

A Longitudinal Study of Connectedness and Information Flow

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ABSTRACT

Social networks formed in MLIS classroom settings can affect students' career trajectories after graduation. However, in online learning environments, students often feel isolated and disconnected from their peers. In fact, students who graduated from online or primarily online MLIS programs may not have access to resources such as employment opportunities that traditional peer networks offer. Despite the rise in enrollments in online courses and popularity of distance education in US colleges and universities, little research has been done to investigate the important role such social networks play in graduates' career and employment prospects. This study thus attempts to do so, by examining the career trajectories of graduates from six MLIS programs. In particular, it analyzes the ways in which social networking, especially in terms of the exchange of employment information, evolved over a 3-year period after graduation.

TOPICS

Education programs/schools; Online learning; Students

INTRODUCTION

Library and information science (LIS) programs in the United States (US) offer an array of graduate degree programs and specializations designed to prepare students for careers in librarianship, knowledge management, and information science. Since their inception in the late 1990s, online courses and even entire online graduate programs have become increasingly common in the LIS field (Kazmer, 2007; Oguz, Chu, & Chow, 2015). These online programs provide several advantages for students, especially those for whom jobs, families, geographical distance, or other factors make it difficult to attend on-campus classes. However, these online courses and degree programs pose some challenges as well. For example, in not interacting in the same face-to-face way that occurs in a traditional classroom, online students report a sense of disconnectedness and isolation (Oguz et al., 2015; Park, 2008; Slagter van Tryon & Bishop, 2009). For such online programs, there is the challenge of forming professional networks with instructors and peers to the same extent as those attending face-to-face classes (Oguz, 2015).

Such professional networks can be vital for attaining jobs and for advancing in one's career (Cannata, 2011; Granovetter, 1974, 2005)

When LIS programs lack residency requirements, students establish fewer social ties with their peers and do not have the same ability to leverage social networks instrumental to their professional careers (Emler & McNamara, 1996; Kazmer, 2006). On the other hand, students taking face-to-face classes have more opportunities to develop the kind of social networks that alleviate the challenges of loneliness and foster the development of supportive social networks (Haythornthwaite, Kazmer, Robins, & Shoemaker, 2000; Kazmer, 2007).

Problem Statement

Finding employment is a function not only of strong academic preparation; it is also a function of the methods such as social networking used to obtain information about job openings (Granovetter, 1995; Huang & Western, 2011). Social networks developed through student-to-student, student-to-faculty, and professional interactions in face-to-face settings may influence students' career and employment prospects. Despite increasing online offerings, little research has been done to examine the differences in social networks of those who earned their degrees in different course or program modalities. This study uses a unique angle towards analyzing online education in the LIS field. It measures the extent to which online education in LIS programs is connected to graduates' success in forming social networks that they can use in the early years of their careers. In particular, the study compares social network characteristics (e.g., socioeconomic status of contacts, frequency and length of relationships with contacts) of graduates of online LIS programs with that of traditional face-to-face LIS programs.

The study draws upon theories about social networks from sociology, such as the strength of weak ties (Granovetter, 1983), social resources (Lin, 2000) and structural holes (Burt, 2009), and it also uses sociological research methods (ego-centric social network analysis). Until now, longitudinal analysis of ego-centric social networks with alter-alter ties has been very limited (Crossley et al., 2015).

This longitudinal panel research aims to develop a better understanding of the effect of differential access to resources available in social connections. The research focuses on connections used to exchange employment-related information upon graduation and two years after graduation. The following research questions guided the study:

- 1- What are the employment characteristics of MLIS graduates?
- 2- What are the socioeconomic characteristics of graduates' contacts?
- 3- How do socioeconomic characteristics of contacts change over time?
 - a. How do contacts' socioeconomic characteristics resemble that of the graduate?
 - b. Is there a relationship between different instruction modalities and socioeconomic characteristics of contacts and types of contacts?

METHODS

The study focused on graduates of LIS programs who completed their MLIS degree requirements in programs that offer courses partially online, completely online, or in-person. Students who graduated in the Spring or Summer 2013 semesters in six ALA-accredited programs in the US were invited to participate in the study. These programs were purposely selected not only to include those that are primarily online or mainly face-to-face, but also to include a range of online/face-to-face class ratios.

Since the research attempted to explore the connectedness of MLIS graduates and how it contributes to their employment prospects, an egocentric approach (Borgatti & Halgin, 2012; DeJordy & Halgin, 2008; Haythornthwaite, 1996) was selected to investigate the relationships that graduates had with others who provided assistance in their pursuit of new employment opportunities. This approach was suitable as it was not possible to describe the boundaries of the graduates' overall networks. To minimize the challenges of recalling data, graduates were asked to look back over the last six months (Burt, 1984) when identifying contacts with whom they exchanged information related to employment opportunities.

An online survey questionnaire was administered to collect the data. The questionnaire consisted of basic demographic questions about the respondent and two sets of multiple-response items adapted from Granovetter (1995) and Burt (1997) to measure tie strength (e.g., emotional closeness, relationship duration) with additional items created to address specific aspects of the research questions (socioeconomic status of contacts) and alter-alter relationships. Respondents answered close-ended questions which provided a limited number of opportunities for brief explanation or expansion.

Three schools provided contact information of their graduates whereas others offered to disseminate the questionnaire via their mailing lists. A total of 103 usable responses were received in the first year. This same panel of respondents were invited to participate in subsequent iterations of the survey. A total of 52 usable responses were received in the next year, and 44 in the final year of the study.

Data Analysis & Results

Complete data analysis is still being conducted, but the data analysis will be completed in time to present at the ALISE 2019 conference. The researchers expect to identify differences in graduate's social networks based on program modalities.

Responses related to graduates' personal social networks will be analyzed using E-Net (Borgatti & Halgin, 2012), a software program for analyzing ego-centric network data, and SPSS statistical analyses software. Analysis of alter variables will be analyzed using parametric and non-parametric tests as appropriate.

IMPLICATIONS AND RELATION TO THE CONFERENCE THEME

The study addresses the research needs around the social impact of online LIS programs. It supports teaching by examining personal and professional outcomes of students' experiences while in school. The findings of this research also can enhance information professionals' professional identity development as they grow in their positions and expand their social networks by examining evolution of their social networks. The study also supports research by providing a foundation for future studies, pointing to the need for further investigation into the socialization process in professional education, especially in an online environment, and its impact on professional development. It also suggests new areas of exploration.

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