

In-depth Interview

By: Sadie Davenport

INFO 285: Research in Academic Librarianship

I chose the second scenario: interviewing an academic librarian in order to improve academic librarianship curriculum in iSchool. I interviewed a librarian at California Northstate University on April 5, 2021 for an hour and fifty minutes. I would like to clarify that I asked this librarian if he could talk for about half an hour, which he happily agreed to, but he had a lot of information and stories that he wanted to share. I am grateful that he wanted to continue talking past the half hour mark, because I learned a lot about the interview process, this librarian and his field.

**My five interview questions:**

- 1) Did you decide to pursue academic librarianship because of your experience in your MLIS program?
  - a) If so, could you explain what elements of your program (class, person, event, moment, lesson, experience, etc.) led you to pursue academic librarianship?
  - b) If not, what made you choose your current position?
- 2) Among the faculty and peers at your MLIS program, who best prepared you for academic librarianship?
- 3) What technical skills did you learn in your MLIS program in preparation for academic librarianship?
- 4) Regarding non-technical skills: What values did your MLIS program teach you about librarianship and more specifically, academic librarianship?
- 5) What was the most unexpected thing from your MLIS program that you use in your role as an academic librarian?

**Explanation of interview questions:**

These interview questions were designed to capture the main benefits of this librarian's experience in his masters program. It was important to me to first determine whether this librarian decided to pursue academic librarianship because of school curriculum or not. This would influence how I interpret the librarians' answers to other questions. Questions two, three and four involve different parts of an MLIS program that could shape a person's outlook toward academic librarianship and prepare them for work within that field. Question five is intended to find skills, lessons or ideas that might not be classified as preparation for academic librarianship specifically, but were helpful in this preparation nonetheless. It's easier to identify what skills from the masters program were helpful in hindsight, once someone is already an academic librarian.

**Themes:**

In the librarian's responses, I found three general themes that best capture his view of academic librarianship and the preparation for it. First, this librarian has a strong respect for and familiarity with physical library spaces, buildings and collections. Second, he highly values his experience working in academic libraries, which he started while attending his undergraduate and graduate programs. And third, this librarian makes it a priority to connect directly with the students, faculty and staff at each academic institution he works as a librarian. He uses this connection to provide his patrons with directly relevant and individualized materials. From these themes, three suggestions for iSchool course material improvements become clear.

This librarian discussed at length the structures of the libraries at which he has worked. This was interesting because no particular question was intended to discuss library building

structure, but he found ways to include structure into his responses. For example, he discussed how he fell into academic librarianship rather than determining it was where he wanted to work as a librarian. In explaining how he fell into his role, he discussed his experience working at his undergraduate library along with its thirty-five departmental buildings, its compact shelving due to small floors, and new additional structures to the library over the years. For him, connecting with the structure of the library and paying attention to its small details was a way to show his respect for the libraries at which he worked. He also has noticed small but important differences between academic institutions that have affected his decision to remain or to leave a particular academic institution. For example, the way faculty and administrative staff interacted and the overall employment structure led him to leave his position at the University of Pacific, a large, private university, for California Northstate University, a small, for-profit health sciences university. This theme is relevant to assessing curriculum because it shows the importance of becoming familiar with libraries in a literal sense, and acknowledging that each library is unique and has a different environment.

He also discussed both school and work experience as preparatory for his current role and as a factor in his determination to stay in academic librarianship. This librarian had already worked in libraries since junior high, and by the time he attended college and needed work to support himself, obtaining a job in the library was easy for him. His overlap in learning about academic libraries at work and in school is reflected in his responses to each question. He flickers between school and work when discussing the technical and non-technical skills he values most in academic librarianship. This observed behavior shows how important both aspects are in becoming an academic librarian. Both the practical and theoretical applications of academic librarianship are important, and should be learned together. This librarian was able to

implement what he learned in school to his positions at similar institutions. From this theme, applying theoretical knowledge learned in courses to a real work environment is essential for students' library science education.

This librarian highly values networking, both during school and while working. He strongly values and prioritizes his relationships with peers, students, faculty and staff. Two professors served as role models for him in his masters program: his practical applications professor and his cataloging professor. These informative professors shaped his understanding of librarianship with their teaching and their own perspective on academic librarianship. He also considers his current relationship with students, faculty, and administrative staff at his current university to be essential to his success at his current position. From this aspect of his personal experience, working with peers and professors and developing professional relationships with them is an important part of the masters program experience.

### **Reflection:**

This interview was a great experience. The most challenging part was sticking to relevant questions while maintaining an authentic, engaging conversation. The most interesting aspect was hearing about this librarian's extensive experience in libraries and about his love for the library. In hindsight, I would have asked more questions about what he wishes he had learned or what he felt was missing, because when I assembled my notes and thoughts, I realized we hadn't covered that in the interview.

The in-depth interview is a complex research method to understand and implement well. It is difficult to lead a good interview because it can be unclear how the interview is going until it is over and analyzed. Specifically, interviewees' responses can seem irrelevant or unclear, only to

make sense in a larger, observed pattern once the interview is over. Using the in-depth interview also requires more analysis than other methods, which costs extra time, money and resources. Finally, it's crucial to determine how the interviewed subjects relate directly to the targeted research group, so that the analyzed results can be applied elsewhere.

Interview responses show a fullness that is lacking in other test methods, like surveys and questionnaires. The librarian I interviewed showed an eagerness to help me in the interview and would say things like: "I hope I answered your question," "is that what you were looking for?" "does that make sense?" and "do you need more information?" These questions from my interviewee showed me how important it is to refrain from guiding a respondent's answer too strongly. When interviewees respond to a question, they don't have a frame of reference to base their answers or a significant amount of time to consider the question. When taking notes on what the librarian was saying in the interview, With in-depth interviews, authenticity is more important than pure relevance. What the interviewee considers relevant (within reason) in response to a question should be taken at face-value by the interviewer.

While an interview has the potential to represent a person's experience more fully than other research methods, analyzing interviews for statistical purposes is challenging and not always suited for research findings. Researchers who use the in-depth interview have to hire coders to translate interview responses into measurable units of quantitative data. Additionally, it is difficult to project the results of in-depth interviews to larger groups without making assumptions. In order to do this well, the projection from interviewees to larger goal populations has to be clear, informed, and pre-determined.

From this interview, I've learned the value in sharing one person's experience. I would use interviews to seek out a variety of experiences regarding a particular event or phenomenon

common to a group of individuals. Measuring a person's experience would be directly relevant to the overall interpretation of the common event or phenomenon. For something broader, like this research topic, I would not use the interview research method.