

# Re-envisioning the MLIS: Assessing MLIS Preparation for Emerging Public Library Leaders

A project by: Anna Mattonen, Katrina Ortega, Carolyn Reagle, and Pauline Stacchini

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## Summary Report

### Executive Summary

This year, one of the PLA-sponsored Emerging Leaders projects was an inquiry into the education of public librarians prior to their working in the field as degreed professionals. The question centered around how well public librarians believe their MLIS education prepared them to work in public libraries, and what skills or competencies are needed in today's public library. Emerging Leaders Project Team H: Anna Mattonen (Springfield-Greene County Library District), Katrina Ortega (New York Public Library), Carolyn Reagle (Loudoun County Public Library), and Pauline Stacchini (Dallas Public Library) were tasked with this project in January 2016 at the Boston Mid-Winter ALA conference. Scott Allen, PLA Project Manager, and Kerry Weinstein, Hoboken Public Library and PLA Member guide, have been providing guidance and support to the team.

Directors, hiring managers, librarians, and faculty generously gave their time and insight during our research which led to the following initial conclusions. Some of the skills and competencies needed today are very different from what might be expected; the traditional librarian behind the reference desk is no longer the public librarian norm. Today, public librarians need top-notch customer service and technological skills, strong interpersonal and communication skills, leadership qualities, and the ability to engage in their communities. They also need to be adaptable, flexible, lifelong learners who can market the library's offerings and problem-solve in an innovative manner.

Although over half (52%) of the initial online survey respondents said they believed their MLIS education prepared them for their first public librarian position, the research team saw the other side: this data also reflects that almost half of public librarians did not feel prepared by their education for a position in a public library. In follow up phone and email interviews, a lower percent agreed that they did not feel prepared for their role of public librarian after graduation. What respondents did say was that the MLIS curriculum provided the foundation for identifying an interest in public librarianship. A number of interviewees said that internships provided work experience in public libraries and an opportunity to find one's strengths. **One respondent said: "With any type of education/program/schooling, the best way to learn things is through doing them. Many of my courses in graduate school were theoretical and therefore I deemed it to be impractical. Internships were always the best form of education in my opinion - seeing first hand the day-to-day tasks that people had to do."**

After being on the job and seeing the reality of public service, newer librarians wished they had taken management, marketing, programming, budgeting, conflict resolution, and community outreach classes. Others expressed the desire for prior experience working with individuals with intellectual or physical difficulties. It was not a surprise that hiring managers and librarians with more experience identified different needs than newer librarians, and saw value in pursuing continuing education opportunities in subjects like project management and grant writing. In

fact, a manager bases candidate selection on their ability to answer yes to: “**Are you prepared to handle change and are you a lifelong learner?**”

Most of the respondents graduated after 2000 and believed that their program somewhat prepared them for the technical challenges faced by public librarians. Those who graduated before 2000 did not feel as prepared to take on the ever-changing technologies used by customers. Evidence from interviewees supports the idea that the MLIS may need to change its offerings to meet the needs of public libraries.

The team will present a poster with their findings, recommendations and conclusions at the ALA Annual Meeting in Orlando on June 23 and present to the PLA Board of Directors on June 24,

### **Background and Research**

The project seeks to answer whether current accredited MLIS programs are adequately preparing library professionals to work as 21<sup>st</sup> century librarians in public libraries. In addition, the team identified the skills and competencies that are most relevant for public librarians by interviewing library directors, hiring managers, librarians with more than five years of experience, librarians with less than five years of experience, and MLIS faculty. Our PLA Member Guides have been working with us and participating in our conference calls during the project. The team has been working virtually via Google Drive and through conference calls to complete the project.

**Research:** First, the team analyzed current studies such as the “Aspen Institute Report”, the “Competency Index for the Library Field by Webjunction”, and other key documents that address the skills and competencies needed for 21st century librarians.

The team decided to conduct its own research by interviewing different stakeholders about how their MLIS education prepared them for their first library position, prepared them for the speed at which technological changes have taken place, and what skills/competencies they believe are essential to a 21st century librarian.

### **Research methods:**

1. **PLA Survey:** The first action item was to post one survey question in PLA’s monthly newsletter. The initial online survey question, “In your opinion, did your MLIS education adequately prepare you for your first position as a public librarian?” had 692 responses, with 52% responding “yes” and 48% responding “no”.
2. **Surveys, online and phone:** Findings from thirty-one surveys conducted via Google Forms and phone interviews provided the team with key findings on the critical skills/competencies needed by a 21st century librarian, insight into what the interviewees wished they had learned in library school, and whether or not library schools are providing the technical foundation to stay relevant in this field. The team decided to

survey stakeholders in the public library field including directors, hiring managers, librarians with five or more years of experience, Librarians with less than five years of experience, and current MLIS Faculty.

- 3. Library school curricula:** The team identified the “top ten” library schools as listed on the 2013 U.S. News and World Report.<sup>1</sup> Each school’s current offerings were explored in order to measure how many offered specific classes for public librarianship. This selection of graduate schools presented the team with a look into what is currently offered and how those classes match up with the interviewees’ self-identified lackings.

### **Research findings:**

- 1. Essential Skills for a 21st century Public Librarian:** Customer service is at the top of list. Soft skills like interpersonal relations, communication, adaptability, listening, networking, and leadership are in strong demand by hiring managers; Directors expressed their need for librarians who can look beyond the library walls and engage their communities. New librarians cited customer service, reference, and technology skills along with traits like adaptability, flexibility, and leadership as all being essential.
- 2. Competencies:** Directors and hiring managers look for life experience outside of the library field that can enrich the library workplace. All looked for candidates who want to serve the public, regardless of their social status. (“Not be afraid of or view customers with disdain in urban areas.”) Prior experience in teaching or in counseling and the ability to speak more than one language were mentioned as assets for candidates. All are looking for positive, bright, inquisitive and confident librarians who will be good team players. Although library school cannot teach many of these competencies, they can provide work groups on projects where these skills can be developed.

**Conclusion:** While there is still more work to be done to make final recommendations, the research team found that there are gaps in MLIS education that should be filled in the future. Whether this is accomplished by mandating fieldwork by all students or whether a percentage of course curricula should become standardized across programs is still unclear. Final recommendations are that the Public Library Association consider the research findings as noted above and assign future teams to delve deeper into MLIS programs.

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<sup>1</sup> “Best Grad Schools: Library and Information Studies.” U.S. News and World Report, 2016: <http://bit.ly/1eS8Sk2>

## Group 1: Library Managers/Directors Interview Summary Conducted by Carolyn Reagle

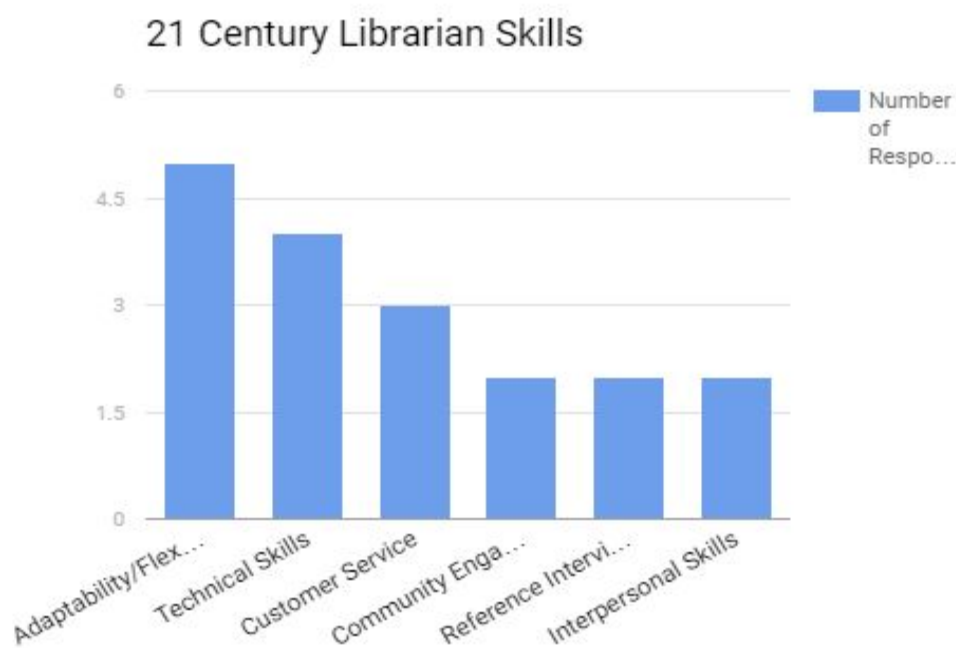
### I. Interviewee Demographics

- A. Total participants: 9. This includes 4 Directors , 1 Programming Director with 50 years of public library experience who is also a Fulbright Scholar, 1 Public Service Manager, 2 Branch Managers - one is a current Library Journal “Mover and Shaker”. All participants hire public librarians. It was a fascinating and dynamic group of individuals. Seven participants interviewed by a scheduled phone interviews. Two interviews done via Google forms online.
- B. Schools attended: Catholic University, University of South Carolina, University of Wisconsin, University of Washington, University of Southern California and Florida State University. 4 out of 7 received their MLIS after the year 2000.
- C. How did you get started in professional librarianship? Some started by working as Library Assistants and one started out as a Children’s Librarian. One individual was Director of Communications for her system and then went back for her MLIS after becoming committed to public libraries. One won an ALA Spectrum Scholarship.

### II. Questions and Responses

- A. Did your MLIS education fully prepare you for the majority of the work you do as a public librarian? Twenty-five percent said their MLIS fully prepared them for their first public library job. Two said the MLIS gave them a foundation of core courses like intellectual freedom. One other said library school gave her the opportunity to find her strengths and interests.
- B. What was the most valuable aspect of your MLIS education? Two said library school gave them the opportunity to find their strengths and interests. Two said the MLIS gave them foundation core courses like intellectual freedom.
- C. What 3-5 skills are most important for a 21st century librarian? **The skills in bold are common themes.** Cultural competency, leadership, **advocacy, willingness to do outreach**, project management, **proficient in technology**, public speaking, looking beyond the library walls to network, being able to troubleshoot complicated customer service issues, **adaptability, flexibility, listening**, reference interview, **interpersonal skills, marketing and community engagement**, desire to learn something new every week, cross-functional knowledge across library specialities, understand the library budget, **love of public service**, being able to promote staff as advisory services.

- D. At any point did you ever think, "Wow, I wish I could have learned THAT in school"? If so, what was it that you had wished your graduate program had covered?: Advocacy, talking to public officials, project management, Intro to management, being able to deal with building issues like the HVAC/Plumbing systems ( I can relate to that!!) , programming, working with funding, grants and Friends of the Library, working with a difficult employee, performance evaluations, grant writing, leadership skills.



- E. Technology and the digital information "cloud" are growing. Did your graduate program prepare you for the speed at which these changes have taken place? Most said no, most were going to school while working and received technical training on the job. One said the bigger question is "Can you handle change and are you a lifelong learner?"
- F. How do you think schools could address the "tech" challenge? Keep track of technology changes and what is key. Provide basic hands-on experience.
- G. Competencies that you look for in librarian candidates outside of the MLIS program? Soft skills: i.e. the ability and desire to want to work with people. They need to want to serve the public and not be scared of or view customers with disdain in an urban setting. Ability to think big picture. The ability to make connections and develop relationships, a warm personality. Willingness to learn

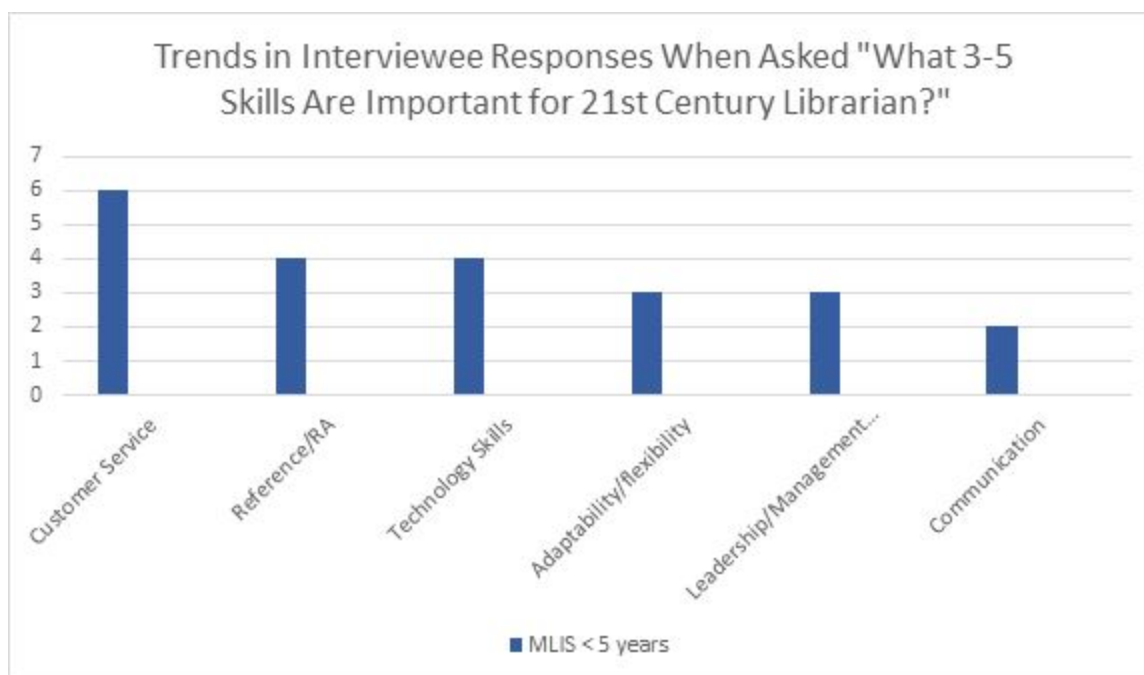
new things, be inquisitive, share your success, support intellectual freedom. Experience working with the public, be bright and inquisitive, adaptable, listening skills, positive, fun, and upbeat, comfortable and confident. Positive attitude!

- H. Could these competencies be incorporated into an MLIS? Mixed answers. Several said MLIS programs could help to develop competencies through projects and curriculum.
- I. All nine interviewees said they embrace CEU's & ongoing training.

## **Group 2: Librarians Holding MLIS for Less Than 5 Years Conducted by Anna Mattonen**

- I. Interviewee Demographics
  - A. Total participants: 9
  - B. The accredited programs attended by interviewees are as follows: University of Pittsburgh, University of Missouri (2 participants), Syracuse University, Kent State University, Pratt Institute, Dominican University, University of South Florida and Indiana University-Bloomington.
  - C. 55% of interviewees did not feel as though their MLIS program adequately prepared them for their first jobs in public libraries. This supports Project Team H's earlier survey results which revealed that 48% of public librarians holding MLIS degrees felt their education did not prepare them for the work field. Three interviewees expressed hesitant answers to the question of whether or not their MLIS program adequately prepared them for the work force. These answers were given with variations of suggestions of what would have made their MLIS experience better. Only one interviewee answered the question with a resounding "yes, my MLIS program prepared me for working in a public library."
  - D. Current interviewee job titles include technology/reference librarian, reference librarian, children's librarian, teen librarian, senior librarian, reference associate, virtual services librarian, adult services librarian, and library director. 56% of interviewees had also held other positions since obtaining their MLIS. Other job titles included acting head of reference, services support specialist, school library aide, children's librarian, substitute library assistant, and youth services librarian.
- II. Questions and Responses
  - A. "What 3-5 skills do you think are important for the 21st century librarian?"

Interviewees gave a variety of answers. Once interviewee responses were broken down, several trends stuck out (see below).

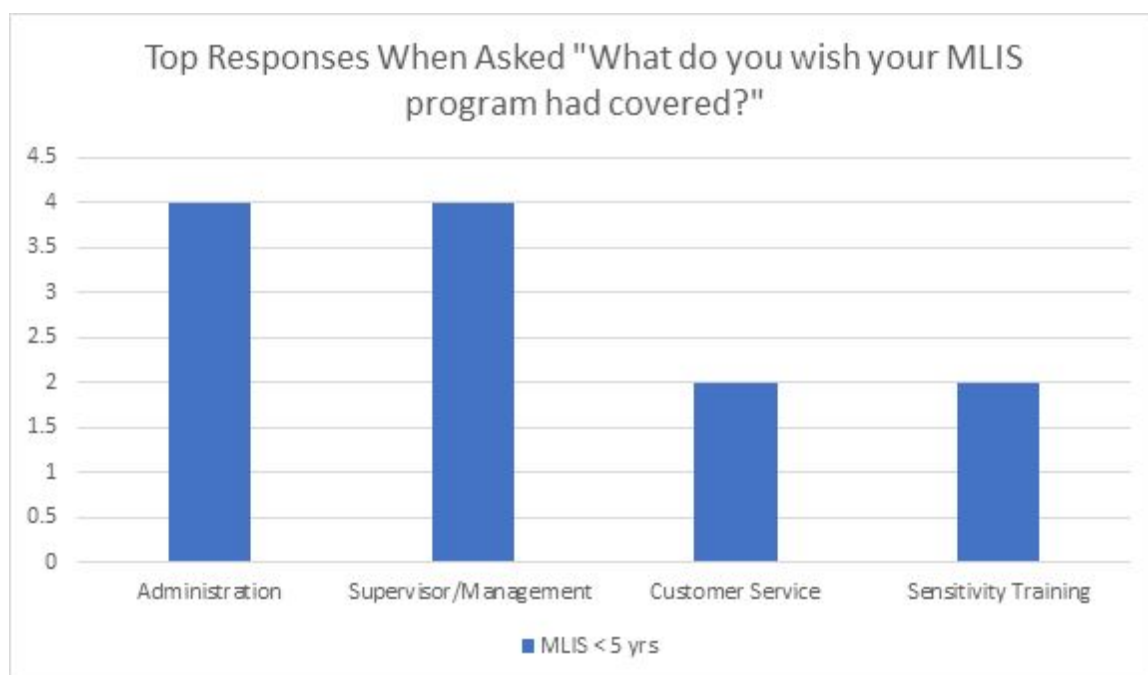


While customer service, reference and RA, and technology skills stood out, less popular but also listed as important skills were adaptability and flexibility; leadership, management and budgeting; and communication. Skills that were only mentioned once by interviewees include literacy, child development, software knowledge, library organization knowledge, and a general attitude of curiosity and willingness to seek continuing education on the part of public librarians.



- B. “At any point have you ever thought, “Wow, I wish I could have learned THAT in school”? If so, what do you wish your graduate program had covered?”

Interviewees expressed a variety of responses to this question.



The most popular responses among interviewees covered administration skills, such as how to prepare library budgets, especially budgets dealing with technology, furniture, and program supplies. Another interviewee echoed administration skills and added that training in administrative operations in terms of funding, budgeting, human resources, and facility management would have been most practical. A third interviewee detailed that they thought managing library buildings, capital construction, tax levies, budgeting, and legal issues related to directorship should have been covered in their MLIS program.

While only mentioned once, the following were included by interviewees as topics they wished would have been covered by their respective graduate programs: more technology training; research; childhood development and early literacy; safety and security; sensitivity training (ie: individuals with disabilities, mental illness, formerly incarcerated, individuals experiencing homelessness, veterans, children in foster care, immigrants, and older adults); library organization; programming; public speaking; and reader’s advisory.

- C. “As professionals in this field well know, technology and the digital information ‘cloud’ are growing. Given the speed at which technology changes, did your graduate program prepare you for the speed at which these changes have taken place?”

Only 22% of interviewees indicated that they were unhappy with their technological training in their degree programs. Considering technology skills were ranked by interviewees to be highly important to their roles as public librarians, this is an area where MLIS programs seem to be adequately preparing students for the field.

It is worth noting that one interviewee said that while they were satisfied with their technology training in their degree program, they did wish to see more focus placed on emerging technologies, such as 3D printers.

- D. “How do you think MLIS programs should address rapidly advancing technology to help prepare librarians of the future?”

In this follow-up question regarding how interviewees believe MLIS programs should best prepare students for rapidly changing technologies, varied responses were given. Most indicated that it is difficult to prepare students for emerging technologies while they are still emerging, though some gave suggestions. One said, “Less focus on the hard skills of coding...more focus on how the library can bridge the digital divide.” Another replied, “Talking with students about the pros and cons of being ‘early adopters’ of new technologies and how to determine what your unique community needs helped prepare me the most.” These responses can help public library professionals identify how best to educate librarians of the future to deal with trends and advances in technology.

- E. “What class/classes contributed the least in preparing you for your work in a public library? Why?”

Interviewee responses to what contributed least to their future work in public libraries were varied. 45% of interviewees indicated that a form of introduction to cataloging was the least helpful. While it wasn’t specified whether or not this introduction to cataloging was required by respective programs, this response

might indicate that even introductory courses on cataloging should be electives. Other courses mentioned by interviewees as being the least helpful to their futures in public libraries were history of libraries, music librarianship, archives, and an outdated reference course. Although these were listed, most interviewees indicated that these courses were interesting, simply not beneficial to the work they ended up doing in their future public library careers.

F. “What was the most valuable aspect of your MLIS education?”

Interviewee responses regarding what they considered the most valuable aspects of their MLIS education were widely varied. While many interviewees indicated cataloging was *least* valuable, two interviewees responded that their cataloging courses were *most* valuable. Similarly, while a majority of interviewees did not think their introduction to libraries class was valuable, one respondent mentioned that the focus in their introductory class was on the changing nature of libraries for the future, and that was what they had found most valuable about their MLIS education.

Learning real-world skills such as patience, social etiquette, classes that required students to work with budgets, and working with the public were all mentioned, as well as specialized courses like young adult and children’s librarianship classes.

The most popular trend in interviewee responses to this question was that their practicum was most valuable. One respondent said, “I believe practicums should be required for students, and allow opt-outs if the student has enough experience already.” While this is often the case in many MLIS programs already, not every program requires a practicum. This is a potential area for PLA and future Emerging Leader teams to look at in the future.

G. “Do you currently pursue continuing education opportunities? In your opinion, do you see continuing education as essential in the ability to perform your job successfully?”

Nearly all interviewees indicated that they currently pursue some form of continuing education, whether it be through in-house training, webinars, or conference attendance. Respondents all indicated that continuing education is essential for public libraries. One said, “I absolutely believe librarians need to

continue learning through the years to keep up with technology trends.” Another said, “Anyone who doesn’t [pursue continuing education] will [fall] behind and miss good opportunities for networking.” The overwhelming response in support of continuing education proves that public librarians must be adaptive and willing to be lifelong learners. Whether this has implications for how MLIS programs are designed and implemented might be an area for PLA and Emerging Leaders to look at in the future.

H. “Any other thoughts or comments you would like to add?”

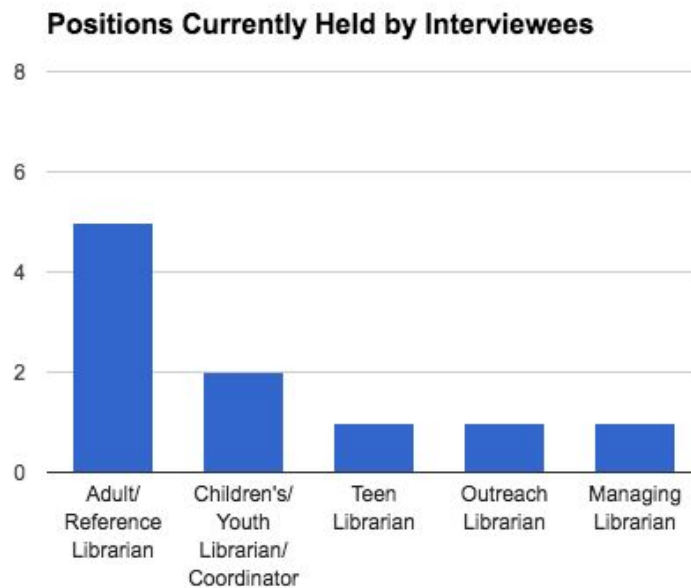
This question was posed to allow interviewees to leave us with some final thoughts on their experiences with their MLIS programs as well as what they’ve experienced in the work field post-graduation. Some of the most insightful comments are included in the table below.

I consider myself fortunate for having worked in libraries before I began my education in Library and Information Science, but a number of my peers did not have that experience or opportunity. Internships, especially unpaid internships, don't seem to alleviate this, and a number of new librarians seems woefully unprepared for the circus they are thrust into upon leaving the environment of graduate school, even if they are continuing in an academic environment.
Libraries stand at an odd position between supporting community member's needs for information and becoming a town center for entertainment. These things are seldom brought up in an academic environment, as most classes only focus on finding information and very little with how to deliver that information or what to expect when working with the public.
I think that students would get more out of their MLIS education if the classes were more focused on what actually happens in libraries and less on the theoretical aspects librarianship.
While I learned a great deal from my MLIS education, the best teacher is always experience, and I probably learned just as much if not more about actual day-to-day operation from my job (Substitute Library Assistant) while attending graduate school.
With any type of education/program/schooling, the best way to learn things is through doing them. Many of my courses in grad school were theoretical and therefore I deemed it to be impractical. Internships were always the best form of education in my opinion - seeing first hand the day-to-day tasks that people had to do.

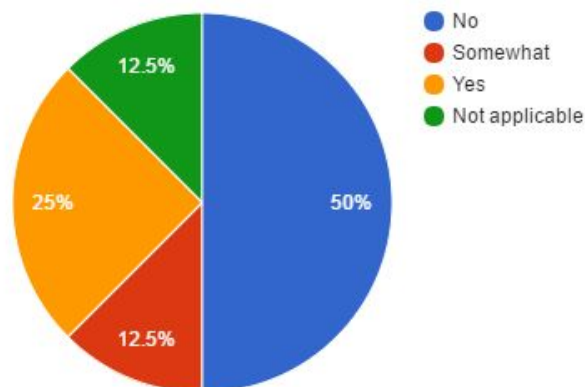
### **Group 3: Librarians Holding MLIS for More Than Five Years** **Conducted by Katrina Ortega**

I. Interviewee Demographics

- A. Total participants: 8
- B. The MLIS programs that interviewees attended included the following:
- Pratt Institute (x4)
  - University of Maryland, College Park iSchool
  - Catholic University
  - Queens College
  - University of South Carolina
- C. Job titles that interviewees currently hold/have held during their librarian careers:
- Every interviewee has held a position in a public library that is public facing.
  - Only one interviewee has held a non-public position (Cataloging Librarian)



- D. When asked whether their MLIS program adequately prepared them for their career in a public library setting, interviewees responded, largely, no:

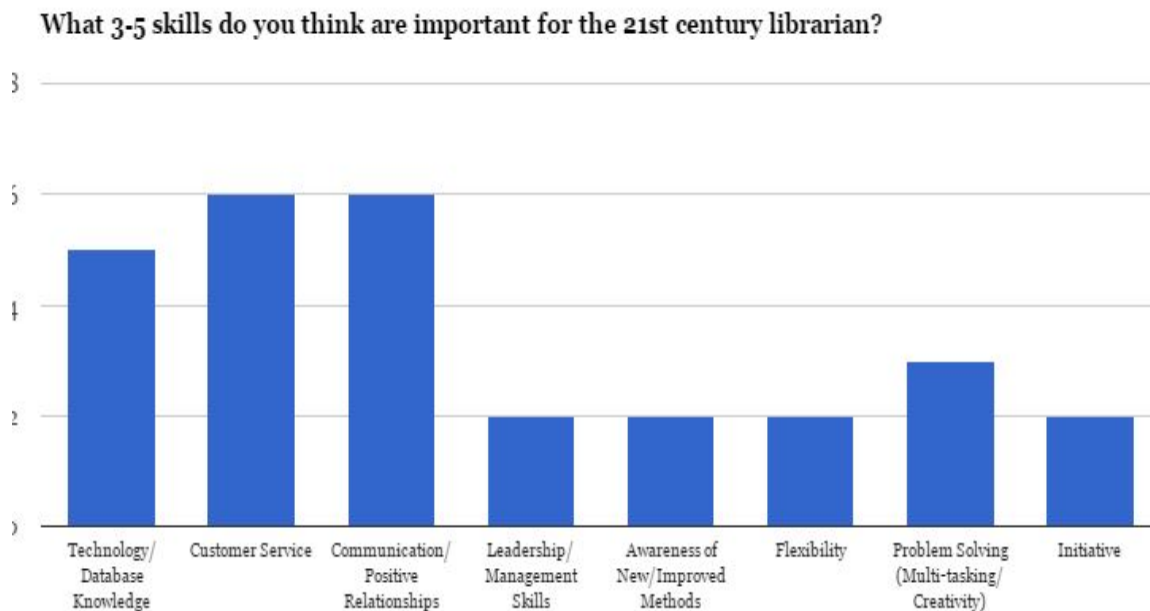


- a. 50% of responses was “No”
  - i. The “Not Applicable” response was given by an interviewee who had worked as a non-professional in a public-facing library setting for many years before attaining an MLIS degree; the interviewee felt that the years spent working in a public library setting had already prepared them substantially for public librarianship.
- b. Further responses stated that MLIS programs failed to teach students the ways in which a public library would serve a variety of functions (“It was especially outdated when it came to the various functions of a modern public library system and its place in the community”); and that while there were things missing from their formal education which they learned on the job instead, they were constantly made aware that many things would happen in the line of work of a public librarian that one could not prepare for in the classroom.

- E. What 3-5 skills do you think are important for the 21st century librarian?

- a. Top 3 common responses:
  - i. Customer Services
  - ii. Communication/Positive Relationships (with community and colleagues)

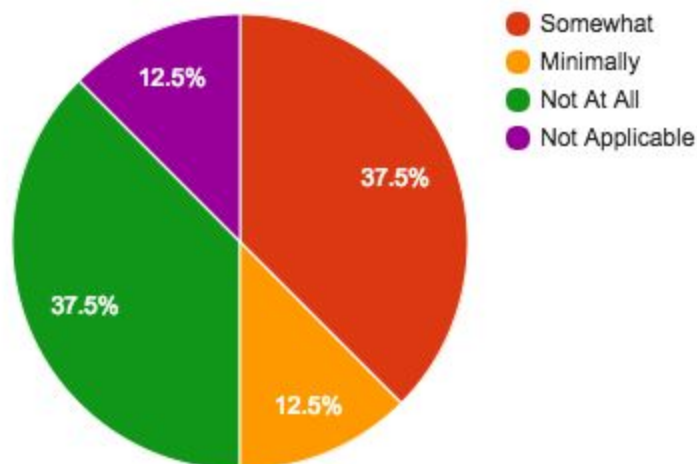
### iii. Technology/Database Knowledge



- F. At any point did you ever think, "Wow, I wish I could have learned THAT in school"? If so, what was it that you had wished your graduate program had covered?
- Management skills for both colleagues on your level and colleagues above
  - Conflict Resolution for both patrons and colleagues; Emphasizing the need for soft skills in the workplace
  - Effective, appropriate, and helpful ways to deal with EDPs
  - Programming for all age groups; focus on developmental/social/community needs
  - Community Outreach, particularly understanding how libraries differ in various community settings (urban, rural, suburban; level on socio-economic scales; ESL communities, etc.)
  - Budgeting in libraries; possibly grant writing
- G. Did your graduate program prepare you for using the most up-to-date technology when you entered into the field?
- Did your graduate program prepare you for the speed at which these

changes have taken place? Similarly, how do you think programs should address these changes to help prepare librarians of the future?

**Were you prepared for the the most up-to-date technology upon entering the profession as a librarian?**

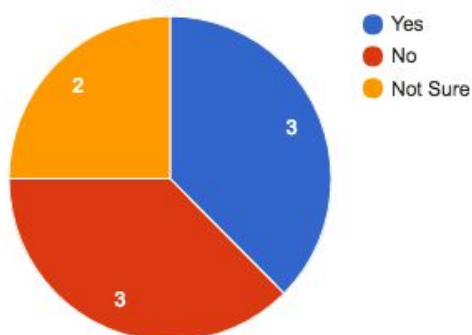


- H. What was the most valuable aspect of your MLIS education?
- A. Access to other professionals and the opportunities to learn from others in the same/similar positions
  - B. The opportunity to connect with others, and therefore to develop career, through professional organizations
  - C. Development of media used in school libraries
  - D. Optimistic outlook of the evolution and growth of the public library in our society
  - E. Understanding the “science” of how information was gathered and organized
  - F. The “philosophy” behind public librarianship, including:
    - i. Library ethics
    - ii. Need for lifelong learning/improved literacy
    - iii. Fostering development of youth in different ways
    - iv. Community services analysis and assessment
- I. Do you currently pursue continuing education opportunities? In your opinion, would you benefit from continuing education? Do you see continuing education as essential in the ability to perform your job successfully?

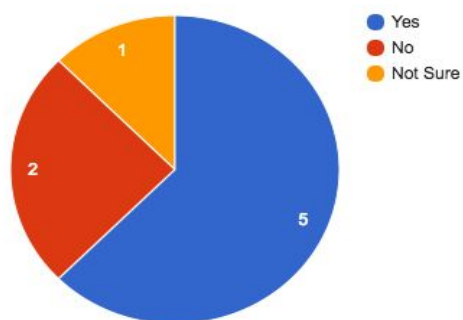


Overwhelming response stated that continuing education is beneficial and essential to the improvement of public librarianship as a whole. Some interviewees repeat the idea that it is necessary in the field because it is such a constantly changing one.

**Do you currently pursue continuing education opportunities?**



**Do you/Would you benefit from increased continuing education?**



- J. Does your library system support a mentoring program? If so, do you participate in it?

Only one interviewee stated that his/her library system supported a mentoring program. That same person said that they participated in the mentoring system and that it was beneficial to them and the system as a whole. Other interviewees stated that, while there is no formal mentoring system, many staff members informally mentor each other through group/committee meetings, shadowing, and other informal modes. Two interviewees also mentioned their involvement with professional orgs as a way to mentor and be mentored by colleagues.

#### **Group 4: SLIS Faculty** **Conducted by Pauline Stacchini**

##### I. Interviewee Demographics

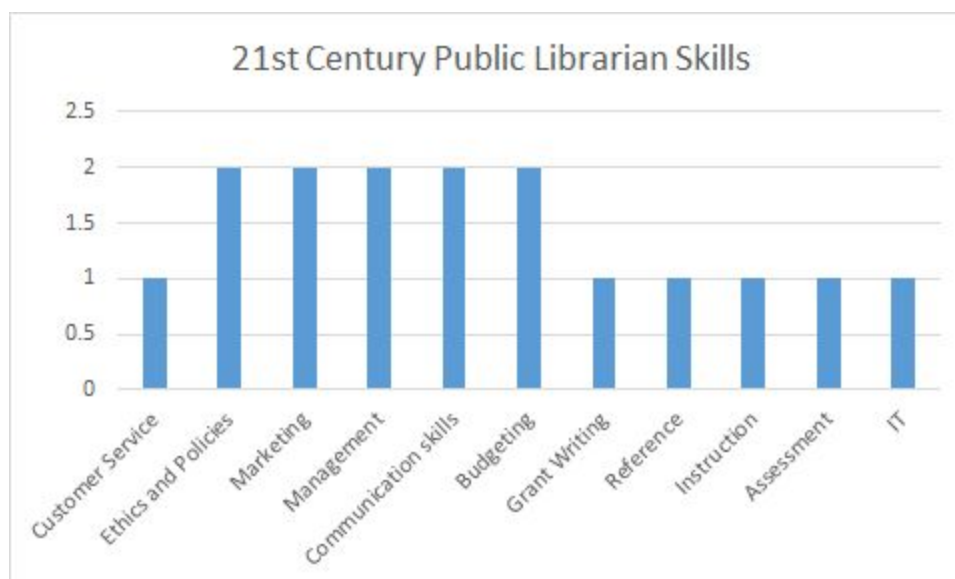
- A. Total participants: 5

- B. The accredited programs attended by interviewees are as follows: Florida State University (two participants), The University of Texas at Austin, University of Maryland, Indiana University.
- C. Out of the five interviewees, only four had experience working in public libraries. Only one person with public library experience replied directly to the question of whether the MLIS prepared them for public service: “No, the MLIS education does not adequately prepare one for the service.” The three other responses were vague, but two seemed to indicate they did feel prepared.
- D. Current interviewee job titles include Associate in Research (two), Associate Professor, and Chief Operating Officer for Public Services (one interviewee did not answer). All of them held other positions since obtaining their degree, such as in a Geographic Information System center, or as an instructor in a Global Development and Social Justice MA program.

## II. Questions and Responses

- A. “What 3-5 skills do you think are important for the 21st century librarian?”

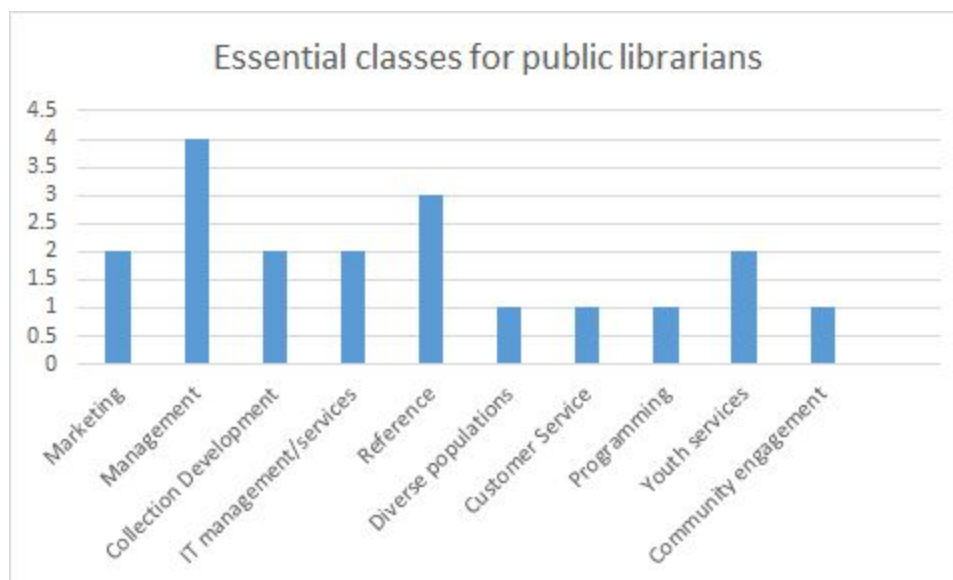
Interviewees gave a variety of answers. Once interviewee responses were broken down, several trends stuck out (see below).



From the responses received, it seems that communication skills (internal and external both), marketing, management, budgeting, and knowledge of ethics and policies are While customer service, reference and RA, and technology skills stood out, less popular but also listed as important skills were: adaptability and flexibility; leadership, management and budgeting. Skills that were only mentioned once by interviewees include literacy, child development, software knowledge, library organization knowledge, and a general attitude of curiosity and willingness to seek continuing education on the part of public librarians.

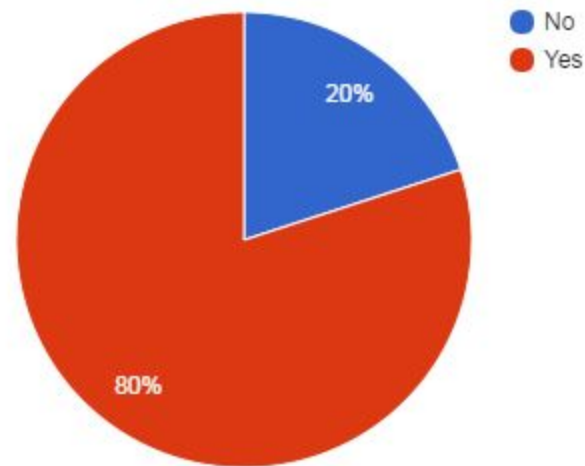
- B. “In your opinion, what classes are essential to all students interested in becoming public librarians?”

The interviewees shared a number of different classes that they believe future public librarians should enroll in, some of which were mentioned by multiple responders. The answers showed the need for librarians who can manage people, or who have had experience in management.



- C. “In your opinion, do you see continuing education as essential in the ability to perform your job successfully?”

### Count of Do you currently pursue continuing education opportunities?



Four out of the five respondents currently pursue continuing education opportunities. When asked if CE was an essential part of performing one's job successfully, all agreed that it was extremely important for professionals working in public libraries to keep abreast of trends in the field through continuing education.

One respondent said, "The degree is only the beginning of the learning that librarians need to do to provide innovative and responsive services to their communities."

D. "How do you see the future of MLIS education? What changes are needed as we educate the next generation of public librarians?"

This question provided interviewees the opportunity to open up about where they see room for improvement in the current MLIS education system. A common thread in the responses was the need to address evolving technologies in some way for librarians to be able to help their customers efficiently. An underlying theme was the need for adaptability in candidates; this is a trait needed as libraries meet the needs of different communities. One interviewee mentioned the need for children's services training, reflecting the library profession's current

hiring trend.

One candidate mentioned: “Leadership skills need to be emphasized. We must do more to encourage continuous technology skill acquisition, public speaking and teaching skills, and courses that teach students to engage with all stakeholders. We have many wonderful energetic students who are driven by service ideals and love the challenges that exist in today's information organizations. But we still have too many reticent students who are passive and actually want to be the shushing librarian of the stereotype, or they want to hide in a cubicle and not engage with users.”

Another interviewee supported the idea that changes need to occur not only in the MLIS system, but also in public libraries employing new graduates. “I think another shift that has to happen is not so much on the part of educators but on the part of librarians and library employers: a large part of what LIS education does is orient people to the profession of librarianship, not the job and the particulars of any given institution's operations. [...] We provide a common foundation, and it's up to our graduates and their employers to develop the specific applications of that knowledge.”

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