

What is the Value of an MLIS? Charting Your Career Course.

Sponsored by the Career Recruitment Committee, Session recorder: Debbie Herman, Central CT State University

Stephanie Maatta, Ph.D., assistant professor in the School of Library and Information Science, University of South Florida and author of *Library Journal's* annual salary and placement survey, led this timely session devoted to career trends in the LIS field. She was joined by Terry Plum, director of the GSLIS at Mount Holyoke program, Brenda Mitchell-Powell, an MLIS degree candidate at Simmons who will enter the Ph.D. program there in the fall, and Danielle Tapper, a recent graduate of the University College London in London, England with an MA in Library and Information studies who is currently working at the New Britain Public Library. Dr. Maatta began her presentation with an overview of the LIS job market both nationally and regionally. According to Maatta, of the 57 ALA-accredited programs in the United States, 26% are located in the Northeast. 80% of LIS graduates are female, 10% claim minority status, and 44% are between ages 25 and 34, slightly younger than reported in previous years. Although the number of academic and public library positions has remained steady, the number of positions defined as "Other" has doubled in the last five years. Positions defined as "other" include employment at NSF agencies, pharmaceutical companies, or other non-profit agencies. Those employed in the information science field, with titles such as "Information Consultant" or "Usability Analyst", had the highest average starting salary, \$50,520. Other trends observed were the separation of children and teen services positions and an increase in positions that require multitasking. Based on trends revealed in her research, Maatta sees the "New Library" as a place in which reference desks are eliminated in favor of "roving reference" and use of technologies that facilitate point of need interactions, increased decentralization and outsourcing of cataloging, greater reliance on support staff and student interns, and greater engagement with our clientele.

The key to making successful career transitions, according to Maatta, is to see them as opportunities to "view oneself in a new light". This is particularly relevant to the 51% of MLIS graduates for whom the LIS field is not their first career. In conclusion, Maatta urged job seekers to 1) scrutinize position announcements for required versus preferred skills, 2) know the average starting salaries, 3) leverage professional experience gained from other careers, 4) join professional organizations and attend conferences, 5) take advantage of mentoring opportunities, 6) engage in environmental scanning, and 7) make sure social networking (Facebook, MySpace, etc.) profiles contain content that is suitable for viewing by a potential employers.

Danielle Tapper, for whom the LIS field is a first career, attended an ALA-accredited program in London, England. However, upon return to the U.S., she had trouble securing a position due to lack of professional experience and opted to work at a library temp agency in the region. In addition to gaining experience, the position gave Tapper the opportunity to work in a variety of library settings. Tapper was subsequently hired at a law firm as a librarian but found she missed working with the public. She discovered that it is difficult gaining entry into academic library positions in the area, but eventually secured her current position at NBPL, which she finds rewarding.

Brenda Mitchell-Powell enjoyed a "long and close relationship with the library community" as an editor and publisher before deciding to formalize her relationship with the LIS profession by pursuing the MLIS. She described the program as "the single most exciting transformational experience of my life," and encouraged those interested in the field to pursue it since it offers "something for everybody."

Terry Plum began his comments with the question, "Is the MLIS a ticket to ride?" He observed a relatively even ratio of LIS graduates in the Northeast to the number of positions posted on the New England Jobline, an indication that the job outlook is holding steady for new graduates. Many of the Simmons GSLIS applicants that Plum interviews express a desire to remain at the libraries where they are currently employed, a goal he finds unrealistic. Most professional advancement in the LIS field requires a move out in order to move up. Plum stated that most employers value experience and skills and are not particularly concerned with the mode (i.e., online versus in-person) or quality of LIS education, something he urged employers to place greater importance upon.