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What Else Can I Do With An MLS Degree?

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What Else Can I Do With an MLS Degree?

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To be or not to be a "Librarian"? Ah, the L word ...

Several years ago at the 2003 convention of the Special Libraries Association (SLA), the members debated long and hard about a change of name for their organization—in particular eliminating the “L” word. Many of the members felt that the word library or librarian did not really represent the work they do. They could not agree on another name and therefore kept the name as is. But if we think of our field in the broader sense of “information professionals,” we can see that there are many ways to use our skills in careers outside the traditional library setting.

A survey of the SLA Web site (<http://www.sla.org>) provides a useful overview of many of the alternative careers open to holders of the Master of Library Science (MLS) degree. According to Rachel Singer Gordon, there are various reasons to consider an alternative career, including “feeling burnt out in your current career ... a desire to strike out on your own, to be your own boss ... a desire to explore options that draw on a library background, yet allow you to advance and command the respect you deserve for your skills and accomplishments, regardless of your degree status.” (Gordon 2008).

One of the most obvious job markets into which we can expand is the technology arena. Many MLS graduates are employed as Web designers, database developers, and information systems specialists. The digital world provides openings for those who can convert materials to digital form and provide access through metadata schemes. Mercy Corps is an excellent example of a non-profit organization that maintains all materials in digital form in order to serve their staff in all corners of the world. Museums and archives

are places that have embraced the new technologies as ways to make their materials more accessible to users. Digitizing collections and putting them online allow people to view the items from any where in the world, while cutting down on the physical handling of valuable materials. Information professionals apply metadata and controlled vocabulary schemes to these digitized items, greatly improving the ability to find once difficult to locate collections.

Vendors who provide products and services to libraries hire MLS holders because they can “talk the talk” to customers. For example, Innovative Interfaces, Inc. (or “Triple I”) has a broad range of positions. You could work on the technical or systems end, do the marketing of their products, or be a trainer or an administrator. Another example is Blackwell Book Services, a local vendor that hires MLS graduates to catalog and process materials, provide bibliographic support, and organize buying plans for libraries.

Brenda Kliethermes works at Triple I and explains how her job relates to her MLS degree:

My position as an Information Resources and Training Coordinator at Innovative Interfaces includes a variety of job duties, such as training staff, producing documentation and participating on special projects. I find that my approach to my diverse duties continuously relies on skills from my MLS. At any moment you might find me conducting a reference interview with staff or a customer who is researching our documentation resources, designing a new training session that addresses a variety of learning styles, using knowledge of information-seeking behavior and information architecture to create and publish documentation, or explaining the complexity of an integrated library system to a new employee whose only exposure to



Skills you are looking for in new librarians

The passion to help people and the confidence to experiment. Any other skills can be trained.

—AARON SCHMIDT
Director
North Plains Public Library

a library was as a patron. The flexibility of these skills allows me to face new challenges with confidence and provide a solid base for continuing professional development.

Being an “independent information professional” has always been a viable alternative to working within a traditional library setting. With the explosion of electronic information resources, the need for this type of work has definitely grown. People who perform this role go by many different titles—*independent researcher, information broker, information entrepreneur, solo librarian, etc.* Often they specialize in certain research topics such as competitive intelligence, market forecasting, government information, and engineering, to name a few. The Association of Independent Information Professionals (AIIP) is a useful resource for those considering going solo and the AIIP Web site (<http://www.aiip.org>) is a good place to start.

An off-shoot of the independent information professional is the generic job title “consultant.” Again, those who market themselves in this way usually specialize within an industry or field. Libraries hire consultants as project managers, grant writers, architectural/interior designers, strategic planners, community analysis experts, etc.

In addition to hanging out your shingle as an independent practitioner or consultant, companies and agencies hire employees to perform the above skills, especially competitive intelligence, market analysis, and prospect researching, which entails finding donors/investors an organization can target for funding.

A specialty niche for information professionals is “medical informatics,” combining the information field of medicine with all aspects of technology.

The Web site for the Department of Medical Informatics and Clinical Epidemiology at Oregon Health & Science University (<http://www.ohsu.edu/dmice/>) explains:

Medical informatics is the field concerned with the acquisition, storage, and use of information in health and biomedicine. As technology and information both become more prevalent in society, the ability to quickly and accurately identify, parse, understand, and utilize that information becomes both more critical and more difficult.

A growing field related to librarianship is records management. Some records managers feel they are the “saviors” of our modern world. In the print-only era, there were secretaries and file clerks who organized files and documents for agencies and businesses. But today, we are all our own file clerks, with primarily digital-only documents which we store our own way on our own computers. As employees come and go, the organization loses important information. There is also recognition that employees possess tacit knowledge which needs to be captured and preserved as organizations do their strategic planning and short term/long term planning. The field of knowledge management is recognized by industry as essential for long term success.

Michele Hanrahan, who works for PATH—a Seattle-based non-profit—feels that her MLS degree has been a significant advantage in her work:

I am leading the project to create archives for closed projects along with a number of other activities, like analyzing policies and record-keeping requirements, doing outreach to promote awareness, and training people to use tools and systems effectively. I think that I have a real advantage over many traditional “records

Alternative Careers

Technology related

Web Designers

Database Developers

Information Systems Specialists

Digital Experts

Working for Vendors

Consultant

Records Manager

Specialties

(either as independent brokers or company/agency employees)

Competitive Intelligence

Market Analysis/
Forecasting

Prospect Researching

Grant Writing

Engineering

Government Information

Medical Informatics

Project Management

Strategic Planning

Architectural/Interior
Design

Community Analysis




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managers” because I emphasize needs and processes over rules and procedures.

Since “information” permeates all aspects of our world, the applications for an MLS are boundless. An important element to remember if we expand our job hunting outside of the traditional library world is to detail our skills in the “lingo” of the field we wish to enter. With creativity and a little

entrepreneurship, we can direct our skills to a limitless array of job possibilities. 

Bibliography

Gordon, Rachel Singer. 2008. Nontraditional Careers for Info Pros: Why Consider Alternatives? *FUMSI*, March 2008: <http://web.fumsi.com/go/article/use/2710>.

The “Social” Way to Learn

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In the six weeks following the conclusion of our program, fully 75 percent of staff used at least one Web 2.0 tool in some facet of their work other than helping patrons. Blogging was the most popular tool, but wikis, social bookmarking sites book-related sites weren't far behind.

The highlight of my work year and this will make me much more effective in my work.

—MCL CLERK

Learning 2.0 worked for us. If your library hasn't tried it, we recommend that you do. You are almost certain not to regret it. If you do go ahead, I hope we've shared some lessons we learned that you might find helpful. If you've already been down

this road, then perhaps this article will cause you to think about your unique experience just a little bit differently.

As library professionals, we need to be as current as possible on the latest technology trends and tools. This project was an excellent use of resources. My staff are now more knowledgeable and confident in these areas and contribute to the overall knowledge base of the library and are better equipped to serve customers.

—MCL SUPERVISOR



References

MCL's Learning 2.0 Program can be found at <http://www2.co.multnomah.or.us/learning/>.

