

Pennsylvania Libraries: *Research & Practice*

Commentary

The Deluge of the MLIS Degree

Julie Tulba

Julie Tulba is a distance learning librarian at a for-profit institution in Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, jtulba@gmail.com

The librarian job market is already oversaturated, yet each year, graduate schools across the country are releasing newly minted MLIS degree holders into the workforce, many with slim prospects for employment in their field, let alone a position to help repay their expensive graduate school loans. It would behoove universities to follow the example of some graduate schools in other inundated fields and limit the number of MLIS applicants they admit until the job market for librarians improves and, thus, eliminate the reality of new graduates competing with librarians who have 10-plus years of experience for entry-level positions.

In 2009, I received my master's degree in library and information science from the University of Pittsburgh, a school whose MLIS program was ranked tenth in the nation based on the 2013 ranking provided by *U.S. News & World Report*. It took me a year and a half to find a position that actually utilized my degree. Compared to some recent graduates, my time in the unemployed or underemployed trenches was not very long; however, it made me feel that I, the student with the 3.71 GPA who held a professional internship at an academic library while attending graduate school, deserved better. I am not a self-absorbed individual who thinks incredibly highly of myself, but the sad truth is that there are many people out there like me--personable, intelligent, some hands-on library experience under their belts--but there are just not enough jobs to go around in the librarianship field. When discussing results of the 2010 Placements and Salaries Survey, Stephanie Maatta reports, "Disappointment and disillusionment were words that the 2009 graduates used frequently when describing their postgraduate expectations. Some even expressed the wish that they had selected different areas for their graduate studies" (p. 28).

An article by Robin Wilson from the March 11, 2012, online issue of *The Chronicle of Higher Education* speaks to the enrollment cutbacks taking place at universities across the country, resulting in the redefining of curricula as well as faculty jobs. Of particular interest was the assertion, "Universities are also purposefully shrinking graduate programs because they are reluctant to continue flooding the already swamped academic job market with more PhD's." Although a master's degree in library and information science is undoubtedly cheaper than a doctoral degree, an advanced degree is never cheap. Three times a year, my alma mater, the University of Pittsburgh's School

of Information Sciences, churns out new MLIS graduates. In Pittsburgh, a city where librarian jobs are few and often held by those who have had them for a considerable period of time, dozens of candidates are “flooding the already swamped academic job market” (Wilson, 2012). So where are the decisions restricting the number of people applying for matriculation in Pitt’s MLIS degree program or others like it? It seems that there are few cities in the United States where there is not already a dearth of professional librarian positions available. Librarianship is a fascinating and admirable field, but what is admirable about being tens of thousands of dollars in debt for a degree that one cannot use because there is simply no work available?

For the University of Pittsburgh’s MLIS degree, tuition for full-time Pennsylvania residents comes out to \$30,498 for the 36 credits, while out-of-state tuition is \$49,935. In comparison at Drexel University, a private school located in Philadelphia, tuition for its MLIS degree comes to \$45,000, which equals \$3,000 per class. And lastly, at Clarion University, the other Pennsylvania higher education institution that offers an MLIS degree, tuition for its 36-credit degree program is \$12,870, and non-Pennsylvania residents are charged just over \$20,000. None of the above mentioned figures includes the many required fees, which increases the overall cost significantly. In Pennsylvania, the recommended salary for an entry-level, full-time professional librarian, as stipulated by the Pennsylvania Library Association Board of Directors, is \$37,132. However, many of the full-time professional librarian jobs that I applied for in Pennsylvania fell well short of the recommended salary, and it soon became clear that there was a daunting discrepancy between the recommended salary for professional librarians and the one that was actually offered.

I now work as a librarian at a for-profit institution. Proprietary education continually receives a bad reputation in the media for misleading students about their chances of finding work in their field upon graduation, but can schools granting MLIS degrees claim that an abundance of employment opportunities exist for their graduates? I was not led to believe upon applying to the University of Pittsburgh that a professional librarian position would await me upon graduation. Still, it is disheartening when unemployment becomes your only constant after graduation. While countless job listings are posted each day on sites like the ALA Joblist and aggregated websites like Indeed, it appears that few who have recently graduated get positions unless they already have considerable experience working in libraries. In *Library Journal’s* 2012 annual Placement and Salaries Survey, new graduates again found “too few entry-level jobs, with many available jobs requiring three to five years of professional experience” (Maatta, 2012, p. 18). This directly reinforces the adage that it is tough to gain experience when no one is willing to provide the initial chance. If this continues, what does the future of librarianship hold for us when we see today’s experienced workers long retired, and those who should be leading the profession with little-to-no experience because they have little prior working experience? Should it not be obvious that it is crucial for entry-level positions to be filled by entry-level professionals to ensure a well-rounded workforce for tomorrow?

In my personal experience, I have found that entry-level librarian jobs (i.e., those geared towards individuals with either no or minimal experience working in a library) often are filled by experienced librarians who are willing to take pay cuts. Actual experience will almost always win out over inexperience. In his article “Employment Opportunities for New Academic Librarians: Assessing the Availability of Entry Level Jobs,” Eamon C. Tewell (2012) writes that “recent graduates face considerable challenges finding an entry level job in an academic library, as nearly three quarters of positions were non-entry level” (p. 420).

Librarianship has had to reinvent itself in the last decade in order to survive, and it has done this by scaling back budgets and changing its name from the stolid “library” to “information commons” or “learning resource center.” It continues to survive but certainly not as it once was, even as little as 10 years ago. As the Bob Dylan song goes, “The Times They Are A-Changin’,” and in librarianship, this is certainly the case. In their analysis of the “evolving role of the Master of Library Science degree in academic libraries,” authors Marybeth F. Grimes and Paul W. Grimes (2008) came to the conclusion that “the degree’s relative importance has declined over time, particularly in those areas of librarianship strongly impacted by structural change” (p. 338). I am not suggesting that schools do

away with the MLIS degree, because contrary to some people's thoughts, I do feel there is a need for an advanced degree in this field. However, until the overall job market changes, the national student loan debt decreases, and libraries gain more solid financial footing against the backdrop of the 21st century, the number of people admitted to programs that grant MLIS degrees should be reduced. Nothing is more disappointing than working hard towards a degree and going deeply into debt only to sadly discover there is no job to be had.

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