

# The

Discovering high-tech,  
high-touch opportunities in library  
and information science

by Ken Haycock and Carla Garner

# Bunheads



# Are Dead

**C**onjure up a picture of today's librarian, and you are likely to be wrong. Professional librarians are information analysts, freedom of information and protection of privacy officers, family literacy specialists, Internet trainers, teen specialists, genealogists, web designers and technologists, database managers, historical researchers, information brokers . . . indeed, few have the title of "librarian" but all have the master's degree in Library and Information Science (LIS).

These days, your school librarian more likely than not is a teacher or part-time aide assigned to library duty. And the customer service desks at your public library more likely are staffed with paraprofessionals. Today's MLIS holders are typically managers of agencies, departments, and systems—less visible to the public than the frontline trained technicians and assistants that they oversee, and highly skilled in emerging technologies like Web 2.0 and Second Life.

Graduate LIS programs are appealing to a younger and more diverse student population, yet recruitment is still problematic due to misconceptions about the career and the little-known fact that the first professional degree is at the master's level. Yes, you do need a master's degree, but not to “check out books” as the stereotype suggests. MLIS students learn higher-order analytical skills for assessing community information needs (whether for a municipality or in the private sector), developing collections of resources to meet those needs, designing programs and services to exploit those resources, and assessing the effectiveness and impact of implemented services.

### **Best-career buzz**

The overall career dome of “information professional” is a hot commodity these days. *U.S. News and World Report* included “librarian” in its list of the 31 best careers of 2009. High growth is also expected within the related information technology career paths of computer systems managers and analysts as well as database administrators, web designers and web developers, according to the U.S. Department of Labor. And with the looming retirement of over half the current workforce (two out of every three librarians are over the age of 45), traditional librarians will be in demand as well, along with archivists who can

cross over from paper-based collections to emerging electronic and digital formats.

The outlook is also strong for the longer term. The World Future Society recently named the top “high-paying careers of the next two decades,” and two of the six were related to library and information science: bioinformaticists who work with the abundant genetic information being generated and serve as a bridge between scientists and those developing drugs and genetic therapies; and cybrarians who will monitor, organize, and enforce policies on an exponentially growing Internet. Both of these jobs exist now, although with different titles—bioinformatics specialist, researcher, information policy analyst, and electronic records manager, for example—positions often held by professional librarians.

This puts the pressure squarely on the 60 programs offering the accredited MLIS degree in the United States and Canada to keep up with the changing needs of the industry, and they have accepted the challenge. A recent survey of LIS programs by Heting Chu at Long Island University's Palmer School of Library and Information Science showed that nearly 30% of new course offerings

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covered the topics of digital libraries, website design and applications, computer and information networks, and digital preservation. Following that were courses on cyberspace law and policy, knowledge management, competitive intelligence, human-computer interaction, and computer security. These certainly aren't the subjects generally associated with a traditional librarian, and signal the dawning of a new direction for the industry as a whole. And while library science has always required a unique combination of right brain/left brain skills, we now are seeing a greater melding of the LIS field with other disciplines, such as business, communications, graphic arts, education, history, urban development, social service, human rights, law, psychology, and computer science. Further, people who began their careers in each of those fields are being drawn to LIS as a second career opportunity.

LIS programs generally require a core foundation for professional librarians regardless of a preferred career path, and beginning courses in the master's program will introduce students to the foundations of the profession. Topics covered include the core values of equitable access to information, intellectual freedom, confidentiality and

privacy of records, information tools and technologies, information design and retrieval, management and leadership, and research methods. Students may then choose to specialize or pursue a general program. There are four common environments for professional librarians—in academic settings such as colleges and universities; in public libraries as community information and popular reading centers; in schools as “teacher-librarians”; and in the corporate, government, and nonprofit sectors as information specialists. Courses address the needs of particular client groups from preschoolers, children, and teens to lawyers and medical practitioners. Some pursue one area exclusively, like information systems and technology, while most choose a more general approach. Graduates may opt to pursue independent and entrepreneurial careers as information brokers and researchers/writers or craft their own positions, such as a medical information officer in a clinic.

## Debunking the stereotype

While the industry recognizes the transitions that are taking place, the stereotypes still persist. Most of us have our favorite librarian memories, from the school librarian who helped us discover a love of biographies to the children's librarian who enthralled us with theatrical versions of *Where the Wild Things Are*. And these individuals still are a large part of today's library experience, but more often than not they aren't professional librarians with MLIS degrees. As retirements occur, many communities and organizations are hiring more degreed librarians as managers and staff developers, supervising trained technicians and clerks. True, this shift was set in motion in part as a cost-cutting effort, but evolving technologies have played a role as well, and today's MLIS students are learning far more complicated skills that frankly make them overqualified for the more traditional frontline library jobs.

It wasn't always the case, however. It is perhaps amusing to look back at the origin of the stereotype and one of the very first library programs offered at San Jose State University (then San Jose State Teachers College) in the 1920s with courses like Library Economy, Book Appre-

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ciation, Lettering (as in book labels and catalog cards), and Storytelling. The handful of women who spent three weeks each summer as students or teachers at the school devoted their lives to their library careers (most were single and would remain so) and in their spare time attended workshops such as Toy Making, Puppet Shows, and Social Hygiene. They were also a free-spirited bunch, taking cross-county road trips and often packing up their belongings and moving from state to state in search of better job prospects. There were few opportunities for women who wanted careers, and librarianship with its emphasis on order, culture, and education was a socially acceptable path. And while the profession attracted its share of independent-minded women, it also encouraged them to maintain strictly organized and systemized workplaces, with books in their correct locations and a church-mouse level of quiet that promoted high-order social behaviors.

Perhaps this is the image many still have of their neighborhood or school librarian, and it has been endorsed through the years by the media, which generally still casts the librarian as the bunheaded spinster, sweater clipped over the shoulders and pince-nez perched at the end of her nose, shushing any who dare to break through her dusty, dimly lit cone of silence. But anyone who walks into a public library today will (or should, if we are doing our jobs right) find a more welcoming and lively environment. Even urban libraries in older buildings now have revamped their spaces, with squishy chairs to promote an afternoon of lounging, open conversational areas for gathering teens, and on-site cafes. Yes, many libraries now allow people to walk freely among the stacks, chatting on their cell phones while sipping Starbucks lattes.

And that same program at San Jose now operates in a high-tech environment with more than 2,500 graduate students in almost every state and more than a dozen countries. Through distance education and the sophisticated use of content management and learning systems, web-conferencing and even a virtual campus in Second Life, the San Jose School of Library and Information Science is the largest in the world, with more than 100 classes a semester on a wide variety of topics, each held to a maximum of 25 students and a highly qualified instruc-

tor. Required “in-person” meetings—through the Web, immersive environments, or the school’s virtual social networking program—are carefully scheduled to accommodate, for example, an instructor at a university in New Zealand with students in Hong Kong, Germany, Canada, and across the United States.

And just as libraries have changed physically, so have they operationally, as a result of emerging technologies and in response to public demand. A recent survey of community residents from around the country showed that computer availability, database access, and Wi-Fi are high priorities, and they expect their libraries to provide these free of charge. And although community members still look to libraries for storytimes and book discussions, more and more they count on libraries for individual support in the form of personalized software instruction or database training, small business assistance such as market research or document translation, and community services like literacy instruction or job-search workshops. These functions require higher-order knowledge, skills, and abilities, and the more mechanical components of book selection and basic reference are being outsourced or handed down to support staff members, under the supervision of a professional. Another outcome of this transition has been the reshaping of the MLIS-degree holder to include librarian and information professional.

## **The new look of the MLIS**

For the past several decades, MLIS programs have recognized the morphing of the library from book repository to community information provider and have redrawn the skill set that goes along with the degree. Courses in information technology and management now are required



components of MLIS programs, and curricula are flexible enough to lead graduates beyond public library work and into positions in business, government, academic, and nonprofit sectors. MLIS graduates are web designers, database administrators, computer information managers, industry analysts, information literacy trainers, and policy researchers along with the more traditional roles of archivist, cataloger, and of course library director (a traditional position but a very untraditional role these days). In fact, 2006 saw a 60% annual increase in MLIS graduates who took information technology positions.

In turn, employers are expecting more from MLIS holders than good organizing skills. Characteristics like the ability to be experimental, responsive, and adaptable are what employers are looking for in today's information professional. In a world with rapid technological change, these *should* be mandatory, and MLIS graduates often report that their skills are well suited for a variety of positions, easily transferable beyond the traditional library arena. Even public librarians are acquiring new skill sets and more likely than not are specializing in one area of the field, such as technology education or outreach to specific populations like immigrants and the elderly. With the advent of virtual technologies, some librarians might see themselves as facilitators, matching up users in need of information with experts in a given field.

As such, the industry is committed to diversifying its fold beyond the stereotype of the middle-aged white spinster. Recruitment efforts continue to focus on greater multilingual and multicultural representation, and, while making some inroads, males currently comprise only 20% of the LIS workforce. The American Library Association along with a number of other organizations offers scholarships for diversity development, but the key is convincing the Gen Y crowd that an MLIS student no longer looks like a librarian, or their image of one anyway. And then there's the matter of pay. Public and school librarians in some areas still trail in average professional wages, but corporate researchers and those on the IT spectrum rival the pay they would find in other career options. Of course, independent information researchers and consultants can establish their own rates.

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And what about the MLIS as a second career path? Over half of recent LIS graduates had switched careers midstream. Any previous life is fair game, including education, business, government, and the arts. Some have turned to LIS when faced with a layoff or limited advancement opportunities. Others such as researchers and consultants have sought a career that offers personal satisfaction and independence. Still others have been drawn to LIS as an extension of their previous positions, using their lifetime experience and subject expertise to pursue a career in which a patent attorney could become head librarian for a law firm or university law library, as one of many examples.

Those who have discovered the contemporary version of the MLIS have been able to dismiss the bunheaded-librarian stereotype traditionally associated with the degree. In doing so, they have discovered a field that offers plenty of growth, countless opportunities, and flexibility to make the career their own. ■

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