in the article.

Stronger research design, sampling methods, and evidence is required to show the extent of LIS students' knowledge about liaison activities. While the limitation of the survey affects our ability to draw a concrete conclusion, it seems that librarians-in-training will benefit from exposure to the concept of liaison roles and responsibilities. We should bear in mind that the goal of any ALA-accredited LIS program is to prepare its graduates for their first professional position as much as possible. Given the current state of liaison roles and responsibilities, it seems impossible for the curricula to capture every details of every type of job that is available. In addition, different organizations operate differently and the way employers view liaison works varies. It would be a great challenge for library schools to consider all those differences during curricula redesign.

The main implication of this study is to provide the hiring institutions and academic libraries with some understanding about the extent of LIS students' knowledge about liaison duties. They can use this information to establish orientation and training programs for new hires and create a liaison manual specific to their institution.

References

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