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**The Impact of Skills Gained in an Online MLIS Degree on New
Academic Librarians Working From Home**

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Introduction

The coronavirus pandemic in 2020 has resulted in most libraries in the US, academic and otherwise, to close their facilities to the public and drastically limit the number of employees working on site. While there have been changes in the strictness of closures affecting libraries throughout the year, the percentage of librarians working from home has remained high. This situation is only one facet of the pandemic's effects on academic libraries, and some observers have suggested that the pandemic is driving a host of changes at libraries that will persist even after the pandemic is over (Cox, 2020). While virtual or work from home library positions predate the pandemic, the number of librarians now working from home is undoubtedly much larger now than ever before. Most of these librarians worked on site prior to the pandemic, but I am interested in a smaller class of library workers: recent graduates from a distance learning MLIS program who are now working at home. The topic of my study is the interrelations between professional and school experiences of new academic librarians that graduated from an online MLIS program in 2019 or 2020. Some may have started working on site pre-pandemic but were shifted to remote work soon after being hired. My focus in earlier versions of this study was designing a questionnaire to identify connections between the academic content of MLIS programs and future job satisfaction and performance. However, I decided near the end of this semester to pivot from MLIS courses to MLIS skills acquisition, and to abandon the survey approach in favor of an in-depth interview and qualitative analysis. My research is an inquiry into the skills that recent distance learning MLIS graduates acquired during their school work which they believe have been helpful in their new online jobs. I pose the research question as follows: "How do new academic librarians currently working from home perceive

the impact of the skills they gained in an online MLIS program on their job performance?” I believe that an exploration of this issue could provide useful information about MLIS program design at least three levels: instructional design, learning outcomes, and skills-acquisition. My focus however is only on the last of these.

Literature Review

Because the amount of scholarly work closely related to my research questions is very thin, I expanded my lens to include non-scholarly articles and to survey adjacent themes and topics. These related topics include: evolutions in MLIS distance learning programs; changes in virtual library services that support MLIS students; managing teams of academic librarians working remotely; the effects of the coronavirus pandemic on academic libraries; pandemic-driven replacement of classroom instruction for distance learning instruction and associated innovation in instructional tools and practices; and academic library positions that are well-suited for remote work.

The advent of the world wide web ushered in distance learning MLIS programs in the mid-1990s. Since then the number and extent of areas of ongoing collaboration and convergence between academic libraries and online MLIS programs have continued to grow at individual, departmental and institutional levels. Abbot et.al. capture the interdependency of students and academic librarians: “Learning and web-based technologies increase student-librarian interaction and communication, expedite the retrieval of library resources, and bring the library to the user” (2013). Abbot et.al. also refer to a 2006 study by Washburn which asked practicing distance education librarians what they thought were the most important

qualifications for thriving in their role. Seventy-five percent indicated technology and outreach skills. While this data point is focused more narrowly than my research question, it does confirm that technology skills have become paramount for academic librarians that work in distance education. In a 2010 article about libraries seeking to enhance their relevance to academic stakeholders by offering virtual access and services, Ash writes: “In addition to teaching students and teachers how to navigate information, libraries have now become a place where students go to create and produce ... [requiring] librarians to be familiar with new technologies and Web 2.0 tools” (2010). Academic librarians now find themselves in the position of needing to keep up with (or anticipate future trends in) the digital skills and knowledge that online MLIS students bring to the table. Those same students are likely to have advantages when they graduate in terms of technology and related online skills over librarians who did not complete a distance learning MLIS degree.

The coronavirus pandemic is pushing academic libraries towards developing new tools and practices and renovating older ones for a primarily online-only service mode. In an article in *Inside Higher Ed* in June 2020, Christopher Cox outlines pandemic driven changes at academic libraries that he expects to outlast COVID-19. Broadly speaking, Cox expects ILL, digitization efforts and virtual services to grow, for budgets to be reworked to favor digital over print, and for online conferences to replace in person events (2020). Cox observes that some services in academic libraries are still thriving and evolving during the pandemic like digitally embedded librarianship, greater use of Open Access publishing, open educational resources, support for online teaching and research and more (2020). Many of these developments play to the strengths of MLIS graduates with experience using digital platforms and tools and virtual

services. Cox argues that the COVID-19-induced “work from home” shift has significant upside insofar as it introduces new software tools, collaborative workflows and management practices which can become part of a new, more effective, safer normal: “libraries should harness this momentum, providing additional technology training and identifying essential technology skills for employees in this new normal” (2020).

One of the few scholarly articles I discovered was Michalak and Rysavy short case study about the Goldey-Beacom College library’s (their employer) response to coronavirus, which involved rapidly shifting to a work from home and remote team management model (2020). They had an edge over some of their peer libraries and institutions because they were accustomed to communicating and collaborating using a variety of online tools, though they replaced some of these with new software. While Michalak and Rysavy’s description of the library’s choices about which software would best facilitate remote teams is interesting, the larger point they make about work-from-home is that they still needed “to formalize those systems and use of tools beyond what we had already established [so that they supported the] trust [which] became even more vital to our successful collaborations as a team due to the physical distance we experienced during WFH” (2020).

In a recent article for American Libraries magazine, Carrie Smith writes about a project by Lorin Flores and Michael Dunbar-Rodney, two young San Antonio librarians, to reach new audiences and create new digital library services using livestreaming platforms Twitch and Discord (2020). Both platforms have become more attractive to forward looking library program directors because of coronavirus lockdowns. Flores asserts that “streaming is a new aspect of digital literacy,” a trend that distance learning MLIS students are in good position to

add to their communication “toolkits” (2020). Smith mentions that the platforms are “already being used in some higher education settings for language learning, lectures, coding demonstrations, and office hours” (2020), suggesting the possibility of further synergies and shared learnings for academic librarians, students and faculty.

In an SJSU iSchool blog post from 2018, Priscilla Amenyro lists some of the academic library jobs that would make for a good match for distance learning MLIS degree holders that want to continue working from home: “positions that require you to do online research can easily be done from your residence ... indexing and abstracting ... user experience and web design, information architecture, database management and digital records management” (2018). Greta Snyder offers further encouragement for online MLIS students: “The good news is that as an [distance education MLIS] student, you have proven success working online and remotely in both collaborative and independent roles, and as an up-and-coming LIS professional with work or internship experience in the field, you might also have demonstrated expertise providing information resources to support your community” (2020).

Methodology

My study population will consist of recent graduates from an online MLIS program who are currently employed at an academic library in a “work from home” position. I will employ a convenience sampling method that will use two approaches to recruit participants in my study: 1) posting announcements with a URL containing more information about my study to academic library listservs like the ALA’s Virtual Communities and Libraries (VCL) Member Initiative Group, RUSA (Reference and User Services Association “e-discussion lists”) and the

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ACRL's Distance Learning Section, Academic Library Services and Graduate Students Interest Group listservs, and 2) emailing roughly two dozen academic library administrators requesting that they forward the URL where my study is explained in more detail to any of their employees that fit my study population profile. Both the listserv post and email to administrators will include my email and a URL with more information and a simple contact form in case they'd rather not email me directly. After making direct contact with individuals expressing their willingness to take part in my study, IDI guides will be emailed along with an informed consent document. We will also ask about their availability to schedule an interview. If these efforts fail to enlist enough participants, offering compensation to respondents may provide a solution.

Although I believe my nonprobability sampling approach is the best method (or two methods) for reaching qualified individuals, I am nonetheless concerned about being able to elicit interest in this study from enough willing respondents. I reviewed ALA and BLS reports on library employment but was unable to find data about the number of new hires by year, much less this data correlated with details on post-secondary education or library type. Without these statistics it's impossible to know how large of sampling pool exists. My best guess is that, at a minimum, there are hundreds of new academic librarians who started working in 2019 or 2020 nationally. I would be surprised if there were more than two thousand. Word of mouth could be instrumental in disseminating the announcement / request for participation. If one academic library administrator was intrigued by my study, she may be willing to try to recruit colleagues at other institutions to send my proposal to qualified individuals.

My data collection instrument will be an in-depth interview which has been pilot tested by an employee of the SJSU King Library who fits my sample profile: a recent distance learning

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MLIS graduate (2019) who is now working from home as a User Experience designer at the King Library. The main feedback I received from my pilot tester was that the interview questions were somewhat too complex and could perhaps benefit from being rephrased or even broken down into two sentences. She stated that while she understood the meaning and purpose of the questions, she had some slight difficulty following the syntax of the first question, but not with the rest of the questions which used the same template. Based on her responses, I worked to shorten and sharpen the questions while leaving some room for elaboration.

The interview asks a series of questions about skills acquired during MLIS school and whether and how they've been helpful at the respondent's current academic library job. A qualitative approach is needed in part because there are virtually no published studies on my research topic and therefore little is known about several of the variables in my research question. The kind of narrative, detail and personalized reflection that can be collected in an in-depth interview makes this method a much better fit for my research question than a quantitative survey. Donnelly and Trochim assert that there are three key benefits of qualitative studies, each of which is relevant to my study: 1) Generating new theories or hypotheses, 2) achieving a deep understanding of the issues, and 3) developing detailed stories to describe a phenomenon (2007). Of course, it remains to be seen whether my interview guide might prompt the kind of responses needed to achieve these objectives. Interviews will be recorded and transcribed at a later date. The interview guide itself may be updated ad hoc during the data collection process based on prior respondents' answers and feedback about the interview questions. These details, any other adjustments to the data collection instrument, will be

carefully documented so as to avoid inconsistencies and mistakes, and will be included with the published findings.

Following Brancolini, Kennedy and Luo's advice that "qualitative research questions should not be too focused because that may lead to tunnel vision and inhibit the understanding and analysis of qualitative data" (2017), I've attempted to formulate questions that are both straightforward yet offer the possibility of deliberation and exploration of the "how and why" of the interviewee's responses, some of which might warrant further probing by the interviewer. That said, the questions also allow for a response of "none" / NA. Each question asks about a different skill set acquired in an online MLIS program which has had a positive impact on the respondent's current job. They address the most important variables in my research question: impact and job performance. Impact is measured in terms of specific skills that have been helpful in one's job, organized into skill categories, e.g. – what particular online communication skills, what particular professional network skills, what particular marketing skills, etc. Job performance is a subjective view of how well one is able to carry out their job responsibilities, defined here in terms of the "helpfulness" of particular skills in their respective categories.

Analysis

By collecting data about different skills and their benefits I hope to paint a picture of what and how particular skills acquired in graduate school have been relevant to new academic librarians' jobs. As a qualitative study the goal is not to simply rank the most popular skills, but to record all the variations in how particular skills gained in an online MLIS program have been

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applicable to the professional lives of my interviewees. By interpreting and coding the answers to my interview questions, a thematic analysis should reveal patterns and connections among disparate responses. Because I have no preconceived themes in mind, I plan to use an inductive and latent (if necessary) approaches to extrapolate themes from the transcribed texts. These texts will then be coded according to the unique thoughts and feelings expressed in each transcript. Codes will be reused, added or replaced as needed throughout the process of coding all the interviews. Coding should help reveal common ideas, meanings and patterns within similar and dissimilar language. After the coding is complete, I will look for and develop broader themes which particular codes can be combined within. These themes will be oriented toward answering the research question. In the thematic analysis findings I'll review the major themes, discussing their meaning and frequency and anchoring them with examples from the data. The conclusion of this thematic analysis will explain how it has helped us answer the research question.

Project Schedule

Project Milestones	Expected Time Needed	Expected Completion
Project start		January 20,2021
Revisit literature review	7 days	January 27, 2021
Second pilot test & finalize interview guide questions	14 days	February 10, 2021
Submit IDI guide, sampling plan and consent form to IRB	30 days	March 12, 2021
Sampling outreach	6 weeks	April 23, 2021
Data collection (interviews)	4 weeks	May 21, 2021
Data transcription	2 weeks	June 5, 2021
Transcriptions returned to respondents for comment	1 day	June 6, 2021
Data analysis	4 weeks	July 8, 2021

Rough draft completed	2 weeks	July 22, 2021
Second draft completed	1 week	July 29, 2021
Research into conferences where paper can be presented, and OA journals that offer peer review of submitted articles	2 weeks	August 12, 2021

Qualifications

Ideally all the researchers involved with this study (if I decide I need to find co-authors or researchers to help with interviews, transcription and analysis), and those peers who will ultimately review it, have completed a distance learning MLIS degree or have some other connection to an online MLIS program. It's no accident that I gravitated to this research topic given the fact that I'm a distance learning MLIS student myself, one who is interested in working in an academic library (though I still haven't figured out in what capacity). For that matter, I strongly doubt that I would have become interested in the situation of librarians working from home if not for the coronavirus pandemic. It is still an open question as to whether pandemic related closures will be in effect when I graduate in 2021, so my research question remains very relevant to my own future. I would also stand to gain from the knowledge and wisdom that I hope this study would generate about the most important skills to focus on building during the remainder of my time at the SJSU iSchool. It strikes me that I would be even more qualified to run this study if I landed an internship at an academic library – whether work from home (more likely circa early 2021) or on site. It seems reasonable to assume that I'd gain new insight into my interview questions from the vantage of an academic library internship, perhaps leading to revisions or a decision to go in a different direction altogether. An internship might also lead to contacts who could help me with the study: either

fellow MLIS students, recent MLIS graduates, librarian practitioner-researchers, or others who may want to lend their support.

Study Significance

I believe my study will produce valuable documentation of the experiences of recent online MLIS degree holders working remotely at academic libraries. This information has the potential to directly benefit online MLIS students or those considering enrolling in such a program, librarians (and LIS faculty) who are engaged in research into instructional design for online MLIS programs. The study has promise for those who are interested in a range of issues relevant to online MLIS schools: technology platforms and tools in demand in the workplace, course literature and the types of skills-building exercises derived from it, the phenomenon of students sharing knowledge and advice with their cohort, the alignment of skill sets with learning outcomes, scholarly and professional guidance shared by MLIS faculty, and pedagogical best practices for foregrounding the development of key skills, among other topics.

Considering the lack of scholarly literature on my research topic and question, I hope that my study might begin to fill in some of the gaps between the intersectional topics I surveyed and establish a reference point for looking at online MLIS programs and online academic library employment, both in the context of coronavirus and in general. There is a large body of informal work aimed at librarians working from home (and those that manage them), but thus far no scholarly articles published about librarians that match my participant profile. This suggests to me that there might be significant interest in a study like mine from current librarians involved with distance learning, librarians thinking about and enacting

policies related to Cox's "new normal" of large numbers of library staff working from home, and online MLIS faculty.

Summary

Even after the current pandemic relents, the number of academic librarians working from home is likely to be much higher than it was pre-pandemic. I found anecdotal information that this transformation was already trending in this direction before coronavirus hit. It is and will remain important to document the experiences of recent distance learning MLIS graduates in online library positions for a number of reasons, chiefly for the possibility of providing guidance to both students and those charged with their education. While the goal of my study is not merely to codify a list of helpful skills for new academic librarians, I do hope that it will shed some light on the successes attained and challenges faced by my study population, and in turn enrich the understanding of students, librarians, and educators about links between professional academic librarianship in the online context and skills-based (as opposed to knowledge-based) learning in online MLIS programs.

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