

You Know It When You See It: A Conversation About Rigor in Teaching

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ABSTRACT

This panel will explore the concept of academic rigor and LIS educators' ideas and practices related to academic rigor. Debates about academic rigor and its purpose have shown that many instructors consider rigor to be a process of upholding standards and setting boundaries, while others see it as a gatekeeping mechanism to “weed out” students who would be successful under more flexible circumstances (Jack & Sathy, 2021). As the COVID-19 pandemic has impacted students' modes of learning, not to mention their mental and physical health, conversations about rigor have been brought to the forefront as instructors balance pre-pandemic course structures, student (and administration's) calls for flexibility, and the need to implement instructional standards and quality of learning. These conversations are certainly relevant for LIS educators who are trying to prepare students for the demands and expectations of professionals working in libraries, archives, museums, and other settings, and therefore may feel that rigor is more than simply ensuring academic prowess, but future professional success as well.

Questions arise, though, as to what rigor actually *is*. Rigor is a nebulous concept, meaning that applications of rigor or “rigorous” courses can be inequitable and help to maintain white supremacy (Campbell, Dortch, & Burt, 2018). Faculty may think of rigor as setting high academic expectations or grading harshly; however, as Posselt (2018) points out, rigor, especially in graduate school, goes beyond creating an academically difficult experience that leads to learning. Rigor is also an experience of acculturation and adjusting to academic practices, which can create inequity for minoritized students without sufficient support. Additionally, some instructors conceive of rigor as the opposite of being flexible, having strict expectations about how and when students will engage in particular activities, which can adversely impact student mental health (Savini, 2016) or make a class less accessible to students with disabilities (Guest Pryal, 2022). On the other hand, students describe rigor in terms of

workload such as the amount of reading assigned, the level of complexity and thought required, and grading standards (Draeger et al., 2015). Further, one's perception of rigor may be influenced by their personal circumstances, such as in the lives of adult students who are juggling school, work, and family responsibilities.

While the nuances of rigor differ across disciplines, best practices of instructional design (Wiggins & McTighe, 2005) encourage instructors of graduate-level courses to take into account not only the specific nature of the discipline but also where learners are “expected to engage with increasing independence in tasks requiring analysis and synthesis, on the edge of their current abilities and their field’s current scope of knowledge” (Posslet, 2018, p. 64). On the other end of the spectrum, Riley (2017) points to the rigor “gatekeepers” who are the “enemy of design” within engineering domains, which also contributes to constructing disciplinary boundaries that keep in (as well as push out) specific methods and ways of knowing. Schnee (2008) argues that rising to rigorous expectations is a social justice issue for academically under-prepared students, a situation that presents challenges requiring substantial resources and creative thinking. Accreditation can be seen as a tool to provide consistency for identifying a rigorous curriculum (Wergin, 2005); however, aligning courses to program outcomes in this manner is necessarily difficult, in part due to the freedom faculty have to design and assess their own courses (Dill et al., 1996). Given the occasionally unclear expectations around rigor and the lack of discussion about rigor in the LIS literature, this panel will provide an opportunity for collective clarification around understandings of rigor in the discipline.

PANEL STRUCTURE

This is an interactive session beginning with a review of how rigor has been discussed in the literature and other disciplines. Attendees will work individually and in small groups to create a common definition of rigor. After sharing the definitions, presenters will lead a discussion on academic rigor, exploring such questions as:

1. What are the concepts, phrases, or words common to all the definitions?
2. What are the major differences in the definitions presented?
3. Are there concepts or phrases in one definition that you wish had been in your group’s definition?
4. Based on these definitions, would you describe your pedagogy as rigorous?
5. Based on these definitions, how is rigor reflected in your courses?
6. What types of assignments are considered rigorous (essays, research papers, tests, etc.)?
7. How is rigor reflected in your grading practice?
8. How, if at all, do you think rigor differs between in-person and online courses?
9. Has COVID-19 influenced your course planning as it relates to rigor?

Attendees will leave the panel with a better understanding of how they conceptualize rigor, how this compares to other understandings of rigor, and how rigor is enacted in their pedagogical practices.

PANELISTS AND MODERATORS

Africa S. Hands. Dr. Hands is an assistant professor in the Department of Information Science at the University at Buffalo. Her current research agenda examines public libraries as an information resource for college-bound patrons and the experiences of first-generation students - both as users of academic libraries and students and professionals in the LIS field. She is the immediate past chair of the Library Research Round Table of ALA. africaha@buffalo.edu

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ALISE RESEARCH TAXONOMY TOPICS

Pedagogy; curriculum; teaching faculty

AUTHOR KEYWORDS

LIS education; academic rigor, panel

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