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## Experience Mandatory: Assessing the Impact of Previous Career and Educational Experience on LIS Education and the Academic Library Job Hunt

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# Experience Mandatory: Assessing the Impact of Previous Career and Educational Experience On LIS Education and the Academic Library Job Hunt

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## Introduction

Since 2002, 97% of librarian jobs posted in *American Libraries* have required an American Library Association (ALA) accredited master's degree (2004). The ALA Committee on Accreditation provides a general framework for library master's program curriculum, "through a variety of educational experiences, for the study of theory, principles, practice, and values necessary for the provision of service in libraries and information agencies and in other contexts." (Accreditation, 2014). ALA curriculum requirements are broad, however, so courses and requirements within ALA degree granting institutions vary immensely from program to program.

Anecdotal evidence implies that obtaining a position in an academic library is much harder than the advertised librarian shortage would have us believe (Weber, 2014) (Manjarrez, C. A., et al, 2010) (Orphan, S., 2006).

The MLIS/MLS graduate degree is different than some other professional degrees i.e. J.D. & M.D., in that a residency, internship, or formal practice component is not always explicitly required by the degree granting institution or the accrediting body. Due to a lack of embedded experience in MLIS/MLS programs, new graduates are put in a difficult position when job searching. For the most part, new graduates within the field do not have the level of experience with in the profession to target positions other than entry level. Entry-level positions as defined by Ratledge and Sproles and Tewell are positions that:

- Require an ALA-accredited MLIS/MLS degree or the equivalent and
- Advertisement says entry level or
- One or fewer years of experience or
- No experience or duties impossible for entry level librarians to gain (i.e. supervising other professionals, administrative experience, and substantial progressively responsible experience). (Ratledge & Sproles, 2004) (Tewell, 2012)

Unfortunately for new graduate librarian applicants, librarians who would not necessarily qualify as new graduates are also applying to entry-level positions. In Tewell's 2012 study, 50 entry level positions were randomly selected from 1,385 job advertisements. Of those randomly selected positions, 75% of the successful candidates did not fit the entry-level definition (2012). Candidates who have more experience than the average new graduate will have

an advantage in interviewing and presenting transferable skills to an academic search committee (Tewell, 2012).

Experience matters. The most common piece of advice given to academic library students by practitioners and library school alumni is to work in an academic library prior to entering the workforce. This advice is supported by the library literature related to hiring practices in academic libraries. The literature further states that academic search committees look not just for the MLIS/MLS degree but also for other experiences relevant to the job that the applicant is pursuing (Eckard, M. et al., 2014). At this time most of the research related to new librarians has been primarily concerned with new graduate advice and studies related to long-term trends in librarianship. Few studies examine the connection between employment and educational experience prior to and while obtaining a degree in librarianship and the job search process. Neither have there been studies surveying new graduates' opinions on what they and their MLIS/MLS programs can do to increase their chances of a successful job search.

## Literature Review

A review of library literature reveals that beginning at the turn of the twenty-first century there have been systematic attempts to analyze the demographics of the field and predict the workforce needs of the future. In 2010, the Workforce Issues in Library and Information Science (WILIS) study compiled data about the career patterns of librarians who graduated between the years of 1964 and 2007. Their work confirmed that if librarians are able to follow through with retirement plans, by 2018 over 23% of the current library staff will have left the workforce. The early results of this study conclude that the demographic shift will challenge academic libraries to replace their current workforce (Moran, Marshall, & Rathbun-Grubb, 2010).

These data obtained confirms Stanley Wilder's claim from 2002. Wilder stated that thousands of librarians would be retiring over the next 15 years and when they did, they would take with them their expertise and bring about, "the most important human resources phenomenon facing the profession" (2002). Wilder stated that the problem was a management concern, not just a workforce issue. Kaufman concurs, stating that a great problem in librarianship is not just a small recruitment pool, but the fact that current frontline librarians are unwilling to move from their "entry level" positions and transition into middle management and administrative positions (2002). In later articles, Wilder (2007) clarifies that the coming retirements will not necessarily result in a one-to-one demand for new professionals and that the demands of academic libraries

would affect the actual need for librarians. According to a study by Edge and Green (2011), there is a pattern of historic alleged librarian shortages dating back to the 1960's. The supposed shortages lead to aggressive recruitment strategies that then lead to an overabundance of LIS graduates.

Nonetheless, many articles and books have advertised a coming librarian recruitment crisis and recruitment efforts by both professional organizations and library schools have increased accordingly. In 2002, ACRL and ARL formed a joint task force with the stated goal of recruiting and retaining new librarians. The task force created videos and other marketing materials aimed at students considering a career in librarianship (Simmons-Welburn & McNeil, 2004). Other programs were also created to deal with a supposed lack of candidates for librarian positions. At the University of Oklahoma, library administration created a recruitment program specific to library staff already working within the library. Staff members in the program would pursue an MLIS while working full time in the library. The particular program was created because of a lack of candidates who had the inclination toward the academic rigors, including faculty and publishing requirements, of librarianship (Huang, Reiss, & Engel, 2003).

According to the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS) librarians held approximately 148,400 jobs in 2012, with a job outlook for growth that is slower than the average profession. Academic librarians make up 17% of all of these librarians. The BLS believes that the increased availability of e-information will increase the demand for librarians in research and special libraries. They also believe that job seekers will face strong competition for a limited number of available positions (Statistics, 2014-15).

Ratledge and Sproles (2004) examined over 2,600 librarian job ads to find out what percentage of entry level jobs were in *American Libraries* and what skills and knowledge were required for new graduates once they entered the librarian job market. Their study found that over time a greater emphasis has been placed on the human/behavioral aspects of librarianship. Their data also indicated that there has been a marked increase in the amount of actual experience required in entry level positions (Ratledge & Sproles, 2004).

This data is echoed by Hall (2013) who examined how important skills and experience were to employers when hiring. Hall surveyed supervisors of newly hired instruction librarians and found that 81% ranked skill sets as important when hiring and 63% ranked experience as highly important. Hall (2013) also found that 96% of the supervisors surveyed felt that instruction skills should be taught within library schools.

Kennedy, Gonzalez and Cenzer (2007) found in their research that, "most employers are more interested in students' experience rather than the way in which their degree was earned." They further state that search committees believe that experience trumps education. In his chapter from *The Expert Library*, "Sustaining, Staffing, and Advancing the Academic Library in the 21<sup>st</sup> Century," David Lewis poses the question, "If coursework doesn't count in hiring new librarians then what does count?" His argument is that LIS education needs to pay attention to the interpersonal aspects of training librarians (Lewis, 2010). His argument then reinforces the importance of coupling LIS classroom curriculum with experience and soft skills. Sproles, Johnson and Farison conclude that classes alone are inadequate to prepare new librarians to be comprehensive

instructors of information literacy (2008). These skills can only be developed by actively engaging in instruction prior to entering the professional field (2008).

Library Science education has to continually adapt to meet the needs of the modern academic library. Sproles et. al. concluded that coursework was not enough to prepare future librarians for information literacy instruction and that "additional training and continuing education" were necessary to develop prepared library instructors (2008). In an examination of LIS curriculum concluded in 2009, researchers found that only nine of the observed LIS programs required an internship or practicum and only one school offered user instruction as a core class (Hall, 2009).

### Questions Guiding the Study

In the exploration of the role of experience in the academic library job-hunt, the researchers conducted their investigation via a qualitative and quantitative survey of the new graduate experience in searching for academic library positions. The researchers created a survey aimed at new and recent library school graduates. The survey asked participants about their pre-MLIS/MLS education and career preparation as well as their work, if any, during library school. The survey also collected the graduate's current job status. This was done in an attempt to discover what, if any, correlation there was between prior MLS/MLIS work experience and ease in finding an appropriate professional position in an academic library. The goal of the qualitative portion of the study is to motivate the development of best practices regarding library school preparation and student empowerment in the job search.

### Methodology

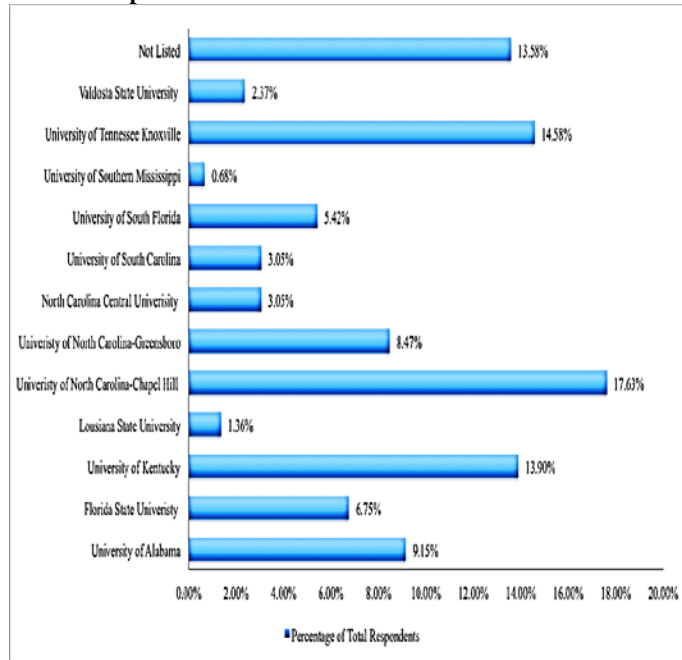
The researchers created and distributed a survey, approved by the investigators' Institutional Review Board (IRB), through the survey aggregator Survey Monkey with the goal of reaching new and recent MLIS/MLS students who were actively seeking employment in an academic library or presently employed in an academic library (Appendix A). The researchers defined recent graduates as individuals who matriculated between the years of 2009-2012. Survey participants should have graduated from an ALA accredited school in the southeast region of the United States. That amounted to 12 graduate programs located from Kentucky to Florida (Appendix B). The researchers engaged student groups, alumni associations, state listservs and ALA professional listservs to recruit participants (Appendix C). The invitation and link was also posted to the Facebook page *I Need a Library Job*. Crowdsourcing was also used as a recruitment tool as participants were encouraged to pass the link on to other interested parties. Upon completion of the survey, participants were offered the opportunity to enter into a drawing to win one of ten \$25 Amazon gift cards.

The survey consisted of fourteen questions, nine of which requested participant information regarding educational status during and prior to obtaining their MLS, as well as the different ranges of their work experience. Four of the questions were demographic, requesting information about their current working status. The final question was an open ended one, offering participants the opportunity to make comments on the study and/or their opinions on the LIS job hunt.

## DEMOGRAPHIC RESULTS

The survey was open for two weeks from late August to early September of 2013. The researchers received five hundred and forty-six (546) responses. Respondents were disqualified through parameters prescribed by the investigators. Those parameters included whether or not the participants were actively seeking an academic library position and what graduate school the participants graduated from. Respondents who did not graduate from a southeastern ALA accredited institution were further disqualified in an attempt to narrow the focus of the investigation. Out of all the responses two hundred and ninety five (295) were qualified to take the survey.

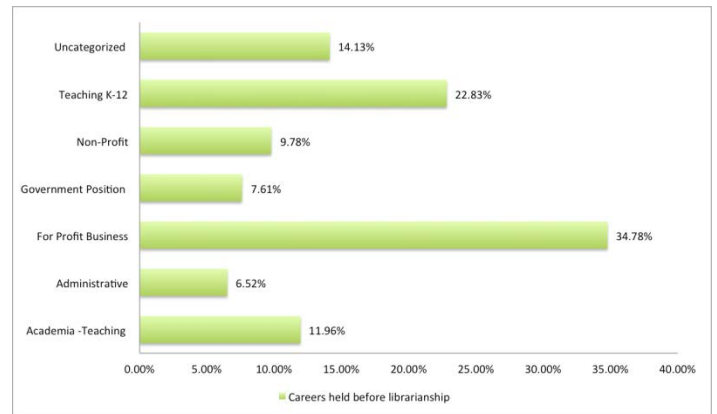
**Table 1**  
**Schools Respondents Attended**



The largest number of responses came from UNC-Chapel Hill School of Information and Library Science at 17.63% and the smallest number of responses came from the University of Southern Mississippi School of Library and Information Science at .68%. The majority of the respondents participated within the first week of survey release. The survey saw a considerable bump in number of respondents after the announcement of the survey on the Facebook page of *I Need a Library Job*.

Of the responses, 32% of the participants had an additional degree or certification that they achieved while or prior to entering their MLIS/MLS program. Of those that had another master's degree, 53% had a graduate academic degree, 20% had a professional master's degree, 15% had a graduate certificate and 8% had a PhD. Sixty percent of respondents reported that librarianship was their second career. The plurality of respondents, 35%, had experience in a for-profit industry. The smallest percentage of respondents 6% came from an administrative or secretarial background. Twenty-two percent of respondents were in their previous position for 10 or more years. Only 7% held their previous positions for less than 2 years.

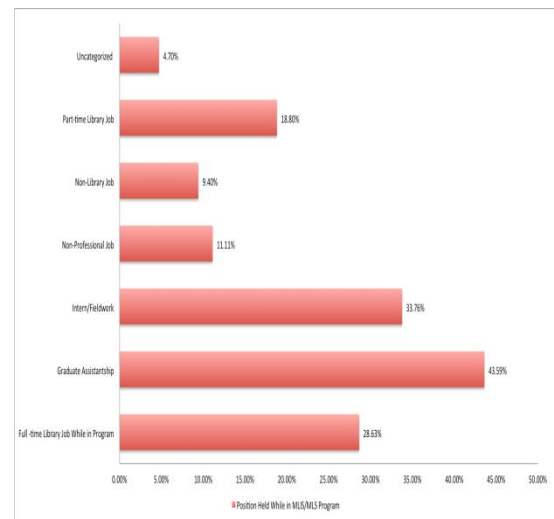
**Table 2**  
**Respondent Careers before Librarianship**



The majority of the respondents worked while in school. In gathering the statistics the researchers coded the reported positions into broad categories. While there may be some overlap in the data categories the coding was based upon self-reporting from the respondents. Ninety-six percent of respondents worked full or part-time. Of those who worked while in school, 9.4% worked in an occupation outside of the library field. 28% worked full-time in a library while gaining their MLIS/MLS degree. The positions they worked ranged from library technicians and assistants to full-time librarians.

The scope of work as a graduate assistant appears to be inconsistent between schools. Some schools had high rates of assistantship and internships that directly related to the program of study. Other schools were dependent upon unpaid practicums for library experience. The graduate assistantships heavily support reference and instruction, archives, and faculty research. The internships seemed to favor public libraries and special libraries.

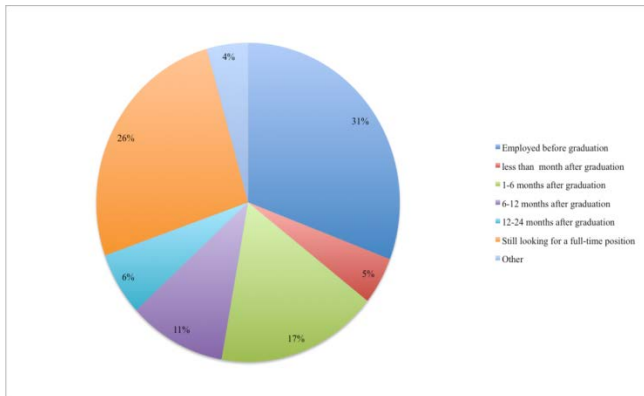
**Table 3**  
**Position Held While in MLIS/MLS Program**



Sixty-three percent of respondents stated that it took them less than 12 months to gain full-time employment. Based on the comments in

this question, many respondents directly credit working while in school to their ability to gain a full-time position before or soon after graduation. Three graduates also stated that their full-time staff positions turned directly into a library professional position shortly after graduation.

**Table 4**  
**Time Until Full time Employment After Degree Attainment**



**Discussion of Responses**

The data obtained from this study was interesting in that it confirms anecdotally, with hints quantitatively and qualitatively of the absolute necessity of experience in the job search. Over 70 respondents explicitly stated in their comments that their work experience prior to entering their MLS program and work during their degree program helped them obtain their positions or that the lack thereof hindered their ability to obtain a position.

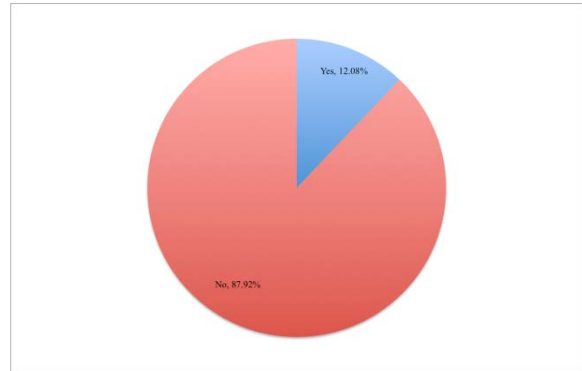
**Table 5**  
**Participants Comments about the Job Search Process**

Participant 542	Having the previous Master's degree as well as practical, relevant experience was extremely helpful in landing my first professional job.
Participant 473	I believe my previous degree and the practical experience I obtained during my internships and jobs were the deciding factor in my success as a candidate for my current position.
Participant 366	I am very frustrated by my currently fruitless job search and feel as though my career counselors should have been more straightforward with me in citing the lack of positions in the field of librarianship.
Participant 255	Although I had many years of experience as a staff member in the library prior to obtaining my degree, I found while interviewing at many academic institutions that this staff experience did not really count so much as professional experience so it was very frustrating to have 10+ years of library experience but lose jobs to people who had been a "librarian" for maybe a year and yet were considered to have more experience.

What is also interesting is that respondents stated that the job they worked while in their MLIS/MLS was not a requirement for

graduation and they did not receive credit for said job. Eighty-eight percent of the respondents who worked while in school did not receive academic credit for their position.

**Table 6**  
**Job held while in MLIS/MLS program a requirement for graduation and/or for credit**



If work experience is crucial to obtaining employment, requiring and giving academic credit for said experience would make sense, but none of the programs surveyed in this study have a practicum or internship as a *required* piece of their curricula. According to Hall (2009), only nine of 69 unaccredited and accredited LIS programs in the United States of America require an internship or practicum in their core requirements. Investigators for this research project found that three of the institutions surveyed state in their online overview of their program that a practicum is highly recommended and the education provided by the program needs to be supplemented by practical work experience.

All but one of the twelve programs surveyed have job search sections on their websites, but only one program has a library specific career counselor. Only one of the programs surveyed has extensive academic library job search counseling with mock interviews and practice presentations for job interviews advertised on their website. If the goal is employment and experience is an advantage toward obtainment of a position then practice should be interwoven throughout the required curriculum but few LIS program require said practice.

**Best Practices**

Based upon the qualitative data and an extensive literature review, the researchers recognize the following as best practices for supporting LIS students' professional preparedness:

**For Students**

- Build relationships with recent graduates prior to entering library school to gain a more well-rounded perspective about employment prospects and what it takes to build a professional resume while in library school
- Think more globally about the profession and entertain the possibility of a more non-traditional track
- Take advantage of any and all career development opportunities offered by the school and the immediate library community

- Diversify coursework outside of the program
- Attend conferences and read literature inside and outside of the profession
- Look for opportunities to develop areas of research and specialization while in school
- Take full ownership of career and professional branding, the library school can only do so much

#### **For LIS programs**

- Provide easily accessible information for students prior to entering their MLIS/MLS that accurately and realistically reflects the current employment outlook for academic librarians
- Communicate employment expectations during enrollment, allowing for opportunities for paid and unpaid work
- Foster deeper relationships with libraries on and off campus and highlight those relationships in a visible spot on the institutional website
- Present a broader curricular focus on production of tangible activity, i.e. website creation, reference and instruction, and publishable research
- Provide extensive career counseling, i.e. mock interviews, practice presentations for job interviews, career specialization outlooks and resume and CV writing workshops
- Develop alumni mentoring networks that support student transition in the profession

#### **Conclusion and Future Implications**

As shown by our study, the majority of the participants recognize the importance of working while in school. This information is also threaded throughout the library literature. But new students may be unaware of what it takes to succeed in this profession. Close to 40% of the respondents to our study were in their first career. It's a safe assumption that these respondents are coming to library school directly from undergraduate programs with limited work experience and limited knowledge of the requirements of getting a job in an academic library. The researchers would like to further test those educational assumptions by reaching out to first year library students and questioning not just their educational and job history but the timing behind their education and jobs.

Even if they are not coming from an undergraduate program, unlike a lot of other professional degrees, the MLIS/MLS degree does not necessarily require work experience to enter to the program. Additionally, academic library job searches are challenging and require knowledge and preparation that even those with experience in job searches may be unaware. As described by the article, "Qualms and Questions for an Academic Job Interview" the academic search process can be a multi-day ordeal involving applications of skill sets that new professionals do not have or need more experience to develop (Herreid II & Full). The authors write "Most are ill prepared for the experience: they have never written a curriculum vitae or resume; they do not know how to give a

seminar; they are not prepared to ask intelligent questions during an interview; and they do not know what to look for in a job" (Herreid II & Full).

In terms of practicums and internships, LIS programs can and should do more to allow a broader definition of what information work can be. If students can communicate effectively that their position is related to the field, library schools should ease the burden to receive practicum credit for the work. Library schools might also consider developing partnerships with distant institutions in order to provide more opportunities for their students to gain experience while pursuing an online education. In terms of next steps for research, the investigators would like to collaborate with MLIS/MLS programs to expand the reach of the survey outside of the original institutions surveyed.

The trend toward more MLIS/MLS programs online makes this challenging, but not prohibitive. This may require an expansion or additional work on the programs part for oversight, but it would give graduates a surer footing and better preparation for the academic library workforce. Programs should also be responsible for providing students access to what they need to succeed in the classroom and in the profession. Institutions can implement and curate programs that serve to cultivate students not only academically, but professionally as well.

Ultimately, it is up to students to pursue the opportunities offered. In addition, when opportunities are not apparent they need to create them. They can do this by engaging actively within the profession, joining student groups, researching community needs and shortfalls, and finding volunteer/ intern opportunities. It is the students' responsibility during their time within their program of study to ensure that they take advantage of all opportunities available.

If the goal of higher education is to ultimately obtain a professional position, every chance should be taken to stand out from the crowd in a competitive job market. Potential employers are looking for patterns of behavior illustrated by work and experience. Mosely and Kaspar state, "in filling these positions today, even as most managers will seek the ALA-accredited library/information science master's degree, there is also a growing need for applicants to demonstrate pertinent supplemental work and life experience" (2008). In order to get that experience students must be proactive in seeking out and creating opportunities not only to learn, but to also practice. By actively engaging in conversations with professionals in the field outside of the classroom, students can potentially open doors to opportunities to get the experience they need to succeed in the job search process. Students may have to be the ones to seek out the critical supplemental experience. Programs in turn can provide a framework that supports students' efforts with a holistic approach to curriculum development. Not only developing and finding opportunities for students to obtain the experience that they need in order to succeed, but also nurturing an environment where outside-of-the classroom experience is an integrated and expected part of the educational experience that they provide.

## Appendix A

### Survey

#### INFORMED CONSENT STATEMENT

Experience Mandatory? Assessing the Impact of Pre-MLS/MILIS Careers & Educational Experience on the Academic Library Job Hunt.

**Introduction:** You are invited to take part in a research survey, conducted by librarians at the UT Libraries. The purpose of this proposed study is to conduct a quantitative analysis of recent graduate's job history and educational experiences as well as illustrate the effects that those experiences had on their academic job search.

**Information About Participants' Involvement in the Study:** You will be asked to complete an online survey with 14 questions. It should take about 10 to 15 minutes to complete. You must be 18 years of age or older to participate.

**Risks and Protections:** There is minimal risk for harm or injury. Some discomfort may be felt after spending time sitting in front of a computer and/or typing.

**Benefits:** Your participation in the survey will help the UT librarians add to the best practices related to MLS/MLIS education and training. The survey will also help UT librarians/investigators share with colleagues at other universities (in articles or presentations) strategies related to training.

**Confidentiality:** The information gathered in this study will be kept confidential. Data will be stored securely and viewed only by persons conducting the study. No reference will be made in written or oral reports that could link participants to the study.

**Compensation:** Respondents who participate in this study will be eligible to enter a drawing for one of ten \$25 gift certificate to Amazon.com. Participants will only be entered after completing the survey. Participants will be asked to provide their email in order to be entered into the drawing; email addresses will remain confidential and will not be associated with your responses.

**Contact Information:** If you have questions at any time about the study or the procedures, (or you experience adverse effects as a result of participating in this study,) you may contact the researchers, Sojourna Cunningham, at (865) 974-3525/scunni16@utk.edu or Ingrid Ruffin, at (865) 974-3513/iruffin@utk.edu . If you have questions about your rights as a participant, contact the IRB Administrator in the Office of Research at (865)974-3466.

**Participation:** Your participation in this study is voluntary; you may decline to participate without penalty. If you decide to participate, you may withdraw from the study at any time without penalty and without loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. If you withdraw from the study before data collection is completed, your responses will be destroyed.

**Consent:** I have read the above information. I can print out a copy of this form. I am 18 years of age or older. I agree to participate in this study.

1. Would you like to participate in this study?  
Yes, I would like to participate and take this survey  
No, I do not want to participate
2. Are you currently working as an academic librarian? Or are you actively seeking a position in an academic library?  
Yes  
No
3. Please select the school that you received your MLS/ MLIS  
University of Alabama  
Florida State University  
University of Kentucky  
Louisiana State University  
University of North Carolina - Chapel Hill  
University of North Carolina - Greensboro  
North Carolina Central University  
University of South Carolina  
University of South Florida  
University of Southern Mississippi  
University of Tennessee

Valdosta State University  
Not Listed

4. How long did it take for you to gain full-time employment after MLS/ MLIS graduation?  
Employed before graduation  
less than 1 month after graduation  
1-6 months after graduation  
6-12 months after graduation  
12-24 months after graduation  
Still looking for a full-time position  
Other (please specify)
5. Did you go directly from an undergraduate program to graduate school?  
Yes  
No
6. Is librarianship your second career?  
Yes  
No
7. What was your career or job before enter library school?
8. How long were you in your previous career?
9. While pursuing your MLS/ MLIS did you have a practicum, internship or assistantship at the school of your attendance  
Yes  
No  
If yes, please specify.
10. Was the practicum, internship or assistantship a requirement for graduation?  
Yes  
No
11. Did you have a post-secondary degree or certification prior to obtaining your MLS/MLIS degree?  
Yes  
No

Demographics

12. What institution do you currently work for? (Institution names will not be named in presentations or articles)  
Yes  
No
13. How many years have you been a librarian?  
Yes  
No
14. Is there anything else you would like to add?  
Yes  
No



## Appendix B

### Institutions surveyed

University of Alabama  
Florida State University  
University of Kentucky  
Louisiana State University  
University of North Carolina- Chapel Hill  
University of North Carolina-Greensboro  
North Carolina Central University  
University of South Carolina  
University of South Florida  
University of Southern Mississippi  
University of Tennessee  
Valdosta State University

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