Column: A New Generation in Librarianship

Not Just for Libraries: The Value of the MLI

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ABSTRACT

The LIS job market is devastating, and the MLIS is no longer a guarantee of landing a library job. So, what's the point? The MLIS is valuable because of the skills it teaches. Whether we work in a library or not, having an MLIS means that we know how to be leaders and advocates. We know how people look for information, and we can use that knowledge to help people find and evaluate information. We know how to organize information for most efficient retrieval. We know how to write grants and how to maintain relationships with stakeholders. Information is everywhere and always changing, and librarians are the ones who ensure we can keep up.

KEYWORDS

MLIS, employment, LIS skills

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The library and information studies field is devastatingly competitive. Getting a librarian job requires a post-secondary education as well as years of direct experience and, without both, early career librarians like myself cannot break into the field at all. The cohorts within my MLIS program mostly already worked in libraries, and several of them have been able to move up within their organizations into librarian positions or leave for librarian positions at other institutions after obtaining their MLIS. Meanwhile, those newer to the field like myself have had to apply to literally hundreds of library jobs before we can break in *even with an MLIS*. In other words, it felt as if employers were saying that, for those with non-library "related experience" they need not apply.

Ugh, Self-Employment It Is

I attended the online MLIS program at the University of Alberta after a six-year hiatus from academia. I worked full-time while I attended 1-2 online classes a semester from Fall 2017-Fall 2020. I have applied to nearly 200 LIS-related jobs over the last two years, with ten interviews total. Only four interviews were for libraries, and I got passed up for someone with more experience in all of them, even for a library assistant position.

The job hunt has been *brutal*. I know I am not alone in my struggle either, because I've heard stories on Twitter about new librarians who also received their MLIS training and were applying for library jobs for 2-6 years—some applying for 300-600 positions before landing anything in the field. I know the field has been even more competitive than usual in the last two years due to the pandemic, with layoffs and turnover, but it has been so disheartening to go through. It feels like I busted my butt for 3.5 years taking classes every semester while working full-time (at three different jobs) and no one even cares. I took the MLIS because I wanted to shift careers, but now I'm not just under-experienced, I'm overeducated and under-experienced.

I have had better luck getting into writing and talking about librarianship from the outside, so this summer I started my own business! I provide writing and research services for non-profit organizations (especially the arts and culture organizations). I also research and write articles for different clients, enabling me to learn new things all the time! I am learning more and more about publishing, and I am looking forward to diving into other areas such as white papers and grant writing.

Now that I have a new sense of direction, I regret burning myself out job hunting. But I do not regret getting my MLIS degree. Those conversations I had at the beginning of my MLIS steered me towards finding the value of the MLIS degree, whether I could get a job in a library or not. In fact, it's because I have my MLIS that I'm as confident about my professional research and writing rates as I am. I know how to do good research and to write well with an extremely efficient turn-around time, and I still get excited about every project.

...Worth It, Though

I enjoyed the MLIS path because I wanted to gain administration and management skills in a way that still valued my bachelor's education in fine arts and allowed me to keep working full-time while I studied. I value my identity as "librarian/archivist" despite not working in a library, because the hat fits so nicely into the work I do now! Librarianship is an ever-evolving and ever-learning field that includes a number of people who wanted to explore what they wanted to be when they grew up. We are connectors who value learning, intellectual freedom, social responsibility, stories, and collections. Despite having so many visions and ideas on how to achieve the work, what I really want to do is manage and organize information to make it more accessible.

While traditional MLIS courses often focus on public libraries or academic libraries, I consistently pushed my classmates to think about information management outside of libraries. In our Introduction to LIS course, the instructor encouraged us to think about other places where information could be found, such as publication, or records management, or corporate library management. I was thinking about working as an executive director of an arts organization. I learned things that could be applicable to non-profit work in general, and I wish I had learned a bit more about publishing and databases. In hindsight, I'm glad I pushed to keep the focus on librarianship vs libraries, because it empowered both me and my classmates to value librarianship for what we could do, instead of focusing on where we could do it.

Leadership and Management

From my conversations with librarians in the field and looking at job postings, I knew from the beginning that management skills were crucial. I also knew that librarianship had a lot to do with leadership, something I wasn't comfortable with yet. Fortunately, early in the program we had a course on Leadership and Management, which was one of the most valuable courses for me. I unlearned a lot of leadership myths that had been holding me back, especially as a hard of hearing, nonbinary, short-statured introvert. For all its criticisms, intersectional feminism and shared leadership were the concepts that really empowered me. I decided I wanted to be a leader not despite my intersectional identity but *because* of it. I could use my leadership skills to empower myself and others by speaking loudly and consistently to anyone who would listen, and by amplifying the voices that seemed to be missing.

I learned that I could be a leader by being an advocate and a connector, rather than dictating what to do or seeking power over others. During my MLIS, I found that I preferred to be able to see the project overview, and that I liked being the ad hoc project manager in group projects. I would set schedules and check in with everyone to see how the project was developing. I often played go-between and made sure that the ideas of quieter group members still were heard and addressed. I even learned how to use my hearing disability to improve group accountability. As it turns out, having things written down and corresponding via Google

Docs and Google Hangouts (at the time) helps to keep everyone involved and in the loop, not just me!

Learning

I could also be a leader by better understanding how to conduct reference interviews. I knew from retail and from my own academic experiences that often people will misuse search terms to ask questions, especially if they are not familiar with the topic. They will make the attempt to ask questions by using related terms but get frustrated when it does not produce the results they actually need. Once I understood that from a librarian perspective, I found that I loved getting to dig into interesting conversations and connecting people to resources and ideas. Even outside of school, I started approaching comments in social media with the understanding that comments that did not make sense were relating to some kind of unaddressed information need. The more I saw myself succeeding at helping people find the words to ask more productive questions, the more I felt like a professional librarian. I love the challenge of helping people find the right words.

Administration

I also worked through my classes with the intention of using the management and administration skills from the MLIS in something relating to information management in general. I had not been able to gain management experience from working in retail, so I focused on gaining as much management and administration knowledge from classes as I could. I took as many management courses as I could and, toward the end of my degree, I was fortunate to partake in a graduate research assistant project on entry-level MLIS jobs. While I did not get into statistical analysis for the research project, during the literature review portion I found that most of the field's criticisms of MLIS programs related to a lack of management training. When I read that, I was very relieved that I took as many management courses as I had.

I took courses in financial management, records management, human resources management, government documents, archives administration, intellectual freedom and social responsibility, database design, and emerging and evolving technologies. I have been able to use a lot of this training to understand how the job search works, my values as an employee (or employer, eventually), and the role that documentation and records management play in any field. And I've been able to talk to people with far more patience than I previously had, because I have also learned about learning!

Some Fun, Too!

Just for fun, one summer I took a course on comics and graphic novels. I was finally able to articulate what I love so much about my favorite Marvel series, *The Mighty Thor* (2015). I am glad I gave myself that chance, because having the opportunity to delve into comics and graphic novels for a while helped me avoid academic burnout. Plus, I now use that knowledge for writing reviews on graphic novels and comic books!

The Value of the MLIS Isn't in the L...

Besides learning about everything (including comic books and learning itself), I am excited that my MLIS has shown me how to work with databases and metadata to improve searchability of collections. I know how important ethical data collection is to representing those within the collection. I'm constantly thinking of more ideas about where I can use my librarian skills in records management, publishing, archives, art documentation, database management, and even non-profit management. I joined the Art Libraries Society of North America (ARLIS/NA) toward the end of my degree and have been using my time there to keep in the loop for libraries, intellectual freedom, copyright, digital privacy, and the like. I'm also involved in several committees, and while I'm learning about how committees work, I make sure to advocate for digital and physical accessibility in the process. Libraries manage collections, but they are not the only ones who manage information-- other organizations do that, too.

Because of my MLIS, I was able to learn all kinds of things about information management, administration skills, and management skills. I learned how to research effectively, gained confidence and patience in my leadership and advocacy skills, and obtained knowledge about non-profit organizations and about the role of librarianship outside of the library. Despite the frustrating job hunt, the MLIS was never only about libraries. Even librarianship isn't only about libraries. Librarianship is about facilitating connections to information.

Whether we work in a library or not, having the MLIS means that we know how to be leaders and advocates. We know how people look for information, and we can use that knowledge to help people find and evaluate information. We know how to organize information for most efficient retrieval—including records management. We know how to write grants and how to maintain relationships with stakeholders. Information is everywhere and always changing, and librarians are the ones who ensure we can keep up.