'A Mulligan's stew': educational preparation for today's academic library liaisons in the humanities and social sciences

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Abstract

Introduction. This short paper reports on findings from a survey of academic librarians with liaison responsibilities to college and university social sciences and humanities departments, with particular attention to newer responsibilities related to research data management and scholarly communications, areas less commonly associated with humanities and humanistic social sciences liaison work.

Method. The survey was distributed to 1085 individuals, 330 of whom responded (rate: 30.4%).

Analysis. This paper reports on one segment of the survey's findings: the extent to which respondents believe their American Library Association (ALA)-accredited master's degree and, where applicable, additional graduate coursework, prepared them for specific duties associated with liaison work.

Results. Three findings are discussed: 1) impressions about the ALA-accredited master's from respondents who have not participated in other graduate education 2) as compared to respondents who have completed additional graduate education, and 3) respondents' impressions of the extent to which additional graduate study prepared them for liaison work as compared to the preparation afforded by the ALA-accredited master's.

Conclusions. Respondents do not believe the ALA-accredited master's to have provided strong preparation for the '*Mulligan's Stew*' of tasks, skills, and responsibilities associated with liaison work. The Discussion and Conclusion sections share suggestions for strengthening liaison preparation.

Introduction

Liaison to academic departments remains one of the most common functions of today's academic libraries (Johnson, 2018). Also referred to as '*subject specialist*, *subject librarian*, *academic liaison*, *subject liaison*, *liaison librarian*, and *subject bibliographer*' liaison librarians have traditionally assisted students, faculty, and staff in assigned academic departments with materials, research, and instructional needs (Church-Duran, 2017, p. 258). In addition to providing these critical services to their constituents, liaisons constitute the public face of the library, offering opportunities to publicize library facilities, resources, and services. However, faculty and students' needs have continuously expanded and changed to include support for data management, copyright, document repository, and open educational resources (OER's). Academic libraries have enlisted a variety of strategies to support these requirements, but the extent to which library and information science (LIS) master's-level programs have evolved to support the expanded educational needs of students preparing for careers as academic library liaisons is unclear.

As educating future library professionals remain a core function of American Library Association (ALA)-accredited master's degree programs, there is sustained interest in exploring the extent to which these programs are preparing students for employment in today's libraries. Recent research has explored library professionals' impressions of the preparation they received for work in areas including technical services (Smith, et al., 2024), data management (Luo and Tang, 2024; Thomas and Urban, 2018), liaison to academic departments (Bright and Colón-Aguirre, 2022), and special collections and rare book cataloguing (Hertenstein, 2023). Findings from such studies provide useful guidance for continued evolution of LIS education as they sketch a realistic picture of the skills and knowledge required for specific specializations.

This paper reports on findings from a survey of academic librarians with liaison responsibilities to college and university humanities departments. The survey included questions about both typical and non-traditional liaison responsibilities. Respondents who indicated responsibility for specific duties were also asked to evaluate the preparation for those tasks afforded them in both their ALA-accredited master's and, where applicable, other graduate degree programs (a small number of respondents indicated not having enrolled in an ALA-accredited master's or being in the process of earning the degree). This area of questioning is this paper's focus, and therefore reports on the sub-set of survey respondents who have completed an ALA-accredited master's degree and indicated responsibility for the tasks discussed here.

Literature review

The changing liaison role

The role of liaison has traditionally been assigned to librarians with subject expertise or interest in specific academic departments outside the library. Traditionally, liaison responsibilities have '*included outreach, collection development, instruction, scholarly communication support, and reference*' (Bright and Colón-Aguirre, 2022, p. 2). As user needs have changed, academic libraries have developed new services, such as providing scholarly impact and metrics information, promoting the institutional repository, and research data management. These new responsibilities are not always assigned to liaison librarians, however: many academic libraries have chosen to distribute responsibility for newer areas of academic library service to '*functional specialists,*' individuals whose '*expertise is not in subject content but rather in tools, methods, and practical domains…*' (Narlock & Robinson, 2022, p. 81). Functional specialists are meant to address these needs on an institution-wide, discipline-agnostic basis. For example, while a department's liaison librarian would be expected to assist faculty members with specialized research queries, they also might enlist the assistance of their library's data librarian for help with any data-specific needs that arise. In the case of research data management, requests for assistance with locating, assessing, cleaning, storing, and meeting standards for data have grown in recent years, leaving small

functional specialist departments overwhelmed with requests for assistance. In addition to the difficulty presented by the sheer number of requests, it can be difficult for a functional specialist to develop and maintain knowledge of multiple sets of requirements, conventions, and customs across scores of disciplines.

Some libraries are transforming traditional liaison work to meet constituents' needs, primarily by reshaping the traditional liaison model in favor of a task-based team approach. Flaxbart (2018) provided a case study of such a reconfiguration at the University of Texas, which reorganized liaisons into three teams: 1) arts, humanities, and global studies (eight liaisons) and 2) STEM and social sciences (seven liaisons), both in the research support and digital initiatives department, and 3) teaching and learning in the teaching and learning services department (six liaisons). Flaxbart adds four liaisons were reassigned to the scholarly resources department to manage core collections in arts and humanities, global studies, STEM, and social sciences, respectively, presumably removing the traditionally-core collection management responsibility from the 19 liaisons reassigned to the three teams (p. 73). Frenkel, et al. (2018) describe a similar process at the University of California-Riverside which saw subject specialist librarians reorganized into three departments: Teaching and Learning, tasked with providing instruction and services to support instruction, Research Services, to '*provide support across the research life cycle*' (p. 53), and Collection Strategies, tasked with developing '*data-driven collection management strategies and communication methods*' to support the university's core functions (p. 57). In these new models, liaisons have responsibility for data management, digital initiatives, and supporting new efforts at measuring research impact. Services provided by library liaisons are both reactive and proactive. In the case of the former, librarians respond to requests from users, while in the latter, librarians offer users services that they might not be aware they would find useful, or often, that they might not understand what the library and their liaisons can provide. This may be true of humanists with research data management needs, as '*few humanists think of their sources as data*' (Sanders, 2024, p. 101).

Optimal education for the liaison role

Expanding the services expected of liaisons begs the question: what preparation have the individuals tasked with these new responsibilities received? Specifically, did the ALA-accredited master's afford adequate qualifications for success in these evolving areas of service? Bright and Colón-Aguirre (2022) note that educational programs such as Collaborative Analysis Liaison Librarians (CALL) have emerged to prepare students for a more inclusive view of liaison work, but CALL was designed for science liaisons. What about liaisons to disciplines in the social sciences or humanities? While requirements for individual institutions and positions vary, the ALA-accredited master's degree remains the baseline requirement for librarians employed in most academic libraries. The LIS literature is rife with practitioners' reflections on the preparation for employment afforded by their formal graduate education. In response to the statement '[*m]y LIS program's curriculum prepared me to be a liaison librarian*,' only 25.8% and 7.1% of Bright and Colón-Aguirre's (2022) survey respondents (respectively) agreed or agreed strongly. Bright and Colón-Aguirre (2022) used a survey and follow-up interviews to gather feedback from liaison librarians about the preparation afforded them by that degree. Those librarians who completed a curricular '*track*' designed for academic librarianship were more likely to believe for-credit courses provided some of the knowledge necessary to be successful as a liaison, particularly through those aligned with '*traditional*' liaison work: '*instruction, reference, collection development, and specialized courses.*' (p. 7) Respondents were significantly more likely, however, to point to co-curricular activities—assistantships, internships, and part time work—as contributing more to their readiness for the liaison role than did their formal coursework.

Explorations of the most desirable education for liaison librarians is not limited to the ALA-accredited master's: despite the Association of College and Research Libraries' 1975 assertion

(reaffirmed in 2001, 2007, 2011, and 2018) that the ALA-accredited master's is the appropriate terminal degree for academic librarians (Association of College and Research Libraries, 2018), discussions of the desirability or necessity of additional graduate education has featured heavily in the LIS literature, often pointing to benefits an additional graduate degree confers to an academic librarian, including improved acculturation to academic life, strengthened subject knowledge, and increased visibility among and acceptance by faculty members (Fleming-May and Douglass, 2014, p. 396). Several also identify improved understanding of and preparation for the process of conducting research as a significant boon of graduate study beyond the ALA-accredited master's (Gilman and Lindquist, 2010, p. 403; Mayer and Terrill, 2005, p. 64). In their study comparing opinions of librarians with a second graduate degree to those with only the ALA-accredited master's, Day and Szurek (2018) concluded that the value of a second graduate degree for subject liaisons is '*debatable*'. (p. 142) Although both groups of respondents reported engaging with liaison duties at similar rates, a large majority of respondents with the second graduate degree indicated believing it enhanced their ability to liaise (87%) and provide instruction (74%) (p. 139). On the other hand, only 44% of those without a second graduate degree believed it would be beneficial for liaison work (p. 144). Sevryugina, et al. (2024) surveyed a group of academic librarians, some of whom also held a subject Ph.D. Nearly half the survey respondents were employed as subject liaisons. Responses to their survey's question about the usefulness of a Ph.D. were similar to Day and Szurek's (2018) findings: while only 20% of non-Ph.D. holders answered that a doctoral degree would be useful to librarians, 67% of Ph.D.-holding librarians answered that question in the affirmative (p. 370). Echoing previous studies' findings, Sevryugina, et al.'s respondents provided similar examples of areas of the academic liaison librarian's repertoire for which a subject graduate degree would be helpful, such as improved disciplinary expertise, greater experience/facility with research, and pedagogical knowledge. (p. 371). These studies of education for liaison work do not typically discuss the '*functional specializations*,' that this paper is concerned with.

Method

This paper builds upon the tradition of research into librarians' opinions about the extent to which graduate education prepared them for their work by reporting on a survey of academic library liaisons to humanities and social sciences academic departments. Notably, the survey is concerned primarily with liaisons' preparation for several areas of librarianship typically assigned to functional specialists, described by one respondent as a '*Mulligan's stew*.' These can be grouped under the broad categories of data management, assessment, and scholarly communications. Wishing to test our hypothesis that librarians assigned as liaisons to humanities and social sciences departments might not have received academic preparation in these areas, we distributed survey invitations to librarians who 1) are listed as humanities department liaisons on the web directories of Association of Research Libraries (ARL) member institutions in the United States, and/or 2) are listed as humanities department liaisons on the web directories of colleges and universities identified by the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) as home institutions of recipients of one or more NEH Office of digital humanities awards made between 2011 and 2024.

Invitation	Number Sent	Responses	Rate
NEH-Awarded Institutions	696	217	31.2%
ARL Member Institutions (not home to NEH Awarded programs)	389	113	29%

Table 1. Distribution of invitations and survey response rate

This paper focuses on one dimension of the survey: questions about respondents' perceptions of the extent to which their graduate education prepared them for several areas of liaison work as identified in previous surveys of liaison librarians (Bishop, et al., 2023) and working documents, such as the University of North Carolina, Greensboro Libraries' "Liaison Roles and Responsibilities"

(UNCG Libraries, undated). In response to the question, *'To what extent did your ALA-accredited master's program prepare you to...'* respondents were asked to select *'well'*, *'somewhat'*, or *'did not'* for each item:

1. Understand the role of library liaison in higher education
2. Understand the specific research processes of the academic disciplines you work with
3. Keep current with general trends in scholarly communications
4. Monitor subject-specific trends in scholarly communications
5. Communicate with researchers (faculty and graduate students) regarding their research support needs
6. Contribute to accreditation reports and applications for new academic programs
7. Support donor connections as relevant to liaison subject areas
8. Inform constituents about scholarly communication issues: copyright, author rights, etc.
9. Encourage and support the writing of data management plans
10. Inform constituents about issues related to open access publishing, institutional repositories, etc.
11. Analyze user data (i.e., reference chat logs, COUNTER usage reports) for trends
12. Monitor research and publishing trends in specific subject areas
13. Examine papers authored by constituents in specific subject areas for research interests, trends, and use of research sources

Findings

Responses to this group of questions both echoed and deviated from other studies' findings discussed in the literature review. Figure 1 represents survey responses divided into two groups: those from liaison librarians holding only the ALA-accredited master's ('ALA Only'), and those holding an additional graduate degree ('ALA +'). The numbers in parentheses in the chart refer to the number of responses to each item. Respondents could select "not applicable" for those tasks for which they were not responsible.
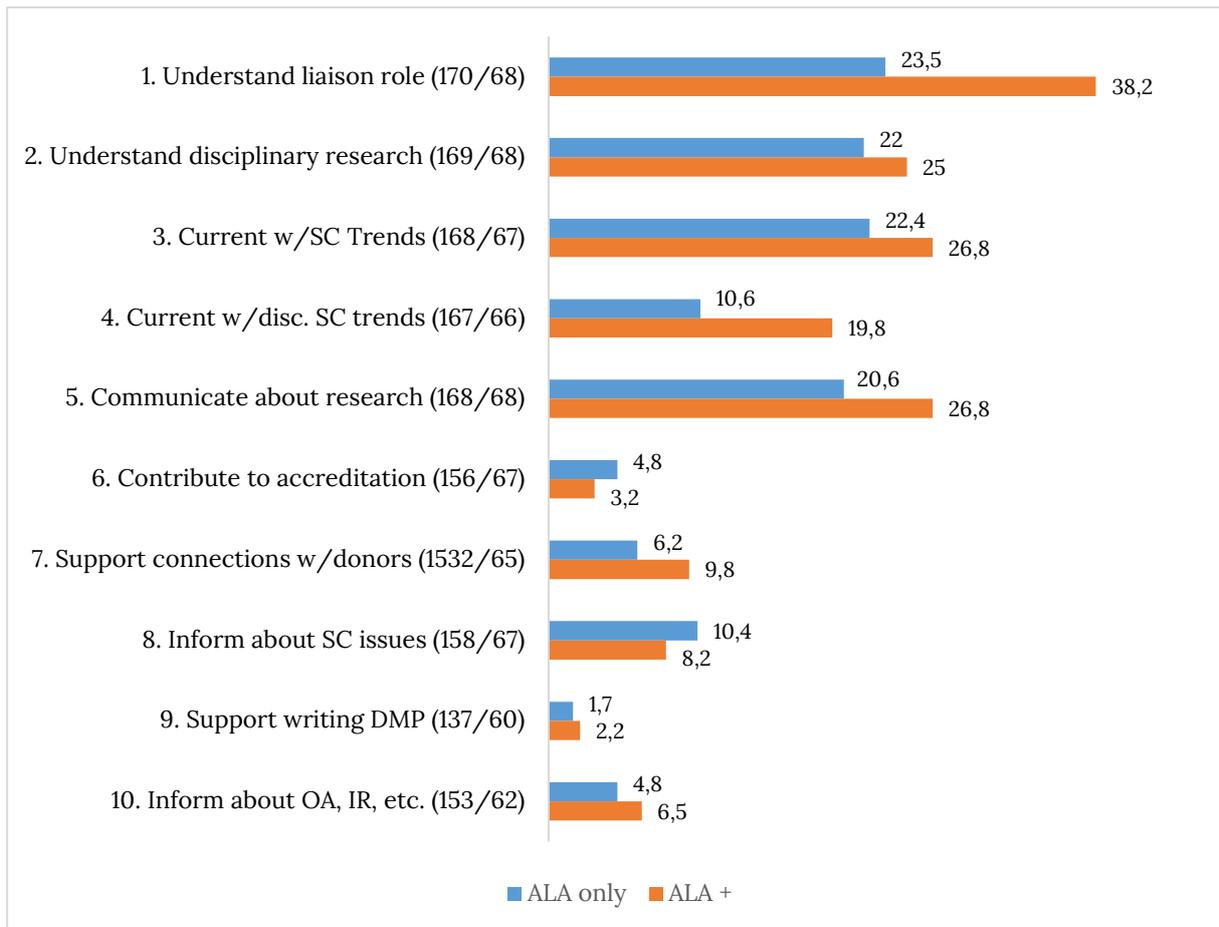
Figure 1. 'My ALA-accredited master's degree prepared me well.'

Figure 1 depicts respondents' impressions of the quality of preparation they received for specific liaison tasks during the ALA-accredited masters. Indeed, in the case of the item for which the largest percentage of respondents indicated the ALA-accredited master's prepared them *'well'* *'understand[ing] the role of library liaison in higher education'*, this option was selected by only 38.2% of those respondents with an additional graduate degree, and only 23.5% of those with the ALA-accredited master's. This item does illustrate an interesting pattern in survey results, however: those respondents who have completed other graduate work in addition to the ALA-accredited master's seemed to view that degree in a more favourable light than those who had only completed the ALA-accredited master's. The percentage of dual-degree holders who categorized themselves as well-prepared by the ALA-accredited master's to *'keep current with disciplinary trends in scholarly communication,' 'keep current with general trends in scholarly communication'*, and *'understand the role of library liaison in higher education'* are all higher than their single-degreed counterparts. We can only speculate about the reason for this discrepancy: perhaps librarians who have completed graduate work outside the ALA-accredited degree have more realistic expectations for graduate education in general?

We also asked those respondents with an additional graduate degree to assess how well that program prepared them for the same tasks. Figure 2 compares the percentage of respondents who selected *'well'* to fill in the statement *'my ALA accredited master's degree/other graduate degree prepared me...'* for each of the tasks. Note: 'ALA *degree*' category includes both groups of respondents in figure 1. Respondents were invited to select 'N/A' if they were not responsible for

a specific task among their liaison responsibilities, so the number of responses for individual items vary; these are indicated in the numbers in parentheses.

Note: 'ALA *Degree*' category includes both groups of respondents in figure 1. In Figure 2, responses from the two groups represented in Figure 1 have been collapsed. Figure 2 also includes three items that did not appear in the segment of the survey administered to those respondents who indicated not having completed additional graduate work: '*examin[ing] papers authored by constituents in specific subject areas for research interests, trends, and use of research sources,*' '*analys[ing] user data (i.e., reference chat logs, COUNTER usage reports) for trends,*' and '*monitor[ing] research and publishing trends in specific subject areas.*' Consequently, those items represent a smaller number of respondents.
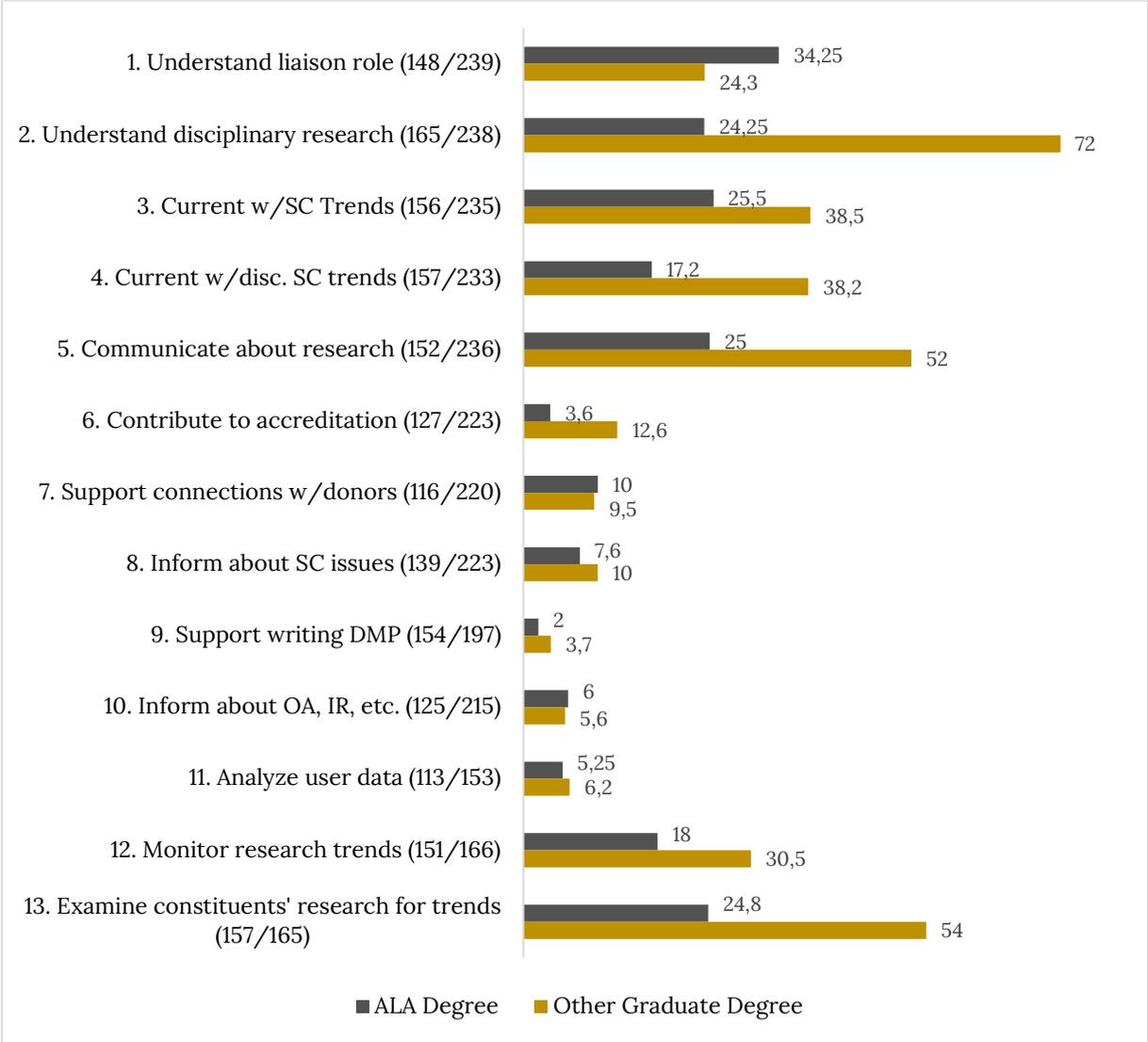

Figure 2. 'My other graduate/ALA-accredited master's degree prepared me well to…'

Comparing respondents' assessment of the preparation afforded by the ALA-accredited master's to that provided by other graduate education is eye-opening as well. Only in the case of the item '*understand the role of library liaison in higher education*' did a notably larger percentage of respondents indicate their ALA-accredited master's program prepared them '*well*' than did their subject graduate work. Respondents considered themselves well prepared by other graduate work

in several areas, including '*understand[ing] the specific research processes of the academic disciplines you work with*', '*communicat[ing] with researchers (faculty and graduate students) regarding their research support needs*', and '*examin[ing] papers authored by constituents in specific subject areas for research interests, trends, and use of research sources.*'

It is interesting to note, however, that respondents did not consider themselves well-prepared by either graduate program in several areas, primarily those typically considered to be under the purview of functional specialists: '*analys[ing] user data for trends*' (electronic resources management), '*inform[ing] constituents about issues related to open access publishing, institutional repositories, etc.*' (scholarly communications), '*encourag[ing] and support[ing] the writing of data management plans*' (research data management), and '*inform[ing] constituents about scholarly communication issues: copyright, author rights, etc.*' (scholarly communications/copyright). The item '*support[ing] donor connections as relevant to liaison subject areas*' could be seen as the responsibility of those library staff tasked with fundraising or soliciting materials donations for special collections. Liaisons' subject knowledge and familiarity with their counterparts in academic departments, however, could make them strong contributors to these efforts.

Conclusions

Responses to our survey suggest LIS programs could improve guidance for students' interest in becoming academic library liaisons. Increasing curricular offerings where gaps between additional graduate degree holders and those who have only earned the ALA-accredited master's (e.g., research awareness and understanding) could be particularly beneficial. It appears that LIS education and graduate education in other disciplines have been equally remiss in educating students in functional specializations that could be '*new liaison*' areas such as data management and scholarly communications. Here, LIS education has an opportunity to stake a position ourselves to our institutional colleagues as expert educators and consultants. Responses to this area of inquiry provide fascinating breadcrumbs for both LIS educators seeking to improve their programs' preparation for librarians entering academic librarianship and for librarians and library administrators interested in identifying professional development opportunities.

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