Who works in library UX?

I ran a survey in 2017 to capture the state of the library UX field. I wanted to estimate how much UX has entered libraries in terms of location, number of employees, library type, and day-to-day work.

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My research questions were

- Who does library UX work?
- Where are they located?
- What kind work do they do?
- What are their backgrounds?

To my knowledge, the first evaluations of UX in libraries were two studies published by MacDonald. The first, published in 2015, summarized the scope of UX librarianship. The second, in 2017, addressed organizational factors on hiring UX librarians.

Method

I created a survey using Qualtrics that included about 30 questions. The survey was broken into 7 sections.

The first section asked library location — including city/town, state/territory, and country — and library type – public, academic (public or private), or special/other library.

The next section of the survey depended on the answer to the second question. Those who chose "public library" were given public library questions, and the same for academic and special/other libraries.

After these sections, the remaining questions were the same for all respondents. These remaining sections were:

- Organizational questions (title, department, duties, etc.)
- UX methods
- Background (education, work experience, etc.)

For the UX methods section, 32 user experience terms and topics were taken from usability.gov, an official website of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Terms were taken from "methods" pages in usability evaluation, user interface design, information architecture, etc.

Respondents were asked 3 questions about these terms:

1. Which of these are you familiar with, including those you have never used or are not comfortable with
2. Of these terms you've heard of, how familiar are you with each (Likert 1-4 scale)
3. Of these terms you've heard of, how often have they been addressed or used in your current position? (Likert 1-5 scale)

Identifying respondents

Along with creating the survey, I created a pool of potential respondents. I wanted to survey those working within a library doing UX work (not in an agency or as a consultant).

First, I searched *library user experience* on LinkedIn to find profiles of professionals with some combination of those words in their job titles.

Since LinkedIn users can put any title on their profile, this search returned people who chose to identify themselves with libraries and UX. While it's true that many librarians do UX work even if UX doesn't appear in their title, this was an efficient way to find people who undoubtedly did some level of UX design in their libraries.

I collected names of people from LinkedIn this way and then used Google to locate any publicly-available emails addresses for each person, which were usually available on their library's website.

I also found potential respondents using library websites themselves. In locating email addresses, if I found a UX department in a library, or any department with a similar name, I took down each employee from the department's name and email as well.

I also collected emails from library UX-focused conference websites and journal websites.

I collected 173 email addresses this way. Of these, 93% were from academic libraries, 5% from public libraries and 2% from special libraries.

Survey deployment

I first sent the survey out in August 2017, and then sent reminders in September 2017. I included a short bit.ly link in the emails to encourage people to share the survey widely, hoping this would reach respondents that my pool had missed.

I also sent the survey to a lib_ux email listserv hosted at UNC-Chapel Hill and posted messages to the professional group found at libraryux.slack.com (see the group's blog or join the Slack here)

Results

The survey collected 106 total valid responses.

Since not all questions were required, some people gave more information than others. So then, there are different *n* values between questions.
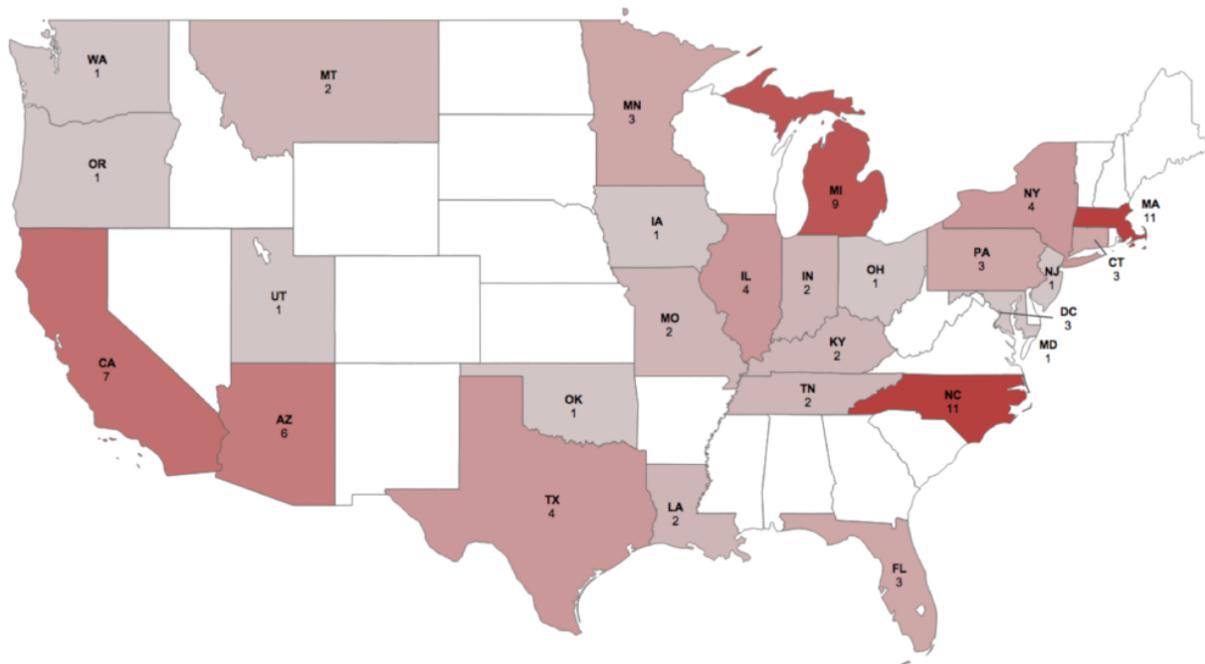
Libraries and locations

Which of these best describes your library? (n=106)

- 92% – Academic library
- 5% – Public library
- 4% – Special library

In what country is your library located? (n=105)

- 86% – United States
- 7% – Canada
- 5% – United Kingdom
- 1% – Ireland
- 1% – Australia
- 1% – Sweden

The map below shows the distribution of U.S. states (n=49).

Map data: Massachusetts (11), North Carolina (11), Michigan (9), California (7), Arizona (6), Illinois (4), New York (4), Texas (4), Connecticut (3), District of Columbia (3), Florida (3), Minnesota (3), Pennsylvania (3), Indiana (2), Kentucky (2), Louisiana (2), Missouri (2), Montana (2), Tennessee (2), Iowa (1), Maryland (1), New Jersey (1), Ohio (1), Oklahoma (1), Oregon (1), Utah (1), Washington (1)

(For academic libraries) Is the institution public or private? (n=92)

- 63% – Public
- 37% – Private

(For academic libraries) Which best describes the institution? (n=93)

- 55% – Research university
- 20% – State university
- 9% – Liberal arts university
- 5% – Ivy League
- 5% – Other
- 3% – Community college
- 1% – For-profit
- 1% – Professional school

(For academic libraries) What is the approximate size of the student body? (n=92)

- 17% – 50,000 or more

- 22% – 30k – 49,999
- 39% – 10k – 29,999
- 12% – 5k – 9,999
- 10% – Fewer than 5,000

(For academic libraries) In what kind of region is the institution located? (n=92)

- 67% – Urban
- 21% – Suburban
- 12% – Small or rural

(For public libraries) Which best describes your public library? (n=5)

- 60% – Mid-size or regional
- 20% – Large or urban
- 20% – Small or rural

All 5 special libraries were federal or state libraries. 80% of them served an audience of more than 7000, and 20% an audience of 100 – 499.

UX work

What UX terms are you familiar with? (n=98)

- 98% – Usability testing
- 98% – Surveys
- 97% – Focus groups
- 95% – User research
- 94% – Responsive design
- 93% – Card sorting
- 93% – Prototyping
- 93% – Storyboards
- 92% – User interviews/contextual inquiry
- 92% – Personas
- 92% – Accessibility
- 92% – Eyetracking
- 91% – User interface design
- 90% – A/B testing
- 90% – HTML, CSS, or JS
- 87% – Information architecture
- 87% – Mobile device testing
- 85% – Wireframes
- 83% – Visual design
- 83% – Content inventory/audit
- 82% – Content strategy
- 80% – Use cases

- 76% – Plain language
- 74% – Task analysis
- 73% – Heuristic evaluation/expert review
- 73% – Interaction design
- 69% – Competitor analysis
- 69% – Diary studies
- 56% – First click testing
- 56% – Gap analysis
- 30% – System Usability Scale
- 24% – Parallel design

Of the terms you know, how familiar are you with each? (n=98)

This was a Likert scale question:

- 4 = Very
- 3 = Somewhat
- 2 = Slightly
- 1 = Not very

Average and mode ratings are below.

- 3.75 – Surveys (mode: 4)
- 3.68 – Usability testing (mode: 4)
- 3.59 – User research (mode: 4)
- 3.51 – Personas (mode: 4)
- 3.49 – Plain language (mode: 4)
- 3.48 – User interviews/contextual inquiry (mode: 4)
- 3.45 – Card sorting (mode: 4)
- 3.43 – Wireframes (mode: 4)
- 3.43 – Focus groups (mode: 4)
- 3.42 – Content inventory/audit (mode: 4)
- 3.39 – Accessibility (mode: 4)
- 3.37 – Prototyping (mode: 4)
- 3.33 – User interface design (mode: 4)
- 3.32 – Use cases (mode: 4)
- 3.32 – HTML, CSS, or JS (mode: 4)
- 3.32 – Information architecture (mode: 4)
- 3.30 – Responsive design (mode: 4)
- 3.28 – Content strategy (mode: 4)
- 3.24 – Heuristic evaluation/expert review (mode: 4)
- 3.21 – Visual design (mode: 4)
- 3.18 – Interaction design (mode: 4)
- 3.14 – A/B testing (mode: 4)
- 3.07 – Competitor analysis (mode: 4)
- 3.07 – Mobile device testing (mode: 4)

- 3.01 – Task analysis (mode: 4)
- 2.89 – First click testing (mode: 4)
- 2.88 – Diary studies (mode: 3)
- 2.88 – Storyboards (mode: 3)
- 2.74 – Eyetracking (mode: 2)
- 2.69 – System Usability Scale (mode: 3)
- 2.38 – Gap analysis (mode: 2)
- 2.29 – Parallel design (mode: 1,2)

Of the UX terms you know, how often do they apply to your current position? (n=98)

This was a Likert scale question:

- 5 = Frequently
- 4 = Many times
- 3 = Occasionally
- 2 = A few times
- 1 = Never

Average and mode ratings are below.

- 3.81 – Usability testing (mode: 5)
- 3.79 – Accessibility (mode: 5)
- 3.71 – User research (mode: 5)
- 3.54 – Surveys (mode: 5)
- 3.47 – Plain language (mode: 5)
- 3.38 – HTML, CSS, or JS (mode: 5)
- 3.37 – Responsive design (mode: 5)
- 3.30 – Content strategy (mode: 5)
- 3.30 – Visual design (mode: 5)
- 3.26 – User interface design (mode: 5)
- 3.25 – Content inventory/audit (mode: 3)
- 3.24 – User interviews/contextual inquiry (mode: 5)
- 3.11 – Information architecture (mode: 5)
- 3.08 – Use cases (mode: 1,4,5)
- 3.03 – Prototyping (mode: 1)
- 3.00 – Wireframes (mode: 1)
- 2.88 – Heuristic evaluation/expert review (mode: 1)
- 2.88 – Interaction design (mode: 1)
- 2.76 – Competitor analysis (mode: 1)
- 2.72 – Mobile device testing (mode: 1)
- 2.71 – Card sorting (mode: 3)
- 2.69 – Personas (mode: 1)
- 2.64 – Task analysis (mode: 3)
- 2.58 – Focus groups (mode: 2)
- 2.22 – First click testing (mode: 1)

- 2.06 – A/B testing (mode: 1)
- 1.97 – Storyboards (mode: 1)
- 1.86 – System Usability Scale (mode: 1)
- 1.76 – Gap analysis (mode: 1)
- 1.66 – Diary studies (mode: 1)
- 1.54 – Parallel design (mode: 1)
- 1.46 – Eyetracking (mode: 1)

Organizational positions

Is UX part of your official job duties? (n=97)

- 82% – Yes
- 18% – No

What non-UX work do you do? (n=84)

I found that 79% (n=106) of all respondents had non-UX duties. I gave people a free text box then coded all the similar answers together. Note that some people gave more than one answer.

- 21% – Reference/chat
- 20% – Web development/design
- 17% – Instruction
- 13% – Management/supervisor/department head
- 12% – Marketing/outreach
- 11% – Liaison/subject librarian
- 10% – IT/servers/systems
- 10% – Committees/meetings/senate

What percentage of your time is spent fulfilling UX responsibilities? (n=98)

- Average: 54%
- Mode: 100%
- Maximum: 100%
- Minimum: 2%

What is your job title? (n=95) (7 most common)

I gave respondents a free text box to write their job titles. I analyzed the titles by looking at which terms were the most frequently used. Note that some titles included more than one of the terms listed below.

- 52% – "UX"
- 46% – "Librarian"
- 19% – "Director/Head/Manager"
- 16% – "Services"

- 12% – "Web"
- 11% – "Assessment"
- 9% – "Design"

In what department / unit do you work? (n=94) (7 most common)

I did the same thing with department names. A gave a free text box and then coded them. Some names include more than one of the terms below.

- 36% – "Services"
- 21% – "UX"
- 14% – "Library"
- 12% – "Technology"
- 12% – "Digital"
- 11% – "Assessment"
- 11% – "IT" / "Information Technology"

Which best describes your position? (n=97)

- 66% – Librarian
- 31% – Library staff
- 3% – Student worker

How many people with official UX responsibilities (including yourself) are employed at your library? (n=97)

- Average: 2.68
- Mode: 1
- Maximum: 10
- Minimum: 0

95% (n=97) of people said they worked full-time, with the rest being part-time.

Professional backgrounds

What is the highest degree you've obtained? (n=93)

- 87% – Master's
- 8% – Bachelor's
- 3% – Doctorate
- 2% – High school

What is the subject of your degree(s)? (n=93) (3 most common)

- 66% – Library/LIS
- 15% – English

- 11% – Information science/studies

For how many years have you worked in libraries? (n=93)

- 43% – Over 10
- 28% – 5 – 10
- 29% – 0 – 4

For how many years have you worked in UX? (n=93)

- 10% – Over 10
- 42% – 5 – 10
- 55% – 0-4

Demographics and salaries

What is your age? (n=89)

- 1% – 60-65
- 6% – 50-59
- 37% – 40-49
- 46% – 30-39
- 9% – 23-29
- 1% – 18-22

What is your gender? (n=90)

- 70% – Woman
- 29% – Man
- 1% – Non-binary or third gender

9% (n=90) of people identified as LGBT.

Which of these best describes you? (n=89)

- 87% – White
- 7% – Of multiple races
- 4% – Asian
- 2% – Black or African-American

What is your salary? (USD) (n=61)

- 8% – $100k and up
- 10% – $80k – $99,999k
- 33% – $60k – $79,999k
- 42% – $40k – $59,999k

- 6% – $14k – $39,999k

- Average: $64,559.31
- Average (man): $62,829.67
- Average (woman): $65,647.24
- Average (white): $63,749.40
- Average (PoC): $69,485.71
- Maximum: $145,000
- Minimum: $14,400 (part-time)

Discussion

Who does library UX work? Where are they located?

- Primarily academic library workers in public research universities in the United States serving urban regions
- Library UX professionals are mostly white and mostly women

What kind work do they do?

- People were familiar with almost every UX term I provided. Only 2 terms were familiar with less than half of the group
- People were very familiar with UX terms. Over 80% of the terms had mode ratings of very familiar (4)
- Even though the group was familiar, about half (47%) of the terms were never used in people's current positions. No term averaged as high as many times (4) or frequently (5)
- Only 15% of terms had modes other than frequently (5) or never (1). This suggests that people use their knowledge of UX either a lot or not at all
- Considering that a good majority (79%) had non-UX duties, we could assume that many library UX professionals probably can't apply all their UX know-how due to time constraints. This might explain why some methods (e.g. usability testing) are more used than other methods (e.g. diary studies)

What are their backgrounds?

- Most had library/LIS master's degrees (shocker!)
- There was way more experience in libraries among respondents than experience in UX

Limitations and further work

As I noted above, 92% of potential respondents and 93% of actual respondents were from academic libraries. These data do not make it clear if UX work happens at a higher degree in academic libraries than others. It could just be a methodology mistake in the pool I created. My

hunch is that UX work *is* in fact most common in academic libraries, but my data isn't very trustworthy for making that conclusion.

Future studies to continue this work might include:

- One that targets public or special libraries specifically
- Ones targeting all of the topics covered by this survey individually — UX expertise and experience, professional and educational backgrounds, demographic makeup of library UX professionals
- Ones that are more international in scope and/or that target a specific nation's library UX profession

Acknowledgement