



Evidence Summary

Master's Students in an Information Studies Program Enter the Program with Excitement and Leave with Concerns about Professional Preparation for their Chosen Fields

A Review of:

Cherry, J. M., Duff, W. M., Singh, N., & Freund, L. (2011). Student perceptions of the information professions and their master's program in information studies. *Library & Information Science Research*, 33(2), 120-131. doi:10.1016/j.lisr.2010.09.004

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Abstract

Objective – To assess master's students' perceptions of their information studies program with regard to the program's academic quality and professional preparation as it moved to become an iSchool.

Design – Longitudinal survey, employing both quantitative analysis of demographics and closed responses, and thematic analysis of open-ended responses.

Setting – University of Toronto, Canada, Faculty of Information, Master of Information Studies (MIS) ALA-accredited program.

Subjects – Students enrolled in the MIS program from fall 2003 to spring 2007.

Methods – Between 2003 and 2007, a self-administered confidential questionnaire was distributed eight times: a short version of the questionnaire to incoming students in the fall term over the four years, and a longer version to the entire MIS student body in the spring term of the four years. Thus, individual students participated in the survey multiple times. Survey questions fell into four categories: program assessment, perceptions on the information professions, career and personal achievements, and demographics. The first questionnaire was mailed in paper form; after that, Web-based questionnaires were used. Quantitative data collected was

analyzed using SPSS, version 17, and open-ended responses were examined for recurring themes.

Main Results – Across the four years of the survey, researchers obtained about 1,000 completed questionnaires. The response rate was always higher in the fall term than in the spring term, ranging from a high of 67% in fall 2003, to a low of 47% in spring 2007 which seemed to indicate “fatigue” with the study (p. 124). Respondents primarily were interested in the information professions and the majority planned to work in one of them (archives, library systems, or library and information science) after graduating. No statistically significant differences relating to the year the survey was completed were found for student perceptions of career prospects or for amount of computer knowledge required. A statistically significant difference was found for perceptions of new students of occupational prestige for archivists and librarians; it increased over the four years. The majority of students surveyed over the four years indicated that: 1) job prospects would grow, 2) required computer knowledge was high and would increase in the next five years, and 3) computer and systems-related tracks garnered higher perceived social status than the archivist and librarian “streams.” Students who had been in the program longer (completing nine or more courses) more strongly supported the master’s program’s move to an iSchool with more emphasis on technology and computing, and an increased emphasis on professional work. These students were also less positive about their academic programs than the students who had completed less coursework. Open-ended responses echoed many other studies pointing to social status assigned to library professionals being lower than the opinion of the students themselves.

Conclusion – The authors’ longitudinal approach and survey methodology revealed perceptual differences between new and more veteran MIST students at the University of Toronto of their master’s program, and that as students progressed through the program,

they felt the need for more professional preparation. Between 2008 and 2010, the authors conducted similar studies regarding the perceptions of students at five other Canadian institutions, and planned to survey students at many other North American graduate library science programs via Web-based questionnaire to compare findings cross-institutionally.

Commentary

This survey vetted some 1,000 returned questionnaires, a good response rate although administered at only one institution. The method of pretesting for questionnaires is not explained nor are the “small number of changes and additions” made in the four years of its use (p. 123). As the authors note, due to anonymity in questionnaires, individual responses could not be tracked over the four years, which would have supplied valued insight.

The study setting’s move to an iSchool is not expounded upon in this study, nor what that transition specifically meant to students surveyed. Questions regarding future program directions were only asked in the final survey in spring 2007, so conclusions drawn from this question only asked in one term cannot be extrapolated to a larger group. It would be worthwhile to explore the concept of the “iSchools phenomenon” (Wallace, 2009) more in-depth, perhaps surveying students fully in the midst of it, both within this institution and at others.

An internship or other practicum is not required at the program studied, as it is in many other accredited information studies programs. It is not surprising, therefore, that the majority of students commented on the need for more professional preparation without this component. Library school educators and practitioners can immediately take from this that they should examine their own programs to ensure that there are sufficient and diverse opportunities such as practica, job shadowing, and paid internships

available to students throughout their program of study. This study also brings to bear the continuing question of balance between theory and practice in professional study. The data and insights revealed here can further assist those involved in graduate library and information science education in planning and assessment.

This study was carried out before some of the more recent explosion in information technology in society at large (social media, ubiquitous nature of handheld devices) of the latter part of the decade and into the present one. In particular, the use of social media is now used in all fields within the profession. In a reiteration of this study, it would be worthwhile to include questions on this topic

and how it impacts information studies programs and preparation for employment. Additional longitudinal studies could also track perceptions of students just after graduation and well into their professional careers in the three tracks examined (archives, information systems, and library and information science).

References

- Wallace, D. P. (2009). The iSchools, education for librarianship, and the voice of doom and gloom. *The Journal of Academic Librarianship*, 35(5), 405-409. doi:10.1016/j.acalib.2009.07.001