Intersecting Disciplines: Should LIS Competencies Include Social Work?

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ABSTRACT

Social work in librarianship is a phenomenon that has gained momentum in public libraries since the first known social worker began working at the San Francisco Public Library in 2009. Few LIS programs offer courses to address this evolving phenomenon, yet librarians and library staff nationwide have expressed the need to have training in social work to help them meet the needs of their users. To date, there are only three universities (Dominican University, University of Michigan and Middle Tennessee State University) that offer dual degree programs and even fewer universities that offer social work librarianship courses. With the concern of librarians not feeling equipped to address the social needs of library users (eg. depression, anxiety, suicide, health issues, substance abuse, poverty) this paper emphasizes the critical need for LIS programs to adapt their curriculum to adequately prepare future librarians for public librarianship.

ALISE RESEARCH TAXONOMY TOPICS

community engagement, curriculum, pedagogy, information seeking, education programs

AUTHOR KEYWORDS

LIS curriculum, public libraries, social work, assets based theory, information seeking behavior

INTRODUCTION

According to data collected by the Whole Person Librarianship website, some public libraries hire social workers or social work interns to help meet the needs of communities in distress (Whole Person Librarianship – Google My Maps, n.d.). There are over 300 libraries that have social workers, interns or some form of social services (Whole Person Librarianship –

Google My Maps, n.d.). Yet, there are 9,049 public libraries in the United States (Curcic, 2023). There is a need to understand from library workers what would be effective in addressing users with information seeking needs related to social services. Few studies investigate social work in public libraries (Gross & Latham, 2021; Huggins, 2022). The authors conducted a national study of public librarians to investigate their preparedness to work in public libraries from a Library and Information Science (LIS) education perspective. Preliminary study results found that 98% of the participants did not take a social work course while pursuing a MLIS and 67% felt that courses they took in their programs did not adequately prepare them for work in a public library.

The goal of this study is to understand the dynamics of social work in public libraries - How it is being implemented, its effectiveness, areas where it could be improved and to identify themes to better understand how LIS education can be enhanced to better prepare students to enter the workforce. This research aims to answer the following questions: Should LIS education include aspects of social work in their competencies to better prepare librarians for working in public libraries? And, if so in what ways?

If LIS education does not include aspects of social work, there may be consequences for the professionals who are not prepared to be frontline workers - often being asked to perform a task that they are uncomfortable with. This became quite apparent during the height of the Covid-19 pandemic when librarians had to respond to the needs of their users during the global emergency (Wahler, Spuller, Ressler, Bolan, & Burnard, 2022). However, public librarians have been on the frontlines since the American public library movement began. Librarians often have to serve the information needs of the unhoused, administer medication like an epi-pen to those experiencing medical emergencies, and provide shelter and resources when the community is in crisis (Chancellor, 2017, Gibson, et.al., 2017). To truly meet the needs of users seeking social service and information in public libraries, librarians need social work knowledge to support their efforts to address the social service information needs of users. LIS programs provide a safe space for future librarians to practice, receive feedback and apply social work knowledge in the classroom and public library settings, prior to working in a public library where the expectation is that they are prepared to engage users from diverse populations with an array of inquiries, which may include social services effectively.

RELATED LITERATURE

According to the National Association of Social Workers, social work is defined as:

Social work practice consists of the professional application of social work values, principles, and techniques to one or more of the following ends:

- helping people obtain tangible services;
- counseling and psychotherapy with individuals, families, and groups;
- helping communities or groups provide or improve social and health services; and participating in legislative processes.

The practice of social work requires knowledge of human development and behavior; knowledge of social, economic, and cultural institutions; and of the interaction of all these factors (National Association of Social Workers, n.d.). The Council on Social Work Education categorizes social work into three types: micro, mezzo and macro. The three types of social

work practice are defined as: micro-level practice: Work directly with individuals and help them cope with their situations; mezzo-level practice: Work with groups instead of individual clients; macro-level practice: Lead and establish social change on a large scale through organizing, policy change, and administration (Council on Social Work Education, n.d.). They further contend that social workers are committed to: promoting social welfare; helping people of all backgrounds overcome their unique challenges; advocating for social and economic justice for all members of the community, and embodying a professional code of ethics (Council on Social Work Education, n.d.). Several scholars indicate that social work should be integrated into librarianship practice (Cathcart, 2008; Gross & Latham, 2021; Williams, & Ogden, 2021; Williams, 2016). Librarians have expressed the need to have training to prepare them to work with patrons experiencing crisis (Shephard, Garner, Bell & Wardle, 2023). According to Johnson and Wahler (2023), "training can assist library staff with addressing patron needs, such as learning about the basics of de-escalation, trauma-informed approaches, Narcan administration or overdose awareness training, and the fundamentals of mental health and substance abuse" (Johnson and Wahler, 2023).

Prior studies have explored the role of the administrator with regards to social work in public libraries (Gross & Latham, 2021; Baum et al, 2022). Other scholars such as Melanie Huggins (2022) have argued that training is the key requirement for working as a social worker in libraries. Finch and Real (2023) interviewed social workers who work in public libraries to develop a guide for other public libraries who aspire to hire a social worker.

SOCIAL WORK and LIS EDUCATION

LIS education already has a foundation for expanding and adopting an interdisciplinary approach for social workers and librarians. As aforementioned, three universities offer a joint MLIS and MSW degree. Additional universities can include this option in their curricula. Assets based theory developed by Django Paris and Maisha Winn (2013) is a useful theory for developing a strategy for implementing social work in LIS education. This theory focuses on what already exists in context, while building on and acknowledging what is present (Paris and Winn, 2013). Library education can utilize the assets they have to understand how to prepare future librarian skills to assist patrons with psychosocial needs. Aspects of social work education can be included in LIS education to satisfy this need.

Librarians are not traditionally taught the skills of social work in graduate school programs, however, when they start working in a public library setting they are expected to utilize social work skills to work with communities. Some public libraries are reevaluating if a Master's in Library and Information Science is necessary to work in public libraries, especially when it comes to management positions. According to Huggins (2022), library managers do not need to have an MLIS degree to successfully manage a library, however she does point out that librarian managers do need skills related to understanding how to engage, build rapport and assess community needs. Social workers traditionally assess individuals for social service needs while librarians assess for resource needs such as books, materials and services. Community members come into the library for a whole host of reasons and it would strengthen the services of the library if there is a shared use of expertise. Huggins acknowledges that aspects of social worker training should be included in management training for librarians (Huggins, 2022).

LIS and SOCIAL WORK COMPETENCIES

        According to the American Library Association (ALA), the Gateway Knowledge Rationale for library professionals who graduate from ALA-accredited library science preparation programs or programs that have met professional standards recognized by ALA/AASL (ALA Council et al., 2023). The competences represent skills and knowledge to be developed by library professionals in practice. In order to achieve the subsequent competences, library professionals, regardless of their specific title and/or role, should have the foundational skills and understanding to work in any library environment. (ALA Council et al., 2023). There are three overarching social work education competencies that can be applied to LIS education. These competencies are:

Competency 6: Engage with Individuals, Families, Groups, Organizations, and Communities
        Social workers understand that engagement is an ongoing component of the dynamic and interactive process of social work practice with and on behalf of individuals, families, groups, organizations, and communities. Social workers value the importance of human relationships. Social workers understand theories of human behavior and person-in-environment and critically evaluate and apply this knowledge to facilitate engagement with clients and constituencies, including individuals, families, groups, organizations, and communities. Social workers are self-reflective and understand how bias, power, and privilege as well as their personal values and personal experiences may affect their ability to engage effectively with diverse clients and constituencies. Social workers use the principles of interprofessional collaboration to facilitate engagement with clients, constituencies, and other professionals as appropriate.

Competency 7: Assess Individuals, Families, Groups, Organizations, and Communities Social workers understand that assessment is an ongoing component of the dynamic and interactive process of social work practice. Social workers understand theories of human behavior and person-in-environment, as well as interprofessional conceptual frameworks, and they critically evaluate and apply this knowledge in culturally responsive assessment with clients and constituencies, including individuals, families, groups, organizations, and communities. Assessment involves a collaborative process of defining presenting challenges and identifying 1strengths with individuals, families, groups, organizations, and communities to develop a mutually agreed-upon plan. Social workers recognize the implications of the larger practice context in the assessment process and use interprofessional collaboration in this process. Social workers are self reflective and understand how bias, power, privilege, and their personal values and experiences may affect their assessment and decision making.

Competency 8: Intervene with Individuals, Families, Groups, Organizations, and Communities Social workers understand that intervention is an ongoing component of the dynamic and interactive process of social work practice. Social workers understand theories of human behavior, person-in-environment, and other interprofessional conceptual frameworks, and they critically evaluate and apply this knowledge in selecting culturally responsive interventions with clients and constituencies, including individuals, families, groups, organizations, and communities. Social workers

understand methods of identifying, analyzing, and implementing evidence-informed interventions and participate in interprofessional collaboration to achieve client and constituency goals. Social workers facilitate effective transitions and endings (Council on Social Work Education et al., 2022).

Table 1 illustrates a comparison of LIS and social work education competencies that can be incorporated into LIS curriculums to improve librarians' preparedness for user engagement in public libraries.

Table 1

Library and Information Science Competency and Social Work User Engagement Competency Comparison

Library and Information Science Competency	Social Work Competency	
Gateway Knowledge	Engage with Individuals, Families, Groups, Organizations, and Communities	
Employ the ethics, values, and foundational principles of the library profession.	Apply knowledge of human behavior and person-in-environment, as well as interprofessional conceptual frameworks, to engage with clients and constituencies	
Promote democratic principles and intellectual freedom (including freedom of expression, thought, and conscience).	Use empathy, reflection, and interpersonal skills to engage in culturally responsive practice with clients and constituencies.	
Consider the history of libraries and librarianship and their role within the context of society.	Assess Individuals, Families, Groups, Organizations, and Communities	

Recognize the history, preservation, and dissemination of information in all its forms, and its impact on libraries.

Identify current types of libraries (school, public, academic, special, etc.) and closely related information agencies, such as museums, archives, and galleries.

Identify social, public, information, economic, and cultural policies and trends of significance to the library and information profession on the local, regional, national, and international levels.

Understand the legal framework in which libraries operate, including laws relating to copyright and fair use, privacy, freedom of expression, equal rights (e.g., the Americans with Disabilities Act), open access, and intellectual property.

Effectively advocate for libraries, librarians, other library workers, patrons, and services, especially in terms of marketing, fundraising, and outreach.

Use techniques to identify, codify, and analyze complex problems and create appropriate and collaborative solutions within library environments.

Demonstrate effective verbal and written communication techniques, including electronically via video, live chat, and email.

Hold current certification, degree, and/or licensure requirements of specialized areas of the library profession.

Apply theories of human behavior and person-in-environment, as well as other culturally responsive and interprofessional conceptual frameworks, when assessing clients and constituencies

Demonstrate respect for client self-determination during the assessment process by collaborating with clients and constituencies in developing a mutually agreed-upon plan.

Intervene with Individuals, Families, Groups, Organizations, and Communities

Engage with clients and constituencies to critically choose and implement culturally responsive, evidence-informed interventions to achieve client and constituency goals

Incorporate culturally responsive methods to negotiate, mediate, and advocate with and on behalf of clients and constituencies.

CONCLUSION

Library and information science professionals and social workers make meaningful contributions to society everyday. As service industries, they are committed to providing top-notch assistance to their user communities. When analyzing the competencies for librarians and social workers there is some overlap, but they are two distinct professions. The library profession is concerned with the information needs of its users. They are guided by ethical principles such as intellectual freedom, information literacy, privacy, as well as advocating against mis/disinformation and censorship. Social work is focused on working towards solving psychosocial problems to support positive social change in the everyday lives of the individuals. Social workers initiate services with individuals by beginning with what they refer to as "starting where the client is". This means that they focus engagement with individuals by meeting them where they are in the social work process. Specifically, it means avoiding judgment to understand the person in context to their unique situation to support efforts to develop a plan to influence positive change (Pilsecker, 1994).

The commonality between the two competencies is that they both engage the user to meet their needs. Users are coming to the public library asking librarians to assist them with complex social needs and librarians are not educated in LIS programs to handle these issues. There is an opportunity for LIS education to include social work in the curriculum to prepare students for these challenges and provide them with a space to practice these skills to enhance their user engagement proficiencies. Integrating social work in LIS education would prepare future LIS professionals with the knowledge and skills to effectively engage users who present with challenges related to social services. "In the last two decades, the synergy and collaboration between LIS and social work has become more pronounced in higher education and professional settings on both sides of the border"(Dali, Lenstra, Senteio, Esposito, and Baluk, 2022). It is beyond time for LIS programs to align themselves with the profession who have been hiring and utilizing social workers for decades. LIS educators have an obligation to students who pursue public librarianship to revisit competencies to help train and prepare emerging professionals for a career in public libraries.

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