MLIS Career Paths In The Library And Beyond

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Abstract

Employment prospects across the span of one's career are an important consideration for MLIS students today. Library jobs occur in many settings, but the skills that employers are looking for are often similar. This essay examines several studies that looked at the educational requirements, skillsets and salaries of librarians in higher education and discusses how these skills might transfer to other industries.

Keywords: MLIS, librarians, academic libraries, job seekers, transferable skills

This essay examines typical skill sets and knowledge bases for information professionals, particularly those with traditional library backgrounds in the field of higher education. Beginning with a survey of the desired competencies, the role of formal education and other skills development will be examined. Employment prospects and remuneration will be reviewed. Finally, this paper will discuss the skills that will transfer most easily to other occupations, and offer some specific advice for librarians seeking to find jobs both within the library environment and beyond.

As the analysis completed by Fraser-Arnott (2013) indicates, a master's degree in library science is generally expected for most jobs within public or academic libraries (p.4-5). Gerolimos, Malliari & Iakovidis (2014) found that 91.7% of job data analyzed required an MLIS degree, and 89.5% specified that the degree must be from an ALA accredited program (p. 25). Ahlbrand and Johnson (2012) wrote on the importance of a law degree for academic law librarians and reported on survey data, which showed that 55% of librarians working at law schools have a dual degree (p. 5). Their research also found that in order to obtain a professional position with a top law school, an applicant would have had to have graduated from a highly ranked law school themselves (p. 566), and that law librarians tended to graduate from better library schools in general (p. 567). Aycock (2015) stated that although the "JD is rarer among librarians...when it comes to advancement, those little letters have quire the influence" (p. 28). Aycock also suggests that a Master's in Business Administration might be of value in a law library as well (p. 28).

In college and university libraries there exists an expectation of a second master's degree, particularly for advancement (Havens, 2013). Yet this is not necessary to get

one's foot in the door as Reeves and Hahn's (2010) meta-analysis shows. Their study of

1,042 entry-level job advertisements from 2003-2006, two-thirds of which were for jobs

in academic libraries (p. 109), only 5.5% required a second master's degree and only

12% mentioned subject specialization (p.112-113). However, another author reviewed the

same data and came to the conclusion that, "Based on the research results, a graduate

degree in library or information science is required, but not sufficient, to enter the

profession, (Torabi, 2010, p. 87).

Multiple studies point to additional desirable qualities that successful job seekers

have. Communication and the ability to work collaboratively in a team-based

environment figure prominently, as does the need for supervisory and managerial

experience. Information technology skills are very important to employers with

knowledge of metadata, mark-up languages and programming all receiving mention

(Fraser-Arnott, 2013, p. 7; Torabi, 2010, p. 87).

In a study of four years worth of data, Reeves and Hahn (2010) found that

advertised starting salaries for academic librarians averaged around $43,490 a year (p.

113). In a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet on their website, Libqual+ (2013) reported that

the average salary of academic librarians with less than five years experience was

$48,248 but it should be noted that there are large regional differences. Libqual+ (2013)

also showed that salaries do increase with experience and additional education and are

generally around $70-65,000 depending on the job title.

Many librarians wonder how well their skills might transfer to other industries. In

this area, it seems that librarians have an advantage. Fraser-Arnott (2013) cites multiple

sources that concur on the "idea that the LIS skill set is highly transferable and will be

increasingly desirable in the modern knowledge economy" (p. 2). There are many

alternative careers that MLIS holders can pursue.

In the article "Invite Yourself to the Table: Librarian Contributions to the

Electronic Record," authors Brandes, Wells and Bandy (2013) discuss how librarians

from a hospital system in Colorado were highly instrumental in implementing an

integrated electronic medical record system. Due to their existing relationship with the IT

department and experience with licensing digital resources, they were able to add

reference products, help standardize physician orders and advise on terminology (p. 259,

261). This project is important to consider when thinking about transferable skills, since

integrated systems appear everywhere from healthcare to the food store, and librarians

are ideally suited to tasks involving making information and services easily accessible.

Entrepreneurial activities also abound. Libraries look for quality programming,

but often lack the skills needed in house to put on a variety of events. However, someone

with a background in library science could put together programming for libraries and

sell these services, either as kits or as whole performances. One seeming lack of outreach

in Northern New England is that library patrons have access to wonderful electronic

resources, but are often unaware or do not know how to use them. Academic publishers,

such as Lexis, have already capitalized upon this idea and hire student representatives to

work as library tutors in college libraries. It would not be too difficult to apply this idea to

the public library and try to get either libraries or database publishers to pay for one's

services.

Although these might not translate to finding a job in a completely different

industry, these ideas provide solid pathways into other areas of librarianship. This

foundational bridge is further strengthened by networking through participation in listservs, social media groups, and conferences that are aligned with one's intended line of work.

Employment prospects across the span of one's career are an important consideration for graduate students today. Before investing considerable time and money in a degree program it is imperative to think critically about how well the curriculum supports the true requirements of the job, what skills will need to be developed beyond what is gleaned academically, and what type of growth one's chosen industry will support in the years to come. The last point is one worth considering carefully, volatility in marketplaces is nothing new, however, the speed of change has accelerated and it is helpful to scan not only the immediate environment, but to be always be on the lookout for opportunities where one's skills could transfer and then pursue those activities as part of an overall career development plan.

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