



Evidence Summary

Differences Between Library Instruction Conference Attendees and their Institutional Affiliations in the United States and Canada are Discernible

A review of:

Willingham, Patricia, Linda Carder, and Christopher Millson-Martula. "Does a Border Make a Difference? Library Instruction in the United States and Canada." Journal of Academic Librarianship 32.1 (Jan. 2006): 23-34.

Reviewed by:

Carol Perryman

TRLN Doctoral Fellow, School of Information & Library Science

University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

Chapel Hill, North Carolina, United States of America

E-mail: cp1757@gmail.com

Received: 29 May 2006

Accepted: 03 July 2006

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Abstract

Objective – The primary intent of this study was to identify differences among library instruction conference attendees and their institutions between the United States and Canada. The overall hypothesis was that there would be areas of measurable distinction between the two countries. The authors tested nine hypotheses: #1, that the largest number of survey respondents would be employed at large institutions; #2, that statistically, the majority of well-developed instructional programs are found at universities rather than colleges; #3, that beginning programs are more often found at four-year institutions; #4, that program development and technological issues predominate among instructional foci in the

early twenty-first century; #5, that more experienced librarians are more likely to attend library instruction conferences; #6, that LOEX (originally an acronym for Library Orientation Exchange) is perceived as the most valuable conference in library instruction; #7, that the impact of conference attendance upon library program development is only moderate; #8, that conference theme and reputation are the two greatest factors contributing to attendance; and #9, that the majority of conference attendees are from the United States.

Design – Historical research, and an e-mailed survey.

Setting – Libraries and library instruction conferences in the United States and Canada.

Subjects – One hundred thirty-two librarians who were attendees at one of three library user instruction conferences: LOEX, LOEX of the West, and WILU (Workshop on Instruction in Library Use).

Methods – First, a brief historical review was conducted on the influence of social, economic, and political events on the development of library user instruction, the creation of conferences focused on library instruction in from the United States and Canada, and national surveys looking at institutional support for instructional development. Next, a survey instrument consisting of fifteen demographic and attitudinal questions was sent via e-mail to all 508 attendees of major library instruction conferences (LOEX and WILU for 2001, and LOEX of the West for 2000) in the United States and Canada. Responses from the 132 returned surveys were tabulated and used to evaluate their linked hypotheses.

Main results – Of the nine initial hypotheses, five were supported, and the remaining four were either partially supported or rejected. Supported hypotheses included: #1, that most participants in the top library instructional conferences came from institutions with >5,000 student populations; #2, that the majority of fully developed instructional programs were in universities; #5, that librarians with greater seniority were more likely to attend instructional conferences; #7, that conference attendance has only a medium impact on program development at participants' home institutions; and #9, that most conference attendees come from the United States. Partially supported hypotheses were: #4, that factors most highly rated by participants were program development and technology, and #8, that conference theme and reputation are ranked higher in

terms of influence in attendees' decision to participate in the conferences. Rejected hypotheses included: #3, that "beginning programs are typically found at four-year institutions," #4, that "program development and technology rank as the two most important instruction-related issues" (note that hypothesis #4 is both rejected and partially supported), and #6, that "LOEX is considered the most valuable conference."

Conclusion – The authors confirmed their overall hypothesis that significant differences exist between the United States and Canada regarding library instructional programs. Although the two countries developed at very different rates prior to the 1960s, technology and cross-border sharing has meant that they are now developing along parallel paths. The authors suggest several avenues for further study including the need to consider attendees over a greater time span, the differences in responses between younger and more senior participants, and questions about the real differences between library instructional programs in Canada and the United States.

Commentary

The inclusion of a thorough history of the development of library instruction programming in libraries in the U.S. and Canada is a valuable addition to the literature, and would have been strengthened by publication as a standalone article. As it exists, the links between the historical overview and the research components of this work do not appear directly pertinent to the research questions.

An additional value of the work is instructional, in that the authors openly discuss problems with the data collection instrument. Based on the critical appraisal checklist created by Lindsay Glynn (pending publication in *Library HiTech*), the

study is invalid both in terms of the sections of appraisal (population, data collection, study design, and results), and overall. Although the authors clearly define their population, and the sample size is sufficiently large for precise estimates, the respondents are self-selected, due to the survey's distribution by e-mail. A major concern is that with the low respondent rate from Canada (28), analysis of the survey questions is questionable, especially when broken down into sub-categories of seniority and institution type.

The authors obtained names and contact information from program attendance records, and fail to mention whether they had deduplicated the records, which means that individuals attending more than one of the conferences (reported as 25.1% of respondents, or 33/132) may have falsely inflated data for analysis. We are also not informed of the country of origin of multiple conference attendees. The overall hypothesis of this study, which questions whether there are measurable distinctions between the library instruction of the United States and Canada, is unclearly defined and ultimately better addressed by the historical section of the article than by the research section, which focuses on conference attendance.

For the second area of appraisal, data collection, critical analysis of the study establishes that the methods are not well described. Validity in this area would have been greatly enhanced by the inclusion of the survey instrument, though we recognize that space constraints may have prevented its publication. Participants attended conferences from 2000 to 2001, but it is not indicated when the survey was conducted. Too lengthy a time from conference attendance to the survey may have introduced recall bias, an issue that is not addressed. In addition, there was no attempt to pilot the instrument, so that errors present in the design were not discovered

until post-administration analysis. The e-mailed survey questions were not provided, so readers cannot discern bias, especially when the results were summarized rather than enumerated. For example, Tables 12-15 in the study inexplicably contain only rankings, and no numeric information.

The study design, a third area of appraisal, is undermined by the lack of detail provided, although the researchers' choice of an e-mail survey sent to all conference participants is appropriate for the research questions asked. The reader would benefit from a discussion of response coding, inter-rater reliability methods (if any), and term definition, such as what determines the developmental level of an educational program (a focus for hypothesis #2). Further enhancement could have been gained by discussion of whether ethics approval had been sought.

One strong component of the study is the results section. The authors carefully and succinctly separate the results of each of the nine hypotheses, and are frank in their appraisal of the study's weaknesses. Finally, they provide thoughtful suggestions for further research in this understudied area. Even with the design errors, the results of this study can somewhat benefit program organizers for future conference planning, and form the basis for further research among the two populations.

Unfortunately, the results are not rigorously considered in the summary and conclusions section, where the researchers make several unsupported statements. For example, the conclusion is made that differences in program maturity levels between the two countries are significant (hypothesis #2), even though the authors had previously discussed instrument and study design weaknesses that would render these same conclusions questionable. Another example is the inference for hypothesis #5 that librarians with more seniority were more

likely to attend conferences due to their seniority and greater access to funds – the first part was established, but not the cause. Ultimately, the study's primary question of whether the 'border makes a difference' is unanswered. Future research in this area would benefit from a more narrowly defined set of hypotheses, a pilot study, and a larger population sample size.