Earning a Master’s Degree in Library and Information Science: First Steps

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Earning a Master’s Degree in Library & Information Science: First Steps

by Fiona May, Kristine Brumley, Gena Marker, and Lizzy Walker

What would it take for you to embark on the great adventure known as a Master’s degree? A panel discussion at the 2011 Southwest Idaho Library Association conference focused on beginning this journey. The four panelists, all students in the University of North Texas (UNT) Library and Information Science program, shared insights into pursuing a graduate degree. This article summarizes their advice to prospective graduate students.

Fiona, whose experience already included some graduate coursework, talks about estimating the cost of advanced education. She also discusses the opportunity for earning a mini-degree called a “Graduate Academic Certificate” through UNT. Gena, a high school teacher-librarian, challenges prospective students to retain balance in their lives, despite long days and heavy demands on personal resources. Lizzy, a recent Boise State University graduate, points to the need for being proactive about staying healthy while stressed. Kristine, whose background includes teaching and museum work, has researched the many scholarships available for graduate study. Hopefully, the insights shared “from the trenches” of graduate school will enlighten librarian-hopefuls in their quest to pursue a Master’s degree.

These Idahoans are part of UNT’s “SWIM” distance education cohort. The SWIM cohort includes students from South Dakota, Wyoming, Idaho, and Montana. They take core classes together, meet in person for two four-day “institutes,” and share the ups and downs of online education as a 68-person unit. Panelists agreed that camaraderie is key to navigating the first months of this demanding program.

Fiona

An important first step in choosing an ALA-accredited distance MLS program is to estimate the cost beyond the dollars and cents. Idahoans are in a tricky situation as there are no ALA-accredited programs in the state. As a result, many library students choose to utilize distance education rather than relocating. Western universities offering online courses include The University of Washington in Seattle, San Jose State University in California, The University of North Texas, and Emporia State University in Kansas (cohorts meet in Salt Lake City or Portland).

When comparing distance education options, there are many variables to consider. How many credits are required to graduate? Do the university’s focus and core courses mesh with your interests? How many face-to-face meetings are required? What is the overall tone of student comments about the program? Can you sign up for a listserv that allows you to receive student comments in real-time? How will your commitment to education affect your family and job? Who will take care of the jobs you usually do? The costs of time, travel, and stress matter immensely in the quest for graduate school success.

Students returning to college after years away may also have concerns about coping with the rigors of graduate school. Consider testing the waters with UNT’s Graduate Academic Certificate (GAC) program. With a prescribed constellation of four graduate classes, students can earn a certificate that shows a level of dedication to library work above the norm. GACs are available for Storytelling, Youth Librarianship, Management, and Digital Imaging. It's acceptable to work slowly, taking a single course at a time if desired. Note, however, that loan and scholarship eligibility are often dependent on taking a certain number of credits.

I decided to take the plunge and enroll in the Master's program at UNT after surviving a single graduate level course. At
that point, I knew I could do it. My Graduate Academic Certificate credits counted toward my degree, which meant I was one-third of the way to completion when I began with the SWIM cohort in Fall 2010. What a deal! I’m working really hard, but thanks to prior planning it’s been manageable.

**Kristine**

There are hundreds of scholarships and grants available for students pursuing an MLS. Use this list as a starting point and be sure to take the extra time to research, ask questions, and write thoughtful essays.

Start planning how you will pay for your degree by reading *How to Pay for Your Degree in Library & Information Studies* by Gail Schlachter and David R. Weber (Reference Service Press, 2010). This publication provides detailed, up-to-date information on eight hundred scholarships, loans, grants, awards, and other funding opportunities for students.

Ready to apply for a scholarship, grant or loan? Here are some excellent options to consider:

- **Idaho Library Association (ILA):** [Gardner Hanks Scholarship and ILA Scholarship](#).
- **Idaho Commission for Libraries:** [Library Services and Technology (LSTA) Continuing Education Grants](#). Must be employed by a publicly funded Idaho library (the library is the grantee); contact Shirley Biladeau (208-334-2150) at the Idaho Commission for Libraries for more information.
- **Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS):** [Laura Bush 21st Century Librarian Program - Scholarships for Master’s Level Programs](#). 2010 grant recipients: Drexel University (PA), Mansfield University (PA), Pratt Institute (NY), Regents of the University of California at Riverside (CA), San Jose State University Research Foundation (CA), University of Alabama (AL), University of Maryland (MD), University of Memphis (TN), University of North Carolina (NC), University of North Texas (TX).
- **American Library Association (ALA) Scholarships**.
- **Check with your employer, Friends of the Library, and your favorite university for scholarship opportunities.**

Scholarship search sites. The sites ask a series of questions to develop profiles that are then used to match students with scholarships.

- [www.fastweb.com](http://www.fastweb.com)
- [www.scholarships.com](http://www.scholarships.com)
- [www.petersons.com](http://www.petersons.com)

Several social networking sites enable students to post pictures and profiles and ask for donations. Donors contribute electronically by PayPal or credit card. Some small fees are required but it could be an option to raise funds.

- [www.greennote.com](http://www.greennote.com)
- [www.sponsormydegree.com](http://www.sponsormydegree.com)

Federal government student loans are also a great way to finance your education.

**Gena**

BALANCE. That's the answer I gave when someone asked about my New Year’s resolution for 2011. I knew that starting an MLS program would be time-consuming and potentially exhausting, but I was ill-prepared for how I would react to the rigors of working full-time as a high school librarian, taking on a leadership role in ILA, and beginning my Master's degree, all at the same time. In addition to feeling tired all the time, I also got so run-down by the end of the semester that I spent the entire winter break sick. At the beginning of my second semester, I had a new game plan to keep a better balance between work, school, and life. So far, although I’ve only gone skiing twice this winter and I’ve had the same Netflix movie sitting on my desk for over a month, I feel like I’m doing a better job of meeting my New Year’s resolution.

One thing that has helped in this endeavor is embracing my new reality. At the beginning of this program I was beating myself up for not continuing to do the same things as I used to. Many of the work-related things I formerly did in my spare
time at home (write grants, read library journal articles, learn new Web 2.0 tools, etc.) have fallen by the wayside. Now I just tell myself that work has to stay at work; I know if I bring it home it won’t get done, as schoolwork always needs to take precedence. I’ve also realized that there are certain nights that need to remain homework-free. Friday nights, for example, are usually full of guilt-free TV watching and catching up on much-needed sleep.

I began the MLS not because I needed it in order to land the perfect job, or even to advance in my current job; I’m already fortunate enough to be doing the thing that I love. For me, the SWIM cohort came along at the right time in my life, and it felt like the right thing to be doing. There have already been many things I’ve learned in classes that I can apply to my job, and I know that ultimately, students are benefiting from what I’m doing. For me, that’s what it’s all about.

Pursuing your MLS takes determination, sacrifice, and a lot of support from those around you. If you can manage those three things, and you want to better yourself in the field of Library Science, then you’re ready to tackle your MLS.

Lizzy

When embarking on a Master’s program, it may be necessary to consciously decide to stay healthy. Unfortunately I learned this the hard way during my first semester with the SWIM cohort. I worked two jobs, one full-time and one part-time. My husband, Arthur, was clearly concerned about my decision to keep both jobs while working on my graduate degree, but he left the choice up to me. At first I was able to handle the workload and demanding strain of my busy schedule.

As the semester wore on, I took to drinking coffee rather than water most of the time. This affected my sleep, which in turn affected my ability to function during the day. I stopped taking vitamins, simply because it was something else I had to keep track of. Also, I stopped working out and taking time for myself; I was exhausted at the end of the day. There were evenings that my husband would invite me go for walks with him even though I had a stack of homework waiting for me on my desk. Fatigue, constant allergy attacks, vulnerability to illness, and an inability to stay alert were signs that I was in poor health, but I chose to ignore them.

By the end of the first semester, I was ready for a break. I had a list of things I wanted to accomplish, books I wanted to read, and people I wanted to visit. I didn’t get one thing on that list done. My immune system was taxed to its limit. By the time the spring semester rolled around, I still had not recuperated. It was clear I had to do something.

I’ve reassessed my situation and made changes accordingly. I accepted a full-time library staff position, which allows me to work just one job. I now have more time to devote to my family and myself while working on my degree. Yoga, walking, and a good cardio workout are also on my schedule so that I keep my mental and physical health in good working order. I’m seeing a wonderful holistic doctor, allowing me to strengthen my immune system.

The best advice I can give is to take the time for yourself, eat right, get plenty of rest and exercise, and be happy.

All

In summary, our best advice is to think carefully about all your options. Why do you want a degree in Library and Information Science? Is it worth the sacrifice? If so, then do your research and take those first steps!

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