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Is the MLS Necessary?

Rethinking Library Science Education

I didn't learn that in library school.

My MLS gave me so many transferable skills.

I advanced my career with my MLS, but I gained many skills while on the job.

These are sentiments the authors of this piece hear regularly. They are often whispered among library professionals that are hesitant to go “on the record” to question the current state of library science education.

Despite any hesitancy to voice concerns about our educational processes, the profession engaged in heated debate about the need for an MLS during the rather contentious search for an American Library Association Executive Director when Keith Michael Fiels retired in 2017. At that time, articles were written supporting or questioning the need for the MLS in this administrative position. In fact, John Berry noted that to disregard the MLS as a requirement or “dilute it by calling it preferred, not required, is to devalue it and the professionalism of the librarians who have earned it.”¹ When ALA was again in search of a new executive director in 2024, these sentiments about the need for an MLS bubbled up, although not as contentiously as in the past.

This discussion acknowledges that there is a group of library professionals that believe someone can successfully enter the profession with other relevant experience and acquire the specialized library knowledge through work in the field. It's unsettling that some can accept this reality for our guiding professional association, yet ignore it when it comes to the library workforce. We believe the discussion at the ALA level, along with anecdotal discontent in the ranks of the profession, reveals the necessity of discussing these issues across the profession.

While we understand the value of the MLS (after earning it to advance in our respective library careers), we question the insistence that it is necessary for all professional or administrative positions. Libraries are constantly changing and evolving. The skills and experiences necessary for success in library positions are not always taught in library science programs. Given inconsistencies we have seen in educational requirements in job postings in our home state of Pennsylvania, we have to wonder about the sustainability of a degree that is both entry-level and terminal. Couldn't we diversify our profession by opening our minds to individuals with varied experiences and skills that could benefit our organizations and libraries? Are there opportunities to expand educational opportunities available to prospective library science students? This doesn't mean we do not value the MLS; it means that we recognize that not every position in a library or library organization requires it.

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We addressed these concerns and shared some ideas for creating alternate pathways for individuals to enter the profession (e.g., apprenticeships, stackable degrees, competency-based credit) in a manuscript submitted to two different library science journals. Both journals provided peer reviews that seemed biased in response. There were some productive comments that helped us to recognize that more research is necessary (in particular, examining degree requirements of MLS programs and looking at expectations and educational requirements in library job postings), but we were surprised by the tone of some of the comments we received. Reviewers seemed offended by the suggestion that there are potential issues with library science education.

Our suggestions for alternate pathways into the profession acknowledge the value of the MLS for library leadership, career advancement, and entry into some areas of the profession. Our suggestions also acknowledge that the profession exists within the zeitgeist of declining confidence in the value of higher education. While many people still see the benefits of obtaining a two- or four-year degree, the perceived value of these degrees is declining while the perceived value of on-the-job training and short-term credentials are rising.² If prospective students are questioning the value of a bachelor's degree, they certainly would not be planning to pursue graduate degrees. Individuals will expect to move in and out of education as it fits their changing needs, necessitating alternate pathways to entry into any career if we expect that career to survive and thrive. The US higher education landscape is grappling with these forces pushing innovation, and it would be foolish to think library science education is immune to them. The profession has an opportunity to reshape the MLS curriculum and make it more valuable. Some acknowledgement of this need is happening, as demonstrated by a recent call for papers from the *Journal of Library Resource Sharing* for articles about what library science programs should teach regarding resource sharing that is not currently being taught but is instead being learned on the job. A new approach can do justice to the idea of an advanced level of study rather than trying to prepare people for both entry-level and advanced work, neither of which, anecdotally, it appears to be doing effectively now.

Does every library position require an MLS? Some would likely argue, yes, it is vital for all library professionals. But are we willing to overlook other candidates who may have valuable experience and knowledge to offer? Are we willing to say that only MLS-holding librarians can truly understand and advocate libraries? Until we answer these questions, we will continue to have the same debate each time an ALA executive director is needed. And if we ignore these questions, market forces may answer them for us when change is forced on us, due to lack of MLS-prepared professionals. Our profession prides itself on the ability to think critically, so why are we unwilling to think critically about how we are educating library professionals? ∞

Notes

1. John Berry III, "The Devalued MLIS: ALA's Leader Must be a Librarian," *Library Journal* 142, no. 2 (2017): 10.
2. Jessica Blake, "Doubts about Value Are Deterring College Enrollment," *Inside Higher Ed*, March 13, 2024, <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/students/retention/2024/03/13/doubts-about-value-are-deterring-college-enrollment>.