

“12pm Eastern, 11am Central, 10am Mountain”: Student Contributions to Research on Rural and Small Public Libraries

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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the role and contributions of master’s students as members of the research team on an IMLS-funded research project on health and wellness programming in rural and small libraries. On this project, students learn myriad aspects of both research and practice, including how to collaborate on a complex project, how libraries function, particularly in this case, rural and small libraries, how to analyze, plan, and evaluate, and how to develop programming.

ALISE RESEARCH TAXONOMY TOPICS

public libraries; education programs/schools; students; community engagement; research methods.

AUTHOR KEYWORDS

student education and research; rural and small public libraries; health and wellness

INTRODUCTION

We often think of LIS student research as being situated within the realm of doctoral education. Research is the *raison d’être* for preparing future faculty. In fact, many LIS programs do not require a research methods class in their master’s programs, and many students avoid them even if they are available, either due to not realizing their relevance to their prospective

careers or due to a fear of becoming enmeshed in something they might not understand. Yet, future information professionals will, indeed, need to have an ability to perform research for multiple reasons whether to promote their libraries to funding agencies and boards, or to prove to administrators that their organizations are providing effective services. And they can learn these skills while working with faculty on research that examines the roles of public libraries in rural and small communities.

“12 Eastern, 11, Central, 10 Mountain” is the mantra for setting up the next meeting for work on the IMLS funded grant, Community Health and Wellness: Small and Rural Library Practices, Perspectives, and Programs, to make sure everyone in each time zone knows when to meet. The goals of this paper are two-fold. First, it discusses health and wellness programming in small and rural public libraries, which is the focus of the grant, then, the ways in which incorporating master’s students into this IMLS grant-funded project contributes to their developing myriad skills related not only to research, but to working together from multiple locations and staying connected through their own social network to help with planning, evaluating, and analyzing.

BACKGROUND

Rural and small public libraries contributing to the health of their communities.

Seventy-seven percent of rural counties are bereft of health professionals, suffering from increased hospital closings, and, thus, poor access to health care ([2017 ALA report](#); [Health Resources & Services Administration](#), 2017; [Rural Health Information Hub](#), 2017). Situated within these environments are rural and small public libraries, which are among the most valued institutions in their communities ([Pew Research Center](#), 2013), often functioning as entities that address health and wellness through resources and public programs (Bonnici & Ma, 2019; Perryman & Jeng, 2020).

In recent years, public library programming has increased, often focusing on health and wellness (Luo, 2018) in the forms of gardening classes, healthy eating, e-health mobile app classes, and health screenings for people of all ages. Bonnici and Ma (2019) described a Blue Zones (BZ) project, whose goals are to advocate for health and wellness in communities around the world. They were interested in learning about public library roles in health and wellness and how these might intersect with the BZ project goals. They found that library directors had many ideas, but implementing them had little support from government. Lenstra’s (2018) interviews with individuals from 39 library systems in North Carolina found that library staff were excited to be able to implement movement programs in their facilities, and that one of the best opportunities occurred during summer reading programs, which included fitness activities such as sports, exercise, and games. To address another facet of health and wellness, the Public Library Association and National Network of Libraries of Medicine (NNLM) have worked together to produce medical resources that public libraries can use when interacting with the general public (Dixon, 2017). As well, OCLC/WebJunction and NNLM have supported health-literacy-related services in public libraries, and public libraries were very involved in helping patrons sign up for the Affordable Care Act (Vardell & Charbonneau, 2017).

However, despite there being some support for such programming, whether through physical fitness or health information provision, in general, rural and small libraries experience barriers that larger libraries may not: resources. Most rural and small libraries serve populations of fewer than 10,000 people, and are only open part time (Swine, Grimm, & Owens, 2013). An IMLS research brief noted that rural and small libraries serve their communities by offering myriad “critical services and information resources” that offer their patrons much-needed support that extends beyond what is thought of as “traditional library services” (p. 9), but often it is hard for those libraries to maintain staff (p. 1), and of those staff, only 1/3 have master’s degrees in LIS, which can, in and of itself, bring challenges.

Professional development: learning by doing.

Students arrive at LIS schools having a wide variety of experiences (Lamb, 2016). Some have been working in libraries for a long time while others are completely new to the field and have only a sprinkling of knowledge as to what it comprises beyond having been patrons of libraries. Thus, it is important to offer experiences beyond classroom learning to not only expose students to various types of information environments, but to deepen their knowledge and understanding of a wide-ranging spectrum of what constitutes working in the field.

Much has been written attesting to the need to re-envision LIS education within the context of the 21st century (Abels, 2016). Some of this re-envisioning refers to adopting and adapting to new forms of technology and transforming libraries creatively, perhaps by promoting types of entrepreneurship or being leaders in developing innovative ways of interacting with communities (Abels, 2016; Heseltine, 2020). Abels (2016) writes that “we must look beyond settings and skill sets generally associated with LIS professionals” (p. 85). Heseltine (2020) suggests thinking about public libraries in terms of their “socioeconomic and cultural impact” (p. 4) and as ever-evolving flexible enterprises that focus on community engagement as a programming resource. Within this vein of promoting community involvement, Overbey (2020) stresses the community impact of public libraries in food deserts and health and wellness programming.

Field experiences are generally considered essential to educating future LIS professionals not only to increase their employability, but to also offer experiences that contribute to their understanding of the connections between research and practice and to foster their identities as librarians (Hoffman & Berg, 2014; Rubenstein, 2017). Librarians often lament that “I didn’t learn that in library school,” but offering field opportunities can alleviate some of these concerns. Perryman and Jeng (2020) described a Texas Women’s University SLIS scholarship program (funded through an IMLS Laura Bush 21st Century Librarians grant) that expands LIS education to include community involvement and participatory research as a way for online students to engage with libraries in their own rural communities, as well as to “develop a new generation of librarians highly competent in using data and technology to empower their own communities” (p. 103). In terms of health and wellness programming and awareness as they relate to public libraries, students are often unaware of the work outside of book lending that libraries do; providing opportunities to be involved in research opens their eyes to new possibilities (Rubenstein, 2017).

CONNECTING GRANT RESEARCH TO EXPERIENTIAL MASTER'S EDUCATION

This grant project seeks to obtain an in-depth understanding of health and wellness programs in small and rural public libraries, how they collaborate with outside organizations to provide these programs, how library staff envision their roles within this context, and how outside collaborators and patrons perceive involvement with library health and wellness programs. On the one hand, there are small and rural libraries that *have* been able to provide programs, but others encounter many barriers. Some of the goals of the research are to develop a model that draws on the results of the research and includes ideas for libraries to draw on to start and sustain health and wellness programs, as well as to create training modules for LIS educators and students in collaboration with research participants.

The project consists of at least 16 case studies of library systems and individual public libraries in small and/or rural areas in the following states: Oklahoma, Vermont, Michigan, and North Carolina. Four individual libraries from each of these four states will be studied, as will, where applicable, the library systems of which those libraries are part. The states chosen for the study represent a cross-section of health rankings (United Health Foundation, 2020): one with very high health scores, one with very low health scores, and two falling somewhere in the middle. As well, each state is very different in terms of infrastructure and state agency involvement in health and health literacy initiatives in conjunction with public libraries, which offers interesting contrasts.

A unique aspect for the graduate student research assistants is that the work presents an opportunity to learn about and focus on how public libraries engage their users and address *health and wellness* in their communities; these aspects of public libraries are often not taught on a regular basis in LIS programs, if at all. Some schools offer courses, concentrations, and programs related to health and medical librarianship or health informatics, but often in reference to medical environments such as academic health sciences libraries, systems, and data analytics. Yet public libraries often play a crucial role towards introducing health information to their patrons, as well as offering ongoing health-and-wellness-related programming that patrons might not be able to obtain elsewhere due to cost (Lenstra, 2018; Lenstra & D'Arpa, 2019; Rubenstein, 2017).

As access to healthcare in small and rural communities has diminished, the role of public libraries as resources in these communities has expanded. By offering an opportunity for MLIS students to participate in research studying such communities' libraries in both a hands-on capacity as well as a research capacity, students are learning both the situatedness of various communities and the intricacies of research. Working with faculty and other students enriches the experience and knowledge of collaborative research, increasing understanding of grant-funded work in particular.

What is the role of the student collaborators in this endeavor? In this particular study, three graduate students attending primarily online LIS programs while living in three different states are collaborating with faculty to gather and analyze data from public libraries in four states (some of which coincide with students' locations but others which do not). In a potential array of confusion, the graduate student in Oklahoma is being shared by two faculty, who along with the student, live in Oklahoma; however, one of those faculty members is doing research in Vermont. Another graduate student and associated faculty member living in Michigan are doing research

in Michigan, while the third graduate student lives in Colorado but attends classes online in North Carolina, where the fourth faculty member lives and is doing the research.

On the face of it, these multiple locations could present some challenges, but in practice, the project is working due not only to the collaborative relationship among the faculty, but to the collaborative relationships being built among the students themselves, who have strived to develop their own social network with each other as they make their way through the research activities. On their own, they have initiated a shared online workspace where they can exchange ideas, and schedule their own online meetings and phone calls in addition to the regular team meetings with faculty. These graduate students bring different experiences to the grant project in terms of prior work and educational experiences, including knowledge of and different ways of thinking about technology, all of which serves to enhance the experience both for them and for the faculty. Together they brainstorm solutions to various challenges and tasks within the project, rather than merely working on their own.

Students on this grant (as many students in LIS) came into their LIS programs with only partial ideas about the complexity of libraries and other information environments and with little formal social science research experience. One student had come from a user experience design background who “did not think of a library as a resource that adapts to community needs” (G. Schneider, personal communication, March 3, 2020); another was aware that public libraries offered “all sorts of education, reference, and readers advisory” (R. Floyd, personal communication, March 3, 2020) but was less aware of the range of resources offered; and the third had “a mental image of a professional at a public library or a school library working with patrons, catalogues, reference and other paper and book tasks. Now...I see this as a gross understatement and cliché” (A. Rose, personal communication, March 2, 2020).

Within the first year of this grant, students have broadened their perceptions of both public libraries and scholarly research. Interviews for the project have been conducted by faculty alone in some cases and in conjunction with students when possible. The students have listened to the interviews, transcribed them, and offered their own perceptions on themes they have noticed in the first round of analysis. They have identified interesting elements found in the interviews, and at the same time offered perspectives on what they are seeing in library calendars, websites, Facebook and Twitter; one student stated, “So far my research on rural public libraries...has centered around examining social media related to health and wellness programs. I doubt I would have exposure to this type of programming promotion if I was not working on this grant” (G. Schneider, personal communication, March 3, 2020). The students’ work has been crucial to successful administration of the grant and in deriving thoughtful observations that will help in developing our model and modules important to the grant’s completion, but it has also been crucial to their own understanding and knowledge of what happens in public libraries and in research settings.

One research assistant stated,

I had no working experience in public libraries prior to starting the MLIS program...I knew public libraries provided all sorts of education, reference and readers advisory, but I thought a lot of the education was in technology and the reference was mostly where to find things in the library...Working with this grant has shown me...that understanding the local community – both the resources and

the people – is critical in creating useful and effective programming and collections (R. Floyd, personal communication, March 3, 2020).

In addition to analysis and depending on their location, students on the grant are gaining valuable experience in field work while accompanying the researchers on interviews and touring libraries. Their work comprises direct observation on-site that affords them a more expansive view of public librarianship while interacting with library directors, staff, and patrons.

Another research assistant noted,

My work with the grant has been especially eye-opening when it comes to understanding rural library systems...many are focusing on the critical needs of the community, especially in health and medical topics, such as programs to help educate patrons on nutrition, health literacy, and health conditions that can make healthy living difficult. Librarians are looking for ways to feed the community's children during the summer, help older generations figure out their social security rewards on computers they are unfamiliar on how to operate, and provide services that may not otherwise exist in the town or even the county...Many ...echo the same virtue: even if they can help only one person who seeks out their assistance, then it is all worth it, to know they improved something for that one patron (A. Rose, March 2, 2020).

Through this project, the research assistants are becoming more attuned to the complex network of partners who work with public libraries, including nonprofits, government, and private businesses interested in health and wellness, and how such collaborations contribute to the library as a place in the community. The students are examining pertinent documents such as annual reports and strategic plans, which are required by some state libraries for continued financial support, and learning about ethical research practices. As well, they are engaged in practical activities not normally found in the classroom, such as interacting with Advisory Board members who are deeply rooted in work related to the grant – some with public libraries, others through research in public health.

With many LIS programs being online and not requiring students' presence on campus, there are fewer opportunities for them to work as funded GAs, and often the opportunities that do exist for on-campus students are in their schools' academic libraries and not public libraries. The work the research assistants are doing for this grant makes their LIS education "real" in the vein of practicums, internships, and class projects that ask students to 1) contact and interview librarians or other stakeholders; 2) observe library activities in order to gain information relevant to the field; or 3) to identify and gather documents such as annual reports and strategic plans.

INTO THE FUTURE

At the time of this writing, our grant has not yet reached its one-year mark out of the three years allocated but data gathering has been in "full steam ahead" mode. The students have been gaining experiences, information, and perspectives not only about library and information science research, but about public libraries and, especially, rural and small public libraries and their unique roles within their communities.

The students have already been incorporating what they have learned into their classes, "I've started thinking about health literacy...in a new context and have done or am working on

several course projects with the theme of physical health and the library. More and more I want to work in a public library helping develop health and wellness programming and collections”; and “My experience working on this grant continues to support the idea that public libraries should evolve and provide programming based on their community needs” (R. Floyd, personal communication, March 2, 2020).

As we go forward, we anticipate that our students will not only learn but make valuable and significant contributions to this research. As a number of us learned ourselves as students in our master’s and PhD programs, LIS students are more than students preparing for a profession; they are junior colleagues who have much to offer and from whom we, too, learn. While “12 Eastern, 11, Central, 10 Mountain” is indicative of the need for clarifying when each team meeting will occur, it has been clear that the experiential work of research has and will continue to contribute to the students’ perspectives on libraries, especially public libraries, health and wellness, and, of course, how research is done and how it can be activated in their education.

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