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Exploring the experiences of international students enrolled in online USA-based LIS programs

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Abstract: *Online coursework offers many advantages to potential LIS students because classes can be completed from anywhere there is an internet connection, students do not have to relocate themselves or their families, and students can balance their studies with personal and professional responsibilities. This panel explored the challenges and opportunities for international students pursuing their education in school librarianship online from United States-based institutions. Panelists found that access to online programs allowed them to compare institutions and pick the one best suited for them based on affordability, scheduling, and program details. However, they also found that they had common challenges in completing their coursework, such as obtaining physical books and materials, balancing their personal lives with graduate study, and contextualizing the content of their program with the specifics of their locals. Overall, they had a positive outlook on their education and provided recommendations to future international graduate students and LIS educators serving international students online.*

Keywords: *Online Distance Education; International School Librarian Education; Library Science Education*

Introduction

International students comprise a small percentage of online students in Graduate LIS programs (Yoon & McCook, 2021). Regardless, they add to the global character of the graduate classroom. In a time when LIS programs are seeking to add global competency and international mindedness to their LIS curriculums, these students serve an invaluable role that is only sometimes fully appreciated or utilized (Engseth, 2023). This paper summarizes a panel that took place on October 28, 2024, virtually via the EventMobi platform during the International Association of School Librarians (IASL) conference. The panelists from four universities provided five different perspectives on the international LIS student experience. Each panelist was working towards a career as a school librarian, and they shared the unique benefits and challenges of taking online coursework from a USA-based institution while they lived outside the USA. This exploratory panel provides a valuable framework for identifying common challenges and needs of international students. It provides some suggestions for LIS educators to enhance the effectiveness of the online LIS program.

Literature Review

Internationalization of LIS education

LIS educators have considered international issues and global mindedness as the concept of the global world, and global education has increasingly highlighted the interconnectedness of

information, cultures, and knowledge systems (Abdullahi et al., 2007; Atkinson, 2001; Chen et al., 2017; Hirsh et al., 2015; Raju, 2020). In particular, Aray et al. (2021) highlight how higher education in the United States attracts international students while maintaining a strongly American-centric view of cultural affairs. Internationalization has not skipped the LIS field, and online programs and course offerings in Library and Information Science education have continued to expand and recruit within and outside the United States (Oguz et al., 2015). Other researchers have considered the experience of international students in higher education programs (Liu et al., 2010; Ortiz, 2020) and even online students in LIS education (Shahvar & Tang, 2022). However, the research on students completing online programs in LIS courses from international locations needs to be more well-developed.

Balancing the global and the local

Online coursework in librarianship is a balance between the global and the local. Haythornthwaite et al., (2007) identify how online students balance what they call the "locus of engagement" and how "Distributed participants divide their attention between local and remote constituencies (p.3). The local context is especially important for students seeking to be certified as school librarians. In the United States, educational certification is handled by each state's Department of Education (Kachel & Lance, 2021).

As one of the participants noted,

> It's interesting to hear people's international experience because, of course, the United States is so state-by-state based. It is interesting to see what different areas require. I am glad I'm not the person at my university who has to figure all that out.

Panelists

This panel explored the experiences of five online graduate students living outside the United States while completing some or all of their coursework in a United States-based MLS or MLIS granting institution. Participants were solicited from the panel moderator's university, the ALA International Relations Roundtable listserv, and the American Association of School Librarians listserv. They represented four different online LIS graduate programs, both asynchronous and synchronous. While studying online at American institutions, they lived in China, Israel, Saudi

Arabia, Taiwan, and Croatia. Four individuals moved while taking coursework, from China to Israel, from Saudi Arabia to Laos, from Croatia to the United States, and within different cities in Taiwan. Four panelists were initially from the United States, while one continues to live and work in her home country of China. One panelist could not be present at the panel virtually due to the time frame. However, she shared her experiences as an online international student over email to provide additional context to this research paper. The panel moderator serves as an LIS educator for an online graduate program. Her experience working with international students in the program led to the panel's creation. However, the panelists themselves had the opportunity to edit and comment on the nature of the questions asked, the transcript of the original panel discussion, and the final write-up.

The participants varied in their experience within school libraries from 0 years of experience to 16 years of experience on the other end. In several cases, panelists were searching for options to become certified school librarians, not just in their international location but also if they were to come back to the state where they lived while in the United States. LeMieux noted, "I am also a certified teacher through Michigan, and I was looking for an option to become certified in that state." Blackford also picked a university based on her permanent residency in Portland, noting, "I chose a university that grants licensure for the state of Oregon."

Likewise, Marcum noted,

> I picked my university because I have a residency in North Carolina and in the state of North Carolina, you do have to have an MLIS to be certified, which is also where my teaching certification is. I am also doing an instructional technology certification and an instructional design postgraduate certificate. I'm the first one in the cohort to do a dual licensure, both in school library and instructional technology.

Type of Online Program

In several cases, panelists were in their second graduate or online program. The online nature of the program was necessary because the participants were living and working abroad. In most cases, participants wanted an asynchronous program, such as McCool,

> I started searching online for asynchronous programs so I didn't have to go to classes or meet at a certain time because of the time difference. That fit

perfectly with my life because I was working full time and had a young child and a baby.

However, not all participants wanted an asynchronous program, Marcum noted,

I didn't want asynchronous classes because my first masters were all asynchronous, and death by discussion board is something I feel deep in my soul. I felt that in the asynchronous program, I had to do five times more work to prove my learning.

McCool agreed this was the challenge of an online, asynchronous program,

In an online course, you have to contribute, you can't just sit there in the course in the back and passively observe, you have to produce something every week. There's a product you have to come up with, for example, with discussion boards, it feels like you are required to say something, whether you have something to say or not. And it feels to me a little bit artificial compared to when you're in a room and the ideas are bouncing around. In-person discussion is more spontaneous and you contribute when you feel like you have something to contribute, and you don't when you're just sort of observing and absorbing what's going on. I don't know how that could be changed in an asynchronous system.

LeMieux found that asynchronous programs offer benefits and challenges,

The benefit of my online coursework was that it was asynchronous because I was between two different time zones at different points. However, asynchronous was a challenge because every class required some kind of group work project, sometimes multiple times during the term. It was always a challenge to find times that fit. When I lived in China, it was easier than in Israel to find a collaborative time for group work.

Practicum Coursework

A few panelists had to complete practicum coursework to become certified as school librarians. Practicum coursework could sometimes be challenging to schedule since it required an in-person presence, LeMieux noted,

The other challenge was the practicum and trying to get it in. My only free time is in summer. I'm working in education, as a technology integration specialist. So, I had to take a couple weeks off at the end of the term, and they had to scramble a bit to get my practicum organized. During the practicum, I was every week in a different place because in the United States, schools get out at different places at different times. I did a week at a public library as part of my practicum. They just pulled every string to make it work.

Marcum also highlighted how the dual licensure program meant that she needed to complete two different practicums, both in the same semester. However, she noted that her school already had procedures in place for international practicums, stating, "I'm very fortunate that I can do my practicum where I'm working." Another panelist, Blackford, saved her practicum for her final classes,

I am a special case since I am back in the US and finishing my program from here. I saved classes that require teaching a lesson for this year when I am back and can work with students. I'm unsure how I would have done the final observation for the program or taken the state licensure test if I were still abroad. Luckily, I didn't have to figure those things out.

Price

Price was an important factor in picking an online LIS program for several participants. LeMieux noted that her university "was not charging international fees; everyone was in the in-state program. That cut down a little bit on the cost." McCool said that price was an important factor,

I found one that checked all the boxes for me and which was a reasonable price. I had initially looked at my undergrad university first and found their <LIS> program was very expensive. So a lot of <my decision> came down to price because it was 100% online and asynchronous.

Zhang had the opportunity to have her school work funded by the K-12 school where she worked, but she noted she found a program online by searching via keywords such as "most affordable program" and "LIS program." The university she finally landed at "was affordable, which was important because my school was funding me. I still had a budget limit from them."

Challenges

Panelists identified a wide range of challenges in taking classes internationally. In particular, purchasing physical books and textbooks required for their classes took time and was sometimes impossible. The panelists also found that online coursework required them to balance their personal and professional lives. One panelist found that information could be difficult to access online without a Virtual Private Network (VPN). They also occasionally struggled with contextualizing the standards and expectations of American school librarians and their local school's requirements or requests.

Purchasing Physical Books

Panelists identified several challenges in doing their library science degree overseas. In particular, receiving books required for their coursework was a challenge met by multiple panelists. LeMieux noted,

> I ordered physical books sometimes because reading everything online could give me problems. But if I didn't plan ahead, I wouldn't have enough time to get the book ahead of the class. One time, I was in a fall class. This was when I lived in China, and my book finally arrived from Amazon in June.

McCool agreed, "Books are sometimes hard to get, and sometimes when I see there is a physical book I need, I break out in a cold sweat a little bit." Blackford also had challenges with getting physical books, noting,

> It was a bit difficult in my collections class, when we needed to read and analyze so many children's books for class, since I didn't have access to English libraries, and it isn't easy to even buy books in English in Croatia, especially in the small town I was living in.

Virtual Information Access

One participant noted that a challenge for her location was access to an unfiltered version of the internet, Zhang said,

> One of the challenges I had was in obtaining a VPN, because there is a firewall that blocks some websites. Going through this program, I was able to see the outside world and hear from different voices. If you are in China and are in a secluded world; get a VPN.

One study by Dutkowska-Zuk et al. (2020) found that almost half of the students in online programs using VPNs were doing so to "bypass Internet censorship" (p. 5).

Balancing Personal and Professional Work

Many panelists had challenges balancing their personal and professional lives. Yao & Garcia (2022) note that online graduate students "may have a variety of responsibilities (e.g. children, elder care, full-time jobs) that they must balance alongside student responsibilities" (p. 24). Marcum completed many of her classes synchronously, noting,

> Two to three times a week, when I was in Saudi Arabia, my classes were either at 12:30 am or 1:30 am, depending on daylight savings time. So I was exhausted, I would try to get up ten minutes before to log in and be present and active, then when the class was over, I would try to get a few more hours of sleep before I had to get up for work. That was my biggest challenge, but it was worth it to me in order to have classes to interact with people and have that human part of it.

Other participants also shared experiences of working full-time while taking classes and parenting young children. Marcum continued,

> Another challenge was a personal one because I was solo parenting a primary-aged child. So I was exhausted in the evenings, but still trying to work on coursework, as well as on Saturday and Sunday, trying to get all of my classwork done because I just do not have the time and energy to do it during the week. So instead, I have a seven-day work week.

ALA and AASL-based standards

Students had various experiences related to the ALA and AASL-focused nature of their coursework. LeMieux noted that the

> ALA and AASL standards, helped give me a base of thinking that helped me even though the school itself <where I worked> was not very American. The school used an IB curriculum, and it had an England/Australia-centric view. There was another librarian in my building also going through the same degree but through Australia. So it was interesting talking about our different

value systems in that background. They were very similar in context. I didn't
feel that the difference was a problem for me. Here in Israel, though I'm not
working in the library here, their library is still very centered on the ALA rights
and responsibilities.

Zhang found that the ALA/AASL expectations matched her employer's expectations.
Specifically, her supervisor wanted the librarians at the school to finalize teaching standards and
a scope and sequence that included lesson plans for the library program. The scope and
sequence was a long-term project begun two years prior. However, she noted that when it came
to the running of the library, the expectations did not always match the practice, instead,

It differed because our school population was heavily second-language
learners and many of our librarians are placeholders because of staffing and
post-COVID. So, each school has one librarian to cover all the grades. So
then we have to be like an octopus and handle multiple tasks simultaneously.

On the other hand, McCool felt that the AASL standards and guidance did not fit his supervisor's
expectations, "I didn't get to do anything that I was being trained to in the program in my school
library job." Instead,

After they gave me the job, they had decided to reduce it to 40% time instead
of full time. There was a change of leadership and a new director of the
school. During my first week, I wrote a report on what I thought the state of the
library was, how many people were visiting, what circulation numbers there
were, and other things that I had been taught were something librarians
should do to show their relevance to administration. I sent it to the new
director, and he was not interested and he said, do not send me this stuff, I
don't want you spending your time doing this kind of thing.

Other panelists found success in using a wider variety of standards within their assignments,
such as Marcum,

My university has been flexible in allowing me to use the IFLA standards on
some of my assignments. I was also able to use the Empire State Standards. I
really liked them and I was able to mash up the IFLA, AASL standards and
Empire State Standards to kind of focus on the types of programs I wanted.

However, when she was asked about the US-centric context of her coursework, she said there were occasions when assignments did not translate as well overseas,

> For example, I recently had to examine local data for Jeddah, Saudi Arabia, and trying to get your hands on data in international schools is very different. Everything is public in the U.S. when it comes to public schools, public education, and universities. So, internationally, even getting data from my school was very tricky.

Overall, she felt the challenge was minor, stating, "I had a lot of freedom in how I was able to contextualize a lot of what I was doing.

English Language and Americanized Content

Online programs for international students can be challenging for other reasons, such as English-language only and Americanized content (Aray et al., 2021; Zhang & Kenny, 2010). Zhang noted, "As an English language learner, I felt that grammar and writing were more challenging, even though I did graduate. I do have a graduate degree from a Chinese university, and there, my professor criticized my grammar and English." However, online asynchronous programs have advantages for the English language learner and native English speaker alike in that lectures and videos can be rewatched if necessary, and students can take their time to reflect and respond (Zhang & Kenny, 2010). McCool expanded upon that advantage noting that online videos are often captioned, "I do like when instructors provide a video lecture, so you can sit in it and just watch it or read the captions." Zhang enjoyed her content but found that her program in the United States had a different emphasis on how learning was assessed,

> I had been brought up in a school that molded everyone into the same size and same thinking, and critical thinking was not as valued. In my university program in the United States, I felt that instead, my creativity and ideas were most valued. I gained a lot from my program, especially when my instructors said that when I was writing on the discussion board, I was not just to agree with someone, I had to say something myself. It was a great encouragement for me to step out and say something.

These differences are echoed in research, and as Zhang & Kenny (2010) note, "Since web-based instruction is based on the particular epistemologies, learning theories, and goal orientations of the designers themselves, it cannot be expected to be culturally neutral" (p. 19).

Suggestions for Future International Students in Online LIS Programs

Several panelists highlighted that they were often the only person in their online classes who was living outside of the United States. LeMieux noted,

> Most of the time, probably 70% of the time, I was the only person who was taking the class from an international location. There were often students located outside of Michigan and even in different time zones, or the Virgin Islands, but usually, I was the only one international.

Panelists identified ways for international students to succeed in their program, including engaging with the faculty and program through consistent communication, focusing on their personal goals and schedules, and making local connections to help put coursework into a local context.

Engage with the Faculty and the Program

Several students found ways to engage with the faculty and the program to enhance community and be successful. Zhang said that engaging with the faculty started when she first began her search for an online LIS program, **"**I also used different strategies of sending emails to different schools, and I felt my school had the most friendly invitation, and I felt embraced and included in the program." Marcum also began communication early,

> At the beginning of the semester, I emailed my professors. This is one of the top programs in the USA, and I can tell in terms of how the teachers are so accommodating and helping me work towards everything I am trying to do. Every single one of them wants me to be successful on a personal level and not just for the program.

Blackford felt that choosing a smaller university helped her get better support, noting, "They do a great job of one-on-one support and tailoring. Choosing a smaller university is key to getting better support, because they have the time and take the care to work with their students." LeMieux felt that communication with professors was vital, "Keep up a conversation with your

professors early when things are getting tough. Reach out early and make sure they know your context, and you'll be amazed at what kind of connections they have." McCool also found that communication with your advisor is critical,

> My advisor is very helpful. Every time I have any kind of question, I get a really clear answer. Everybody on the institution side seems interested in helping me succeed. So it doesn't seem impersonal, even though it's from a great distance. I feel like people really care about how I'm doing.

Focus on Your Goals

Students taking part in online education must balance their personal and professional lives (Kymes & Ray, 2007). McCool suggested, "I would say that a really important thing is to figure out the system and the scheduling. In the first week, make a calendar and put everything in it." Marcum also highlighted the importance of remembering what you want to get out of your program, even at the very beginning,

> From a student perspective, think about what you want from a program; it is very beneficial to have that goal in mind. Obviously, finances are a huge part of obtaining any graduate degree, but then also finding what you are looking for and don't give up, it can exist.

Make Local Professional Connections

Kazmer's (2005) community-embedded learning (CEL) highlights how students create links "between communities, learning worlds and educational institutions" (p. 18). Several panelists echoed how these concepts. In particular, they found that making local professional connections or taking classes with a colleague or other local student helped them connect to their program and contextualize their learning. LeMieux said,

> I found that having some kind of local listserv or discussion group saved me, especially in the beginning, when I had to do a lot of interviewing and making connections with other librarians. Because I was placed in a WeChat in China with librarians from an area of Shanghai, that was my group, and they bent over backwards providing me with knowledge. There were several that had a full degree, there were few that were librarians with no degree, but they had so many different experiences. There were local Chinese, international, and various people, and we supported each other. They were

the ones who reached out when I needed to talk to someone with a degree.
It was during Covid, so a lot of those things had to happen online. Creating
those connections and finding a group was the best support.

Zhang highlighted that she was also in this WeChat group and found it supportive; she also noted,

If you have a chance, take courses with another person near you, or follow
someone in their coursework. They can give you specific information about
your program, such as in mine, the summer courses were on an accelerated
schedule, so it can be helpful to know that you are not the only one under a
mountain of homework.

LeMieux also shared that her university had been recommended to her by a personal colleague in Shanghai who could vouch for the program and its doability for an international student. The CEL model did not initially include students from international contexts. However, panelists identified how engaging with an online professional world outside the classroom enhanced their social ties and educational experiences (Kazmer, 2005).

Tips for LIS Educators and Institutions

Panelists had several suggestions for LIS Educators and institutions with international students taking classes. LIS educators need to realize and be aware that students are in different time zones, have policies and protocols for international students, and recognize that overseas contexts can be markedly different than in the USA. Marcum noted, "Sometimes we are the only ones in a different time zone than the US." Blackford highlighted that it was beneficial for her instructors to "Allow me to watch recordings of the classes rather than attending the Zoom meetings live, since they were at 1:30-2 a.m. my time in Croatia." However, "I did stay up once for one class to present my final project." Marcum suggested that universities,

Have some protocols in place for international students and ensure that you
have those things in place for your international students so that the hoops
are at least equitable to what our state's counterparts would be able to
navigate. If there are certain things that they are expected to do, find
workarounds for international students to do something similar.

Multiple panelists noted that a common assignment to visit, observe, or interview at a library was a challenge abroad. LeMieux noted how challenging this assignment was when she was taking classes during COVID,

> One class I had to drop twice, once because I could not get China to let me
> into their public libraries, it was COVID, and all the international universities
> were allowing only students who attended the university to come in or even
> sometimes just their professors. When I finally took that class, I had to reach
> out to a lot of people, and on the third attempt I managed to get through it. I
> had to work with a lot of people and I had to follow librarians for a whole day.
> That was my toughest assignment getting into those public libraries.

McCool also found it challenging to talk to some international librarians who were not as well-versed in English,

> Instructors need to remember that overseas things are not always the same
> as in the US. I had to find a public library to go and study. There are public
> libraries here but people don't speak English so I couldn't talk to anyone.
> Right now, I'm in the academic library course, and I have to interview a
> librarian. I also have to find a library to study in. Luckily, I was able to find
> one I could go to, but so far, I'm not having much success finding someone
> to talk to me.

Flexibility on assignments was something that multiple panelists highlighted, Blackford noted,

> Because I was not working in a school in Croatia when I was taking classes,
> instructors were also very flexible about the fact that I didn't have access to
> a school library for some assignments. I was able to communicate over
> email with the librarian of my school in Portland that I was on leave from, in
> order to gather information and complete assignments a bit differently.

Other suggestions included finding additional ways to create a community in online coursework beyond the discussion board, McCool said, "There are so many programs going online that I

think it's good to talk about the general issues of being online and trying to make a community with your class when it's all online."

Conclusion

International students continue to serve as an important piece of online LIS programs. LIS educators who wish to support their international students can make their coursework more flexible by considering and engaging with students' local context, provide opportunities for considering global objectives and standards, and continue to motivate and champion the hard work their students are doing. They may also wish to consider ways to continue to support an inclusive classroom community where international students can learn from and interact with other students in a way that considers and supports time zone differences. These accommodations benefit not just international students but the program as a whole, providing a more global perspective in the classroom and allowing all graduates to further their readiness to engage with the future, globalized library and information world.

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Biographies

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Terea Marcum is a student at the University of North Carolina Greensboro who is working towards licensure in school library, instructional technology, and instructional design. Last semester (Spring 2024) she was based in Saudi Arabia but is moving to Laos over the summer.

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