



Evidence Summary

Online Programs and Geographic Proximity are Key Determinants of Information Professionals' Interest in Pursuing Post-Master's Education at the Doctoral Level

A Review of:

Powell, Ronald R. and Susan E. Boling. "Post-Master's Educational Needs of Information Professionals." *Journal of Access Services* 3.4 (2005): 29-43.

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Objective – To investigate post-master's educational needs and interests of information professionals.

Design – Survey research using print and electronic questionnaires.

Setting – The geographic area surrounding Wayne State University in Michigan, United States of America.

Subjects – Members of the library associations of Michigan, Ohio, Indiana, and Southwestern Ontario, Canada.

Methods – Systematic random samples were derived from the membership lists of the library associations in Ohio, Indiana, and Southwestern Ontario. Paper

questionnaires were mailed to those selected. Michigan Library Association's official policy barred the release of its membership list to researchers. Consequently, announcements of the survey were placed in three successive issues of the Association's electronic newsletter. Interested members were directed to a web site to complete an electronic version of the questionnaire. This option was also extended to members of the other three library associations. The overall research question was investigated through specific questions that sought to ascertain the overall level of interest in professional library and information studies (LIS) education, levels of interest in specific types of programs, factors that favoured or deterred enrolment in doctoral programs, as well as the fields of

study that were preferred for combination with LIS in doctoral programs. With the exception of demographic type questions (e.g., place of residence and educational qualifications) and two questions that required open ended responses, the questionnaire design encompassed questions with Likert scale type responses. Analysis of the responses included descriptive statistics, the use of Pearson chi-square to determine statistically significant relationships, and, to a lesser extent, content analysis.

Main Results – A total of 270 questionnaires (33%) were returned from three populations: Ohio, Indiana, and Ontario. A self-selected sample of 101 members (6%) of the Michigan Library Association responded. In general, almost 80% of the respondents admitted some importance to adding to their LIS qualification. However, only 41% felt that this was important or extremely important. From a choice of six educational offerings, namely, continuing education activities, non-degree master's coursework, a second master's degree, post-master's certification, doctoral programs, and other, continuing education activities was the most valued, by 65.5% of the respondents.

Participants were asked about their reasons, and the importance of these, for considering or deciding to enrol in an LIS doctoral program. The yearning to acquire knowledge was reported by 69.7% as the major reason, followed by 45.8% of the respondents who cited the wish to increase their income potential. In terms of major factors, prestige received the lowest rating, 21.1%. The time involved (73.8%), cost (66.3%), and distance from the program (63.2%) were cited as the major deterrents to enrolling in doctoral programs.

When asked about the likelihood of pursuing a doctoral LIS program in combination with business administration,

computer science, or without any combination, "not likely" was the most popular choice. Those who were very likely or likely to pursue a joint program totalled approximately 30% of the respondents, while 37% indicated an interest in undertaking a doctorate in LIS only. The most frequent reasons proffered by those who selected "not likely" or "definitely not" for any of the three doctoral offerings included lack of interest, mitigating factors (e.g. time, cost, age, and program location), unfavourable cost/benefit analysis, preference for another area of knowledge, and the view that Ph.D.s were only useful for university faculty. Given the option to name subject areas that they desired to see combined with LIS in a doctoral program, 23 of 101 respondents proposed education, while 19 opted for public administration.

A question inviting any other comments on the issue of post-master's education yielded a predominant desire for "non traditional instruction," particularly online courses as well as classes held in convenient locations. In terms of relationships between geographic location and factors that influenced interest in enrolling in a doctoral program, the desire "to become a more effective manager," and "other" were statistically significant. The analysis also revealed a strong positive relationship between willingness to pursue an LIS-only doctoral program and the availability of such a program in geographic proximity. Similarly, there was a strong relationship between willingness to pursue an LIS program in close vicinity and the importance that was given to further LIS education.

Conclusion – Online instruction and geographic proximity are key determinants of information professionals' interest in pursuing post-master's education at the doctoral level. Continuing education activities, non-degree coursework, and

certificate programs are preferred over doctoral LIS programs, despite the finding that the major reason for enrolling in doctoral LIS programs is to fulfill the desire for knowledge acquisition. Schools offering Library and Information Science studies need to explore options for providing distance-education doctoral LIS programs as a means of reversing the current shortage of LIS faculty.

Commentary

This research was critically appraised using the EBLIP Critical Appraisal Checklist developed by Lindsay Glynn. The study investigated the post-master's education needs of information professionals. The methodology employed was a questionnaire survey administered to representative samples of members of three of the four library associations in the geographic area of choice. The survey methodology and sampling technique were suitable for the research question. The researchers admitted, however, that the self-selected nature and small size of the sample of respondents from the Michigan Library Association "limited the generalizability of the results for that group" (32). With regard to this group, the use of an additional method of data collection (e.g. focus group) could have served to increase the validity of the findings, since it is possible that the post-master's educational needs of those who did not volunteer to respond, could be different. Additionally, while the overall response rate was 33%, the response rates for Indiana and Ontario were 29% and 13% respectively. These response rates suggest the possibility of some degree of non-response bias. The study stated that 43 respondents possessed qualifications that were not an MLIS. It would have been useful for an analysis to be conducted in order to ascertain whether their responses differed significantly from persons with the MLIS qualification.

Nevertheless, despite these limitations the conclusions accurately reflect the analysis.

No suggestions were provided for further areas of research. Nonetheless, future research of this nature would benefit from an examination of information professionals' post-master's educational needs in the context of the practice specializations of respondents (e.g., special, academic, public, and school librarianship). Such a study would expand the knowledge base pertinent to the post-master's educational needs of informational professionals beyond current literature, which the researchers themselves acknowledged as having focused predominantly on the field of academic librarianship. The researchers chose to focus their study on the geographic area close to Wayne State University. Replication of this research in other geographic areas would be useful for comparative purposes and generalizability.

This article is significant to the field of LIS since it provides insight into the wide spectrum of interests that practitioners have in the sphere of post-MLIS education. In terms of library and information practice, LIS schools as well as professional associations need to find ways to provide the variety of desired post-MLIS educational programs, and in the case of doctoral studies, in online mode. Ph.D. qualified librarians are needed to serve as faculty for MLIS programs. This need was underscored by the researchers who alluded to looming shortage of teaching faculty in LIS schools (Berry 20). Moreover, through the process of obtaining a Ph.D., librarians will build competencies in undertaking high quality quantitative and qualitative research, including longitudinal studies. Such research is requisite not only to increasing the literature in the LIS field, but also to improving the knowledge base of the profession, towards facilitating

evidence-based library and information practice.

Works Cited

Berry, John. "LIS Boom Spurs New Faculty Push." Library Journal 124.4 (2002): 20.

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