

# Teaching social work concepts to LIS students

<sup>a</sup>Sarah C. Johnson

<sup>a</sup>University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, USA

sjo0034@illinois.edu

## ABSTRACT

While there has been tremendous growth in the number of partnerships between social work and public libraries in the last fifteen years, an educational gap exists in teaching students about social work concepts within library and information science (LIS) graduate curricula. Recent scholarship does speak to the importance of integrating social work skills and knowledge into LIS coursework, yet little has been written about what this instruction looks like in practice. This thought piece demonstrates an originality of ideas by describing the content, structure, and goals of a cross-disciplinary graduate course entitled *Library Social Work*. In doing so, the author aims to illustrate the significance of incorporating concepts and themes into LIS curricula to better prepare students for the field of public librarianship and ultimately to benefit library patrons and librarians themselves.

## ALISE RESEARCH TAXONOMY TOPICS

curriculum; education programs/schools; public libraries; students; teaching faculty

## AUTHOR KEYWORDS

interdisciplinary education; LIS curricula; LIS education; social work

Copyright 2023 by the authors. Published under a Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International License. See <https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/>.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.21900/j.alise.2023.1281>

## INTRODUCTION

The number of public libraries that partner with social services providers has risen dramatically in the last fifteen years. While primarily unfolding in the United States, globally there are approximately 115 professional social workers employed at or contracted to public libraries on either a part- or full-time basis (Zettervall, 2023). Additionally, the number of libraries that operate as host sites for social work students conducting their field practicums currently stands at 155. Scholarship, trade literature, social media posts, news outlets, conference presentations, and consultants dedicated to social work/library partnerships also continue to grow. Yet, what fails to keep pace are the number of library and information science (LIS) programs offering coursework on these collaborations. At the time of this writing, only two universities in the United States (Dominican University, 2023; University of Michigan, 2023) offer dual LIS and social work (MSW) degrees. Less is known about the number of LIS programs that teach classes dedicated to the intersection of social work and librarianship or weave social work concepts into its curricula. When we consider the proliferation of social work/library partnerships, the existing gap in LIS education that features content about social work concepts is concerning. The aim of this thought piece is to describe an existing graduate LIS course that seeks to minimize this instructional void. One course alone will not bridge this gulf, so I share my unique experience as a replicable template for LIS educators aiming to integrate social work concepts into their teaching. While including social work into the wider LIS curricula is certainly desirable, what I offer here is a feasible first step to better prepare students for the realities of working in a public library and thereby make an even greater impact on our communities.

### **The importance of including social work concepts.**

I teach a graduate LIS course at [name of university withheld for blind review] on the intersection of public librarianship and social work. I developed this *Library Social Work* elective in part because of its relevance to the current realities of working in public libraries and my agreement with research that determines public “librarians currently lack the training that would allow them to help users in a more comprehensive manner” (Gross et al., 2022, p. 3). I also concur with Dali et al. (2022) that by aligning with social work, LIS educators can help prepare future librarians to make a significant impact on library communities.

Many of my students already work in libraries and they want to address the challenges they face on the job in ways that are not only effective, but more accessible and inclusive. Many are concerned already about experiencing burnout (Tolley, 2020), low morale, or falling prey to vocational awe (Ettarh, 2018). Adequately preparing them for the realities of the field is impossible to achieve in one semester as many of us know the best instruction often comes on the job. Yet I want to “better prepare students by including social work skills and knowledge in the curriculum” (Gross et al., 2022, p. 6) rather than hope or assume they will receive consistent and quality training once in the field.

A growing body of literature recognizes students “would benefit from coursework that provides an understanding of homelessness, mental health, substance abuse, trauma, and de-escalation...joint classes between future social workers and librarians could increase dialogue and collaboration” (Provence, 2020, p. 443). By partnering with schools of social work or current

social workers in the field, cross-disciplinary coursework can “help address a critical need in public librarianship. At universities with social work and library science programs, developing opportunities for collaboration in educating public library professionals will help introduce critical knowledge and skills, creating a library workforce that is confident and competent in supporting patrons in crisis” (Williams and Ogden, 2021, p. 73). But what does such instruction look like in practice? How can even a single course provide a baseline introduction to social work/library collaborations? In preparing my course, I found few examples that moved the needle from theory to practice, so I decided to develop an original elective from my years of researching and writing about this topic (Wahler and Johnson, 2023; Johnson, 2019) and drawing on the professional collaborations I garnered along the way.

### **How this is done and what is included.**

The *Library Social Work* course was birthed by a small yet dedicated joint committee of social work and LIS faculty at the [name of university removed for blind review]. As both a licensed social worker and librarian, I was consulted on the committee’s plan for crafting a dual LIS/MSW degree. While discussing a feasible first step of offering an elective LIS class on the intersection of social work and public librarianship, the committee agreed I would teach the nascent four credit, online class beginning in January 2022.

Currently in its third semester, enrollment has steadily grown to 22 students from an initial cohort of 12. At the time of this writing, only LIS students have completed the course. Most come with a desire to work in public libraries though a considerable number have experience in or see a future for themselves in academic libraries. With over ten years of experience as an academic librarian, I am confident that the content of this course can be applied to academic librarians as well.

The class provides a broad introduction to the ways in which social work concepts--and social workers themselves--are woven into public libraries in North America. It’s not uncommon for library-based social workers to wish their library colleagues had a better sense of what social work entails (Winkelstein, 2020). So, even if students are loosely aware of what it means to be a social worker, I address the fundamentals so they can develop a clearer understanding of what social work is and how its concepts can enhance the capacity of libraries to meet the psychosocial needs of their patrons (Wahler et al., 2021).

Over the course of sixteen weeks, we cover topics that include the shared and differing values of the two professions; potential scenarios librarians can anticipate in working with patrons experiencing homelessness or mental health challenges; what professional social workers, social work students, and peer navigators can *and cannot* bring to collaborations with public libraries; how librarians can better serve patrons by conducting needs assessments and tailoring programming to marginalized populations. Students develop an understanding for social work theoretical concepts such as the ecological “person in environment” perspective (Zettervall and Nienow, 2019) and a strengths-based approach to working with individual patrons and the wider library community (Public Library Association Social Work Task Force, 2019). While not comprehensive, we look at “social work approaches to the user interview, de-escalation training, and more exposure to social service resources” since there is “value of incorporating training for library workers that is focused on the development of social work skills that support one’s ability to interact with people in crisis” (Gross, 2022, pp. 4; 9).

I set aside two classes each term to focus on what it means to be trauma-informed and how this particular lens can positively impact our work as librarians. Yet two evenings dedicated to this social work-related concept does not suffice. Trauma informed approaches are revisited and integrated throughout the term. We work through scenarios students are likely to encounter on the job using the text *A trauma-informed framework for supporting patrons: The PLA workbook of best practice* (Public Library Association Social Worker Task Force, 2022). This text also helps us routinely consider how secondary trauma and workplace stressors impact library workers. Including trauma-informed approaches in the class is one avenue I can help students thrive as public librarians in a more humane and equitable way. It can give them a means to advocate for trauma-informed perspective in their libraries: from reframing the language of their branch's behavioral policies to ensuring a supportive work environment for staff. Intentionally including this social work concept--beyond one-off, on the job, mandatory trainings with minimal context--can help address the need for a fundamental, cultural shift in libraries that embraces a holistic, humanizing approach.

I also take pains to clarify what the course is *not* about. As the instructor, I am not attempting to turn my students into social workers or condone that they take on additional work outside the scope of librarianship. I'm not coaching or beckoning them beyond their current trajectory as librarians. For instance, when discussing trauma-informed concepts I deliberately use the terms *approach*, *lens*, and *perspective* because there is no expectation that librarians provide trauma-informed care, case management, treatment, or therapy to patrons. Despite the course's title, I'm not trying to convince them that social workers are going to fix challenging patrons, that social work partnerships are suitable for all branches, or that these collaborations are without problems; my guest speakers attest to this.

Which brings me to a key feature of the class: To bring these concepts to life, I bring in the experts--library-based social workers and social work students, peer navigators, librarians, and library directors, as well as social work researchers who've partnered with me on this topic--that have first-hand experience of what social work in libraries looks like in practice. I don't need to carry the weight of this course alone and nor should other LIS educators who venture into such cross-disciplinary topics. As a researcher, I offer a birds-eye view of social work/library collaborations but what truly resonates with students is learning from experts who are directly involved in these partnerships. Our speakers speak to both the successes and failures of these formal ventures that are still relatively new. They address what works and what doesn't about social work/library partnerships. We all have a great deal to learn, including myself.

Aside from lectures and student-led discussions, course content is scaffolded through readings, written reflections, and requiring each student to conduct a case study on a public library of their choice. By having a library through which to frame each module, students regularly consider and apply concepts throughout the semester to an existing library community. They conduct an environmental scan of their libraries' communities and conduct an in-depth interview with a member of their library's staff, the library director, or--if applicable--their library's social worker. In the end, they generate a proposal to either hire a social worker, develop a plan to maintain funding for an existing library social work position, or suggest alternate methods for forging community collaborations to meet the psychosocial needs of their patrons.

As most LIS programs do not offer formal, interdisciplinary coursework or dual degrees in social work, educators need not wait until a colleague develops an entire class or stand beholden to the approval of a curriculum committee to start discussing social work concepts in

their courses. I recognize my students are fortunate to have the opportunity to take cross-disciplinary electives through our University's School of Social Work with titles such as *Trauma-Informed Crisis Intervention in Library and Social Service Settings* and *Issues Surrounding Mental Illness in Library and Social Service Settings* [citation withheld for blind review]. Yet reaching out to a local social work program is a feasible first step for most LIS programs. Inviting social work educators to introduce students to fundamental, social work concepts and skills is a manageable goal to weave social work content into LIS coursework. Additionally, an invitation can be extended to a librarian involved in social work partnerships to share their perspective is on such collaborations. Beginning with a lecture or workshop to gauge interest and collect feedback on including social work concepts is also achievable. It is possible for LIS educators to move from theory to practice in these ways. Dali (2018) surmises this actuality when she states that while "the ideal solution would be to offer a dual SW/LIS graduate degree...it is highly possible to modify and improve LIS courses and achieve a certain level of blendedness in professional education and training, even in the absence of a formal dual program" (p. 112).

### **We need to start somewhere.**

I joke with my students that I may inadvertently steer them away from public librarianship as we walk through the actualities they can expect to face on the job but it's a risk I'm willing to take. It is my responsibility to speak the full truth to my students and allow them to make informed decisions about their professional paths. For all the strengths that social work and its concepts can bring to librarianship, I don't view this as a panacea for meeting the challenges of public librarianship. Yet it's the best interdisciplinary framework I've come across that can help us reframe our services and spaces to the benefit of our patrons and to ourselves as library workers. Like a good researcher, I'm open to better information and approaches when they emerge and prove worthwhile. For now, I'm proposing that social work concepts be mindfully integrated into LIS coursework. I offer this description of my course as one way that LIS educators can make a significant impact on our students. It is a concrete avenue to introduce and integrate social work concepts which align with our professional ethics of equitable and unbiased service, respect, advocacy, professional development, as well as honoring the dignity and rights of each person, including their own selves (American Library Association, 2021; National Association of Social Work, 2023). We owe it to our students to incorporate the best tools on hand so they can in turn provide quality service to library patrons and advocate for healthy work environments.

## REFERENCES

- American Library Association. (2021, June 29). Professional ethics. *Tools, publications & resources*. <https://www.ala.org/tools/ethics>
- Dali, K. (2018). Integrating social work perspectives into LIS education: Blended professionals as change agents. In *Re-envisioning the MLS: Perspectives on the future of library and information science education* (pp. 83–121). <https://doi.org/10.1108/s0065-28302018000044b007>
- Dali, K., Lenstra, N., Ogden, L., Senteio, C., & Williams, R. D. (2022). LIS and social work: From current issues to a collaborative future [Conference proceeding]. *Proceedings of the ALISE Annual Conference*. <https://doi.org/10.21900/j.alise.2022.989>
- Dominican University. (2023). *Master of social work/Master of library and information science*. <https://www.dom.edu/academics/majors-programs/master-social-workmaster-library-and-information-science>
- Ettarh, F. (2018, January 10). Vocational awe and librarianship: The lies we tell ourselves. *In the Library with the Lead Pipe*. <https://www.inthelibrarywiththeleadpipe.org/2018/vocational-awe/>
- Gross, M., Latham, D., Baum, B., & Crabtree, L. (2022). “No one told me:” A dialog on preparing public librarians to provide social services in public libraries [Conference proceeding]. *Proceedings of the ALISE Annual Conference*. <https://doi.org/10.21900/j.alise.2022.997>
- Johnson, S. C. (2019). MSW interns and public libraries: Enhancing services through interdisciplinary collaboration. *Public Services Quarterly*, *15*(1), 13–23. <https://doi.org/10.1080/15228959.2018.1541332>
- National Association of Social Workers. (2023). *Code of ethics*. <https://www.socialworkers.org/About/Ethics/Code-of-Ethics/Code-of-Ethics-English>
- Provence, M. A. (2020). Encouraging the humanization of patrons experiencing homelessness: A case study of the role of the U.S. public library social worker. *The Library Quarterly*, *90*(4), 431–446. <https://doi.org/10.1086/710258>
- Public Library Association Social Worker Task Force. (2022). *A trauma-informed framework for supporting patrons: The PLA workbook of best practices*. ALA Editions.
- Public Library Association Social Work Task Force. (2019). *Overview of trauma informed care*. [http://www.ala.org/pla/sites/ala.org.pla/files/content/tools/Public-Library-Social-Work\\_Overview-of-Trauma-Informed-Care\\_FINAL.pdf](http://www.ala.org/pla/sites/ala.org.pla/files/content/tools/Public-Library-Social-Work_Overview-of-Trauma-Informed-Care_FINAL.pdf)
- Tolley, B. Y. R. (2020). The weight we carry: Creating a trauma-informed library workforce. *American Libraries*, *51*(11/12), 44–47.

- University of Michigan. (2023). Master of science in information and master of social work. *School of Information*. <https://www.si.umich.edu/programs/master-science-information/dual-degree-programs>
- University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. (2023). Library Social Work. *Course Catalog*. <https://courses.illinois.edu/schedule/2023/spring/IS/582>
- University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign. (2023). Special Studies in Soc Work I. *Course Explorer*. <https://courses.illinois.edu/schedule/2023/spring/SOCW/561>
- Wahler, E.A., & Johnson, S.C. (2023). *Creating a person-centered library: Best practices for supporting high-needs patrons*. Bloomsbury. <https://www.bloomsbury.com/us/creating-a-personcentered-library-9781440880834/>
- Wahler, E. A., Provence, M. A., Johnson, S. C., Helling, J., & Williams, M. (2021). Library patrons' psychosocial needs: Perceptions of need and reasons for accessing social work services. *Social Work*, 66(4), 297–305. <https://doi.org/10.1093/sw/swab032>
- Williams, R. D., & Ogden, L. P. (2021). What knowledge and attitudes inform public librarians' interactions with library patrons in crisis? *Journal of Librarianship and Information Science*, 53(1), 62–74. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0961000620917720>
- Winkelstein, J. A. (2020). *Libraries and homelessness: An action guide*. Libraries Unlimited.
- Zettervall, S. (2023). Whole person librarianship: Map. *Whole Person Librarianship*. <https://wholepersonlibrarianship.com/map/>
- Zettervall, S. K., & Nienow, M. C. (2019). *Whole person librarianship: A social work approach to patron services*. Libraries Unlimited.