Interview:

Hiring Committee Perceptions of Online MLIS Degrees

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For my interview, I wanted to continue working on my chosen topic for this course, academic library hiring committee members' perceptions of Master of Library and Information Studies (MLIS) or equivalent degrees accredited by the American Library Association (ALA). Before I began the process of drafting questions, I sought information on how to go about preparing for and conducting a qualitative interview, how to formulate effective questions, and effective interview techniques (in Creswell, 2012; Hannon, 2007). I wanted to make this experience as authentic as possible so I would feel prepared to conduct "real" interviews for research in the future.

Fortunately, there were a couple open-ended questions on the survey I created that easily translated into a single interview question on strengths and weaknesses of candidates with an online MLIS (Appendix A, question 3). In addition, one of the closed-ended questions from the survey regarding whether the respondent felt online and traditional MLIS degrees were equal left me with more questions than answers when I reviewed the survey results (appendix A, question 2). I altered the wording slightly to make it appropriate for the interview and used it. I then brainstormed other ideas for what I could ask. I wanted to start with a question that did not mention online MLIS degrees to see if interviewees would come up with online MLISs as an issue of debate on committees on their own (Appendix A, question 1). I decided to take the question on strengths and weaknesses a step further to see what advice the interviewees would offer to online graduates (Appendix A, question 5). This information would be great to share in whatever article I might publish of my results so online graduates could walk away with practical guidance straight from the mouths of those in charge of hiring at academic libraries. Lastly, since

I knew my interviewee had earned an online MLIS, I wanted to also ask her/him how s/he feels that dynamic influences her/his perspectives of candidates with online MLIS degrees (Appendix A, question 4).

I selected my interviewee from the people I know who have recently served on a hiring committee appropriate to my research focus. We scheduled a mutually convenient time and met in a quiet location free from distractions. Though we have a personal rapport, I let her/him know in advance that I wanted to keep the interview formal, as if I were a researcher s/he did not know well. After settling in and exchanging pleasantries, I hit my introductory talking points (see Appendix A. Upon receiving her/his consent to record, I started a recording and proceeded with my questions.

I remained conscious of my tone and body language throughout. I wanted to appear interested and wanting to know more, but also did not want to lead the interviewee's responses in any particular direction. When my subject found her/himself rambling, s/he was apologetic but I reassured her/him that it was okay and we were doing great on time. I am glad I encouraged it because the answers to my questions often emerged at the end of a ramble. From the feedback the interviewee provided at the end, I discovered that my willingness to allow the rambling while appearing patient and amenable positively influenced the interviewee to be forthcoming and feel comfortable.

One of the most important lessons I learned during the interview was to be cautious of probing too much. The readings I used to prepare for the interview both said I should ask probing questions to clarify, get more information, make sure the interviewee has said all they can, etcetera (Creswell, 2012; Hannon, 2007). I did ask some probing questions that proved effective in eliciting more. However, many of them seemed awkward to the interviewee. When s/he really

had said all s/he had to say, s/he would repeat what s/he had said. Occasionally I felt like I was living out the old saying, beating the dead horse. I also occasionally felt like I was almost beginning to lead the interview with the probing questions, though my interviewee did not express the same feeling. I plan to review the interview recording to see if I can determine where I was going wrong. In any case, I will be more mindful in the future of whether a probing question feels natural at a given time and whether there may actually be anything else to get on the question or if I should the dead horse rest in peace!

   Overall, I really enjoyed this experience conducting an interview and feel that I was naturally good at it. I suspect that many years interviewing candidates on hiring committees and independently has taught be excellent interviewing skills that translate well into a research interview context.

References

Creswell, J. W. (2012). *Educational research: Planning, conducting, and evaluating quantitative*

    and qualitative research (4th ed.). Boston, MA: Pearson.

Hannon, A. (2007). *Interviews in education research.* Retrieved from

    http://www.edu.plymouth.ac.uk/resined/interviews/inthome.htm

Appendix A

Interview Script and Questions

Introductory Talking Points

1. This interview will take no more than 30 minutes and we can stop the interview at any time if you

    wish.

2. I'm conducting this interview as a learning exercise for my research methods course.

3. The results will be reported out to my classmates and on my public blog. However, your name and

    anything that personally identifies you will not be shared.

4. In order to create a transcript and evaluate myself, I'd like to audio record this interview. The

    transcript will not be shared and will be destroyed at the end of this assignment. Is this ok with you?

5. At the end of the interview, I'll ask you for your feedback on how you felt during the interview and

    your assessment of me as an interviewer.

Questions

1. Think about the hiring committees you have served on for positions requiring an ALA-accredited

    MLIS or equivalent. What sorts of things did the committee(s) discuss in relation to candidates'

    degrees? (Follow up if online degrees are not mentioned: Do you recall any discussions relating to

    whether a candidate had an online or traditional degree? Tell me about those.)

2. Do you feel that an ALA-accredited MLIS completed online is equal to one completed in person and

    on-campus? Why or why not? What differences are there?

3. What do you perceive to be the strengths and weaknesses of candidates with online MLIS degrees?

4. You yourself have an online MLIS. How do you think this impacts your perspective on candidates

    with an online MLIS? (Follow up: Have you perceived any differences between how you view online

    candidates and how colleagues with traditional degrees view online candidates?)

5. What advice would you give specifically to online graduates as they prepare for, apply for, and

interview for positions?

6. Do you have anything else you would like to add before we conclude?

7. Your feedback is helpful for my learning process. Can you comment on your experience with this

interview? Can you comment on me as an interviewer?

Appendix B

Summary of Responses from Interview with "Subject A"

1. Think about the hiring committees you have served on for positions requiring an ALA-accredited

   MLIS or equivalent. What sorts of things did the committee(s) discuss in relation to candidates'

   degrees? (Follow up if online degrees are not mentioned: Do you recall any discussions relating to

   whether a candidate had an online or traditional degree? Tell me about those.)

   Interviewee mentioned that the only conversation s/he could recall that centered on a person's

   degree was a conversation about whether a person with degrees from an especially prestigious

   university would be happy with the position. S/he cannot recall any discussion of online degrees,

   though s/he was aware that some applicants had one.

2. Do you feel that an ALA-accredited MLIS completed online is equal to one completed in person and

   on-campus? Why or why not? What differences are there?

   Interviewee views them as equivalent in terms of the quality of education, except maybe for some

   online graduates having more technology competency. Though an online program was right for what

   s/he needed and the one s/he chose was excellent, s/he does not view her/his experience as superior

   to a traditional program. S/he felt more drawn to discuss the benefits and drawbacks of getting the

   MLIS online versus on campus (from the student's experience) and had to redirect herself/himself a

   couple times to what the question was asking.

3. What do you perceive to be the strengths and weaknesses of candidates with online MLIS degrees?

   After talking herself/himself through various possibilities, s/he concludes that the strengths and

   weaknesses of online degrees are no different than for traditional degrees, except perhaps for most

   online graduates having somewhat superior technology skills and comfort.

4. You yourself have an online MLIS. How do you think this impacts your perspective on candidates

   with an online MLIS? (Follow up: Have you perceived any differences between how you view online

candidates and how colleagues with traditional degrees view online candidates?)

Interview expressed an initial feeling of camaraderie, an ability to relate to them on that level. However, the feeling is fleeting and s/he perceives it have no impact on her overall impression of the candidate. S/he expressed that a person's motivation for pursuing the job was the most important factor to her/him in making hiring decisions (why this job, why Alaska, etc.).

5. What advice would you give specifically to online graduates as they prepare for, apply for, and interview for positions?

   S/he struggled to come up with advice specific to online graduates (as opposed to any graduate). S/he concluded that getting experience, even if it's as a volunteer or on a committee, is even more important for online graduates than traditional graduates.

6. Do you have anything else you would like to add before we conclude?

   Interviewee expressed a feeling that this (whether a person has an online MLIS) was more of an issue in 2006, 2007, or even 2010 than it is now. S/he perceives that online degrees have become much more accepted. S/he pointed out that some (most?) of the best MLIS programs offer online-only options.

7. Your feedback is helpful for my learning process. Can you comment on your experience with this interview? Can you comment on me as an interviewer?

   Interviewee perceived me to be well-prepared. I seemed very neutral, both in the phrasing of my questions but also in my tone and body language. S/he never felt judged and felt encouraged to be open and honest. S/he appreciated that I let her/him talk her answers out until s/he was able to articulate a conclusion.