

They Are Like Us: Designing a Human-Centered Public Library Curriculum to Prepare Students for Working with Vulnerable Populations and the Unhoused

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ABSTRACT

With homelessness affecting over 582,000 individuals in the U.S., according to the 2022 Department of Housing and Urban Development, libraries are increasingly relied upon as safe havens for unhoused populations. In response, some libraries have embedded social workers to provide critical services, yet Library and Information Science (LIS) programs have not kept pace in preparing students for these expanded roles (Chancellor & Crooks, 2024; Dali, et.al, 2022). This paper illustrates how collaborations between public librarians, social workers and community organizations are reshaping service provision and argues that LIS education must be reconceptualized to prepare graduates for this expanded professional landscape. Using the *They Are Like Us* lens—an interpretive framework that promotes shared humanity over difference—this paper presents a model course designed to embed empathetic pedagogy, social work principles, and experiential learning into LIS curricula. These innovations aim to equip future librarians with the tools, perspectives, and emotional intelligence necessary to serve marginalized communities with dignity and compassion.

ALISE RESEARCH TAXONOMY TOPICS

Pedagogy; Public libraries; Community engagement; LIS education; Social justice; Students.

AUTHOR KEYWORDS

Unhoused; Social services; Vulnerable populations; Human-centered curriculum; Project-based learning.

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INTRODUCTION

Public libraries have long stood as cornerstones of their communities—open, democratic spaces committed to equity, access, and lifelong learning. Recognized for their evolving role in meeting diverse community needs, libraries have consistently adapted to address economic, educational, and social disparities (Gibson et al., 2017; Cooke, et. al., 2022). In recent years, one of the most pressing social challenges confronting public libraries is the visible and growing crisis of homelessness in the United States. As of 2022, it is estimated that approximately 582,000 individuals are unhoused, representing 18 out of every 10,000 people—an increase from previous years (USA Facts, 2023). This population often turns to libraries not just for information access, but for basic human necessities: warmth, food, safety, restrooms, and a refuge from harassment (Ryan, 2023).

In response to this reality, many public libraries are expanding their scope beyond traditional services by embedding social workers and forming partnerships with local agencies. As of 2022, approximately 55 public libraries across the nation have embedded social workers into their staff structures to provide on-site support, referrals, and crisis intervention (Benson, 2022). This shift signals a paradigm change in librarianship—one that necessitates new skill sets, interdisciplinary understanding, and a commitment to trauma-informed, human-centered service models (Crooks & Chancellor, 2024). However, despite these advancements, many LIS graduate programs have yet to systematically incorporate social work training or empathetic pedagogy into their curricula (Chancellor & Crooks, 2024; Dali, et.al.,2022).

This paper argues that preparing future librarians to serve unhoused and vulnerable populations effectively requires a critical reimagining of LIS education. Grounded in the *They Are Like Us* lens—an interpretive framework that foregrounds recognition of shared human dignity and commonality across cultural, social, and historical boundaries while resisting othering discourses—this paper proposes two model courses designed to embed empathy, social justice, and applied learning into LIS programs. These courses aim to equip students not only with professional competencies but also with the emotional intelligence and cultural sensitivity needed to thrive as public servants in increasingly complex social environments. By integrating these approaches into the LIS curriculum, educators can better prepare librarians to meet the ethical and practical demands of twenty-first-century public librarianship.

EDUCATING FOR EMPATHY: COURSE DESIGN ON LIBRARY SERVICES FOR THE UNHOUSED

Library Services for the Unhoused is a 3-credit, fully online summer course developed by one of the authors, who teaches in a LIS program (program name omitted for anonymity). The course aims to empower students to serve unhoused library users by designing intentionally curated spaces that are accessible, inclusive, and non-discriminatory. Another key objective is to cultivate an empathetic lens through which students can examine homelessness—both domestically and globally—within the framework of traditional and emerging library services. The course utilizes a project-based learning (PBL) model to emphasize the importance of community partnerships. Students engage with local leaders and organizations that support

unhoused populations. Central to the course is a human-centered philosophy: recognizing individuals beyond their housing status. Students learn that *seeing the person* requires rethinking identification markers and understanding that *home* reflects one's relationship to belongings, pets, and community—while *house* refers simply to a physical structure. As suggested by the instructor, there's no way you can fully see me as a person if you have not appropriately and intentionally redefined your identification markers for me.

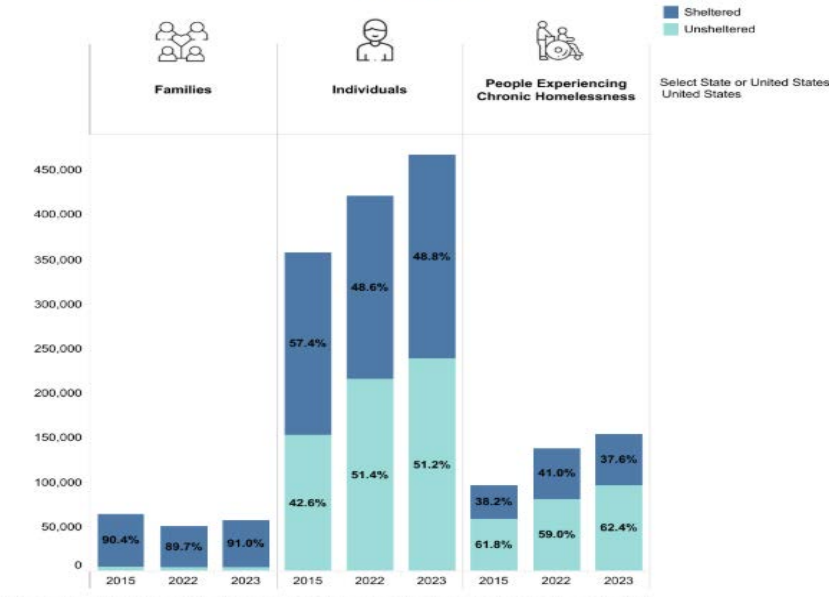
To embed students in the communities they aim to serve, one assignment involves conducting a community-based needs assessment of their local library environment. This allows students to identify community strengths, vulnerabilities, and gaps in service. According to the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, the number of sheltered and unsheltered unhoused persons rose by 32.5% between 2022 and 2024 (see Fig. 2), underscoring the urgency for libraries to adapt and respond. Libraries across the country are rising to meet this challenge. In Las Vegas, the Clark County Library District offers hygiene kits, and nearly thirty branches are designated *Safe Place* sites for homeless youth (Ryan, 2023). In Chicago, outreach teams facilitate meetings between case managers and unsheltered individuals to connect them with public benefits and housing support. Meanwhile, the Salt Lake City Library provides free clothing for those living in nearby encampments along the river.

The 2023 Annual Homeless Assessment Report to Congress (AHAR) by HUD offers a sobering view: individuals experiencing chronic homelessness are increasingly unsheltered. From 2015 to 2023, the numbers have continued to climb. As Figure 1 illustrates, the national trend of unhoused individuals seeking refuge in public libraries is growing. Libraries, as essential third spaces, continue to serve as safe havens for all community members—housed or unhoused—reflecting their evolving and compassionate role in social infrastructure.

Figure 1

U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, 2023 Annual Homeless Assessment Report to Congress (AHAR). Individuals and People Experiencing Chronic Homelessness Are Most Likely to be Unsheltered.

Individuals and People Experiencing Chronic Homelessness Are Most Likely to Be Unsheltered



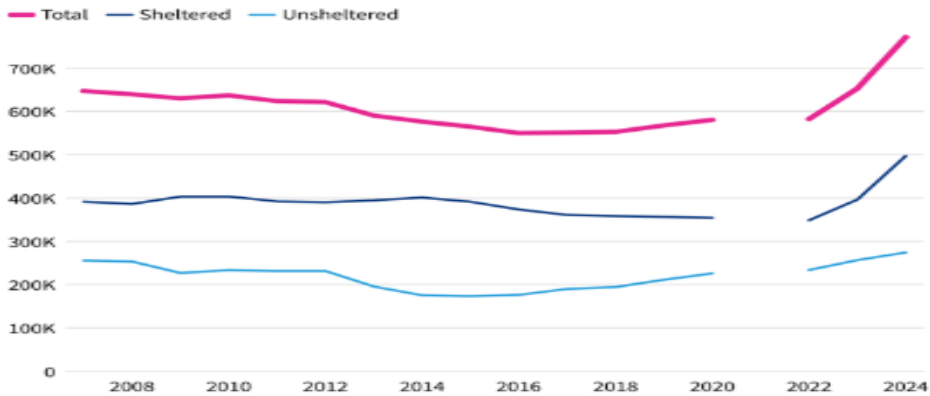
U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, 2023 Annual Homeless Assessment Report to Congress (AHAR).

Figure 2

U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development, Point-in-time estimate of the homeless population, overall and by sheltered status. The Total homeless population in the U.S. rose 32.5% from 2022 to 2024.

The total homeless population in the U.S. rose 32.5% from 2022 to 2024.

Point-in-time estimate of the homeless population, overall and by sheltered status



2021 data is excluded because many cities suspended counts during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Source: Department of Housing and Urban Development

USA FACTS

A RELATIONAL APPROACH TO TEACHING PUBLIC LIBRARIES?

Public librarians and library staff have increasingly reported feeling unequipped to assist patrons in finding resources that address complex social needs (Gross, Latham, Baum, Crabtree, & Randolph, 2024; Wahler et al., 2023; Gross & Latham, 2021). While some public libraries have responded by hiring social workers or hosting social work interns, many are unable to do so due to financial limitations, administrative barriers, and bureaucratic constraints. Traditionally, public library courses in Library and Information Science (LIS) programs emphasize transactional interactions at the reference desk. These interactions focus primarily on information-seeking behavior, with the goal of helping users find tangible resources. However, this approach often overlooks the broader human contexts patrons bring with them—contexts shaped by psychological, emotional, social, economic, cultural, and environmental experiences. Gross, et al. (2024) in their survey on library preparedness to support patrons in need of social services, found that “librarians and branch managers want LIS students to be better prepared for the realities of their work world.” Participants of this study also indicated that “they want students to be prepared to interact with people who have been traumatized, are in crisis, or are grappling with any number of personal challenges and societal ills” (Gross, et al., 2024). To address this gap, a social work librarianship lecture, delivered as part of a Public Libraries course, introduces a humanistic approach to reference services. This lecture emphasizes the understanding that information needs are deeply connected to lived experiences. It encourages students to see patrons not merely as information seekers but as whole individuals navigating complex realities.

The lecture highlights the importance of applying core social work skills—such as effective communication, assessment, and empathy—to build meaningful connections with patrons. Many library users now approach reference desks with questions about community services, housing, mental health, or legal aid. Responding to these inquiries requires more than technical knowledge; it requires human-centered engagement grounded in empathy, rapport building, and a strengths-based approach. According to Trevithick (2005), social work involves over 50 distinct skills. These have been grouped into five categories that support the “helping relationship.” Table 1 outlines how these skills can be integrated into reference services, enriching librarianship with practical, compassionate strategies that better meet the evolving needs of public library users.

Table 1

Helping Relationship Skillset Based on Trevithick's (2005) Social Work Skills List.

Categories of the Helping Relationship Skills →

Relational Skills (Social Work Skills)



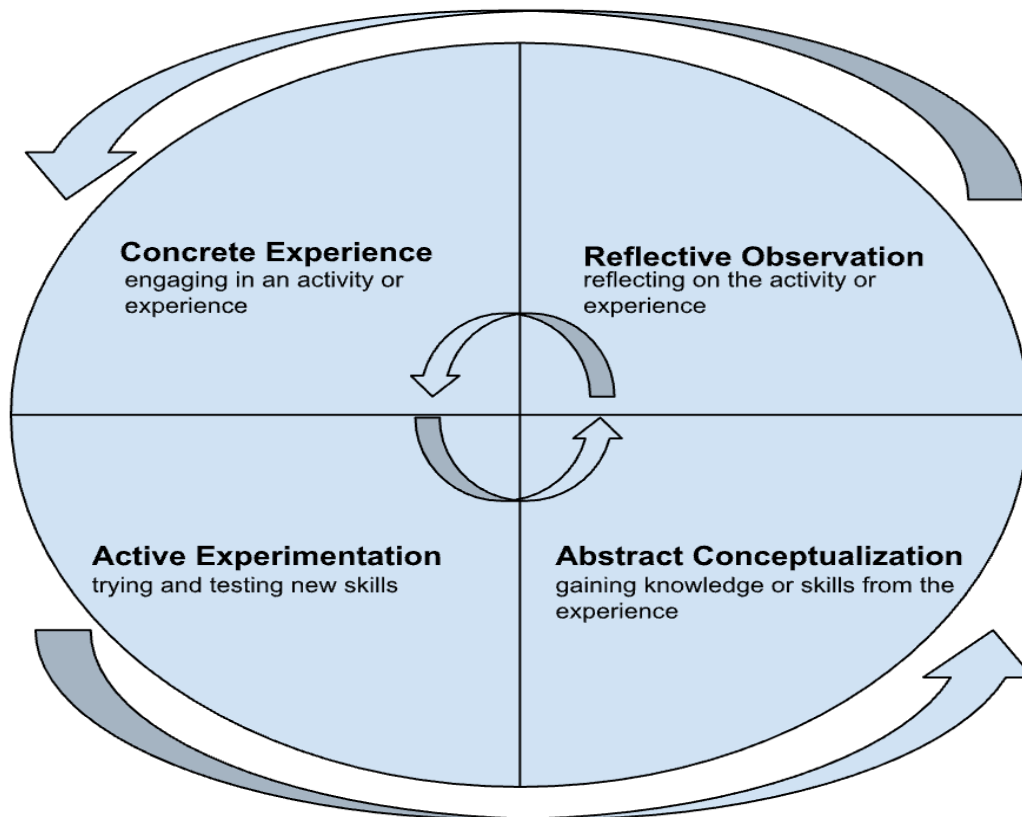
Building Rapport	Effective Communication	Assessment	Case Management	Conflict Resolution/Crisis Management/De-Escalation
Welcoming skills, providing care and providing support	Open Questions	Offering interpretations and allowing and using silences	Providing care and advocacy skills	Using persuasion and being directive
Creating a rapport and establishing a relationship	Closed Questions	Giving and receiving feedback, providing information, and providing explanations	Ending an interview	Modeling and social skills training
Empathy, sympathy, and offering encouragement and validation	'What' questions	Sticking to the point and purpose of the interview, Probing, and Reframing	Negotiating Skills and Managing professional boundaries	Containing anxiety and utilizing the role of self knowledge and intuition
Giving advice and Counseling Skills	Circular and prompting Questions	Ending an interview and Closing the case to end the relationship	Contracting Skills, providing practical and material assistance and record keeping skills	Assertiveness skills and Providing protection and control
Using self-disclosure, providing reassurance, empowerment and enabling skills	Paraphrasing, clarifying, and summarizing	Planning and preparing for the interview	Networking Skills and working in partnership	Mediation skills, adaptation skills and dealing with hostility, aggression and violence

Understanding individuals within the context of their life experiences offers deeper insight into library users' needs, providing librarians with the contextual knowledge necessary to interpret those needs holistically. When a library user asks for information, they may divulge their life story which provides the librarian with underlying circumstances that may be driving the library users quest for information. This context is important when determining the types of information to provide to the library user and should be considered, evaluated and understood when helping library users during the information seeking process. The social work librarianship lecture provides students with experiential learning opportunities to practice, implement and interpret relational skills. Kolb's (1984) Experiential Learning Cycle illustrated in Figure 3 structures the lecture, with public library scenarios illustrating how students can learn and apply relational skills in Table 1.

Figure 3

Kolb's 1984 Experiential Learning Cycle. Kolb D.A. (1984) 'Experiential Learning Experience as a source of learning and development,' New Jersey Prentice Hall.

Kolb's Experiential Learning Model



CONCLUSION

As public libraries continue to serve as inclusive, accessible spaces for all members of society, their evolving role in addressing homelessness and social vulnerability becomes increasingly vital. However, this transformation must be matched by a shift in LIS education—one that prioritizes empathy, interdisciplinary collaboration, and culturally responsive pedagogy. Integrating frameworks like the *They Are Like Us* lens into coursework not only fosters understanding but actively equips students with the emotional intelligence and practical skills to navigate complex social issues. The proposed model courses illustrate how LIS programs can embed these principles in meaningful ways, preparing a new generation of librarians who are not just information stewards but also compassionate community advocates. In doing so, the

profession reaffirms its foundational commitment to equity, access, and human dignity.

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