Today's MLIS Students: What's On Their Minds?
By Don Dickenson and M. Claire Williamson

In March of 2005, ten students attending the University of Denver's (DU) Library and Information Science (MLIS) program were invited to participate in a qualitative survey about the librarianship profession. Each student was asked to respond to six open-ended questions and to provide some limited information about his or her background. This format allowed us to take a more intimate look at how current MLIS students perceive librarianship. Using their own words, students were able to tell us what attracted them to librarianship and what concerns them the most as they approach graduation.

STUDENT PROFILES

Students continue to come to the MLIS program from a variety of educational backgrounds, and our group of participants was no exception. Coming to the program with undergraduate degrees in ten different fields, participants have diverse interests and skills. Six of the students are female and four are male. The average age of our group is nearly 36, with the youngest being 25 and the oldest 51. At the time of the study, the students had been in the program for an average of 24 months and five of the students expected to graduate by the time this article is published. Eight students reported having some kind of library work experience, seven with experience that preceded their enrollment in the MLIS program. Only two students have had no library experience at all.

WHAT DID THEY SAY?

Of your personal strengths, skills, or interests, which most strongly lends itself to the LIS profession? The first question asked the students to describe why they felt that librarianship was a good match for them. In response, the students noted their ability to solve problem and their strong organizational skills. Many of the students expressed how much they enjoy the process of helping others find the information they need. **Suzanne Royce Cruse**, who currently works in a public library, explained why she believes the profession is a good match for her, "With a varied career background and many personal interests, the LIS field is a perfect match for someone like me who is a strong believer in personal growth and life-long learning…. I think there is a part of me that really enjoys problem solving and troubleshooting. I also enjoy the knowledge- sharing part of the profession. Giving people 'tools' to solve their own problems or to learn something new is always exciting." Many of the students' responses exhibited this strong "public service" component.

What factors contributed to your decision to enter library school at this point in your life? The second question requested that students share their experiences concerning the timing of their decisions to seek MLIS degrees. Common ideas mentioned in response to this question included a change in career path and financial considerations.

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A majority of respondents (6 of 10) mentioned that the decision to pursue a career in LIS was brought about—at least in part—by a change in their employment situation, a perceived change in the job market, or a general dissatisfaction with an existing job situation or career path. **Julie Wood Wilson** wrote, "I had reached a point in my previous career when I did not feel satisfied. I was no longer challenged by what I was doing. I wanted a change and had always had librarianship stuck in my head as a potential career."

Some respondents indicated that a career in LIS offered them an opportunity to transfer previously developed skills and interests to a new field. **Rob Scogin**, whose previous degree was in computer science, wrote, "I was between computer programming contracts and considered a career change, but I ultimately decided to continue working in the IT arena by leveraging my computer skills in the library field." For **Vaughn Thompson** the decision to pursue a library degree represented an opportunity to advance an existing career path, "I had finished a graduate degree and had done some university teaching when I realized that I really needed a professional credential to land an academic position that would sustain my family. LIS was that ticket."

Financial factors were cited by multiple respondents as playing a significant role in the decision to pursue an MLIS degree. The presence of financial support from an employer was cited as being an important motivator for at least one of the respondents, and financial support from the university—including departmental scholarships and discounted tuition rates—were cited as being highly significant factors which impacted the decision to enroll in DU's LIS program. Other factors that impacted respondents' decisions to enter library school included the time required to obtain a professional degree for utilization in the LIS field (in comparison with other professions in which a doctorate is the accepted terminal degree), and consultation with professionals currently active in library and information science.

What aspect of a career in LIS do you find most attractive? The third question asked the students to identify the aspect of a career in librarianship they find most attractive. A common thread appearing in the responses suggests that what makes a career in librarianship attractive is the opportunity to learn. Wilson wrote, "A career in LIS means learning something new every day, and not every day will be the same." Scogin wrote, "There is huge potential to apply new technologies to virtually all aspects of librarianship. This field will be constantly changing and exciting." Similarly, Adam Reshotko said that what was attractive to him was "being on the cutting edge of information technology" and the "connection to the book world, and also music and multimedia." **Amy Legg-Rogers** addressed the dynamic nature of the profession, "I felt the profession would be something that I could evolve with. I don't see myself retiring in the traditional sense…so I see the profession as something I can stay with over the course of many years."

Other students expressed the idea that they are attracted to the profession because of the people they have met, be they other students in the MLIS program or those already in the profession. **Melissa Herb** wrote, "The year I wrote my thesis was the year that the CSU library flooded, and so I did much of

my research at Penrose. I was very impressed with the reference librarian I worked with there—he was able to point me in the right direction to get the sources I needed, and I was intrigued by that."

Finally, it was the fundamental nature of a librarian's work that was most attractive about the profession for Thompson. He summed up his feelings by stating, "For me, I resonate with the professional ethos of sharing information with others and helping others to access information. There's something deeply democratic about this."

What is your biggest concern about the LIS profession as it relates to your own career? In addition to asking the students what they thought was most attractive about the LIS profession, we asked them to tell us their biggest concern. Their answers were surprisingly similar. Nine out of the ten students wrote that their biggest concern was low salaries and/or the lack of jobs in the profession. Here is what some of the students had to say:

- "I am most concerned with whether or not I will find a full time job. It appears that jobs for librarians have dwindled considerably in numbers recently."
- "My biggest concern is the consistently low salaries in the areas in which I'd like to work."
- "Lack of jobs. There is no shortage of librarians now, nor do I anticipate one in the future. Library schools are producing more graduates than available jobs, and with trends towards budget cuts, hiring freezes, part-time work and outsourcing, the predicted future shortage is probably a myth."
- "The hype about plentiful jobs due to a mass wave of retiring of older librarians appears to be false."
- Only one student responded that she thought that, "with a large portion of librarians retiring, there will be plenty of opportunities…"

The good news, however, is that not one student expressed any concerns with the substantive work of librarianship itself. Given that eight out of the ten students have had real library work experience, it is encouraging to hear how much enjoyment the profession still offers to those working in the field.

If you entered the LIS field from another career path, in what ways do you anticipate that an LIS career will be different? When questioned about anticipated differences between an LIS career and their work experiences in the past, students often mentioned the personal benefits associated with helping others to find the information that they need. In comparison to her previous work experience, **Katie Fauvelle** felt that a career in library and information science would offer "more fulfillment and a feeling of doing something worthwhile."

Another common theme elicited by this question involved the intellectual challenges and opportunities associated with a career in librarianship. Herb succinctly conveyed this idea by writing, "I anticipate that an LIS career would allow me to learn new things as I help other people find the information they need."

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A related concept that was repeatedly cited by respondents involved the variety associated with working in a library situation. Illustrating this point with her own experiences as a library staff member, Wilson wrote, "At a library, you are on your feet, constantly dealing with the public, helping solve problems and answer reference questions that vary every day in scope and subject. Every day is different, every question has its own challenges." The perception of the library setting as an eclectic, interesting workplace was also cited by Cruse in reference to her colleagues in librarianship, "I think the library profession attracts people with a variety of interests and goals, therefore making 'who' you work with even more interesting. I enjoy the variety of personalities that are attracted to library work."

In comparing LIS to his previous career as a computer programmer, Scogin contrasted the professional cultures of the two fields, "The computer contract-programming environment can be very competitive, while the LIS environment is much more cooperative in nature, which is a refreshing change. Professional ethics and integrity are also held in high regard in this field."

If you could have your choice of any job in the LIS world, what would your dream job be? The final question produced a diverse array of responses. As respondents described their ideal job situations, two key themes emerged: specialization and variety. Numerous respondents expressed a desire to concentrate on specific subject areas of personal interest (e.g. humanities, life sciences) within a library and information science context, bringing an advanced level of knowledge and expertise to their jobs.

A contrasting sentiment was expressed by other respondents who reported that their ideal position in the library world would be characterized by a variety of intellectual and professional challenges. **Jamie Lowen** wrote that his ideal position would be, "…any job where I am intellectually challenged on a regular basis and where I can develop relationships with practitioners in the field who are willing to be mentors." Wilson reported being attracted to the prospect of becoming the head librarian at a small public library in which she "would have the opportunity to do everything: from acquisitions to cataloging and circulation and performing outreach services such as book talking and story times."

CONCLUSIONS

In considering the responses, a few recurring themes were pervasive. Students repeatedly related their belief that a career in library and information science offers them the opportunity to participate in a field in which they can be intellectually challenged on a continuing basis and in which their own skills can continue to evolve as new information technologies appear. In reflecting upon the aspects of the profession that they found most attractive and the services they expected to provide, it is interesting to note that reading and the love of books were rarely mentioned. Students moving into the LIS field seem to be embracing the information age and the idea of being facilitators who can help their patrons make sense of a rapidly changing information environment, as well as incorporating evolving technologies into their own jobs and lives.

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While most responses focused on the benefits of librarianship as a career, a great majority of the participants shared significant concerns about the availability of jobs and appropriate compensation. There seems to be a palpable tension between reports of the continuing availability of quality library jobs and perceptions to the contrary of those who are entering the LIS field. The presence of this perceptual gap points to a need for further scholarly inquiry directed at assessing the relative success of LIS graduates in finding positions that are appropriate given their training, experience, and desires.

Despite the uncertainties of the LIS job market, responses consistently reflected students' enthusiasm toward the profession. It seems that students' perceptions of the personal rewards associated with a career in librarianship have offset their concerns about the LIS job market—although this may represent a delicate balance. For most respondents, the initial decision to pursue a career in LIS seems to have been driven by more intangible benefits associated with the profession—such as the opportunity to do relevant, meaningful work within an interesting and dynamic environment. It is imperative, therefore, that library organizations offer encouragement and support to individuals who express a serious interest in the field, and it is equally important that the profession's commitment to service be continuously cultivated and maintained.

Don Dickenson and M. Claire Williamson are MLIS students at the University of Denver and Research Analysts for the Library Research Service.