Chapter 15
The Master's in Library and Information Studies Program via Distance at the University of Wisconsin–Madison

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ABSTRACT

A narrative history of the development of the online Master's degree at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, School of Library and Information Studies (SLIS), from its inception in collaboration with an Illinois public library system, to its current, fully online iteration is given. In addition, course delivery methods, from videoconferencing to Web-based methods, are outlined, and other details of the program are described.

INTRODUCTION

In the Fall of 2005, the University of Wisconsin-Madison, School of Library & Information Studies (SLIS) admitted its first class of distance students who would be pursuing an MA in Library & Information Studies. In this first iteration of the distance program, four core courses were taught using a combination of videoconferencing and online courseware. SLIS offered the MA in collaboration with the Prairie Area Library System (PALS), based in northwestern Illinois. To attend the videoconference class lectures, students met in classrooms at three PALS service centers, located in Rockford, Shorewood, and Coal Valley IL. After completing the core, students took the rest of their courses completely online. Students came to Madison only for a one-day orientation at the beginning of their program

The SLIS/PALS collaboration continued until 2008. Four student cohorts, ranging in enrollment from 17 to 25, began the program in each of these first four years. We had remarkably low student attrition – only three students left. As I write this in the summer of 2012, the majority of the approximately 80 students admitted during the SLIS/PALS program have completed the MA degree. Four graduated in the Spring of 2011, leaving one, who graduated in December 2012.

From the outset, we emphasize a number of qualities we believe distinguish our program from other distance library master's degrees. Of primary importance is the program's structure: the distance degree is the equal of the on-campus one; we require the identical curriculum for both. Also, students in both the on-campus and distance master's programs begin in the Fall, in order to build a cohort. Although distance students are given priority registration for online courses, we integrate the distance program with the on-campus program by allowing all students to enroll in online courses, in contrast to other LIS programs, which segregate their online and face-to-face students. A percentage of on-campus students appreciate the convenience of Web-based courses, although the same requirements apply. We also require a practicum placement, or internship, for all students in both programs.

One of the advantages of offering the distance program for SLIS is that we have been able to tap into a lesser-used university funding line, intended to support course development for students who would not otherwise be served by the University (e.g., students who live too far from the Madison campus to attend classes regularly). This has enabled us to build capacity by offering a greater variety of courses than might otherwise be available if we did not have students from the distance cohort. We try to alternate online and face-to-face offerings of core and required courses and popular electives to accommodate all students.

Taking – and teaching- classes in the online format is not universally preferred over face to face by our students and faculty. Since we are the main campus of University of Wisconsin system, and Madison is considered a desirable place to live, there is a steady supply of students willing to re-locate, thereby ensuring an adequate enrollment. In addition, some students and faculty maintain that distance courses cannot equal what happens in the classroom. Occasionally, we do hear complaints from on-campus students who, due to the short length of the program – most students complete the degree in two years – and other scheduling considerations, feel 'forced' to take an online class. The School has not required pre-tenure full-time faculty to teach via distance. The rapidly increasing interest in online and blended learning is on our side, however – new faculty who have joined SLIS in the last few years almost always come in with some experience with online learning – either teaching or assisting in an online class. In addition, since we are a small department, the distance program makes it possible for us to offer a greater number and variety of courses, so the value of the program is starting to be seen by all.

RESTRUCTURING

Though the SLIS/PALS collaboration was successful, we began to feel after the first four years that we would not be able to continue to recruit consistently superior students given the geographic limitation of the program, which was that students had to drive to one of the PALS service centers to attend class. These service centers were located in suburban areas not well-served by public transportation. In addition, there was concern that we not diminish the quality of the distance program by accepting students of lesser caliber solely for the sake of enrollment. We therefore took a hiatus in 2009 to re-think the distance program.

The solution we reached was to offer all distance courses as entirely web-based, including the core, which meant that we could recruit nation-

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