

M.A. Student Input and Engagement with LIS Program-Level Operations

Eric Ely^a and James Bjork^b

^aUniversity of Central Missouri, USA

^bUniversity of Wisconsin – Madison, USA

eely@ucmo.edu, jbjork@wisc.edu

ABSTRACT

In this critical essay, we call for a revisioning of LIS educator roles in our administration and mentor capacities in relation to the incorporation of MLIS students in program-level, particularly curricular, decision-making processes. The goals and responsibilities of LIS programs are varied, yet students are generally understood to be critical program stakeholders despite their limited time in LIS programs. In positing an involved role for MLIS students, this paper addresses the issue of agency in decolonizing LIS as it proposes a reimagining of librarian educator roles by empowering students as change agents. Additionally, including MLIS students in program processes, and providing them with a voice, offers a more equitable approach to the operation of LIS programs. Our call demands a revisiting of policies to promote inclusivity and equity in LIS programs. In these ways, this conceptual paper prioritizes diverse perspectives, cultivates agency, builds inclusivity, and prepares students for equitable and dynamic information environments.

ALISE RESEARCH TAXONOMY TOPICS

Education programs/schools; Administration; Students; Curriculum.

AUTHOR KEYWORDS

LIS programs; LIS education; MLIS students.

Copyright 2025 by the authors. Published under a [Creative Commons Attribution-ShareAlike 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-sa/4.0/).

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.21900/j.alise.2025.2015>

INTRODUCTION

Library and Information Science (LIS) departments have several core functions essential to their operation and contributions to institutional and larger academic communities, including curriculum, adherence to and support of academic and professional standards, scholarly research, and teaching. Internal curricular decisions and curricula development depend on faculty expertise and their determinations of specific curricular requirements (Saunders, 2019). These curricular decisions are made, in large part, to meet external accreditation standards (ALA, 2023). Examining changes in LIS research output, Järvelin and Vakkari (2022) found an increasing diversity of research topics, while Jamali and Nabavi (2021) focused specifically on the scholarly evolution of research regarding teaching and learning. Beyond technical skills and subject content, formal LIS education must also include additional components to ensure the production of successful LIS professionals, including soft skills, especially applicable to public-facing information positions (Saunders & Bajjaly, 2022).

In fulfilling these functions, LIS departments accomplish the essential task of training future information professionals. Although students' time in LIS programs is limited, quickly cycling through departments while obtaining their degrees, they are critical stakeholders of LIS departments. Their experiences contribute to their professional development, ultimately shaping the future of information professions. As key stakeholders, departments should engage students as active participants in program-level decisions relating to curriculum. We contend MLIS students should participate in departmental decision-making processes and that more work is necessary on the part of LIS departments to ensure that student participation is accessible and effective. Efforts to meaningfully include graduate students in program-level processes have the potential to enhance diversity and equity within LIS programs, contribute to students' professional development, and prepare them for dynamic professional environments. We propose a reimagining of LIS educator roles focusing on empowering students as change agents. Including MLIS students in program processes, and providing them with a voice, offers a more equitable approach to LIS program operation. Our call demands revisiting policies to promote inclusivity and equity in LIS programs. This essay prioritizes diverse perspectives, cultivates agency, builds inclusivity, and prepares students for equitable and dynamic information environments. We emphasize involvement in curricular processes given ALISE's scope and the direct impact of curricular decisions on MLIS students' experiences; however, we advocate for student involvement in all aspects of program-level processes.

CURRENT OPPORTUNITIES FOR STUDENT INVOLVEMENT

In our call for incorporating MLIS students more fully into program processes, we must first address existing ways students can participate. Scholars have examined LIS curriculum from various perspectives, including social justice (Cooke, Sweeney, & Noble, 2016), diversity, equity, and inclusion (Poole, Agosto, Greenberg, Lin, & Yan, 2021), pedagogy (Rapchak, Hands, & Hensley, 2023), and the need for curriculum to meet accreditation requirements and competencies (Hirsh, et al., 2023; Taylor, 2024). While these are natural areas of concern for

curriculum design, they do not directly address the needs and interests of MLIS students. There is a comparatively small body of literature which addresses the role of students in the shaping of curriculum. Since 2016, much of this research has appeared in the *Student Engagement in Higher Education Journal*. The existence of a scholarly journal devoted to this subject demonstrates a growing interest in students' contributions to curriculum design, but the relatively short span of time this journal has existed is indicative of the novelty of this approach.

The form of student input existing literature most commonly addresses is surveys which are administered shortly before or immediately after a student's completion of a course or program. Mitchell (2013) developed a coding framework for interpreting student feedback which has been sporadically implemented over the past decade. While such surveys have their merits, in that their comparative simplicity and ease of distribution facilitate the gathering of information from a large student body, their impact on curriculum design is unclear. Few published studies address the specific methodology of their survey design, making it difficult to critically evaluate the validity of their measures or to replicate their findings. At the University of Wisconsin - Madison, where both of this paper's authors have served as instructors, standardized surveys are provided to all students in the final weeks of each semester by the university. The substance of these surveys is virtually identical across all classes and academic departments, making it difficult to gather data addressing the specific needs of LIS programs. Additionally, collecting this data does not necessarily result in meaningful changes to curriculum. Within the University of Wisconsin-Madison's iSchool, there is a lack of clarity about which records of student feedback are retained, the retention schedule, or purpose of these records. This lack of transparency contributes to a sense of insignificance and departmental devaluation of student evaluations. Additionally, this prevents researchers from studying the impact of curriculum changes. Moreover, conducting these surveys at the end of the semester means that students themselves cannot see the impact of their feedback. If changes are made, they are visible to incoming cohorts and do not have a direct impact on the learning outcomes of the students who identified the need for said changes.

Students in UW-Madison's LIS program are also given the opportunity to join the iSchool's MA LIS Curriculum Committee. For the 2024-2025 academic year, this committee met for 50 minutes on the first Wednesday of every month. It is primarily comprised of teaching faculty in the department, with three student representatives from the LIS program during the 2024-2025 academic year. Of these students, two were enrolled in the iSchool's online only program while one was enrolled in the in person program. For this reason, only the latter student was consistently present in the room during Curriculum Committee meetings, with the other two attending by teleconference. The in person student member reported feeling that their input was acknowledged and appreciated by the teaching faculty, but that there were a number of roadblocks that they encountered.

Changes in curriculum design happen on an elongated timescale, a fact which presents a challenge to gaining student investment. The comparatively short duration of students' enrollment in the LIS program exacerbates this issue, a fact which was highlighted by the in person student member of UW-Madison's Curriculum Committee. The average student completes their master's degree in about two years, meaning that they are unable to benefit directly from any curriculum design changes to which they contribute. Moreover, those two

years require a significant time commitment to complete coursework, internships, on campus work hours, and extracurriculars. The in person student member of the iSchool Curriculum Committee reported that most monthly meetings of the committee consisted primarily of reports about the work of subcommittees, with much of the actual work towards curriculum design being done by subcommittees between monthly meetings. While participation in these subcommittees does seem to have been open to student members, it would have required an additional commitment of time and labor on the part of already overburdened students. For this reason, none of the three student members participated in subcommittees during the 2024-2025 academic year. This combination of factors means that students who choose to participate in curriculum design must do so altruistically and at a cost to themselves. It is therefore unsurprising that most students choose not to engage with the more impactful, and inherently more costly, means of contributing to curriculum design.

While these formal avenues are the predominant forms of engagement in curricular design, they are not the sole means by which this can occur. Opportunities also exist at the individual level through advisor meetings and informal water cooler channels, though the informality of these methods means that they are by their very nature under-studied. Therefore, little data is available regarding their efficacy. These may supplement the course and program level methods which have been more extensively discussed by this paper. Additionally, many programs require or offer student-driven capstone projects or practicum placements. Through these systems, programs could encourage students to undertake projects that involve program-level research which would provide the student with hands-on experience and produce valuable insights for the department. It is evident that existing opportunities offer students various ways to engage in program-level processes; however, lacking a coordinated and explicit plan, these opportunities remain of limited utility.

PREPARING STUDENTS FOR EQUITABLE AND DYNAMIC INFORMATION ENVIRONMENTS

One primary role of LIS programs is to train and prepare students as information professionals upon graduation. To most effectively achieve this responsibility, LIS educators must understand the skills and knowledge required in contemporary information environments. Scholars have identified the most relevant skills and knowledge in various LIS professions, including corporate and special libraries (Davis & Saunders, 2020), academic libraries (Saunders, 2020), and public libraries (Williams & Saunders, 2019). Findings indicated, with some variation, a core set of knowledge and skills is common among institution types. Recognizing essential skills and abilities is a necessary prerequisite for LIS educators to best prepare students. However, LIS programs should incorporate student preparedness via multiple avenues. Perhaps the most obvious of these is through coursework. LIS educators can incorporate practical or experiential learning opportunities in their courses. Additionally, student organizations, chapters, and other student-initiated professional engagements offer opportunities to build essential skills and competencies outside the classroom. LIS programs can offer various supplementary opportunities for students to engage in program-level processes, including frequent and transparent meetings or town halls, mandating the inclusion of student

representatives on departmental committees, establishing student advisory committees, developing formal mentorship programs, and collaborating with student organizations. When these initiatives are effectively integrated into program processes, they can offer students opportunities to engage with program decisions and develop professional skills. Given the concerns regarding time commitment highlighted by student members of the UW-Madison iSchool's curriculum committee during the 2024-2025 academic year, effective implementation is not a given; these initiatives must be integrated into existing programs without substantially adding to students' workload for any given semester.

As mentioned, student engagement in departmental processes is an added demand of their time, the benefits of which they do not directly receive. Individual LIS educators must invest in students, demonstrate their commitment to student success, and foster a collective environment of care and compassion. By focusing on these affective components, instructors can demonstrate authentic concern for students as valued individuals, not just as products passing through our programs. Thereby instilling them with a more meaningful connection with the program and, perhaps, incentivising students to give back by providing valuable and insightful contributions. We can impress upon students the lasting impact and legacy of their work, which contributes to improving our programs in the future. As educators, and in our administrative capacities, we must show our appreciation of the benefits to our departments from students' perspectives, insights, and experiences. On a more practical level, as LIS educators, we can discuss the professional benefits of departmental engagement, even if students do not directly benefit from their involvement. Engaging in decision-making processes while students can enhance their leadership, communication, and organizational skills. Furthermore, engagement increases students' professional networks as they connect more deeply with faculty, administrators, and peers, all of which benefits their future careers. In modeling professional environments, we can stress to students how engagement contributes to their professional development.

REVISITING CURRENT POLICIES AND PRACTICES

Earlier, we discussed existing opportunities for MLIS student engagement in curriculum design. Having reflected on these opportunities, we must call for LIS educators to revisit their department's actions and policies for engaging students, particularly from the lenses of inclusion and equity. Collectively, we must re-examine our current approaches and policies. When educators discuss inclusion and equity in our programs, it is necessary to ask where and how students fit into these discussions. Each LIS program must independently evaluate its current policies to identify areas in which it excels and areas in which it can improve. Faculty and students must collectively determine what changes to implement while striving to promote inclusion, equity, and student agency. This requires a degree of foresight to preemptively identify challenges in implementing changes and developing strategies to address them. This essay's goal is to provoke discussion related to empowering students. We call on LIS educators to consider these issues in their practice and research.

AGENCY IN DECOLONIZING LIS

By advocating for MLIS student engagement in curriculum and other program decisions, programs can promote departmental equity while encouraging student agency. Decolonizing knowledge systems, indigenizing research methods, exploring identity and representation within LIS professions, and considering how physical and digital library spaces can perpetuate or disrupt traditional and normative values all rightly receive scholarly attention (Hill, Harrington, Rothbauer, & Potts, 2021; Kranich, 2020; Lilley, 2024; Pierson, Goulding, & Campbell-Meier, 2020). We call for LIS educators to think reflectively and reconsider department policies and practices, particularly when these practices reinforce the status quo. In doing so, departments can avoid complacently reproducing colonial, hierarchical education systems. This will be enabled by individual and departmental introspection as well as sustained dialogue across student and faculty lines. This is not to suggest incorporating students in departmental decision-making processes, considering various ways to provide students with extracurricular professional development, or leaning into our mentorship responsibilities are the definitive answers to these challenges. Rather, by focusing on the role of student agency, LIS educators can empower students, which contributes to reshaping the information professions in order to collectively respond to current and future challenges. In reimagining LIS educator roles to empower students, we treat them as equal partners in LIS' shared agenda of promoting diversity, ensuring equity, fostering inclusion, and advocating for social justice (Tang & Hu, 2023).

CONCLUSION

If LIS educators are legitimately committed to preparing and empowering students, they must collectively establish coordinated efforts to enhance student agency within their departments. The additional work required to meaningfully engage with students should not be seen as a burden, but as a mutually beneficial opportunity. For LIS educators, providing ample opportunities for student participation provides LIS programs crucial insight into student perspectives, a key stakeholder group. LIS programs (and higher education more generally) should care about students now more than ever given uncertainty surrounding federal funding and attacks on diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility. Grants or funds can be rescinded, yet student tuition dollars that pay for instruction provide some level of stability in uncertain times. This is not to say LIS programs should only care about students for this reason, it simply emphasizes how significant students are to our programs. For MLIS students, engagement in program operations, curricular or otherwise, provides experience relevant to future professional success and, pragmatically speaking, helps them secure a job upon graduation. The short- and long-term benefits of our inclusive and equitable approach to LIS educators, programs, students, and professions abound, making the mutual efforts worthwhile and rewarding.

In addition to provoking discussion regarding the role of students curricular and other departmental decision-making processes, this essay introduces questions that merit future scholarly attention: How do LIS departments consider MLIS graduate students? What opportunities exist for students to contribute to program decisions? How can MLIS students

maintain awareness about departmental decisions following graduation? From the student perspective, what level of transparency is desirable and how can it be sustainably achieved? We hope this essay, and these questions, promote discussion and encourage future research.

REFERENCES

- American Library Association (2023). 2023 Standards for Accreditation of Master's Programs in Library and Information Studies. <https://www.ala.org/educationcareers/accreditedprograms/standards/>
- Cooke, N.A., Sweeney, M.E., & Noble, S.U. (2016). Social justice as topic and tool: An attempt to transform an LIS curriculum and culture. *The Library Quarterly*, 86(1), 107-124. <https://doi.org/10.1086/684147>
- Davis, R., & Saunders, L. (2020). Essential Skills for Corporate and Special Librarians. *Journal of Library Administration*, 60(7), 762–783. <https://doi.org/10.1080/01930826.2020.1786984>
- Hill, H., Harrington, M., Rothbauer, P., & Potts, D.P. (2021). Decolonizing & indigenizing LIS. *Proceedings of the 2021 ALISE Annual Conference*. <https://www.ideals.illinois.edu/items/118777>
- Hirsh, S., Saunders, L., Bright, K.M., Davis, R., Hands, A.S., Salaba, A., Villagran, M.A.L., & Williams, R. (2023, Oct. 3). *Integrating the new ALA Core Competencies of librarianship into the LIS curriculum* [Conference session]. 2023 ALISE Annual Conference, Milwaukee, WI, United States.
- Jamali, H.R., & Nabavi, M. (2021). Scholarship of teaching and learning: Evolution of research on library and information science education. *Journal of Education for Library and Information Science*, 62(3), 287-302. <https://doi.org/10.3138/jelis.2020-0025>
- Järvelin, K., & Vakkari, P. (2022). LIS research across 50 years: Content analysis of journal articles. *Journal of Documentation*, 78(7), 65-88. https://doi.org/10.1108/JD-03_2021-0062
- Kranich, N. (2020). Libraries and democracy revisited. *The Library Quarterly*, 90(2), 121-153. <https://doi.org/10.1086/707670>
- Lilley, S. (2024, Oct. 15). *Indigenizing research methods: Making research outcomes better for all* [Conference session]. 2020 ALISE Annual Conference, Portland, OR, United States.
- Mitchell, E. (2013). Reflective course construction: An analysis of student feedback and its role in curricular design. *Education for Information*, 30(3-4), 149-166, <https://doi.org/10.3233/EFI-130192>
- Pierson, C., Goulding, A., & Campbell-Meier, J. (2020). Professional identity as gateway to critical practices: Identity negotiations of public librarians in New Zealand with implications for LIS education and practice. *Journal of the Australian Library and Information Association*, 69(3), 286-301. <https://doi.org/10.1080/24750158.2020.1777636>

- Pool, A.H., Agosto, D., Greenberg, J., Lin, X., & Yan, E. (2021). Where do we stand? Diversity, equity, inclusion, and social justice in North American library and information science education. *Journal of Education for Library and Information Science*, 62(3), 258-286. <https://doi.org/10.3138/jelis.2020-0018>
- Rapchak, M., Hands, A.S., & Hensley, M.K. (2023). Moving toward equity: Experiences with upgrading. *Journal of Education for Library and Information Science*, 61(1), 89-98. <https://doi.org/10.3138/jelis-2121-0062>
- Saunders, L. (2019). Core and More: Examining Foundational and Specialized Content in Library and Information Science. *Journal of Education for Library & Information Science*, 60(1), 3–34. <https://doi.org/10.3138/jelis.60.1.2018-0034>
- Saunders, L. (2020). Core Knowledge and Specialized Skills in Academic Libraries. *College & Research Libraries*, 81(2), 288–311. <https://doi.org/10.5860/crl.81.2.288>
- Saunders, L., & Bajjaly, S. (2022). The importance of soft skills to LIS education. *Journal of Education for Library and Information Science*, 63(2), 187-215. <https://doi.org/10.3138/jelis-2020-0053>
- Tang, R., & Hu, Z. (2023, Oct. 4). *LIS Associations' Commitment and Effort in Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI): Content Analysis, Term Analysis, and Topic Modeling* [Conference session]. 2023 ALISE Annual Conference, Milwaukee, WI, United States.
- Taylor, N. (2024, Oct. 15). *Core Competencies, Core Courses: How Accredited MLIS Programs Interpret the ALA's Core Competencies through their Curriculum* [Conference session]. 2024 ALISE Annual Conference, Portland, OR, United States.
- Williams, R. D., & Saunders, L. (2020). What the Field Needs: Core Knowledge, Skills, and Abilities for Public Librarianship. *Library Quarterly*, 90(3), 283–297. <https://doi.org/10.1086/708958>