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Clarke, R. I., & Kim, Y.-I. (2018). The more things change, the more they stay the same: educational and disciplinary backgrounds of American librarians, 1950-2015. *School of Information Studies: Faculty Scholarship*, 178. <https://surface.syr.edu/istpub/178>

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Evidence Summary

Recent American Library School Graduate Disciplinary Backgrounds are Predominantly English and History

A Review of:

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Abstract

Objective – To determine the educational and disciplinary backgrounds of recent library school graduates and compare them to librarians of the past and to the general population.

Design – Cross-sectional.

Setting – 7 library schools in North America.

Subjects – 3,191 students and their 4,380 associated degrees.

Methods – Data was solicited from every ALA-accredited Master of Library Science (MLS) program in the United States of America, Canada, and Puerto Rico on students enrolled between 2012-2016 about their undergraduate and graduate degrees and areas of study. Data was coded and summarized quantitatively. Undergraduate degree data were recoded and compared to the undergraduate degree areas of study for the college-educated American population for 2012-2015 using the IPEDS Classification of Instructional Programs taxonomic scheme. Data were compared to previous studies

investigating librarian disciplinary backgrounds.

Main Results – 12% of schools provided data. Recent North American library school graduates have undergraduate and graduate degrees with disciplinary backgrounds in humanities (41%), social sciences (22%), professions (17%), Science, Technology, Engineering and Math (STEM) (11%), arts (6%), and miscellaneous/interdisciplinary (3%). Of the humanities, English (14.68%) and history (10.43%) predominate. Comparing undergraduate degrees with the college-educated American population using the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System (IPEDS) classification schema, recent library school graduates have a higher percentage of degrees in social sciences and history (21.37% vs. 9.24%), English language and literature/letters (20.33% vs. 2.65%), computer and information science (6.54% vs. 2.96%), and foreign languages, literatures, and linguistics (6.25% vs. 1.1%). Compared to librarians in the past, there has been a decline in recent library school graduates with English language and literature/letters, education, biological and physical sciences, and library science undergraduate degrees. There has been an increase in visual and performing arts undergraduate degrees in recent library school graduates.

Conclusion – English and history disciplinary backgrounds still predominate in recent library school graduates. This could pose problems for library school students unfamiliar with social science methodologies, both in school and later when doing evidence-based practice in the work place. The disciplinary backgrounds of recent library school graduates were very different from the college-educated American population. An increase in librarians with STEM backgrounds may help serve a need for STEM support and provide more diverse perspectives. More recent library school graduates have an arts disciplinary background than was seen in previous generations. The creativity and innovation skills that an arts background provides could be an important skill in librarianship.

Commentary

This summary uses the CAT generic critical appraisal tool (Perryman & Rathbun-Grubb, 2014) to assess the article. The authors of the article clearly stated their study objective and provided a good overview of the literature. In the article, the authors used a longitudinal comparison to highlight three studies, which found that humanities disciplinary backgrounds predominated among MLS graduates.

The authors chose to collect data sets from institutions rather than conducting a survey in an effort to have a “more thorough and representative set of data” (Methods section). The authors noted that limitations of the study included a small sample size, and although the response rate was not high, this collection method is a strength. Of those schools that participated, their entire population was included rather than a selective sample of individual responses. The authors stated that the included schools varied in size, structure, and ranking. Including these data would have been useful to compare to non-participating schools to determine if it was a representative sample.

The authors extensively detailed their process for coding data. First, the authors presented the coding of data to compare to the general population. Table 2 in the study presented the comparison clearly and concisely. Next, the authors recoded the data to allow a comparison with previous papers investigating MLS student disciplinary backgrounds. The authors discussed the challenges of this analysis. The presentation of the analysis in Figure 2 was awkward to read as not all totals equaled 100%; however, the authors addressed this in the text.

In the “Implications and Conclusions” section, the authors stated that students with humanities backgrounds struggle to understand expectations because of their unfamiliarity with research methodologies and genre conventions in an MLS program. This might be true, but the authors do not present evidence to support this statement. Checking

the curricula of the participating schools for required research methods courses could provide evidence to support or disprove this statement.

This study is methodologically rigorous. The authors provided an excellent description of their data collection, coding, and analysis. This article will be valuable to researchers doing analyses that require building crosswalks between data sets. Overall, the paper points to the continuing skewed educational background of MLS graduates. As the authors noted, MLS programs should do more to recruit students from STEM disciplines. Current STEM librarians can help promote this by connecting more with their students. Each interaction is an opportunity to demonstrate and promote librarianship to STEM students, maybe even encouraging some of these students to become librarians.

Reference

- Perryman, C. & Rathbun-Grubb, S. (2014). The CAT: A generic critical appraisal tool. Retrieved from <http://www.jotform.us/cp1757/TheCat>