

Academic Library Hiring Committees' Perceptions of Online Library School Degrees:

A Research Proposal in Brief

D'Arcy L. Hutchings

University of Alaska Fairbanks

Academic Library Hiring Committees' Perceptions of Online Library School Degrees:
A Research Proposal in Brief

With the explosion and continued growth of online graduate degrees over the past decade and a half have come questions about the value of such degrees in a variety of fields, including librarianship (Chant, 2013; Stephens, 2011; Thompson, 2009). Academic libraries almost universally require librarian candidates to have a Masters of Library and Information Studies (MLIS) or equivalent degree from a program that has been accredited by the American Library Association (ALA). Accreditation takes some of the guesswork out of the make-up of the degree but as long as resistance to change remains a key part of human nature, some resistance to this new way of obtaining the degree is to be expected. Regardless how much research is done that demonstrates the equivalency (or even supremacy) of online and in-person education (U.S. Department of Education, 2010), the perceptions of those who make the hiring decisions continue to influence who does and does not get hired for any particular position. Understanding academic library hiring committee members' perceptions of online MLIS degrees can inform decisions made by administrators of online MLIS degree programs, individuals considering a MLIS program, and MLIS graduates seeking positions in academic libraries.

Little research has been done in this area. This is an excellent opportunity for me to contribute substantially to current knowledge. Though previous research has concluded an overall acceptance of online MLIS as equivalent to degrees earned on campus, in most studies that conclusion was based on a small number of study participants as many or most respondents had not had sufficient exposure to online candidates to judge (Kennedy, Russell Gonzalez, & Cenzer, 2007; Kim & Kusack, 2005; Russell Gonzalez, Kennedy, & Cenzer, 2007; Wilde & Epperson, 2006). Some more current surveys have also found that the majority of those surveyed

accept online MLIS degrees as equivalent but they were not conducted or reported as research and were not subject to peer review. (Braceros and Ching, 2008; Chant, 2013).

Research Questions

The research will seek to answer the following three questions:

- How is the online MLIS perceived by academic library hiring committee members in comparison to degrees completed on campus?
- What strengths and weakness do employers' attribute to online MLIS graduates?
- Does a hiring committee member's own experience with online MLIS graduates or online MLIS coursework positively influence their perception of online MLIS degrees?

Anticipated Results

I hypothesize:

- Respondents will tend to view MLIS degrees equally regardless of mode of delivery as long as they are ALA-accredited. A small percentage will feel online degrees are, in fact, better. This may be a higher than the 4% of respondents in the Braceros and Ching (2008) survey who felt online graduates were more prepared for law library work than graduates who got their degrees on campus.
- The vast majority of hiring committee members will have had some experience with online MLIS graduates or coursework, either through working with someone who got their degree online, considering candidates with online degrees while on a hiring committee, or taking online MLIS coursework themselves. There should be a drastic increase in respondents with exposure compared to the research of the early- to mid-2000s.

- There will be a positive correlation between one's exposure to online MLIS degrees and competent online graduates and the value one sees in an online MLIS.
- Common themes will appear among the strengths and weaknesses hiring committee members attribute to online graduates. Strengths may include comfort in working with technology (such as was found in Wilde & Epperson, 2006) and self-discipline. Weaknesses may mirror those articulated in prior research, including subpar social or interpersonal skills (Braceros & Chang, 2008; Kim & Kusack, 2005; Wynkoop as cited in Wilde & Epperson, 2006).

Research Design

A survey will be distributed to popular academic library list-servs and online groups soliciting responses. The email/post will encourage people to share the survey with others. The survey will contain primarily closed ended questions with ample opportunities to provide additional comments. Respondents who state that they have served on a hiring committee in the past two years will be directed through the remainder of the survey.

References

- Bracerros, C. S., & Ching, T. S. (2008). Hiring (or not) the distance grad. *AALL Spectrum*, 12(5), 24-33.
- Chant, I. (2013). Research: As online degrees become more prevalent, questions linger. *Library Journal*, 138(18), 23-23.
- Kim, H. J., & Kusack, J. M. (2005). Distance education and the new MLS: The employer's perspective. *Journal of Education for Library and Information Science*, 46(1), 36-52.
- Kennedy, K., Russell Gonzalez, S., & Cenzer, P. (2007). Student perspectives on library school degrees and the hiring process. *Journal of Education for Library & Information Science*, 48(4), 284-293.
- Russell Gonzalez, S., Kennedy, K., & Cenzer, P. (2007). E-education: Does an online degree make a difference to academic library employers? Paper presented at the Thirteenth National Conference of the Association of College and Research Libraries, Baltimore, Maryland. Retrieved from <http://www.ala.org/acrl/sites/ala.org.acrl/files/content/conferences/confsandpreconfs/national/baltimore/papers/11.pdf>
- Stephens, M. (2011). Online LIS education--or not. *Library Journal*, 136(17), 36.
- Thompson, L. D. (2009). *Perceptions of employers toward hiring graduates with online degrees*. (Ph.D., University of Nevada, Las Vegas). *ProQuest Dissertations and Theses*, Retrieved from <http://search.proquest.com.proxy.consortiumlibrary.org/docview/305091938?accountid=14473>. (305091938)

U.S. Department of Education, Office of Planning, Evaluation, and Policy Development. (2010).

Evaluation of evidence-based practices in online learning: A meta-analysis and review of online learning studies. Retrieved from <http://www2.ed.gov/rschstat/eval/tech/evidence-based-practices/finalreport.pdf>

Wilde, M. L., & Epperson, A. (2006). A survey of alumni of LIS distance education programs:

Experiences and implications. *The Journal of Academic Librarianship*, 32(3), 238-250.

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.acalib.2006.02.013>