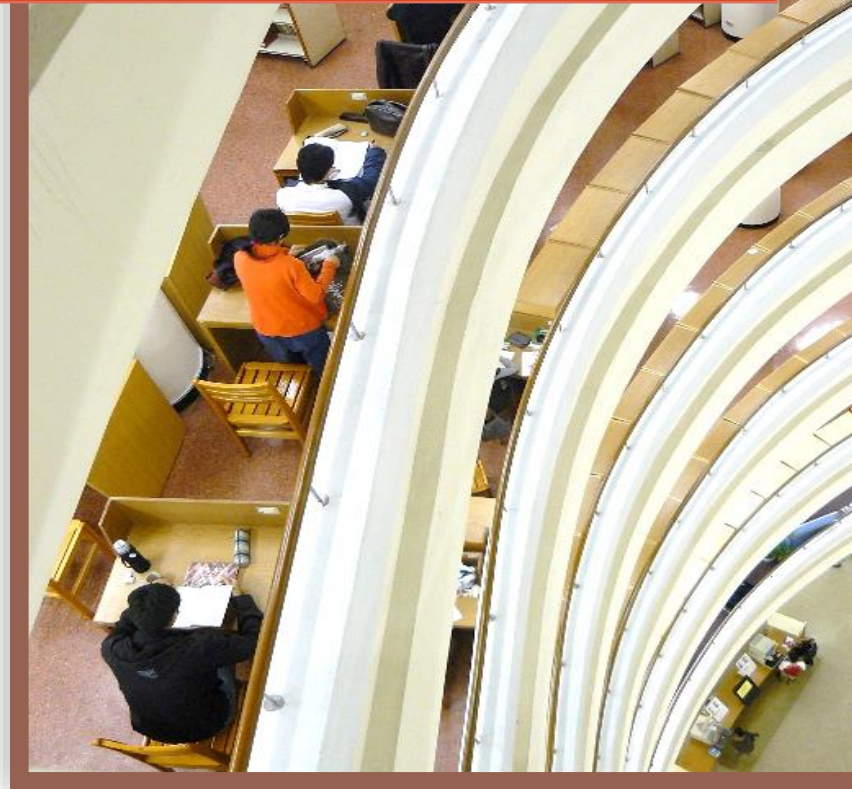May, 2015

Learning Outcomes Assessment at American Library Association Accredited Master's Programs in Library and Information Studies

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Executive Summary

There is an increasing emphasis on learning outcomes assessment in the accreditation process in higher education in general and in library education specifically. This mixed methods study investigated the practice of outcomes assessment at master's programs in library and information studies accredited by the American Library Association in the United States and Canada. Six salient themes emerged from the survey responses of Accreditation Liaison officers and the content analysis of 12 program presentations of MLIS programs. First, outcomes assessment has taken hold at MLIS programs in which 93% of programs have adopting a common set of learning goals and outcomes, whereas 79% developed a written assessment plan. Second, accreditation is the primary driver for MLIS assessment efforts, while program directors, faculty, and assessment and curriculum committees provide leadership in its practice. Third, MLIS programs employed a diverse range of tools for measuring learning outcomes. Course assignment, course evaluation, rubric, internship rating, portfolios, and surveys are the most commonly used direct and indirect measures. Fourth, MLIS programs applied assessment results extensively for improving program, curriculum, course, and instruction; enhancing student services; and preparing for accreditation. Fifth, MLIS programs conduct outcomes assessment with limited resources. Two-thirds of the MLIS programs surveyed have no dedicated assessment personnel to support assessment efforts. Sixth, MLIS programs and faculty recognized the intrinsic values of assessment and accreditation. The findings suggest that MLIS programs can sustain assessment efforts by combining direct and indirect assessment measures, providing adequate faculty support, and further integrating assessment in the infrastructure and culture of the program.

The complete study is available at:
http://digitallibrary.usc.edu/cdm/compoundobject/collection/p15799coll3/id/561362

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The Study

In the fall of 2014, the author conducted an online survey among the 62 accreditation liaison officers (ALO) of MLIS programs accredited by American Library Association in the United States and Canada on their outcomes assessment practice. A total of 29 valid survey responses (or 47%) were received. Additionally, the author also analyzed program presentations from 12 selected accredited MLIS programs on their current practice to supplement and compliment the survey data.

The research problem driving this study was to investigate how the new emphasis on learning outcomes assessment in the 2008 *ALA Accreditation Standards* was integrated into the operation of MLIS programs in the United States and Canada. Four specific research questions were addressed:

1. To what extent is the practice of outcomes assessment implemented at ALA-accredited MLIS programs?
2. What types of outcomes assessment measures and approaches are employed at these programs?
3. How have student learning outcomes assessment results been used in program's improvement efforts?
4. What are the perceived value and importance of outcomes assessment by program administrators?

Findings

Through the triangulation of findings from both data sets, six prominent themes emerged across the survey responses and content analysis of program presentations. Collectively, the six themes adequately address the study's four research questions.

Theme 1: Outcomes Assessment has Taken Hold at MLIS Programs

With the prominent emphasis on student learning outcomes in 2008 *ALA Accreditation Standards*, the practice of outcomes assessment became the norm at MLIS programs. About 93% of the surveyed MLIS programs adopted a common set of learning goals and outcomes for all their students, while 79% developed a written assessment plan with clearly articulated learning goals, outcomes, and measures. In addition, learning goals and objectives at MLIS programs are tightly integrated with their curriculum, course syllabi, assignments, and assessment plan. MLIS programs also incorporate competencies statements from a wide range of professional organizations in defining learning outcomes for curriculum and courses. On average, each MLIS program adopts six competency statements. The study also revealed that assessment practices at some MLIS programs are an integral part of an assessment framework and mandate from its university, state, or regional accreditation agencies.

The program presentations further disclose that many MLIS programs conduct ongoing outcomes assessment in a systematic manner. Assessment practice is further integrated into the school's planning and curriculum development process, as well as its organizational structure. These observations address Research Question 1 about the current practice of outcomes assessment at MLIS programs.

Theme 2: Accreditation Is the Primary Drive for MLIS Assessment Efforts, While Program Directors, Faculty, and Curriculum Committees Provide Leadership in Its Practice

Accreditation keeps MLIS programs viable in recruiting students effectively, receiving external funding and grants legitimately, and certifying the employment of its

graduates. Seventy-Seven percent of survey respondents attributed ALA accreditation as the primary force for the assessment activities at their program, whereas faculty and MLIS directors exert critical influence on program's assessment efforts. Curriculum and assessment committees chaired by faculty members coordinate the assessment work, initiate new effort, set up achievable targets, interpret results, and implement the changes at MLIS programs. Faculty, staff, and students are well-included and represented in these committees.

The study further shows that assessment efforts at MLIS programs are substantively influenced by the two leading, but sometimes opposing, purposes of outcomes assessment: accountability and program improvement. However, many MLIS programs find a balance between compliance with accreditation standards and the desire to improve the quality of student learning with no obvious tension. These observations suffice to address Research Question 1 about the current practice of outcomes assessment at MLIS programs.

Theme 3: MLIS Programs Employed a Diverse Range of Metrics for Measuring Learning Outcomes

MLIS programs employ more than 37 direct and indirect measures to gather qualitative and quantitative evidence of student learning formatively as well as summatively at both program and course level. In addition to the commonly used course assignment and course evaluation, rubric, internship rating, portfolios, and surveys are the most popular assessment mechanism cited by MLIS programs. To ensure capturing a fuller picture of student learning, MLIS programs combine multiple assessment tools, such as rubric with portfolio and student survey with internship, in assessing student learning. Evidence from multiple sources is then triangulated to reach a richer conclusion. MLIS programs also solicit opinions from a wide spread of constituencies, ranging from current students, faculty, and alumni, to employers, external reviewers, and practitioners, on student learning. Likewise, they take into account recognized student achievements, including honors, scholarships, rewards, presentation, and publications, in assessing program effectiveness. Longitudinally, MLIS

programs rely on direct and indirect evidence related to enrollment, retention, grade, passing rate, graduation, and job placement to monitor program performance and success.

Externally, MLIS programs actively track the development of the library and information profession, the advances in technologies, and the employment trends in order to keep the program and curriculum relevant and agile. They form advisory boards composed of practitioners, employers, industry leaders, and state officers so as to tap into the environmental changes. To monitor the employment trends and skill requirements, they analyze job postings and interview employers. To maintain as well as expand connections, they host regional meetings, sponsor workshops, visit employers and alumni, and participate in professional conferences. To benchmark performance against their peers, they participate in library education projects, such as WILIS (Workforce Issues in Library and Information Science), and track the educational rankings. These observations address research question 2 about the types of outcomes assessment measures and approaches employed at MLIS programs.

Theme 4: MLIS Programs Applied Assessment Results Extensively

Although accreditation agencies are the primary customer of assessment results, the MLIS programs apply assessments results for program improvement and student learning enhancement extensively. Assessment evidence contributes to the development and alignment of program goals and objectives, the revision of curriculum and courses, the launch of new specialization or program tracks, and the formation of partnership and collaboration on projects. Assessment outcomes are also used to improve instruction, student services, facility, resources, and class scheduling as well as to evaluate the performance of faculty and staff. In many cases, MLIS programs are responsive to the feedback from stakeholders and that changes are implemented in a timely manner. By leveraging accreditation, MLIS programs make assessment more meaningful and use accreditation recommendations to stimulate changes. These observations address research question 3 about the application of outcomes assessment results at MLIS programs.

Theme 5: MLIS Programs Conduct Outcomes Assessment with Limited Resources

Due to the relatively small size of MLIS programs, two-thirds of the programs surveyed have no dedicated assessment personnel to support assessment efforts. Instead, most of the programs depend on assessment committees or curriculum committees to conduct assessment work, with additional support from regular staff members. Additionally, MLIS programs rely on campus resources, such as university's centers for teaching and learning and assessment experts from other departments, to complete assessment work. As for faculty support, only a few programs reported that they offer professional development, stipends, technical assistance, or release time for faculty involved in assessment work. These observations address research question 1 about the current practice of outcomes assessment at MLIS programs.

Theme 6: MLIS Programs and Faculty Recognize the Intrinsic Value of Assessment and Accreditation

While meeting the compliance requirements from accreditors, the university, or the state, MLIS programs continue to gain interest in the value of assessment for the purposes of program improvement and student learning enhancement. There are indications of more conscientious measures of student learning and the use of assessment data in program planning and curriculum development at MLIS programs. However, there are also indications that more effort is required to move assessment work beyond the designated committees to all faculty members and to expand assessment practice at the program level to all courses. These observations address Research Question 4 about the perceived values and importance of outcomes assessment at MLIS programs.

Implications for Practice

Building upon previous research of this topic, this study shed additional light on the current assessment practices at MLIS programs. It provides a more nuanced and detailed picture of different assessment approaches, applications, and implications across a diverse group of MLIS programs. It is hoped that, with additional knowledge of the magnitude and shape of these variations, MLIS program leaders, educators, and assessment personnel will have a better idea of what their peers are doing and will be better informed on assessment planning and accreditation groundwork. It is further hoped that this study may generate additional interest, dialogue, research, and collaboration among educators, practitioners, and accreditation agencies on this topic.

Using Multiple Measures

Learning outcomes assessment is generally used either for internal quality improvement or external accountability. Although they are not mutually exclusive, tension between these two imperatives tends to exist due to differences in their intended use, target audience, measuring approach, and reference points (Ewell, 2009). While this study did not identify any obvious tension, there is no doubt that the priority of assessment efforts at MLIS programs is to meet the external requirements - either programmatic or regional accreditation or university mandate. Surveys and other indirect measures are used intensively by MLIS programs to report assessment practices and learning outcomes. Evidence from indirect measures is also used to make program and curriculum changes. On the other hand, the extent of employing direct measures in combination with the evidence from indirect measures among MLIS programs is less common and varies widely across programs. All assessment measures are not created equal and no single measure can fully capture the broad spectrum of student learning outcomes (Jankowski et al., 2012). The evidence collected from different types of measures should not be treated the same. It is imperative for accreditors and accreditation standards to clearly explain the difference between these two types of measures and the potential deficiencies of heavily relying on a single tool for assessment. Emphasis should also be placed on establishing principles for judging the

adequacy of evidence, encouraging the use of multiple direct and indirect measures, and triangulating data from multiple sources to capture wider range and deeper data.

Involving and Supporting Faculty

Assessment is furthered when it is integrated into organizational structure, culture, and process (Hersh & Keeling, 2013; Kinzie, 2010; Kurzweil, 2015). There is limited evidence from this study that MLIS programs allocate adequate resources for assessment operations or in sufficient supporting faculty involvement. To grow assessment into the operation of an MLIS program, to increase faculty engagement and use of assessment results, to advance assessment at the course level, and to continue to build a sustainable assessment infrastructure, MLIS programs need to invest additional resources and provide faculty professional development opportunities and support. Direct faculty involvement and ownership is essential to meaningful assessment programs, and MLIS administrators should strive for a positive environment and climate with adequate resources to recognize and reward faculty contributions in this area, to encourage innovative practice, and to increase discussions on assessment issues at regular meetings.

As leaders in library education and the programmatic accreditation process, both the Association for Library and Information Science Education and ALA should continue to work with other relevant professional organizations in fostering a dedicated community of learning, sharing, discussing, and collaborating around this topic. Special interest groups should be formed to sponsor activities, such as training, professional development, conferences, online forums, projects, research, and publications, in this area.

Sustaining Assessment Efforts

Applications of assessment evidence appear to expand beyond an act of compliance at MLIS programs, evident both from the survey responses and the content analysis of 12 MLIS program presentations. Nevertheless, this study also reveals that there are nuances in terms of attitude, embracement, and enthusiasm toward assessment practices and efforts across MLIS programs. Without buy-in and

commitment from all participants, assessment stands as an obligatory response to external demand and the results of outcomes assessment might not lead to a desirable action and improvement. For MLIS programs to demonstrate their value and effectiveness to external stakeholders, learning outcomes assessment must be an ongoing and iterative process and should be tightly connected with program goals and objectives. Assessment work needs to be embedded within the curricular review function and strategic planning process as well as woven into the culture and structure of the program. In order to sustain assessment efforts, assessment results must be applied toward improving instruction and learning and translated into resource allocation. Student success stories and best practices must be shared among MLIS programs.

Conclusions

Assessment made great strides across higher education and throughout academic disciplines in the last two decades. The responses to the survey, the additional comments by ALOs, and the contents from the program presentations provide an in-depth understanding of the current state of assessment of student learning at MLIS programs. There is considerable progress being made at MLIS programs in assessment practices, including the incorporation of learning outcomes into program goals and objectives, the employment of a wide range of assessment measures, and the engagement of more assessment activities. MLIS programs also aptly apply assessment results into program improvement in addition to complying with accreditation requirements. There is evidence of substantial involvement by faculty members, as well as increasing interest and support of assessment work. However, some programs are more advanced in assessment practices than others, and support and resources dedicated to assessment work are also relatively limited. Challenges remain and there is still room for further improvement.

As a professional degree program, MLIS curriculum focuses strongly on the acquisition of technical skills, accumulation of hands-on experience through real-world practices, and attainment of know-hows. MLIS program shares many similarities with the principles of competency-based learning and emphasizes and expects its students to apply learned knowledge and skills in real-life settings. The ability for MLIS programs to integrate outcomes assessment effectively at course and program levels and to leverage assessment results for program improvement determines the quality of the degree, the employability of the graduates, and the future of the profession. With no standardized mechanism, such as licensure or certification examinations, to audit the quality of new entrants, an efficacious assessment program at MLIS programs is even more critical for a successful career of graduates and the health and prosperity of the profession.

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