

E-Education: Does an Online Degree Make a Difference to Academic Library Employers?

Sara Russell Gonzalez, Kathryn Kennedy, and Pam Cenzer

Abstract

With the proliferation of traditional library science graduate programs now offering a master degree online, the question is raised as to the perceptions and prejudices associated with an online degree by academic library employers. Anecdotal evidence suggests that graduates with an online degree are sometimes perceived as possessing a less rigorous degree, lacking interpersonal skills, and devoid of a commitment to library work.

We examined this issue through a comprehensive web survey and personal interviews. Our survey, sent out through email, was designed to collect input from current MLS students, recent MLS graduates, and the search committees and hiring authorities for professional academic librarian positions. The response to our survey was tremendous, with a total number of 1,011 participants across all demographics. Additionally we conducted interviews with 19 members of the academic library community to solicit information and opinions not included in our survey.

Our results confirm that there is great anxiety by current library students about how their online degree

will be received; at the same time, the majority of academic search committee members do not make a distinction between the two delivery methods (online and traditional). While the diversity of opinions of the study participants was surprising, we found that respondents repeatedly emphasized the importance of previous experience in a library over the delivery method of library science degree. With this presentation, we hope to further discuss the taboos that exist when it comes to online degrees and provide insights for current and recent online MLS graduates as they seek academic library employment.

Introduction

The increase in reliance on technology and digital communication in the academic library is reflected in the evolving library science graduate degree. Once strictly traditional in format with students attending courses in classrooms, now many Master of Library Science (MLS) programs allow students to complete coursework online with little or no time on campus. The first signs of online courses in LS curriculum appeared in the mid

Sara Russell Gonzalez is Assistant University Librarian, Marston Science Library, University of Florida, email: sargonz@uflib.ufl.edu. Kathryn Kennedy is Engineering Outreach Librarian, Marston Science Library, University of Florida, email: katkenn@uflib.ufl.edu. Pam Cenzer is Assistant Chair, Marston Science Library, University of Florida, email: pamcenz@uflib.ufl.edu.

to late 1990s. Now, 25 out of 56 ALA-accredited programs in North America include an online component to the degree, with 13 granting degrees earned solely online. It is difficult to exactly quantify the number of graduates that obtained an online MLS degree through 2006 since the ALA does not track such differences, however, the number of online students is believed to be increasing rapidly.¹ These courses can be conducted either synchronously or asynchronously and are often operated using course management software.

This change in degree delivery has caused much discussion amongst both librarians and current library science students. Anecdotally, there appears to be some anxiety and discussion among current students and recent graduates about how the online MLS is perceived by library hiring committees.²⁻⁴ Concerns raised include that online degrees are less rigorous as compared to a traditional degree, that candidates may not possess strong interpersonal and communication skills, and that their commitment to library work is not as strong as a traditional candidate. Conversely, some discussions suggest that an online degree graduate might possess greater expertise with digital information and technology than a traditional degree graduate. Advocates of distance education highlight several additional attributes that justify the presence and increasing availability of online classes. These include the potential for reaching students who would not normally be able to attend library school, due to full-time employment, family responsibilities, or proximity to the school.

It was these types of perceptions and experiences that we sought to examine through a survey of academic librarians, current students, and recent graduates of library school. This paper will present the results of the survey, distributed over the Internet between February to June 2006, targeting these three groups of interest that generated over 1,000 responses. We also conducted interviews with 19 library faculty and administrators at the University of Florida to further investigate the issues and questions that arose from the survey responses.

Previous Studies

Three previous studies addressed the topic of the validity and perception of online library science education from the perspective of the employer. In 2003, Wynkoop published findings of a web-based survey online that addressed the library workforce's perception of MLS graduates with online degrees.⁵ Wynkoop sought responses from all types of libraries unlike this study, which focused solely upon academic libraries. Her sur-

vey, totaling 397 submissions, was completed primarily by respondents with hiring input, and she found, while the majority would hire an online degree candidate, mixed results on the perception of the equivalency of the online and traditional degrees.

Similarly, Kim and Kusack sought to characterize library employer's impressions of distance education in library science.⁶ They received survey responses from 92 academic, public, and other types of libraries posting advertisements on the LIBJOBS mailing list from October 2000 to February 2001. Kim and Kusack queried the employers as to their consideration of distance education degreed candidates with respect to traditional degree candidates. They found that, as of early 2001, the impact of distance education on the LIS job market was insignificant and that the majority of employers do not distinguish the distance degree from the traditional. Our survey, conducted in 2006, is an update to their survey since the number of distance graduates entering the library job market has increased substantially.

Recently, Wilde and Epperson presented results from a December 2004 online survey that queried 115 LIS alumni with degrees obtained through "distance education."⁷ Their broad use of the term includes online courses in addition to courses delivered off campus. Wilde and Epperson sought to characterize the experiences of these alumni while in LIS school, and our findings, while conducted 1.5 years later, contain an overlap of potential respondents.

Study Description

The survey was available online from February to June 2006. We sought academic library members with experience on hiring and search committees in the last three years (ASC), current students in an MLS program (CS), and recent graduates of an MLS program who had graduated in the last five years. To investigate graduates' experiences further, we created separate surveys for graduates who had been hired in an academic library (RGH) and those graduates still seeking academic library employment (RGSE). This paper will focus upon the findings from the search committee and recent graduate surveys. For results and discussion pertaining to the current student responses, please see the companion paper by Kennedy et al.⁸

Respondents were invited to complete the survey through website postings on LISjob.com and LiveJournal's Library Lovers, and messages posted on popular listservs including ALA's New Member's Round Table (NMRT) and NewLib. We also sent out targeted email

invitations to ARL library directors and human resource directors, library school deans, and recent library hires listed in *American Libraries* and *C&RL News*. Because we encouraged recipients to forward the survey link, the total number of potential respondents is unknown. Only interested respondents completed the survey, so the tabulated results below are suggestive rather than conclusive.

The survey response rate was tremendous, with 1,011 qualified respondents participating. Of these survey respondents, we received 183 search committee members, 610 current LS students, 155 LS graduates with an academic position, and 63 LS graduates who were still searching for employment. We were surprised at the relatively low number of respondents who identified themselves as graduates still seeking employment because of the conventional wisdom that the academic job market is currently very tight.⁹ However, this may be due to our survey distribution method as library science graduates still seeking employment may not read the librarian discussion lists or have lost contact with the librarian or library school community.

After the survey results were tabulated, we sought to further investigate the experience and opinions of recent graduates and search committee members by interviewing 19 University of Florida Libraries staff members. Thirteen of the interviews were with staff who had participated in one or more search committees within the last five years and four interviewees were recent hires. The remaining two were current MLS students. These interviews were transcribed anonymously to preserve privacy and offer insight into the findings of the survey. The majority of interview participants had also completed the appropriate survey, and thus we used those questions as a springboard to discuss online education and employment in more depth. Topics included the interviewee's educational background, opinion and knowledge of online education, and search committee experience.

Respondent Demographics

Academic Search Committee (ASC)

The academic search committee (ASC) survey asked for respondents to complete the questions only if they had been a member of a search or hiring committee (in the last three years) for a professional academic librarian position. The first academic survey committee question asked the respondents which job classification best fit their position. The majority of the 183 respondents identified themselves as Librarians (43%), followed by

Library Directors (19%), Library Chairs (12%), Associate Directors (12%), Other (6%), Human Resources (6%), and finally Paraprofessional (2%).

When asked how long they had worked in their library, the majority of respondents replied between 1 to 5 and 6 to 15 years (37%, 33%). Almost a quarter of the respondents were greater than 15 years (24%), and only 6 percent were less than one year. The geographical distribution of our respondents was equally mixed with the largest numbers located in the Southeast and North Central portions of the U.S (37%, 22%). Less sampled regions included the Northeast (14%), Pacific (11%), Southwest (10%), Rocky Mountain (4%), Canada (1%), and other (1%).

The final profile question asked how many professional search committees the respondent had served on. Surprisingly, the majority (60%) said five or more, followed by one (11%), three (11%), four (10%), and two (8%).

Recent Graduates with Employment (RGE) and Seeking Employment (RGSE)

The 155 recent graduates with employment (RGE) were first asked about their MLS course delivery. The largest group of 43 percent indicated that it was partly online, partly traditional in the classroom. Thirty-eight percent of the respondents took their courses traditionally in the classroom, followed by 18 percent completely online. Of the 63 people who completed the recent graduate seeking employment (RGSE) survey, the majority (54%) wrote that their course delivery was part online, part traditional. There were more respondents who indicated that it was obtained completely online (27%) than in the employed group. Correspondingly, less of the job-seekers completed a traditional degree (19%) as compared to the employed graduates.

The geographical location of the employed respondent's academic library was primarily in the Southeast (29%) and Northeast (27%). The next most selected locations were the North Central (17%), Pacific (10%), Southwest (9%), and Rocky Mountain (5%). Finally, Canada and other were selected by one percent of the population. The majority of graduates seeking employment are applying to libraries in the Northeast and North Central regions (25% each). The Southeast is the next popular region (20%) followed by the Pacific (15%), Southwest (10%), and other (2%).

We asked the employed graduates what other types of libraries, besides academic, they applied to for their professional position (multiple selections were allowed).

The most popular selection was public (44%), followed by other (21%), and corporate (17%). A surprisingly low number of respondents selected school libraries (2%), suggesting a strong discontinuity in employment choice of librarian candidates. Twenty-eight percent of the respondents declined to answer this question, which suggests that a portion of these candidates only applied to academic positions. The job-seeking graduates responded with similar percentages. In addition to applying to academic libraries for employment (a requirement of the survey), a majority of the job-seekers (59%) replied that they are applying to public libraries, followed by 36 percent applying to a corporate library. In contrast, very few respondents are applying to school (10%) or other (12%) types of libraries.

The final profile question we asked of the respondents was about their prior library experience before accepting their current position. Forty-eight percent had experience as a paraprofessional, 41 percent volunteered or interned, 31 percent specified "other" experience, and 6 percent had no experience prior to their professional position. This is significant because it suggests that the vast majority of employed graduates have had prior library experience. Likewise, the job-seekers also have experience working as paraprofessionals (69%) and volunteers/interns (51%), and other types of positions (27%) in a library. None of the job-seekers stated that they lacked experience working in a library.

Survey Results and Analysis

One of the goals of our survey was to characterize the experience of the academic search committee respondents with online education. The ASC respondents' experience and knowledge of online MLS degrees was of key interest because it should markedly influence their hiring outlook. We found that the vast majority of the ASC respondents (89%) do not have an either partially or entirely completed online MLS degree. Of the 11 percent that do possess an online degree, more than half have between one to five years experience in a library. This is not a surprising result since there has recently been an explosion of library science distance students.¹⁰

While this study was motivated by discussions about the online MLS in the public arena, we sought to determine the extent of awareness about the degree and the amount of discussion by the search committee. A majority (56%) of the ASC respondents replied that they had not heard or participated in conversations relating to the validity of an online MLS degree. Forty-three percent said "yes" and one percent did not answer.

This is in contrast to the response from recent graduates with employment that showed a majority of them (62%) had participated in or heard discussions relating to the validity of an online degree. Interestingly, we found the exact opposite for the RGSE respondents; 61 percent responded that they had not participated in such discussions. Similarly, the current student survey reported that 62 percent of current MLS students also had not participated in conversations about this topic either.

Inside the interview with potential librarian candidates, a significant majority of the ASC respondents (75%) stated that there were no discussions about online MLS degrees. Fourteen percent of the ASC respondents marked that their search committee did discuss the online MLS degree and ten percent could not recall. For the respondents who marked "yes," supplementary comments included that the interviews contained discussions about the nature of online coursework and the features of online course management software. Similarly, during private search committee meetings, 72 percent of the ASC respondents stated that there were no comments relating to an online MLS degree. Only 16 percent responded that there were such discussions, and 11 percent could not recall their conversations.

The recent graduate surveys provide insight into the academic library interviews from the other viewpoint. We found, as suggested by the ASC respondents, that the majority of interviews do not discuss candidate's type of degree. During the RGH professional position interviews, a majority (68%) did not receive any questions or comments as to their type of MLS degree. Thirty percent replied they did, and two percent declined to answer. During their interviews for a professional position (if any), 59 percent of the RGSE responded that they did not receive any questions or comments about their type of MLS degree. Twenty-two percent however did report having a discussion within the interview, and 19 percent declined to answer. For the 11 percent of the ASC respondents that reported possessing an online MLS degree, a slight majority (55%) responded that they recall discussion of their degree during the interview process for their own current or past professional positions.

The lack of discussion about the type of MLS degree during academic search committee interviews suggests the following questions: how aware are search committees about a candidate's type of degree? We found that a significant majority (84%) of the RGH respondents do not indicate their type of degree on their resume or cover letter. Only six percent responded that they speci-

fied their degree, and nine percent declined to answer. In agreement with the RGH population, the large majority (86%) of RGSE respondents stated that they do not specify their type of degree on their resume or cover letter. However, a majority of ASC respondents (56%) were able to specify that some or all of their searches contained candidates with an online MLS. Only 17 percent responded that they did not know whether they had online MLS candidates. This result is larger than that found by Kusack and Kim (2005) who reported that 24 percent of respondents had interviewed a distance education candidate.¹¹

One of the most important questions in the survey was whether the academic search committee member would have more confidence in an online MLS degree candidate or a traditional degree candidate who both have similar experience. The ASC respondents largely stated that it would not be a factor in their decision (73%). The remaining 26% said that they would have more confidence in the traditional degree candidate. There were no responses in favor of the online degree candidate, and 1% declined to answer. These results show a stronger belief in the equivalency of online and traditional degrees as compared to results reported by Wynkoop.¹² She found that 44 percent of the academic respondents felt that the degrees were equivalent, and 33 percent felt that the traditional degree was better. Kim and Kusack¹³ found identical results as Wynkoop with 44 percent of their participants responding that distance graduates are equivalent to traditional graduates. Similar to our findings, Wynkoop reported that only two percent felt that the online was better.

Further examination of the responses reveals that 90 percent of the ASC respondents who possess an online MLS stated that it would not be a factor in their decision. On the other hand, for the ASC respondents who possess a traditional degree, that percentage is much lower at 70 percent. It is interesting that, even among the respondents possessing an online MLS degree, no one felt that an online candidate was to be preferred over a traditional degree holder.

A question that can be explored is whether years of experience affect the perception of the type of degree. The ASC survey revealed that of the 48 respondents who prefer a traditional degree candidate, the group with the largest response (34%) was committee members with 6 to 15 years of experience.

What do the recent graduate respondents think about how an academic library employer perceives an online MLS degree? The RGE displayed mixed opin-

ions on what type of impact an online degree has upon a search for a professional position. Forty-five percent were not sure, 23 percent believed it has a negative impact, 21 percent stated it had no impact, and only 8 percent replied that it had a positive impact upon finding employment. We found, for the respondents who replied that an online degree had a positive or no impact upon a search, only six percent specified their type of degree on their cover letter or resume. The majority (86%) of the RGSE population do not feel that their type of degree has hindered their job search. Sixty-one percent of these graduates seeking employment are not sure what impact an online degree has upon a search for a professional position. Ten percent feel that it is positive, and 14 percent see it as a negative impact. The same percentage, 14 percent, stated that they believe it has no impact at all upon the job search. Interestingly, the current students appear to be much more confident that an online degree will have no impact upon their job search. Forty-three percent of the students taking online courses felt that it would have no impact, and 37 percent replied that they weren't sure. The above mixed results differ from those found by Wilde and Epperson¹⁴ where 85 percent of the respondents felt that others perceived distance education degrees as comparable to a traditional degree.

Discussion and Conclusions

In corroboration with the previous surveys addressing employer's perceptions, we found that the majority of employers do not express a preference about degree when faced with equal traditional and online degree applicants. This question generated a large number of responses from the survey participants, and, from their volunteered statements, it is apparent that there is a diversity of opinions regarding online MLS degrees. Of the participants that stated that type of degree played no part in their decision, the majority of statements emphasized that it was the candidate's skills and experience that mattered, not the degree type. Some of their comments included: "We are interested in the skills and abilities of the person applying, not their instructor's skills." "When we hire, we are looking for skills, experience, and potential. We are not concerned with 'how' they earned their degrees." "I look much more at practical experience, even that done as a practicum or field experience for school credits, than I look at the degree. The degree for me is pretty much a 'has it' or 'does not have it' thing." In the student survey, one student said a faculty librarian at her library said she would "never hire

a librarian who had earned their degree entirely online.” The same student asked another librarian at the school, and “he was of the opinion that, as long as you’re the right ‘fit’ for the position, it doesn’t really matter how you earned your MLIS.”

The comments for the respondents who preferred a traditional candidate were mixed. Many emphasized the belief that traditional courses provide opportunities for personal interaction and development of communication skills that are not present in online courses. “I would place a value on the live interactions and interplay that are a part of being physically at an academic institution.” “Exposure to classmates and professors in person is an important part of the educational experience, relative to expressing and sharing ideas in an interactive environment.”

Additionally, many of the respondents who preferred a traditional candidate wrote about a general lack of knowledge or experience with online degree education, such as: “Still too few online degree holders for comparison with traditional degree holders in the marketplace” and “I am familiar, therefore more comfortable with the traditional degree program.” The importance of possessing a familiarity with online education is underscored by the finding that the ASC respondents holding an online degree were more favorable to an online candidate than the respondents holding a traditional degree. These results and statements highlight the need for online library programs to better educate the library community about the strengths of their programs and course offerings.

Another issue of direct relevance to academic libraries that was discussed by several interviewees is the possibility that receiving a traditional degree provides a student with exposure to academic life. At many academic libraries, librarians are considered faculty and thus can bear the same sort of tenure responsibilities as typical teaching and research faculty. Without this immersion into academic life, some interviewees speculated that it could be difficult for a student to be fully prepared to join the academic ranks. One interviewee stated: “I often wonder when I talk to some of the other newer faculty, when they have trouble with tenure and it’s such a daunting thing for them, I wonder if maybe, because I know that some of them are online degree recipients, I wonder if some of that is because they don’t have as much experience with the academic world.”

Preferences for traditional over online candidates aside, we found that the majority of search committee interviews do not discuss type of degree, and the major-

ity of candidates do not offer that information in their cover letter or application. Therefore, it is possible that many search committees are unknowingly interviewing candidates with partially or fully-completed online degrees. As one respondent stated: “It’s [online degree] not something that’s asked about in the typical interview process for us, unless it’s relevant to the specific job.” A recently employed graduate commented: “Sometimes I volunteered the information if it was relevant to our discussion, but I was never asked ‘what type of degree do you have?’”

The lack of an in-depth discussion about a candidate’s MLS degree during the interview leads to one of our most striking findings. From the surveys and interviews, a point that was emphasized repeatedly was that experience trumps education, including name of institution, grades, and awards. A search committee member wrote in their survey: “candidate experience and excellent oral and written communication skills are bigger factors than how a degree was obtained.” Another interviewee commented, “It’s the experience that I am really looking for. I have thought about whether I really care about what institution people have their degrees from, and I don’t think I care that much. I care more about what their experience has been.” Recent graduates and students need to be aware of this due to its implications for the selection of a graduate school, skills obtained and emphasized, and coursework. The emphasis that academic library employers place upon prior experience is definite cause for library schools to stress the importance of practicums and/or internships to their students, especially those who are new to the field.

The implications from this study point to the need for a more broad investigation into how academic employers perceive the MLS. To obtain our study respondents, we contacted individuals at ARL libraries which limited responses to perspectives from large, well-endowed academic libraries. Small colleges and medium-sized academic libraries may have differing views about hiring, and this angle needs to be explored more fully. The results also suggest that additional research into what qualities academic library employers are seeking in recent graduates is needed. If education, as suggested above, isn’t valued as highly as experience, the content and curriculum of the MLS as a terminal degree for librarians needs to be examined by the library community in more detail. The above results and comments also point out a need for an increase in dialogue between library schools and academic library employers.

Notes

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