

What is the Value of an MLIS to You?

June 2012

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A CLOSER LOOK

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by

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In the style of an online readers' poll, LRS's 60-Second Surveys are short and to the point. Narrow by intent, these surveys capture the perceptions of respondents on a single timely topic. The online surveys are publicized through local, regional, and national library listservs, blogs, etc., and as a result most respondents have some connection to the library profession.

Introduction

In 2008, LRS conducted the 60-Second Survey *What is the Value of an MLIS to You?*. It was inspired by heated discussions on the Colorado library listserv Libnet about the value of the MLIS degree. The passion, urgency, and breadth of opinions expressed by Colorado librarians on the subject prompted LRS to provide a forum to systematically collect these opinions and reach out beyond Colorado.

LRS administered this survey for a second time in May 2011 to determine how the recession and its ongoing impact on the job market have affected peoples' opinions about the degree since 2008. A total of 2,487 people responded to the 2011 survey, which asked eight questions about MLIS education, employment, and feelings about the degree (see the Appendix for the complete survey instrument). Most importantly, the survey asked respondents if they felt that the MLIS was worth the time and money they invested, and if they would recommend it to someone else today. More than half of the respondents backed up their survey responses with thoughtful and candid comments about MLIS programs and the library profession. This report presents the results of the survey, with an in-depth analysis of those comments. Additionally, it compares this analysis with the comment analysis from the 2008 survey, revealing some noteworthy trends regarding respondents' attitudes toward the MLIS degree over time.¹

Survey Results

Demographics

More than one-third of the respondents (37%) worked in academic libraries, whereas 33 percent worked in public, 17 percent in special, and 5 percent in school libraries. The remaining 8 percent were not currently working in a library. Respondents represented all states, as well as 15 countries outside of the United States. Colorado (12%) had the most respondents, followed by Oregon (9%), Virginia (6%), and Ohio (5%).

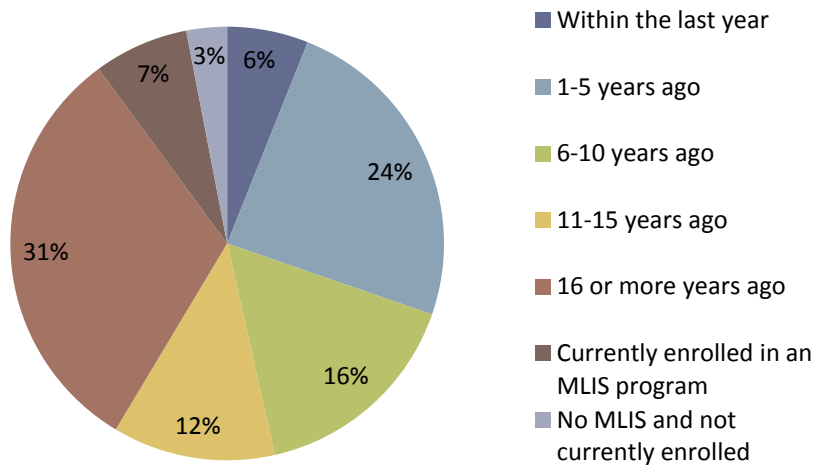
Degree Status and Professional Experience

The survey opened with a question about when respondents had completed their MLIS degrees. As is shown in Chart 1,

¹ A total of 1,958 respondents participated in the 2008 *Value of an MLIS to You* 60-second survey. Reports of these results can be found at http://www.lrs.org/documents/fastfacts/269_Is_It_Worth_It.pdf and http://www.lrs.org/documents/fastfacts/270_In_Your_Own_Words.pdf. Some items on the 2011 survey were revised, which precluded comparisons with the 2008 data. However, the comments for both the 2008 and 2011 surveys were analyzed using the same six comment categories.

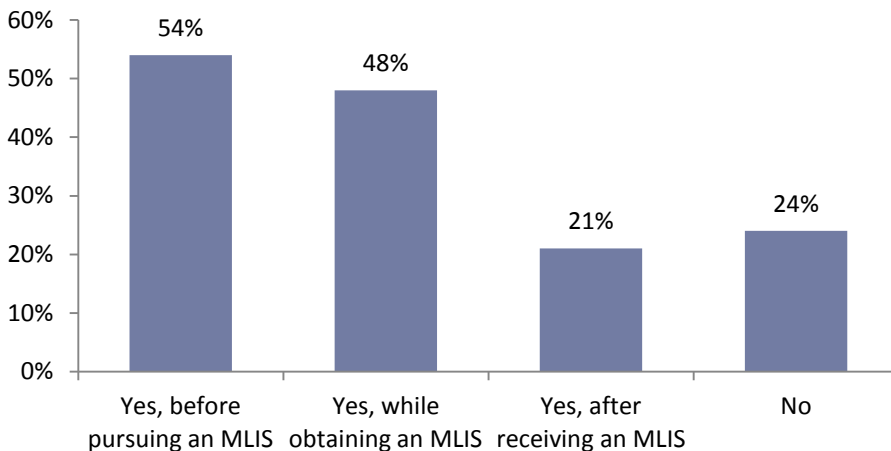
more respondents indicated that they had received their MLIS 16 or more years ago than any other group (31%), followed by those who completed their programs within the last 1-5 years (24%). Just 182 respondents (7%) were currently enrolled in an MLIS program, and 81 (3%) answered that they did not have an MLIS and were not enrolled in an MLIS program.

Chart 1
When did you complete your MLIS?



Respondents were able to select multiple responses to the question “Have you ever worked in a library position that did not require an MLIS?” (see Chart 2). About one-fifth of the respondents (21%) said that after receiving their MLIS, they had worked in such a position. Slightly more respondents

Chart 2
Have you ever worked in a library position that did not require an MLIS?*



About one-fifth of the respondents (21%) said that after receiving their MLIS, they had worked in a position that did not require this degree.

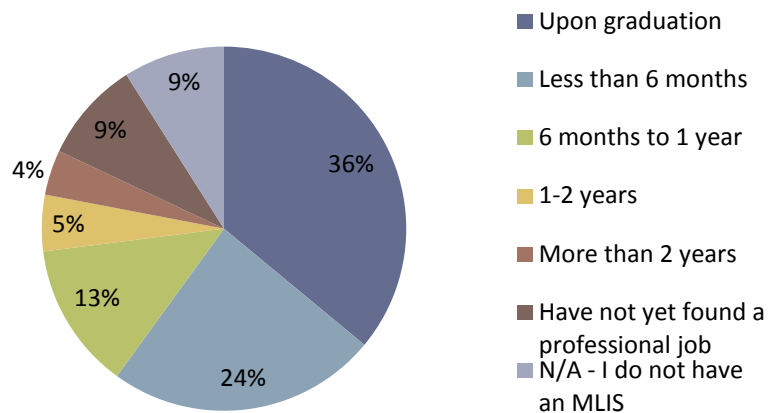
*Multiple responses could be selected.

60 percent of respondents indicated that they found professional positions within 6 months of receiving their MLIS.

(24%) answered that they had never held a library position that did not require an MLIS. Around half of the respondents worked in a library position that did not require an MLIS either before pursuing an MLIS (54%) and/or while obtaining an MLIS (48%).

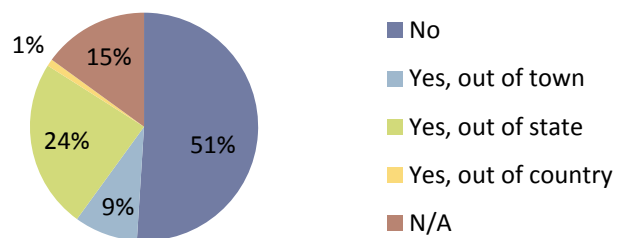
In response to the question, “After receiving your MLIS, how long did it take you to find a professional library job?”, 60 percent of respondents indicated that they found positions within 6 months of graduation (see Chart 3). However, 216 respondents—almost 9 percent—answered that they had not yet found a professional job.

Chart 3
After receiving your MLIS, how long did it take you to find a professional library job?



A fourth question asked survey participants whether they had to relocate for their first professional library positions. While half of the respondents answered “No,” about a quarter said that they had moved to another state to secure their first jobs as professional librarians (see Chart 4).

Chart 4
Did you need to relocate for your first professional library position?

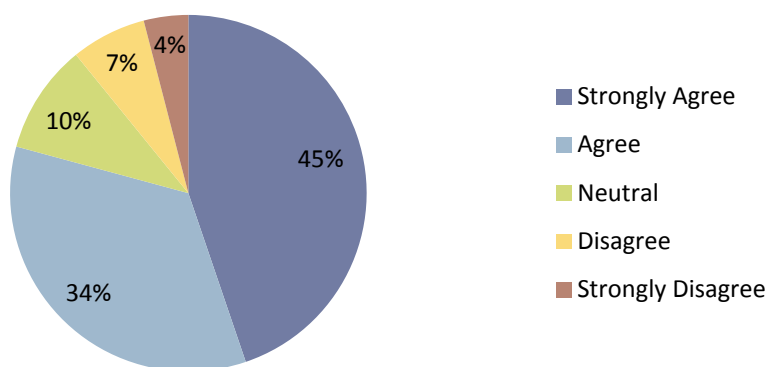


Value of the MLIS Degree

Following these questions about degree status and professional experience, the survey asked respondents to indicate to what extent they agreed or disagreed with the statement “My MLIS degree was/is worth the time and money invested in it.” About four in five respondents (79%) either strongly agreed or agreed with this statement, while 11 percent of respondents disagreed or strongly disagreed (see Chart 5).

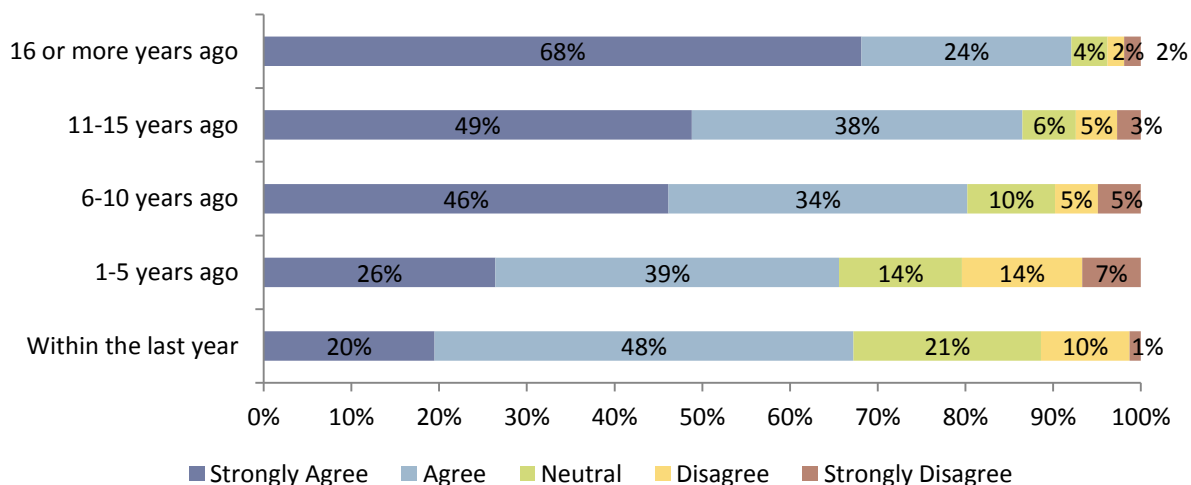
Respondents who have had their MLIS degree the longest were most likely to indicate that the time and money invested in the MLIS was worth it.

Chart 5
My MLIS degree was/is worth the time and money invested in it.



Respondents who have had their MLIS degree the longest were most likely to indicate that the time and money invested in the MLIS was worth it (see Chart 6). Nine out of ten (92%)

Chart 6
My MLIS degree was/is worth the time and money invested in it.
By When Degree Was Completed

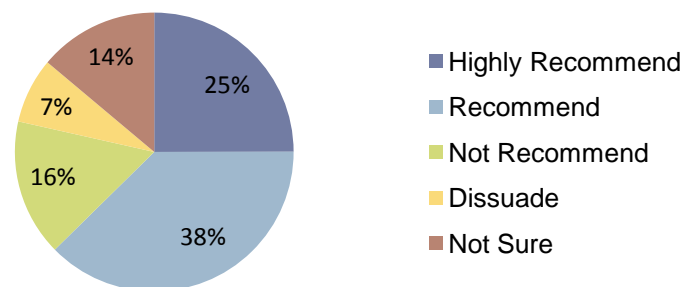


Almost two-thirds of respondents (63%) would recommend pursuing the MLIS degree today. However, 16% would “not recommend” pursuing the degree, 7% would dissuade others from pursuing it, and 14 percent were “not sure.”

respondents who have had their MLIS for 16+ years agreed or strongly agreed that the degree was worth the time and money they invested in it, and only 8 percent disagreed, strongly disagreed, or were neutral. Almost 90 percent of respondents who have had their degrees for 11-15 years agreed or strongly agreed that the investment in the MLIS degree was worth it, as did 80 percent of respondents who have had their degrees for 6-10 years. While about two-thirds of newer professionals agreed or strongly agreed that their investment in the degree was worthwhile, they were less likely to strongly agree and were more likely to select neutral or to disagree or strongly disagree. Respondents who completed their degree 1-5 years ago were the most likely to indicate that the degree was not worth the time and money they invested in it, with 21 percent selecting disagree or strongly disagree.

Finally, respondents answered the question “If asked TODAY, would you recommend pursuing an MLIS degree?.” As is shown in Chart 7, almost two-thirds of respondents (63%) would indeed recommend the MLIS degree today. However, 16 percent answered that they would “not recommend” the degree, and another 7 percent would actively dissuade others from pursuing an MLIS. The remaining 14 percent of respondents wrestled with this question, saying they were “not sure” whether they would recommend the MLIS degree to someone else.

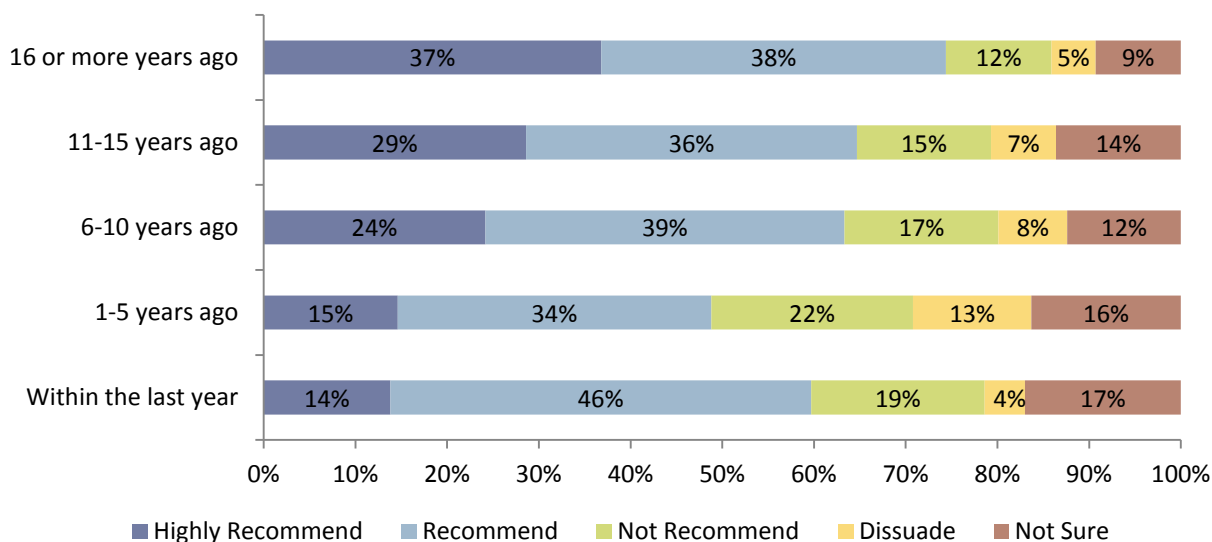
Chart 7
If asked TODAY, would you recommend pursuing an MLIS degree?



In addition to being more likely to agree that the investment in the MLIS degree was worth it, respondents who have had their degrees the longest were also the most likely to indicate that they would recommend pursuing the degree to others, with three-fourths of those who have had their MLIS for 16+ years indicating they would recommend or highly recommend the degree (see Chart 8). Around two-thirds of those who have had their MLIS for 6-15 years would also recommend or highly recommend the degree to others. Those who have had their degree for 1-5 years were the least likely to highly recommend

or recommend the degree (49%) and were also the most likely to indicate that they would not recommend (22%) or actively dissuade (13%) others from pursuing an MLIS.

Chart 8
If asked TODAY, would you recommend pursuing an MLIS degree?
By When Degree Was Completed



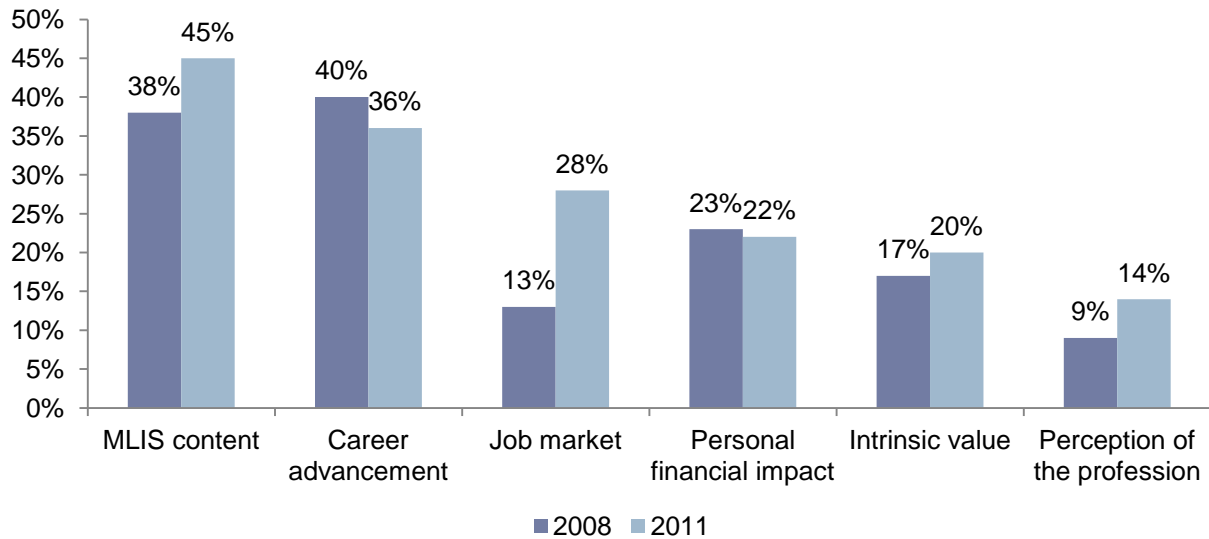
Comment Analysis

On the 2011 survey, 1,309 respondents made comments, which were classified by three coders according to six categories: personal financial impact, perception of the profession, job market, intrinsic value, MLIS content, and career advancement (see box and Chart 9). Comments could be coded in multiple categories; for example, a comment that

Definitions of Comment Categories (number of comments)

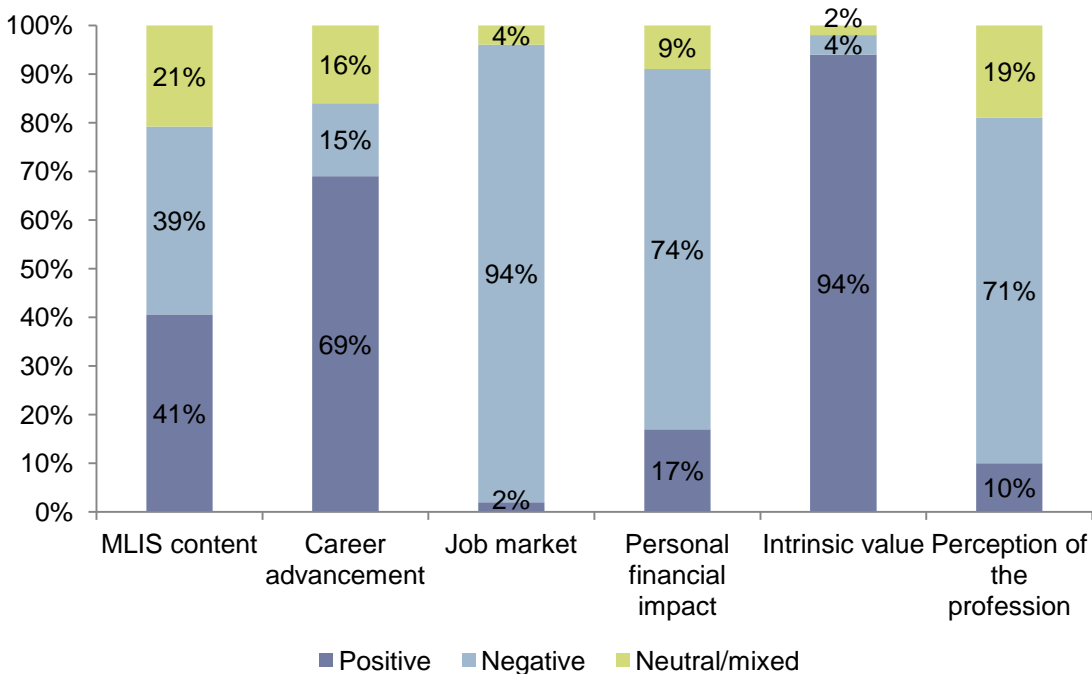
- **MLIS content (593 comments):** Any reference to MLIS (or equivalent) degree programs and curriculum, including knowledge and skills and/or the need to supplement with additional degrees or experience.
- **Career advancement (477 comments):** Any reference to the ability to advance in a library career, including the degree being a requirement.
- **Job market (366 comments):** Any reference to the availability of professional positions for MLIS holders and the ease or difficulty in obtaining those positions.
- **Personal financial impact (285 comments):** Any reference to the cost of the degree and the salaries earned post-degree.
- **Intrinsic value (268 comments):** Any reference to personal values and beliefs related to working in the profession.
- **Perception of the profession (183 comments):** Any reference to the public's or government/policy makers' view and/or appreciation of librarianship.

Chart 9
Percentage of Comments by Category, 2008 and 2011



mentioned both a respondent's struggle to pay off student loans and her/his love of public service would be coded both as "Financial Impact" and "Intrinsic Value." Comments that were out of sync with all of the comment categories (47, or 3%) were removed from the analysis. In addition to coding comments according to these categories, they were also classified as positive, negative, or neutral/mixed in tone (see Chart 10). These same methods were used to analyze

Chart 10
Comment Categories by Tone, 2011



the 1,024 comments from the 2008 survey.

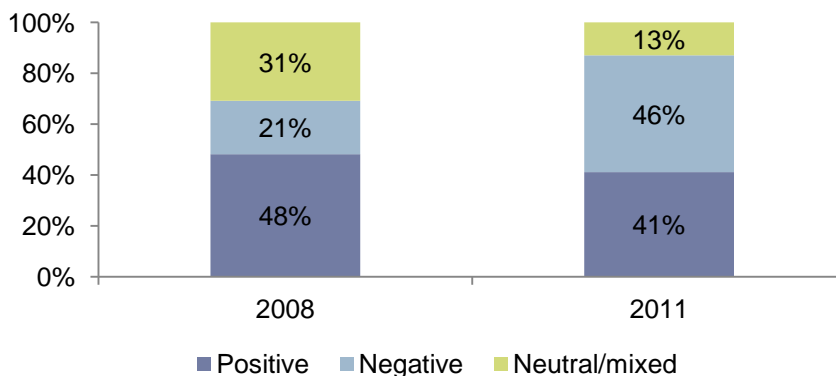
General Trends

More comments related to MLIS content than to any other category—understandably, as the value of a MLIS degree was the focus of this survey. From 2008 to 2011, the percentage of comments related to MLIS curriculum increased slightly.

These comments on MLIS content were almost equally positive and negative in tone. Career advancement was the next most popular comment category, and these comments were largely positive (69%). Reflecting funding crises and a weak job market, the percentage of respondents who referenced job opportunities—or more accurately, a lack thereof—more than doubled since 2008, from 13 percent to 28 percent. These comments were overwhelmingly negative, with only 2 percent coded as positive. In 2008 and 2011, 23 percent and 22 percent of comments, respectively, mentioned personal financial impact; in both years, approximately three-fourths of these comments were negative.

Regardless of market trends or other changes affecting librarianship, survey respondents were upbeat about the intrinsic value of the profession in both 2008 and 2011. Most comments in 2011 (94%) were positive when the topic of personal values and beliefs related to librarianship came up. Perception of the profession was the last comment category, and received less attention than any other topic, but the percentage of remarks that mentioned how librarians are viewed by society climbed from 9 percent in 2008 to 14 percent in 2011. In both years, the majority of these comments were negative, sounding alarms for library advocacy at the local and national levels. Overall, respondents were less positive about the degree in 2011 than in 2008, with the number of negative comments across all categories doubling from 21 percent to 46 percent (see Chart 11).

Chart 11
Percentages of Positive, Negative, and Neutral/Mixed Comments in All Categories, 2008 and 2011



Overall, respondents' comments were less positive in 2011 than in 2008, with the number of negative comments across all categories doubling from 21 percent to 46 percent.

Below, the findings for each comment category are covered in more detail. Comparisons between the 2008 and 2011 comment analyses are discussed wherever meaningful patterns or shifts in attitudes were observed. Categories are presented in order of number of comments received, from most to least.

MLIS Content

In 2011, MLIS content drew the most attention of any of the 6 categories used to code survey comments (see Chart 10). In all, 593 comments touched on the MLIS experience and curriculum. These responses were nearly equally positive (41%) and negative (39%). An additional 123 comments (21%) were coded as neutral/mixed, showing that respondents were less certain about their feelings towards the curriculum of MLIS programs than they were about any of the other comment categories (see Chart 11). Compared to 2008, comments relating to MLIS programs were more critical in 2011.

The positive comments referencing MLIS content often mentioned opportunities to gain core skills in resource evaluation, technology competencies, and classroom instruction. Many of these comments also applauded MLIS curriculums for instilling a feeling of professionalism in students and for providing opportunities to build valuable professional networks.

Nearly as many comments about the value of graduate-level LIS education were negative in tone. Many respondents noted that the degree was a “hoop to jump through” in order to get a position, and that while they found the resulting credentials valuable, the actual content of their education was lacking. They stressed that work experience and on-the-job training were more valuable than what they learned in classes. Lack of intellectual rigor, lack of “practical” library experience, and irrelevant course content were top among the reasons for dissatisfaction with LIS programs.

Twenty-one percent of comments related to the content of the MLIS degree were neutral or mixed, most of these noting that the program’s value will vary greatly depending on, as one commenter summed up nicely, “the quality of the school's program, what you know of the field going in, and what effort you put into it while there.”

Respondents who earned their MLIS degrees 16 or more years ago were the most positive about the curriculum. Those who received MLIS degrees 1-5 years ago were the most critical of program content, followed by respondents who did not have MLIS degrees and were not currently enrolled. Recent graduates were relatively positive about the MLIS

*"I worked in a public library for several years before I went back for my MLIS degree. I learned many skills that I did not know before. Even though I am a Reference Librarian, the training in the cataloging and database classes I had to take helped me to understand my job better. I learned how to speak to and teach various groups. Sure I could have learned those things on my own, without the MLIS, but the degree made me a professional."
-Survey Respondent*

curriculum's content: 43 percent of their comments were coded as positive and 31 percent as neutral or mixed.

Career Advancement

Respondents were less ambivalent about the value of the MLIS degree in advancing their careers than about the quality of MLIS programs. Of the 477 comments that mentioned career advancement, 69 percent said that the degree is indeed valuable in advancing a library career. Sixteen percent reflected a neutral or mixed opinion, and another 15 percent of comments were negative.

The positive comments stressed that many or most professional library jobs require the MLIS degree or noted that the MLIS could apply to a variety of work settings. For example, one respondent commented:

"If you want to work in libraries as a professional, the [MLIS] degree is a must. No question! As with everything, the school you attend and your degree is what you make of it."

Negative comments reflected concerns about non-degreed paraprofessionals replacing MLIS holders in many workplaces. Some respondents said that they felt overqualified and un-hirable due to their graduate degrees, and many reported working one or more nonprofessional jobs to make ends meet. Others said that additional education or experience beyond the MLIS degree was necessary to advance their careers.

More respondents who had secured professional library jobs upon graduation commented on the ability to advance in a library career than any other group; 142 of 184 (77%) of these comments were positive. And while comments about career advancement were consistently upbeat regardless of when respondents had completed their MLIS degrees, respondents who indicated that they had not attended an MLIS program and were not currently enrolled were not equally enthusiastic. The majority (53%) of their comments were negative.

Respondents who indicated on the survey that they would highly recommend or recommend the MLIS degree were more positive about the prospects of career advancement than those who would not recommend or dissuade others from pursuing MLIS degrees. Comments about career advancement opportunities from respondents who were unsure about whether they would recommend the degree were more positive than negative, indicating that they were reluctant to promote MLIS programs even though they were optimistic about their value in advancing library careers.

"The reason I'm not sure if I could recommend the degree is the awful trend I am witnessing of MLIS holders who can only get nonprofessional jobs upon graduation. My own library's trend is to hire this way [because] of budgetary expenses of paying for a librarian. Ridiculous, I know. Sad but true too. We have lots of pages, clerks and [library assistants] here with MLIS degrees who took the job [because] of benefits and health care and to get their foot in the door. Not sure if that's much help considering when someone retires, those who remain absorb their responsibilities."
-Survey Respondent

Job Market

Not surprisingly, the comments received about the current job market on this survey were overwhelmingly negative. Of the 366 comments received in this category, just 2 percent were positive and 4 percent were neutral; the remaining 94 percent were negative in tone, as compared to 69 percent in 2008.

The handful of positive comments tended to mention specific geographic locations, or the freedom to relocate, as factors that contributed to respondents' successful job searches. As one respondent observed:

“If you aren't tied to a specific location, and are willing to live in places that aren't particularly the big city, you shouldn't have any problem finding a job.”

Negative comments included first- and second-hand accounts of MLIS-certified librarians unable to find employment, references to decreased funding at the federal, state, and local levels; observations regarding the re-classification or elimination of positions that require MLIS degrees; and comments about intense and increased competition from other job candidates:

“The field is just too saturated, and only those who can afford the greatest flexibility in time, money, and geography can get great jobs. I would hope that anyone wishing to pursue the degree, which I do love, would be able to hear that kind of information transparently...just so they know.”

“An MLIS is only valuable if it provides flexibility for today's uncertain job market. Also, I think an MLIS degree is less valuable than it was years ago because the job market has been flooded with too many program graduates, especially since the programs can be done online, anyone anywhere can do it and you don't have to move to a library school.”

References to financial impact, including the cost of the degree and the salaries earned post-degree, were found in 22 percent of the survey comments.

Financial Impact

References to financial impact, including the cost of the degree and the salaries earned post-degree, were found in 285 (22%) of the survey comments. Positive comments, of which there were 48 (17%), mentioned pay increases or professional advancement that resulted from having obtained an MLIS degree.

Nine percent, or 26 of these comments, were not perceived to be either negative or positive. Some of these respondents said that they felt the degree should only be an option for those students who have the financial means to absorb the cost, for those who receive funding from their employers or the

institution granting the degree, or for those who intend to become library administrators. Other respondents mentioned that they were hesitant to recommend an MLIS degree given today's costs, though they felt that their own degrees had been wise investments.

In contrast, the majority of comments that mentioned the financial impact of the degree—74 percent—were coded as negative. These reflected the cost of the degree, low wages and unemployment, and the struggle to pay back student loans:

"I am pleased I got my degree, and I really love my job. However, with jobs so hard to come by and the huge expense of the degree, I'd have a really hard time recommending this degree to someone unless they could a) attend a state school or get a grant and b) relocate after graduation to find a job."

"The MLIS is disproportionately expensive compared to the amount of money you can make as a librarian. . . . I do wish I had found another way to pay for it. My student loans are too large given my earning power in this profession."

Looking on the bright side, the percentage of negatively-charged comments related to the financial impact of the MLS degree actually decreased slightly since the 2008 survey, from 77 to 74 percent.

Intrinsic Value

The most positive comments left in response to the *Value of an MLIS to You* survey related to the intrinsic value of working in the LIS field. Of the 268 respondents whose comments touched on the intrinsic value of the profession, 94 percent said something positive. Just 11 comments were negative, and 6 were neutral.

"I love my job" was a common phrase among these comments. Respondents mentioned commitment to service, community participation, lifelong learning, and the challenging and diverse nature of their work as factors contributing to their personal job satisfaction:

"Every day I go to work excited about what I do, whether it's doing story time, visiting classes, doing readers advisory for our patrons or teaching classes to the staff and public, I feel like what I do matters to the quality of life of our individual patrons and to the vibrancy of our community."

The most positive comments left in response to the *Value of an MLIS to You* survey related to the intrinsic value of working in the LIS field.

“Even before the current economic crash, many employers were cutting professional-level jobs, either replacing them with lower-qualified positions or not replacing them at all, due to the widespread perceptions that the existence of the internet and ebooks make both libraries and librarians unneeded and unwanted.”

-Survey Respondent

“I don't know of another profession that requires you to continue to learn, to change, to grow as much as keeping up with professional library work. Whether reference or cataloging, librarians must be aware and analyze, guide users, and impact others' lives.”

Perception of the Profession

Of the 183 comments that pertained to attitudes toward librarianship, 71 percent were tagged as negative, in comparison to 86 percent in 2008. An additional 34 comments (19%) were perceived to be neutral, and only 19 (10%) carried a positive connotation. Overall, many of these comments referred to the changing landscape of librarianship brought on by the digital age and economic downturn.

Many of the comments that were perceived as positive touted the expertise of MLIS-certified librarians and justified their necessity, remarking that others saw this necessity as well:

“I love my degree, I love my job, and acquaintances who learn that I am a librarian look at me with utmost respect!!! As if I represent something of tremendous value for our society (even though they may not have visited the library in ten years)!”

Comments that were coded as neutral referred to uncertainties brought on by changes to the field or talked about the ways in which the degree is—or ought to be—marketed, by individuals and by organizations such as the American Library Association.

Many of the 130 negatively coded comments about the perception of the profession referred to trends of devaluing either libraries or librarians. Often, these comments mentioned an increased availability of paraprofessional positions, versus positions that traditionally required MLIS degrees. One respondent observed:

“It appears to me that no other profession must [defend] its existence so rigorously as librarians.”

“Important: The degree itself is only half the opportunity. You must also know deeply, and be able to articulate clearly, why you pursued it and what libraries actually mean to you and to society.”

-Survey Respondent

Conclusion

The *Value of an MLIS to You* 60-second survey showed that a majority of respondents would both recommend the degree to others today (63%) and agree that the MLIS is worth the investment of time and money (79%). While some respondents would be reluctant to recommend the degree or to say that the MLIS retains its value today, their comments indicated that any hesitations about recommending the degree stem largely from a weak job market, the financial burden of

education, concerns about the content and delivery of LIS curriculum, and a generally negative perception of the profession by others. Yet, comments as to the intrinsic, non-monetary rewards of librarianship, and about opportunities for career advancement, compensate for these drawbacks, especially for those who have had their degrees for more than 15 years.

The comments as a whole on the 2011 *What is the Value of an MLIS to You* survey were less optimistic than those on the 2008 survey. While in 2008 only 21 percent of comments were negative, in 2011, this number rose to 45 percent. Positive responses dipped only slightly, from 48 to 41 percent.

While, overall, the comments to the 2011 survey were more negative than positive, such is not true within each of the designated categories; responses about the content of MLIS degree programs, career advancement, and the intrinsic value of the MLIS degree were more positive than negative. However, responses reflecting on the job market, personal financial impact, and perception of the profession were more negative, reflecting the concerns of MLIS holders and future graduates, especially regarding the availability of jobs and the changing nature of the field.

The shift in attitudes from 2008 to 2011 reflects larger trends like the continuing impacts of the recession, rising tuition rates, and uncertainties associated with emerging and growing technological trends, such as e-books and Google. However, it is reassuring to remember that these same factors are likewise affecting and re-shaping many other professions. Moreover, respondents remained steadfast in their appreciation for Library and Information Science, as shown by the number of positive comments on the intrinsic value of the profession. Though library professionals and future MLIS graduates may be largely at the mercy of uncontrollable outside forces, many of the survey respondents stressed that for those with ingenuity, passion, and tenacity, librarianship continues to be a rewarding career choice.

“The MLIS/MLS/MSLS degree retains its value even for folks working outside the library field, as librarians are acknowledged as the best finders of information whatsoever.”

-Survey Respondent

Appendix

60 Second Survey: The Value of an MLIS to You

For this survey the term **MLIS** is used to describe any master of library science or equivalent school library degree (e.g., school library endorsement).

1. When did you complete your MLIS?

- Within the last year
- 1-5 years ago
- 6-10 years ago
- 11-15 years ago
- 16 or more years ago
- Currently enrolled in an MLIS program
- No MLIS and not currently enrolled in MLIS program

2. Have you ever worked in a library position that did not require an MLIS? Check all that apply.

- Yes, before pursuing an MLIS
- Yes, while obtaining an MLIS
- Yes, after receiving an MLIS
- No

3. After receiving your MLIS, how long did it take you to find a professional library job?

- Upon graduation
- Less than 6 months
- 6 months to 1 year
- 1-2 years
- Have not yet found a professional job
- N/A—I do not have an MLIS

4. Did you need to relocate for your first professional library position?

- No
- Yes, out of town
- Yes, out of state
- Yes, out of country
- N/A

5. Please indicate to what extent do you agree or disagree with the following statement:
My MLIS was/is worth the time and money invested in it.

- Strongly Agree
- Agree
- Neutral
- Disagree
- Strongly Disagree
- N/A

6. If asked TODAY, would you recommend pursuing an MLIS degree?

- Highly Recommend
- Recommend
- Not Recommend
- Dissuade
- Not Sure

7. In which state do you live?

8. Which of the following best describes the library where you work?

- Academic
- Public
- School
- Special
- N/A—Not currently working in a library
- Other—Please Specify

9. Please feel free to leave your comments about the value of an MLIS degree: