"…And Well-Being for All": Some Implications of an Interdisciplinary Research on Public Libraries and Community Resilience for LIS Education

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ABSTRACT

Library and Information Science (LIS) programs in the U.S. are continuously assessing the educational needs of their students against the daily realities of library practice. This process is reflected in the American Library Association Core Competences of Librarianship. The constantly evolving nature of this programmatic document testifies to the changing nature of the contexts in which librarians conduct their work. LIS research often reveals gaps between expected professional competencies of librarians and LIS pedagogy and curriculum. This paper focuses on some of these gaps as evidenced by the three co-authors' ongoing research on Midwestern public libraries. In doing so, the paper contributes to the scholarship on best practices in public librarianship and librarian education. The authors articulate a key implication of their research for the competencies of library professionals in a complex world of environmental, economic, and political challenges. Finally, they describe an assignment sample by means of which LIS students can learn how to address social justice needs in the community; demonstrate how to practice cultural humility when planning for collections, programs, and services; and apply Evidence-Based Practice processes for identifying, assessing, and addressing community needs.

ALISE RESEARCH TAXONOMY TOPICS

public libraries; community-led services; curriculum; community engagement; social justice

AUTHOR KEYWORDS

community resilience; well-being; ALA core competencies; LIS education

INTRODUCTION

LIS programs in the U.S. are continuously assessing the educational needs of their students against the daily realities of library practice. This process is reflected in the list of Core Competences of Librarianship developed by the American Library Association. The constantly evolving nature of this programmatic document testifies to the changing nature of the contexts in which librarians perform their work, including the changing demands that patrons place on libraries (Schnitzer and Rosenzweig, 2016) and the complexification of competencies that librarians need to display as a result (Gutsche, 2010; Saunders, Rozaklis, and Abels, 2014). Empirical research of librarianship often reveals gaps between expected professional competencies of librarians and LIS pedagogy and curricula (Saunders 2015; Westbrook and Fabian, 2010; Williams and Saunders, 2020). This paper focuses on some of these gaps as evidenced by ongoing research on Midwestern public libraries, conducted by an interdisciplinary team at our university since 2021. In doing so, the paper contributes to the LIS literature which has examined ways to improve not only public library practices, but also LIS education. After providing a background discussion of our research, we formulate one surprising implication of our team's findings for the competencies of library professionals in a complex world of environmental, economic, and political challenges. In addition, we describe an example of assignment which is built around the use of an Evidence-Based Practice (EBP) framework first popularized in the biomedical sciences (Guyatt et al., 1992; MacPherson, 1995), adopted by LIS scholars since the early 2000s (Booth, 2003; Booth & Brice, 2004; Miller et al., 2017), especially in the version currently developed by Koufogiannakis and Brettle (2016). As such, we claim that this paper contributes explicitly to the main theme of this conference – the need for a dialogue between library practitioners and LIS educators.

BACKGROUND: THE STUDY

Despite a $12 billion annual investment in 9,000 public library systems across the US and despite their important service to vulnerable individuals and communities, research assessing the effects of public libraries on local communities is scarce. Nencka (2021) recently documented libraries' impacts on patronage, students' achievement, and housing values, and found some (limited) positive impacts. However, the impacts of libraries on resilience in times of crises, their innovations, successes and shortcomings have not yet been systematically assessed. This is a lost opportunity, especially for library scholars and practitioners interested in alleviating climate, social, economic, and political community vulnerabilities (our target groups). Assessing the impact of local public libraries on the most vulnerable populations (the poor, racialized minority, elderly, isolated, recent immigrants, unhoused people, and those with poor health and addictions) can provide invaluable information on the best practices to enhance community resilience – by which we mean a community's ability to recover from disruptions, adapt, and rebuild stronger. Libraries' role for local resilience was particularly salient during the COVID-19 pandemic, an extreme example of biological vulnerability, when public libraries creatively redesigned their services to support their patrons' information needs.

In this context, since 2021 we have formed an interdisciplinary team together with other scholars in our university (from Urban Planning, Sociology, Social Work, and Business Analytics). Our goal has been to document and assess public libraries' impacts on community resilience. Building on our combined expertises, we have so far examined the socio-economic impacts of Midwestern public libraries, in particular their contributions to the resilience of the most vulnerable populations to climate extremes and natural disasters, economic recessions, public health emergencies, and disinformation campaigns.

In the context of that paper, we have sought to answer the following question:

(RQ) Given the important role of public libraries as spaces and of librarians as service providers, what is their actual impact on the resilience of vulnerable communities?

In particular, we wanted to know how libraries innovate to provide essential services in times of crises (e.g., pandemics, heat/cold waves, high unemployment); whether libraries are effective mechanisms for delivering services for which they were not originally intended, and if so, how.

Surveys.

To assess public library practices that may contribute to community resilience, we surveyed public library directors in the Midwest. We designed and distributed a web-based survey covering such topics as priorities, resources, morale, and services to local patrons implemented in relation to the COVID-19 pandemic; waves of heat and cold; and economic downturns. We developed this questionnaire with input from practicing librarians in our area. A total of 510 Midwestern librarians opened the survey, 415 answered at least 30% of the questions, and 369 answered at least 90%. A great majority of respondents were library directors (93%) with 6-10 years of experience in their libraries.

Not surprisingly, we found that respondents overwhelmingly prioritize collections as the most important library function. Indeed, when asked about the most important objectives of their libraries, 89% mentioned building a love of reading and 86% providing trustworthy information – the two primary missions of libraries. However, a large proportion of the participants also ranked high the contribution of their library to civic life (61%), the provision of space for events (52%), and safe spaces for unhoused people (34%), the imparting of workforce skills and training (26%) as well as the offering of referral services (24%). About 80% of respondents thought that all those services were "very" and "somewhat" important to their library's mission.

In times of economic crises, public libraries provide information about jobs and job search websites; help patrons identify and apply for jobs (1 to 10 patrons each day in more than 250 libraries) and access social services; organize various types of classes and workshops; as well as supply information about social/public services and the best ways to access government websites.

Also, during heat/cold waves, most public libraries have an open-door policy. More than 200 libraries serve 1-5 needy patrons on extremely cold/hot days, 50 libraries serve 5-10 patrons, and a few serve 50-100 patrons. More than 200 respondents considered that libraries can act as shelters, and 180 that they should.

Finally, during the COVID-19 pandemic, almost all libraries we surveyed strove to disseminate accurate health information to their patrons and protect their staff and patrons' health. About 200 libraries encouraged community members to take protective measures against the virus. Many provided curbside pickup, increased online services, wireless access points and other measures allowing library services while social distancing. Some also served as testing centers.

Interviews

To understand in more detail some of the insights gained through the survey component of our research, we selected the 14 libraries with the most innovative practices and conducted in-depth interviews with their directors. These interviews helped us articulate a set of thematic clusters of public library activities and concerns, one of which is particularly interesting for the purposes of this paper, namely that public libraries are increasingly linked to services aimed at increasing patron well-being, e.g., physical and mental health through appropriate nutrition, physical activity, and medical services when needed. For instance, one library director referred to a partnership their library developed with other institution to help feed people in need:

> "In March 2020 we started these bi-weekly free food, pop-up coops, and we worked with two groups: a food distributor (they get food from places that maybe [...] have food sitting in their warehouses or it's going to expire in a month or some other factor; and then there's a small little local newspaper called 'Southland Voice' – we partner up with them. So, we started out in the library parking lot. We were probably doing maybe about one hundred cars at a time." (Participant A)

Along similar lines, some libraries have become hubs for food sharing among community members. As one director puts it,

"In our foyer, or even on the bench in front of the library, people will just leave things like fresh produce, cucumbers, tomatoes, or whatever. Those kinds of things are just, like people know that at the library, they could just pick up any of those things. Then some people drop plants off." (Participant B)

In addition, many libraries have also started offering services aimed at engaging patrons in physical activities, e.g., annual walking paths in the spring, family camp-outs in the summer, and field trips at local wildlife parks.

Overall, our findings confirm findings of LIS scholarship on the many ways in which public libraries and librarians' work impacts the well-being of community members, for instance by enacting or just enabling social work functions (Baum et al., 2022; Cathcart, 2008; Gross & Latham, 2021; Lloyd, 2020; Ogden & Williams, 2022; Westbrook, 2015), participating in the food justice movement (D'Arpa, Lenstra, & Rubenstein, 2020; Lenstra & D'Arpa, 2019), or enabling mental and physical health by promoting healthy bodily activity (Lenstra, 2018a, 2018b; Lenstra & Campana, 2022; Lenstra et al., 2022).

SIGNIFICANCE FOR LIS EDUCATION

Reflecting on the focus of their libraries on well-being, most directors expressed genuine concern that they were not prepared for the kinds of challenges this newly discovered focus of library services raises.

This concern points to a gap that exists between the core competencies expressed in the ALA list and the current LIS educational practice, on one hand, and the constantly changing contexts within which libraries operate. For instance, one director confessed that "[w]e get patrons coming in that are clearly struggling with mental health issues and sometimes abuse situations. [...] we know who they should contact, but we lack the ability to really put them right there with the help they need" (Participant C). Another director pointed out a need for librarians to know how to "provide trauma-informed care, especially because with trauma in a community, it affects everybody; it doesn't just affect you individually, it affects the community as a whole. People are going to come in and they're going to be responding to that trauma, and sometimes in not positive ways" (Participant D). The pressing need to address demands that go beyond the traditional boundaries of librarianship is eloquently yet also alarmingly voiced by a director who states that mental health has become an issue among librarians themselves and, thus, knowing how to deal with this challenge is a skill that librarians have yet to acquire:

"There's all kinds of different things that the library is kind of expected to take care of and do well, and when we don't take care of ourselves we're just sacrificing our well-being to be almost martyrs for the community. [...] If your job duties are becoming too much, especially if you've been volunteering to do something and all of a sudden now it's become part of your everyday routine, and now it's expected of you, trying to set those boundaries and being able to be like 'Hey, this is way too much on my plate right now. It's time to delegate some of these to somebody else.' That can be hard, because a lot of libraries are also short staffed, especially right now." (Participant E)

Increased demands on librarians to perform activities beyond their usual duties and the impact that these demands have on their mental health present LIS education with a serious challenge: what should MLIS students learn to be better prepared for situations such as those described by the quoted directors?

ASSIGNMENT SAMPLE

The insights gained through our research reveal a need for LIS programs to build on three sections of the ALA Core Competencies in particular (Reference and User Services, Research and Evidence-Based Practice, and Social Justice) to develop improved curricula. These curricula can help students acquire the knowledge, skills, and abilities to do this work competently and effectively in their communities.

How can LIS educators prepare MLIS students to go into the world and make an impact on Social Justice issues? Drawing on our findings, we believe LIS students may benefit from having multiple opportunities to create community needs assessments to address social justice needs in the community; to

demonstrate how to practice cultural humility when planning for collections, programs, and services; and apply Evidence-Based Practice (EBP) processes for identifying, assessing, and addressing community needs.

One of the authors has already started implementing assignments aimed at training MLIS students in these three directions. In what follows, given the size limit of this paper, we discuss only one such assignment. In the longer version of the paper, we provide a more extensive discussion of this and other assignments, including excerpts from student work, and we suggest new topics based on the cases we have learned about from our interviews.

The activity we chose to describe here asks the students to imagine themselves serving in the role of a librarian in the type of library they wish to work in. In that role, they are seeking to introduce or improve a collection, program, service, or space at that library. As a sample of topics the students chose recently, we can mention: building a collection of materials in Arabic and French for a growing population of non-English speakers at a local community college; establishing a seed library and related educational programming about healthy eating and gardening at an urban public library; creating a Reading Buddies program with students enrolled in special education programs; expanding the circulation of library technology (laptops and hotspots) at a rural public library to improve connectivity; increasing the amount of archiving of university resources that tell the story of students who are transgenders; and developing a safe space within an academic library where students with neurodiversity needs have a safe space with low lighting, reduced sound, and limited distractions. Such topics reflect the diversity of new challenges that public libraries face these days.

First, the students are required to assemble a planning team of 3-4 classmates and identify a library for which they will complete an EBP exercise based on the *Evidence Based Library and Information Practice* (EBLIP) model (Koufogiannakis & Brettle, 2016). EBLIP enables teams to think through a problem by asking questions centered on five key concepts: Articulate, Assemble, Assess, Agree, and Adapt. Second, the team identifies a collection, program, service, or space at their library that they wish to improve. Third, the group works through the five EBLIP steps, after which it plans a 10–15-minute presentation to share the results of that work.

The first step (*Articulate*) requires that the students ask questions about the problem they aim to address. The questions may target typical dimensions of a problem, such as the specific *population* affected by the problem; a type of *intervention* to address the problem; possible *alternatives* to that intervention; and specific desirable *outcomes* or *effects* of the intervention, together with an *evaluation* of their impact. Such dimensions are spelled out in various EBP frameworks, such as those known acronymically as "PICO" (Richardson et al, 1995) and "SPICE" (Greenhalgh et al., 2004).

To complete the second step (*Assemble*), the students are asked to identify and locate the best evidence sources that would allow them to address the problem articulated at the first step. They can accomplish this new task by performing an "environmental scan" (Aguilar, 1967) and an "organizational scan" (Thompson, 1967) to identify strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, and threats (Humphrey, 1972), as well as aspirations, and desired results (Stavros & Hinrichs, 2009) related to their chosen library.

After collecting evidence they deem relevant to addressing their problem, the students need to evaluate it and ponder how it applies to the context of their chosen library. As part of this third step (*Assess*), students may use one or more of the existing frameworks for information evaluation, such as the CRAAP (Blakeslee, 2010) or RADCAB (Christensson, 2001) tests. These and other approaches have in common the requirement that students collect indicators of source credibility and content soundness. As far as source credibility is concerned, students are encouraged to ask questions about the credentials, the stated or implicit purposes, and the biases of the person who generated the evidence under consideration. As far as content soundness is concerned, students need to ask whether the evidence is *prima facie* plausible; is sufficiently detailed to be credible; and whether it can be corroborated with evidence from other, already well-established sources (Vamanu & Zak, 2022).

At a fourth step (*Agree*), students attempt to find the best decision given the evidence. In the process, they need to reflect on a few aspects and attempt to answer certain questions related to:

(1) Their vision for their project: *What are the results of successfully achieving the vision? What is the impact on the community in five to ten years if we achieve our vision? What needs have been met, what aspirations have been fulfilled?*

(2) Equity aspects, by adapting one of the existing Racial Equity Toolkit (such the one published by the Louisville KY Free Public Library):

1. *How will the proposed program impact equity? What are the most important equity outcomes we expect will come from the program proposal*?
2. *What is the demographic structure of your community, especially in terms of race? Have we gathered community members and stakeholder input about your proposed program? What are 1-3 stakeholder groups in our community who may be impacted by this program? What factors of our proposed program may produce or perpetual inequities*?
3. *What adverse impacts or unintended consequences could result from our program proposal*?
4. *How will we address the impacts (including unintended consequences) of our program on equity*?
5. *How will we continue to partner and deepen relationships with community members who have faced discrimination, racism, or other barriers? How will we evaluate and report impacts on equity over time*?

(3) Possible goals (based on the articulated question or problem; the environmental and organizational scan procedure; and vision): *What goals emerge as salient, given all we know already*?

(4) Specific objectives: *Given each goal and objective that emerged, what outcomes should we aim for? How can we measure them? How should we evaluate them? How will we know that we succeeded in accomplishing them?*

At the final step (*Adapt*), students are required to ask and attempt to answer questions about what worked and what did not work, what aspects should be changed and what can be improved.

In the final report, the students are required to provide details on their activities for each step and present it to their classmates.

CONCLUSIONS

We began this paper by briefly presenting ongoing interdisciplinary research we have conducted, since 2021, on the impact of Midwestern public libraries on community resilience. We believe that some of our findings have implications for how LIS curriculum can be improved. In particular, we emphasized the increased focus of public librarianship on well-being, an umbrella-term that covers a wide range of issues, such as mental-physical health, food justice, safety, and so on. We found that often librarians find it difficult to address the aftershocks of such stressors as the economic downturns, ecological disasters, health crises and pandemics, all of which affect the libraries and the communities they are supposed to serve. Revisiting the ALA Core Competencies, we believe that there are ways in which LIS programs can build on three sections of it – Reference and User Services, Research and Evidence-Based Practice, and Social Justice– to develop improved curricula. These curricula can help students acquire the knowledge, skills, and abilities to do this work competently and effectively in their communities. We described one type of assignment which we believe LIS students can engage in to learn how to address social justice needs in the community; to demonstrate how to practice cultural humility when planning for collections, programs, and services; and apply Evidence-Based Practice (EBP) processes for identifying, assessing, and addressing community needs.

Future work may attempt to test the value of such assignment for real cases in local public libraries, by eliciting insights from students, front-line librarians, and beneficiaries of these exercises.

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