

In Your Own Words: The Value of an MLIS

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In May 2008, the LRS 60-Second Survey, “The Value of an MLIS to You,” was released, prompted by a 2008 posting on a Colorado-based library listserv that asked a simple question: Would you recommend an MLIS degree to a recent college graduate?

Enthusiastic responses to the listserv question from dozens of people inspired the Library Research Service to create its own survey, distributed mostly via listservs and blogs. Almost 2,000 responses from all 50 states and six continents were received, and over half included voluntary comments further explaining respondents’ thoughts about the MLIS degree.

Overall, the results of the survey showed that respondents do value the MLIS. Nine out of ten (89%) respondents said their degree was worth the investment. However, not quite as many would recommend the degree to others (86%).¹ This is a small difference, and it and other subtleties of the responses may be explained in the many thoughtful comments left by respondents.

In reviewing more than 1,000 comments received on the “Value of an MLIS to You” survey, many themes emerged and most fell into six categories. These categories were the overall perception of the profession, the job market, the intrinsic value of the degree, personal financial impact, MLIS content, and career advancement. Each comment was tagged with the categories that it covered, and whether the comment was perceived to be positive or negative.

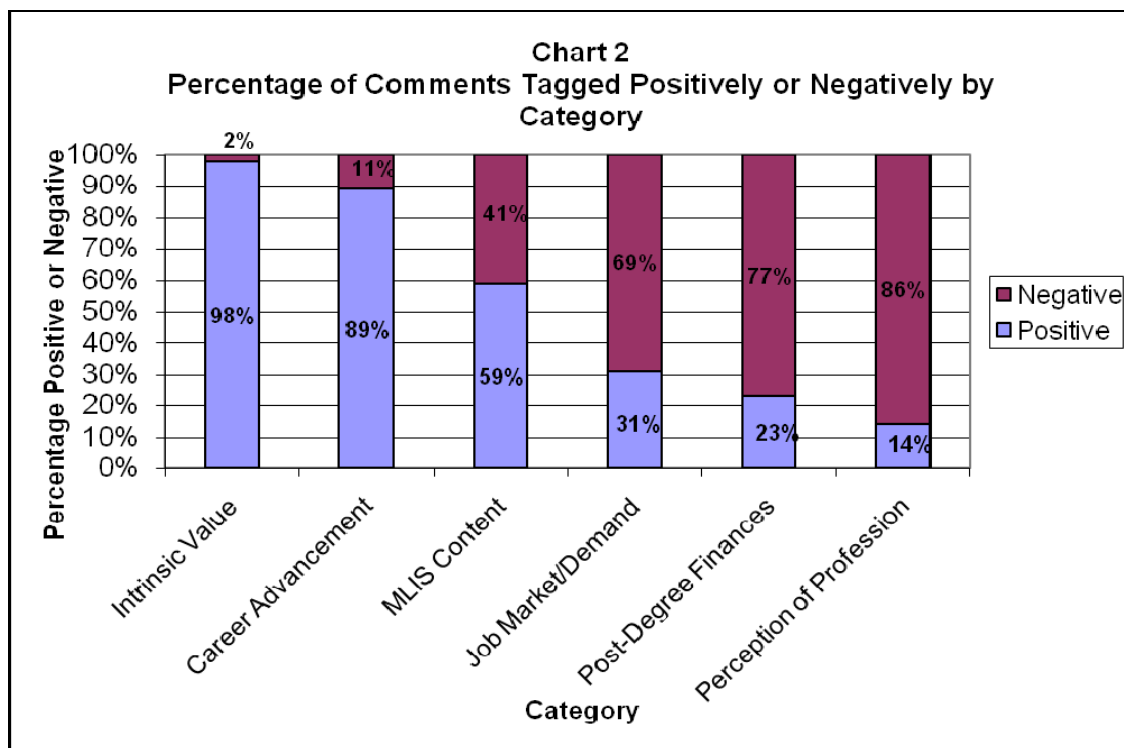
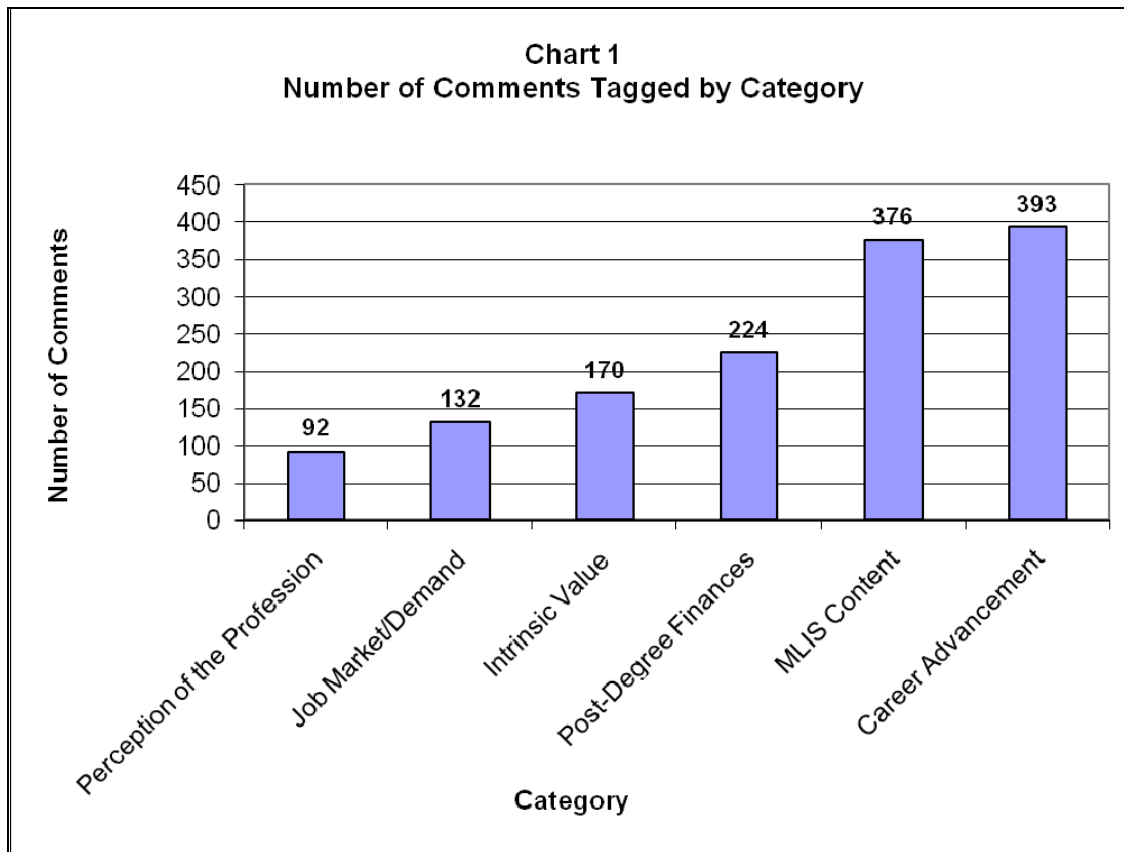
Many comments mentioned more than one theme and were included in multiple categories. Chart 1 shows the number of times a category was mentioned at least once in a comment. Chart 2 shows the number of responses that were perceived as positive and negative in each category. No comments were tagged as both positive and negative *within* a category, but some respondents did make positive comments in one category and negative comments in another category. The overall tone of the comments is analyzed later in this Fast Facts. The categories are discussed in order of most positive response received to least positive response received.

Definition of Comment Categories

- *Perception of the profession:* relating to the public’s view and/or appreciation of librarianship
- *Job market:* availability of professional positions for MLIS holders and the ease or difficulty in obtaining those positions
- *Intrinsic value:* personal values and beliefs related to working in the profession
- *Personal Financial Impact:* the cost of the degree and the salaries earned post-degree
- *MLIS content:* MLIS degree programs and curriculum
- *Career advancement:* the ability to advance in a library career

¹ For complete findings from the survey, see: Fast Facts no. 269





Intrinsic Value

Comments that were categorized as relating to intrinsic value were overwhelmingly positive. Ninety-eight percent (167) were categorized as positive – more so than any other category. The comments in this category were defined as those that mentioned personal values and beliefs.

The intrinsic value of the MLIS degree was regarded positively in multiple respects that included recognizing librarianship as an opportunity to contribute to society and being a part of a profession that is congruous with their value system. Respondents articulated many underlying values, including the defense of intellectual freedom, the search for truth, provision of sound information, and betterment of self and community. Other respondents mentioned that the degree gave them the capacity to shape their interests and talents into a fulfilling career that they love and enjoy. Based on their remarks, most of these respondents implied that job satisfaction has value above monetary compensation.

“For me, the value of the MLIS lies in the feeling of having a fulfilling, important career. Every day I feel as though I am making a difference. The degree was worth the money in the knowledge I have utilized every day alone. If I could go back, I would do it again.”

The few respondents in this category who left comments perceived as being negative expressed personal preferences for paraprofessional work, and a dislike of the role of politics in libraries.

“This degree has allowed me to get a job that I enjoy – that is worth every penny I lost from a higher paying job that I hated.”

Career Advancement

More comments referred to career advancement than any other category. Of the 393 comments related to career advancement, almost nine out of ten (89%) were positive. These respondents seemed to feel that the MLIS is essential for a successful career in libraries. Many stated specifically that they had advanced and experienced flexibility in their own career due to the MLIS degree. For many respondents the value of the MLIS degree is exhibited in the number and type of opportunities available when one has the degree. Some wrote that the degree turned what was formerly just a job into a profession, and others commented on the portability of the degree and the wide range of opportunities available to MLIS graduates. Others mentioned the salary increases that came with the degree as proof of its value.

“It was the only way I could obtain a professional position. Right now, our library is being cut. MLIS positions were saved.”



"I started studying for my MLS when I was 44. I had already worked in libraries for 8 years and wondered if it would be too late for it to make a difference in my career. It has! It opened many professional doors for me and today I am the director of our public library."

Some respondents who didn't have the degree would recommend it for others, but said they chose not to pursue it because it would not bring any career advances or pay increases, often due to personal factors (e.g., the respondent was unable to relocate or the rural library they worked for did not employ degreed librarians).

MLIS Content

Comments in this category related to the quality and value of the MLIS degree program and/or coursework. MLIS content was mentioned in 376 comments, making it the second most common theme, and one of the most divisive. Respondents expressed strong opinions, both positive and negative, about the MLIS.

"Learning the theory behind what we do is important, and is a framework for decisions that we make. I learned about sources and services that I use to this day. A lot of what I learned has changed, and a lot was not even invented (internet, for one), but I've been able to adapt because I had the foundation of knowledge."

Comments in this category that were perceived as being positive (60%) usually referred to the MLIS degree as an essential foundation that provided theoretical and historical grounding for the profession and contributed to a common culture among librarians.

Some respondents stressed that in order to be successful, the MLIS student would need to pursue practical experience and participate in professional development activities in addition to their formal education.

"The value of the degree is completely dependent on the experience the student intends to have. Some will treat the MLIS like it is a true graduate degree; others will treat LIS school like it is trade school, or a rite of passage. Some students will leave LIS school with a line for the resume; others will leave with a robust curriculum vitae that will only continue to develop."

However, 41 percent of comments related to MLIS content were perceived as being negative. These respondents voiced disappointment with their degree programs, criticizing the relevance and academic rigor of their courses. Some felt the curriculum was outdated, and

"I wouldn't recommend that someone get a degree, except that it's a requirement for the job. There is no real content to an MLS degree... the MLS curriculum was really very silly. Not graduate level work at all."



lamented the lack of technology, management, or library instruction courses. Several wrote that the skills they learned on the job were more valuable than the skills they learned in school or negated the need for an MLIS entirely.

Job Market

Several respondents voiced frustrations with the job market – their comments were generally perceived as negative. Of the 132 comments tagged as job market, 91 of them were categorized as negative. Many argued that the market is saturated, especially in areas

“It has been an unbelievably frustrating, sad, disheartening experience to work so hard for a degree with so little economic or professional value. I simply cannot find work, and after 6 years of looking, I am giving up on the field.”

where there are one or more library schools. Without additional data, it is impossible to know whether the dearth of job opportunities was real or perceived, but the

presence of this theme indicates it is a legitimate concern for those who commented. Some comments explained that the job market is tight especially for those without library experience and for those who are unwilling to relocate for a position. Some mentioned the notion that new librarians have been drawn to the field, due in part to the oft-cited librarian shortage brought about by the large number of librarians expected to retire. Many expressed feelings that the librarian shortage has not materialized and would not materialize any time soon.

A few respondents, however, noted that the variety of career possibilities for graduates made the MLIS a valuable degree, and their comments were often perceived as positive.

“Marketed effectively, these skills open up many opportunities within the “traditional” boundaries of our profession, as well as outside of those boundaries.”

Personal Financial Impact

Of the 224 comments that mentioned personal financial impact, 77 percent were perceived as negative. Several respondents mentioned the struggle to pay back student loans on

“Given the low wages and poor opportunities for advancement in the field, within my geographic area anyway, I’m questioning whether all the debt I went in to get my MLIS was worth it. And I was one of the lucky ones in my class who got a full-time job shortly after graduation.”

librarian salaries; others wrote they would only recommend the degree to someone with significant existing financial support. A few commented that in hindsight they wished they had pursued more lucrative professional degrees, such as business or computer science.

Those who referred to personal financial impact in what was perceived to be a positive light usually mentioned salary gains or promotions that came after obtaining the MLIS.

“If you were to judge an MLS on a strictly monetary ROI [return on investment], no one in their right mind would get one... the only thing keeping libraries going is the sincere love for the job that many of us have.”



Perception of the Librarian Profession

Ninety-two comments mentioned the public's perception of the library profession. More than five out of six reflected a negative perception of the profession (86%). These comments were defined as those that discussed the public view of librarians and/or the MLIS.

Many respondents wrote of a general lack of understanding of a librarian's educational background and role in the community. Some comments perceived as negative in this category discussed the low pay of some MLIS graduates as a constant reminder that the public does not have a particularly positive perception of librarians, if they have any perception at all. Some noted a recent rise in staffing paraprofessionals in librarian roles and felt this practice diminishes the value of the degree in the eyes of the public and the eyes of MLIS graduates. According to some respondents, librarians are individually and collectively responsible for promoting their own professional value to the public and have disregarded this responsibility in the past.

"The perception the degree carries with potential employers, especially public library trustees, is of more value than the practical skills taught in pursuit of the degree."

The few positive comments in this category mentioned the value of the degree in the eyes of library directors and trustees. These respondents wrote that the degree demonstrated a

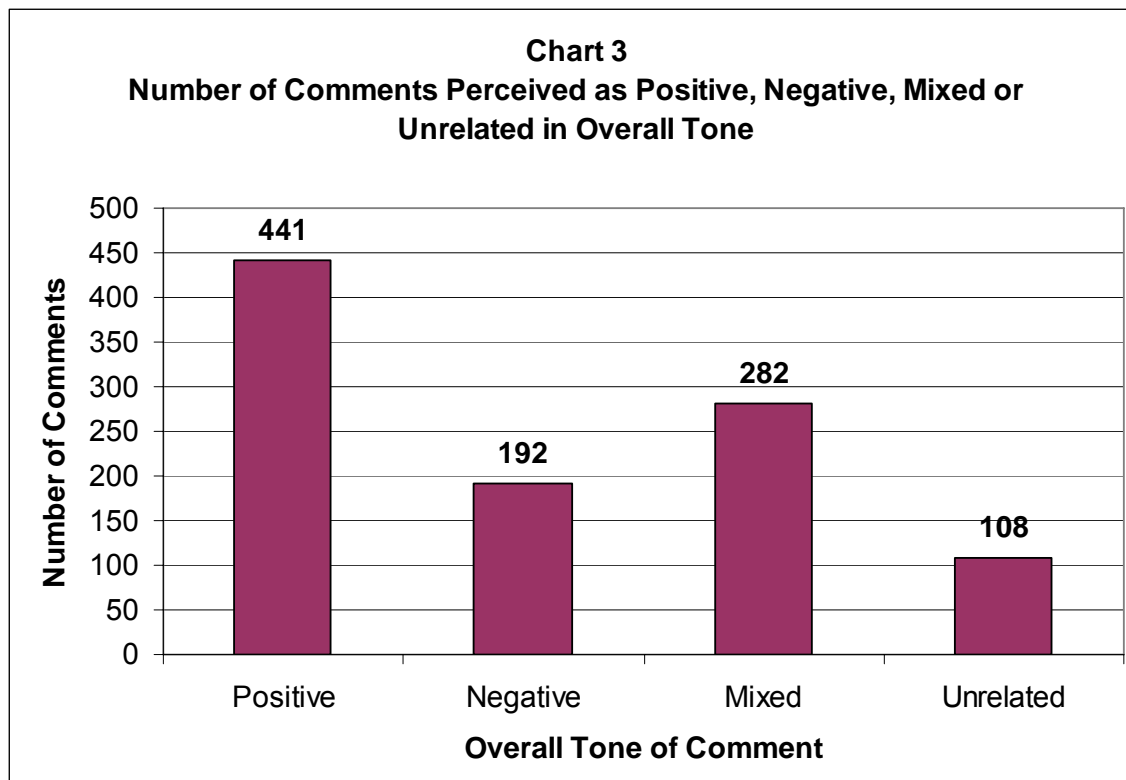
"I love being a librarian, but I am disappointed that librarians have such a low level of recognition by the community. Unlike teachers, our profile as perceived by the public has never changed. I think that is the main reason that libraries are the first department or institution cut when money tightens up. We need to do a much better job clarifying what we do that helps the community. We do much more and our libraries offer more than people realize. We need to make libraries indispensable to the communities."

commitment to libraries, life-long learning, communities, and one's own career and education. Only a couple of respondents stated that they felt respected and appreciated by the public.

Conclusion

In the over 1,000 comments left by respondents, many lauded the degree and profession in one or more categories. About 43 percent of comments had a positive tone only and 28 percent had a "mixed" tone, meaning the comment had both a positive and negative tone. Less than one in 5 respondents (19%) had a negative only comment. (See Chart 3.) Just over 100 comments were not applicable to this analysis and were labeled "unrelated." These comments were either personal comments or too vague to infer meaning.





The positive comments reflected on a love of the profession, the necessity of the MLIS for career advancement, and an overall belief that the MLIS program content provides a fundamental foundation of knowledge to thrive in the profession.

The negative comments acknowledged concern with the job market, post MLIS personal financial impact, and the perception of the profession. These concerns caused hesitation for respondents in recommending the MLIS degree to others. However, many respondents who mentioned negatives also made positive comments in other categories.

There are two sides to the value of an MLIS degree “coin” and it is necessary to examine both the positives and negatives. The comments indicate that librarians clearly value the MLIS degree. At the same time, they have many real-life concerns. Armed with this knowledge, library leaders and library educators can advocate more effectively for librarians and enhance the value of the degree for all.

“Repeat after me: I will be cognizant of realistic expectations (salary, daily activities, career advancement/opportunities, freebies etc) in my chosen career - libraries or otherwise -my interests and desired location must match supply and demand for a realistic match -a sense of entitlement won't get me a job, much less one I really think I should have -choosing among my options carefully, and with work and some good fortune, will increase my chances of a having a great career I love!”

ABOUT THIS ISSUE

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