

Research Record

EVELYN L. CURRY, EDITOR

Postdoctoral Research in Library and Information Science: Is There a Need?

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Introduction

Library and information science (LIS), as a discipline, is relatively young compared with other established disciplines in both the sciences and social sciences. LIS as a subject of study gained recognition about a century ago with the starting of formal teaching at the graduate level; the first doctorate in the field was awarded in 1930 by the University of Chicago. Research in LIS at the doctoral level started earlier but was carried out under the purview of schools other than library schools. It seems that LIS now has sufficient theoretical foundations on which to develop, practice, and carry out further research to provide a sound base for the subject. The changing nature and growth of the subject are evident from the multidisciplinary approach adopted by it and from the employment of new technologies and techniques in its theory and practice. The most noteworthy aspect of this change is its involvement with computers and other related technologies, which provide the subject with a new dimension.

It has been about sixty years since the first doctoral degree in the field was awarded. According to Schlach-

ter and Thomison, between 1930 and 1981 1,668 doctoral dissertations were completed in LIS and its related topics.¹ They also reported that, on average, 111 doctoral dissertations were completed each year between 1973 and 1981. Assuming the same growth rate, one can estimate that the total number of doctoral dissertations completed in the field to date is approximately 2,450. This large number of doctorates constitutes significant manpower for carrying out further research and, thereby, discovering new facets of the subject and developing new techniques. It appears that after the doctoral degree no formal program of postdoctoral research in LIS is currently available at any of the library schools. This is confirmed by a review of the literature. The authors felt a need to conduct a brief survey of U.S. and Canadian library schools that offer doctoral programs to find out whether any postdoctoral research program is available or is being planned at these schools.

Methodology

There are currently 25 schools of LIS in the United States and Canada that offer a doctoral program.² Of these, 23 are in the United States and 2 are in Canada. A short questionnaire was designed, and telephone interviews were conducted with all 25 schools. Calls were made between August 14 and August 25, 1988, to the deans of the schools. In the absence of the dean, the information was sought from the associate or assistant dean or other responsible school official.

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Results and Discussion

The authors were able to contact 23 library schools out of 25 (92 percent). Fourteen responses were obtained from the deans (60.87 percent), and the rest were received from the associate or assistant deans or other school officials. The telephone responses were recorded on the questionnaire. An analysis of the data revealed that only 3 schools reported having some kind of postdoctoral research program in LIS. Eighteen schools reported having programs of research at postdoctoral level, but under the heading of "visiting scholar"; the remaining 2 reported having no such program at all. As can be seen from the above data, 21 of 23 (91.30 percent) LIS schools have a postdoctoral research program of some sort. However, in comparison with their master's and doctoral programs, these programs are neither structured nor properly planned.

When asked about the need for such a structured program in the discipline, 15 schools (65.21 percent) responded in the positive, whereas 5 (21.74 percent) responded in the negative and the other 3 (13.04 percent) were not sure. Those who supported the need for postdoctoral research felt that there exists a gap of such research in the subject and strongly recommended initiating such a program, at least in 1 or 2 schools, on a structured, regular basis. They also recommended that, in order to execute such a program, sufficient funds and facilities should be made available to the schools, either by the parent institution or other agencies. Present resources available to the schools are not sufficient even to support existing programs. It was also suggested that some time gap should exist between the doctoral and postdoctoral programs. This time gap will provide an opportu-

nity for the candidate to teach or work in the field before returning to do further research. Those who opposed initiating such programs felt that LIS is a soft science as opposed to a hard science. As such, the practices of hard sciences (i.e., biology, chemistry, engineering, physics, etc.) of pursuing postdoctoral research cannot be applied to LIS. They argued that for doctoral degree holders in LIS the job market is fairly open; whereas for those in hard sciences, such opportunities are limited. It is customary in hard sciences to do postdoctoral research after obtaining a doctoral degree. A few respondents reported that LIS is not a highly research-intensive discipline, and, as such, no postdoctoral research program is required.

It is inferred from the responses that there are no fixed entrance qualifications and/or experience requirements for such a program. Library schools with postdoctoral research programs consider candidates with a Ph.D. only, but it is a preferable qualification for the schools offering such programs under the heading of "visiting scholar."

The number of candidates entering such programs varies from school to school. On average, one or two candidates enter a program per year. It was also revealed that both native and foreign scholars are accepted in such programs. The duration of the program varies from three months to one year.

All schools stated that they have no funds allocated for sponsoring candidates for the programs. The candidates who join are usually self-sponsored and come on sabbatical from their parent institutions. Some schools, like the University of Pittsburgh and UCLA, have the privilege of getting foreign scholars under the Fulbright Exchange Program in LIS. Such scholars were provided round-trip passage plus boarding and lodg-

ing allowances by the sponsoring agency.

All schools provide work facilities to visiting scholars, such as office space, access to computers, library facilities, and some secretarial assistance.

Such programs have been initiated at the request of scholars who often have a research project in mind and are accepted by the schools to conduct their research either on an independent basis or in collaboration with faculty having similar interests. Most of the research is highly individualized and independent. Often these scholars have been asked to present a seminar or colloquium in their area of specialization. The schools do not associate them in their programs, except for a guest appearance in a particular class.

Conclusions

From the above analysis it can be concluded that there is a definite need for a structured program of postdoctoral research in LIS. A loosely structured, informal program is not suitable for the proper growth of the discipline. A structured program can attract serious researchers, both native and foreign, to conduct research in their areas of expertise. Funds and facilities are the two major obstacles in initiating such programs. This problem is more acute for privately funded schools; thus it would be easy to establish such programs in a publicly supported school. Further, it would be preferable if federal funding agencies such as the National Science Foundation, Humanities Foundation, and Council of Library Resources could be approached to provide grants to support postdoctoral research in LIS. Similar approaches should be made for more fellowships and grants for foreign scholars to conduct such research by agencies such as United States Agency for International Development (USAID) and the Fulbright

Exchange Program. Library associations, publishers, and other library-related independent agencies such as bibliographic networks and commercial database vendors could also serve as catalysts for such programs by providing financial assistance and other support. Online Computer Library Center (OCLC) has an ongoing structured postdoctoral research program in its Office of Research, but it can be expanded by carrying out OCLC-sponsored research in library schools. Other vendors and networks could follow OCLC as an example to promote such research either at their own headquarters or in library schools.

Finally, the library and information science discipline has come to a stage where, like hard sciences, it needs to have a postdoctoral research program in library schools. The infrastructure—namely the large number of schools with doctoral programs, the integration of computer technology in library and information science curriculum, the exponential growth of library and information science literature—justifies the initiation of this kind of research in the discipline.

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2. American Library Assn.: "Accredited List" (March 1988).

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Readers are encouraged to submit articles of 1,000-1,500 words on topics related to research to Evelyn Curry, Texas Woman's University, School of Library and Information Science, P.O. Box 22905, Denton, TX 76204.