Professional Competencies of Canadian LIS Graduates

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ABSTRACT

This study aims to determine current competencies necessary for graduates of Canadian library and information science (LIS) programs. Perspectives from different communities of interest, including current students and graduates from LIS programs, staff and employers of LIS graduates, and library school faculty (full-time and contingent) from across Canada were gathered via a nationally disseminated survey in 2023. Competency areas include general skills as well as communication, user services, management, and technology. Early findings suggest the importance of established areas of practice, such as selecting and evaluating resources, while emergent areas of priority were also identified, including the importance of equity, diversity, and inclusion, and understanding the responsibilities of libraries in decolonization, Indigenization, and reconciliation efforts.

ALISE RESEARCH TAXONOMY TOPICS

AUTHOR KEYWORDS

INTRODUCTION

The roles of library and information science professionals are continually evolving along at least two fronts. First, information professionals continue to be employed in a wide variety of settings beyond 'traditional' libraries, including roles on research teams, and various roles in the private sector and in industry (e.g., competitive intelligence). Second, even within the library environment, the role of libraries (and thus the information professionals within) in their various communities continue to grow and evolve.

Amongst the many challenges in academic libraries, for example, is adapting to changing enrolment demographics and in turn, shifting library and information resources and services to meet student needs. Increasing numbers of international students has been a driver of this shift in Canada (Statistics Canada, 2021), as has a greater proportion of distance and online learning (Canadian digital learning research association, 2021). Beyond a change in the composition of the student body, there has also been an increasing role and demand for support with research, teaching and learning, digital scholarship, user experience, and scholarly communication (Ducas, Michaud-Oystryk, Speare, 2020).

Within the public library environment, public libraries have been increasingly tasked with supplementing a crumbling governmental social support infrastructure (Lee, et al, 2022); supporting newcomers (Shuva, 2022), providing care for community members experiencing opioid crisis (Feurtein-Simon et al, 2022), and resisting efforts to censor materials and programming in libraries (ALA, 2021) are all prominent, and troubling trends in the field at this time.

Over and above these developments has been the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic which affected libraries and information professionals across sectors. Libraries had to make significant shifts to service delivery models with very little notice or time to plan, with even greater demand and reliance on the provision of digital collections and services, the need to shift entire operations to remote pickup of physical materials, as well as the continued development of online programming (Decker, 2021; Jones 2020). These changes raise questions about the knowledge, skills, and capacities information professionals need to know in order to be successful in their roles and throughout their careers. Of particular interest to this study are the competencies that might exist exclusively within the Canadian context. Canadian LIS programs exist in a complicated circumstance, where they are accredited by a professional body in another country, the American Library Association (ALA) in the United States (US). This does not preclude LIS programs or their graduates in the Canadian context from considering the particular or even distinct library and information needs of Canadians.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Professional competencies have been established and provide some guidance to LIS programs in developing curriculum. The International Federation of Library Associations (IFLA) released new guidelines for professional LIS programs in 2022. Included are eight, "foundational knowledge areas (FKAs)" that include: information in society, foundations, information and communication technologies, research and innovation, information resources management, management for information professionals, information needs and user services, and literacies

and learning (2022). These FKAs provide a broad overview of knowledge areas, but do not identify or address the specific competencies that are of interest in the current study.

More recently, the ALA released their updated *Core Competencies of Librarianship* (January 2023). Included in these competencies is a new focus on social justice, which is a welcome addition considering the current turbulent social, economic, and political climate in which libraries operate and LIS professionals practice. That said, there are no specific competencies that address developing an understanding of the responsibilities of libraries in the work of decolonization, Indigenization, and reconciliation, areas of particular interest within the Canadian context. Additionally, the ALA is in the process of updating the ALA standards for accreditation of Master's programs in library and information studies.

The question of professional competencies has also been of interest within the research literature. Much of this work examines competencies in relation to specific contexts. On a national level, studies of librarian professional competencies have been done in Pakistan (Khan & Mahmood, 2013; Ismail & Khan, 2021), India and South Asia (Kaur, 2015; Yadav, 2022), the United States (Goodsett & Koziura, 2016; Saunders, 2019; Hu et al, 2022; Saunders, 2015); Japan (Toshimori, Mizoue, & Matsumoto 2011), and South Africa (Bothma & Britz, 2000). There has also been a focus on competencies related to specific information work including competencies for data professionals (Kim, 2016; Harris-Pierce & Quan Lui, 2012), health information professionals (Pandolfelli, et al; 2022), and knowledge management (Husain & Nazim, 2015) workers.

The research outlined above focuses on developing an understanding of what skills and attributes should be a part of LIS education programs. Additionally, there is a focus on gaps within LIS education as perceived by information professionals in the field, including the importance of practice (real life scenarios and experience), management skills and experience, and communication skills. While this research provides valid insight into the competencies necessary for information professionals, there has been a lack of information within the Canadian context. It is not assumed that competencies within Canada would be completely dissimilar from those in other countries, but there needs to be understanding of the specific Canadian context. This research seeks to fill that gap.

RESEARCH QUESTION

What are the core competencies necessary for graduates of Canadian library and information science programs for them to thrive in their professional environments?

METHOD

This research uses a modified version of Saunders' (2019) survey instrument to gather insights into LIS competencies for Canadian LIS program graduates. Saunders (2019) survey gathered information on competencies for LIS students from the communities of four iSchools in

the United States. The survey uses a Likert scale and includes five areas of focus including general skills, communication, user services, management, and technology. Participants can evaluate the various skills as core (every graduate should know this), very important (most professionals will need to know/be able to do this), important (many professionals will need to be familiar with this skill/content, specialized (only professionals in specialized positions are likely to need this skill/knowledge) or as not important. The main change from Saunders (2019) original instrument was the addition of questions around decolonization and Indigenization. Within the Canadian context we deemed it important to ask these questions given the Truth and Reconciliation Report recommendations from the Canadian Federation of Library Associations (CFLA-FCAB) (2018).

The survey opened in January of 2023 and was distributed through invitations to participate in the research that were disseminated via social media, including Reddit, Facebook, and Twitter, LIS practitioner and program email lists (including targeted invitations to the program chairs of the eight LIS programs in Canada), and through promotion at the annual Ontario Library Association (OLA) SuperConference, which is the largest, cross-sector library practitioner conference in the country. A deeper level of dissemination took place at the authors' home institution, where the survey was disseminated to current students, staff, faculty, alumni, and library sector employers. Data collection continued through April 2023. 303 surveys were submitted. Preliminary analysis identified that six surveys were incomplete; those submissions were omitted from the pool of 297 surveys that were included in the final data analysis.

RESPONDENTS

Survey participants identified affiliations with all but one Canadian LIS program (Montreal), with representation from coast-to-coast. Participants who identified an affiliation with Ontario LIS programs (i.e., Western, Toronto, Ottawa) accounted for the greatest number of surveys submitted, with LIS schools located in Eastern provinces also represented (i.e., Dalhousie, McGill). LIS programs located in Western provinces (i.e., British Columbia, Alberta) are also represented in the data. Overall, survey responses were received from participants affiliated with 7 of the 8 ALA accredited programs in Canada. Respondents affiliated with Western University comprise the bulk of the surveys submitted, at 95, followed next by Dalhousie (64), Toronto (35), UBC (16), Alberta (13), McGill (7), and Ottawa (4). Montreal was the only school not represented and 6 respondents stated they had no connection to any specific Canadian LIS program.

Of these respondents, 174 identify as having an LIS/information studies degree, 29 identify as LIS current students, and 4 do not have an LIS/information degree. 90 participants chose not to answer the question related to LIS program affiliation. The current geographic location of respondents included representation from across the country, with Ontario (118), Nova Scotia (28), Alberta (19), British Columbia (18), Saskatchewan (5), New Brunswick (4), Quebec (3), Yukon (3), Prince Edward Island (3), and Manitoba (1) represented. There were no responses from Newfoundland and Labrador, the Northwest Territories, or Nunavut. Survey participants work in a broad range of settings, most commonly academic libraries (85), but with representation from public libraries (38), special libraries (19), instructors within LIS programs

(21), as well as some retired library staff (8). Represented in smaller numbers were archivists, consultants, knowledge managers, information researchers, database managers, and others in knowledge organization roles.

FINDINGS

Two areas, distinct from Saunders' 2019 survey results, arise as areas of focus from the current study. The first relates to the additional question that addresses decolonization, Indigenization, and reconciliation, which was an addition to Saunders' original instrument. The second area arose from an open-ended question that asked respondents to offer their perspective on additional knowledge, skills, and capacities that graduates from today's LIS programs in Canada need in order to be successful post-graduation.

The question on decolonization, Indigenization, and reconciliation was placed in the 'general skills and content areas' section of the survey. This section opened the direction to "please rate the importance of the skills and content area" from which respondents could choose from a listing of researcher-provided options. From these, the top skills/knowledge areas that were deemed 'core' in this section of the survey included 'knowledge of professional ethics' (179), 'evaluating and selecting information resources' (174), 'reflective practice grounded in equity, diversity inclusion & accessibility' (156), 'cultural competence (i.e., the ability to work effectively in cross-cultural situations/with people of various cultural backgrounds) (151), and 'understanding the responsibilities of libraries in decolonization, Indigenization, and reconciliation' (135). Of the 219 participants who elected to answer this question, 204 identified 'understanding the responsibilities of libraries in decolonization, Indigenization, and reconciliation' as either core (135), very important (49), or important (20). Nine participants considered this area to be specialized, and another 6 deemed it not important.

The last question in the competencies section of the survey included an open-ended question, whose aim was to capture any nuanced skill, knowledge, or capacity that may have been missing from the earlier segments of the survey. While this section was designed for this purpose, it was also used to reinforce the importance of information collected earlier in the survey. Responses were coded inductively and independently by each researcher; the researchers then worked together to identify overarching categories for the qualitative data collected. The most significant categories identified here included: communication, equity, diversity, inclusion, and decolonization (EDID), libraries and the world, and technology.

In the responses related to communication, responses were clustered into the following three, broad categories: formal communication, interpersonal communication, and conflict management. Formal communication includes knowledge and skills related to writing and presentation skills (e.g. authoring formal reports, strategic communications, and otherwise formally communicating with staff, library and community partners, and leadership, including senior leaders outside of the library, and library boards). Interpersonal communication includes skills and capacities related to practicing empathy, being able to work effectively on a team, and understanding emotional labor. Prominent in the survey responses were overt references to 'conflict management' skills and capacity development, especially related to crisis management,

de-escalation, harm reduction, understanding how to work with vulnerable populations, and other knowledge and capacities aligned closely with social work.

The EDID category included broad calls for an increase in focus on cultural competencies and social justice while also noting particular areas. While there was a call to the importance of non-Western knowledge, there was a focus on developing an understanding of Indigenizing and decolonizing related to specific areas including 'decolonizing metadata,' 'decolonizing GLAM institutions,' and developing an Indigenous knowledge competency. Also in the EDID category is an emphasis on accessibility for persons with disabilities including knowledge of accessibility standards. One participant noted that we needed to think beyond accessibility and consider disability justice.

The final category and area of focus in this subset of survey responses falls under what the researchers have labeled 'libraries and the world.' This is meant to capture any responses that referenced LIS graduates' understanding of how and where their role or library or information organization fits in the broader organizational or governance structure, with an understanding that each role and site is situated within its own distinct social, economic, and political ecosystem. Here, survey respondents shared comments about the importance of understanding legislation relevant to libraries and information organizations from the Public Libraries Acts in various provinces, to copyright and freedom of information policy and law. There was a focus on knowing how the library works within and connects to its governing body, including how to work with library boards, as well as understanding the environment (municipal, higher education, corporate, etc.) in which the library or information organization exists, and being able to articulate library values, priorities, and a professional identity to those from outside the LIS discipline.

The mention of a range of specific technologies peppers the data. This was a larger category and deserves its placement here, despite there being little consensus on any particular type of technology or tool. As such, technology was identified as a category where there were a broad range of topics, including library systems, database design, assistive technology, AI, and database management and manipulation (e.g., SQL, Python).

LIMITATIONS

There are three significant limitations in the data. The first is the lack of a French language version of the survey to facilitate survey participation by Francophone LIS students, graduates, faculty, or employers. The survey was only disseminated in one of Canada's two official languages. This likely led to lower survey response rates by Francophone participants and could be one cause for low responses from Quebec and other predominantly French language regions.

Second, one LIS/information studies program accounts for just shy of a third of the responses. Any discussion around findings needs to be tempered by this limitation as it shapes who has responded and their relationship with one LIS program in particular.

Third is a limitation that is often seen in Canadian surveys, that of participants from Ontario dominating the responses. Just over a third of the responses to this survey are from Ontario,

which the researchers acknowledge impacts that data. At the same time, the province of Ontario represents just shy of 40% of Canada's total population (of 40 million), and as such, an Ontario heavy response rate is not viewed by the researchers as necessarily problematic.

DISCUSSION

This research began from the questions of what competencies are necessary for graduates of Canadian LIS programs. So far, the answer to this question is complex. In the overall data, there appears to be a wide breadth of competencies deemed important. This breadth is something that is often of discussion in LIS programs as the diversity of librarian and information professions continues to grow. Focusing here on the two areas divergent from the initial survey from Saunders, provide the start of our questions with this data.

Given the Truth and Reconciliation Report recommendations from CFLA-FCAB (2018), and their prominence in social and political discourse in Canada, the researchers surmised that there would be interest in decolonization and Indigenization evident in the survey results. That said, the importance of LIS graduates developing knowledge, skills, and capacities in this area surpassed what was anticipated. Of the 22 areas of knowledge or skills listed in the first section of the survey, "understanding the responsibilities of libraries in decolonization, Indigenization, and reconciliation" was in the top five of skills deemed either core or of high importance. In a section that also includes such skills/knowledges as taxonomy, metadata, records management, preservation, there is a strong focus on the social and interpersonal skills. Decolonization, Indigenization, and reconciliation sits with reflective practice embedded in EDID, professional ethics, and cultural competence as general skills deemed of high value.

The one question that explicitly focused on decolonization, Indigenization, and reconciliation was not enough for some participants such that they used the open question to reinforce the importance of this subject. Decolonizing GLAM institutions, decolonizing metadata, and a suggestion to adopt an Indigenous knowledge competency indicate participants' desire to address this area of competence at the individual practice, institutional, and professional or LIS field levels.

In examining responses to the final open question, there is a strong emphasis on relationships and communication. Broadly, there is a focus on developing cross-cultural understanding in relation to historically marginalized groups at both the interpersonal level and at the organizational level. There is a perceived importance that graduates will be able to successfully communicate with, understand, and work with those from cultures beyond their own both within the organization and with the community. Further, there is a perspective that beyond interpersonal skills, graduates need to know how to engage with and work with community members that may be struggling, whose ideas and values may differ from their own. This last finding is not surprising given the uptick in violent incidents at libraries across both Canada and the US (Hune-Brown, 2023; CUPE, 2020).

The category 'libraries and the world' could actually be a part of the broad communication category as it pertains to understanding the library or information organization's place within its broader governance structure, as well as the need to be able to effectively communicate the value of libraries and library staff to groups outside the discipline.

Understanding the broader context and structure was something that was noted in reference to both public and academic libraries, specifically. This category is understandable given that the governance of any one type of one type of library and its ecosystem are likely only be deeply covered in electives related to a specific library environment.

The last category is technology, which is complex on a few fronts. First, it was not surprising that technology surfaced as a significant category in this part of the survey. There are at least three issues to consider here. The first is that the technology used in the profession evolves and shifts as new technologies emerge and as others fall into disuse. (A prominent example that one of the authors recalls is the emergence of Second Life as a necessary software to know and to understand at one point during their own MLIS program.) The second comes from the diversity of technologies used by library staff in specialized roles, or across different departments of the same organization. Staff who work closely with the organization's integrated library management system may not need to have an understanding of programming languages, such as Python or SQL, for example. And last, graduates from ALA-accredited MLIS programs find employment in a wide diversity of organizations and sectors, each of which have their own, distinct approaches to the adoption and use of technological infrastructure and tools. With such a wide range of information technology systems, strategies, and tools in place across differing library and information environments, and the ubiquity of technology as in integrated, and integral part of library and information practice, it makes sense that facility with, knowledge of, and capacities to use technology emerged in the survey responses.

CONCLUSION

The strong focus on knowledge, skills, and capacity development related to various formal and informal types of communication, as well as skills and knowledge related to preparing LIS graduates to be able to meet the significant social challenges that impact library and information services, programs, and patrons, are findings of significance in the data. As is the continued dialogue about the degree to which interpersonal skills and cultural competence can be learned or taught within the curriculum of LIS programs. The lack of consensus around the question of technology throughout the qualitative data (i.e., responses to open-ended questions) are a consideration for LIS programs and those faculty and staff involved in shaping LIS curriculum. Finally, survey findings indicate a high-level of perceived importance with respect to understanding the responsibilities of libraries in efforts to decolonize, Indigenize, and actively participate in reconciliation work. Professional competencies from the ALA (the body that accredits LIS programs in Canada) do not explicitly address this area, which suggests an opportunity for conversations about professional competencies distinct to the Canadian context.

Further analysis is still ongoing which will include linkages between formal professional competencies, and the perceived knowledge, skills, and capacities that Canadian LIS students, graduates, faculty, and employers perceive as important. The competencies from IFLA provide the perspective at an international level, while the recently revised ALA competencies offer an opportunity for more direct, comparative analysis between LIS programs in Canada and the United States. As the authors signaled earlier, the relationship between Canadian LIS programs and the ALA as their accrediting body is complex. Understanding how and where LIS

community members perceive alignment between Canadian LIS programs and the ALA's articulation of competencies, as their governing body, is worthy of investigation, as is the opportunity to identify where or if possible divergences exist between the body that oversees the professional education of people in another country (in this case, Canada) and the distinct needs or competency requirements (i.e., knowledge, skills, and capacities) that library and information professionals require to be successful in their chosen field or career in a country or region outside of the United States.

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