

What I Learned About the Value of an MLIS Degree: An LIS Student's Perspective

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"I am torn between not recommending and recommending pursuing a MLIS degree... While I value my degree and what I have learned, entering the profession has been disappointing and frustrating."

"The job market is extremely glutted, while at the same time people outside of the profession are seeing less and less value in paying for a professional librarian. It's a really terrible job market right now, yet ALA and library schools are doing absolutely nothing to address these very serious problems."

"The MLIS reflects our earlier vision and mission but may not address the present and future as well as it should."

After hours of skimming responses to the Library Research Service's MLIS value survey¹, I suppose a bit of self-doubt was inevitable.

As a student only a few months away from my own MLIS, the stress of exams and projects is gradually being replaced by another, more nebulous anxiety: the fear that I won't be able to find a professional job, especially once the bills for my student loans start showing up in the mailbox. More than that, will the job translate into a rewarding career and a decent lifestyle? Here, directly from the folks in the trenches, were words that spoke to my anxieties, and they weren't exactly comforting.

Discussing it over lunch with another student who was busy analyzing her own survey responses, I was relieved to hear she felt the same way. As with most of our peers, we had not made the decision to attend library school lightly. Despite the promise of rising entry-level salaries, retirements, and plentiful opportunities, we knew we'd have to be good, exceptionally good, to get a foot in the door. It was still sobering to read the words of anonymous librarians who regarded library school as a bad investment or a waste of time.

I took a break from the survey. After the threat of an existential crisis had passed, I thought about the comments in a more objective way. What were the lessons here for students who have signed the promissory notes on their loans and committed to the library field? After all, if 89 percent of the respondents felt their degrees were worth the time and money invested, and if 86 percent would recommend the MLIS degree to someone else, the comments shouldn't necessarily be discouraging.

Here, in no particular order, are the lessons for new professionals that I gleaned from the survey comments.

1. **Have realistic expectations.** Know what kinds of salary you can reasonably expect, what your day-to-day activities will be, what skills you'll need, and what kind of opportunities for advancement may (or may not) present themselves. And no, you will not make as much money as you'd like in your first professional job. As one



respondent put it “Don’t just get a public library reference position and hope to get rich off of it.” Well said.

2. **Be willing to relocate.** Opportunity is tied to geography. In general, the closer you live to a library school, the more competition you’ll face for entry-level positions. It is highly unlikely that you’ll get the perfect job within walking distance of that perfect apartment. The farther you’re willing to go, the more opportunities will present themselves.
3. **Think about your skills in the broader context.** In an information economy, library skills are useful in myriad settings. Think about all the ways you could use your MLIS training outside of the traditional library, including corporate and business environments. Tailor your course plan to prepare you for all types of information work, and don’t neglect the skills you may have developed in earlier incarnations of your career.
4. **Commit to lifelong learning.** Some respondents claimed their library programs didn’t adequately prepare them to work with the technology they were required to master, or that the training was obsolete within a few years of earning the degree. Given how rapidly libraries are changing, the onus is on us to make sure our skills remain current.
5. **Respect paraprofessionals.** Not everyone in Library Land chooses to pursue an MLIS, and many of those who forgo the degree have pretty pragmatic reasons for doing so. The degree does provide valuable theoretical grounding, but considering how much all of us actually learn on the job, lack of an MLIS shouldn’t necessarily negate years of library experience.
6. **Your degree has as much value as you give it.** Most professions are vulnerable to the forces of burnout, and librarianship is no exception. No, libraries and librarians are not always as well-respected as they should be. But if we respect ourselves and value our skills, it really shouldn’t matter when an acquaintance is baffled by the need for an advanced degree. If you’re lucky enough to have had a rewarding educational experience and a career you enjoy (most of the time, anyway), then the degree was probably worth it.

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¹ For more on the findings from the “60-Second Survey: The Value of an MLIS to You” see Fast Facts nos. 269 & 270.

