



## Factors that Increase the Probability of a Successful Academic Library Job Search



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### ABSTRACT

Finding a position in an academic library can be challenging for recent Library and Information Science (LIS) graduates. While LIS students are often encouraged to seek out experience, network, and improve upon their technology skills in hopes of better improving their odds in the job market, little research exists to support this anecdotal advice. This study quantifies the academic and work experiences of recent LIS graduates in order to provide a better understanding of what factors most significantly influence the outcome of their academic library job searches. The survey results demonstrate that the job outlook is most positive for candidates who applied early, obtained academic library experience (preferably employment), participated in professional conferences, and gained familiarity with committee work.

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### INTRODUCTION

Finding a position in an academic library can be challenging for the newly minted library and information science (LIS) graduate. Fortunately, there is no shortage of job-seeking advice for prospective candidates. From librarian blogs to professional magazines and websites such as “I Need a Library Job” ([www.inalj.com](http://www.inalj.com)), suggestions and recommendations abound. In their 2010 C&RL News piece, Cannady and Newton recommended making the “best of the worst of times” (p. 210) and gave specific advice for each phase of the job search: application, phone interview, and face-to-face interview. Singleton (2003) recommended building a network of professional contacts and being prepared to show effectiveness in professional assignment, professional development, and service. In “Academic Library Job Search Blues,” Baker (2010) advised making oneself more marketable by finding internships, becoming involved in organizations, and taking a balanced blend of classes.

While this advice may be sound, it is largely based upon the subjective experiences of the authors. The overabundance of such anecdotal advice can make a difficult job search even more challenging. With the variety of choices in coursework, internships, and other opportunities students are advised to pursue during their short time in graduate school, how will they know which activities are the most beneficial for ensuring a successful academic library job search? The objective of this study is to

quantify the experiences of recent LIS graduates to better understand what factors might help job seekers obtain their first professional position. By comparing the academic library job search outcomes of survey respondents, this study shows that applying early, obtaining academic library experience (preferably employment), participating in professional conferences, and gaining familiarity with committee work increases the probability of being able to obtain a first post-degree position. The results of this study also identify trends in LIS students' graduate school involvement (academic and extracurricular) and recent LIS graduates' perspectives of the academic library job market and the process of securing a job.

### LITERATURE REVIEW

The labor market for LIS graduates has been described, in general, as “relatively ‘recession proof’” (Morgan & Morgan, 2009, p. 299), and indeed, librarianship has endured the Great Recession of the late 2000s. The 2012–13 edition of the Occupational Outlook Handbook stated that employment of librarians is actually expected to grow by 7% from 2010 to 2020 (U.S. Department of Labor & Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2012, 2013). While slower than average for all occupations, this is growth nonetheless. According to an analysis done in 2012, salaries are up 5% while unemployment for recent graduates held at 6%, suggesting that positions are available, with similar numbers for 2013 (Maatta, 2012, 2013).

### ACADEMIC LIBRARY JOB MARKET

According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, later in the decade prospects should be even better as older library workers retire and

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population growth generates openings (U.S. Department of Labor & Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2012, 2013). However, it should be noted that this optimistic prediction is reminiscent of the early 2000s expectation that the availability of academic library jobs would increase “due in large part to the ‘graying’ of the profession” (p. 408), an estimation that never came to fruition because budget constraints, especially in local government and educational services, slowed demand for librarians (Tewell, 2012).

The academic library job market for recent LIS graduates is competitive, and for those lacking significant practical experience, it is a “potentially insurmountable challenge” (p. 422) (Tewell, 2012). Nearly three-quarters of academic librarian positions in 2011 preferred or required work experience (Triumph & Beile, 2011). Also, in 2012 almost three-quarters of academic library jobs were non-entry level, and of those 26% of all job advertisements were administrative, creating a tough market for recent graduates (Tewell, 2012).

#### SEARCH COMMITTEE PERSPECTIVES

The academic library job search and hiring process provides an additional challenge for recent graduates. During times of economic distress when employment opportunities are few and the number of applicants increases, candidates must be aware of the rigorous academic library job search process (Durán, Garcia, & Houdyshell, 2009). In their survey of search committees, Hodge and Spoor found that 78% of respondents are receiving more applications per position opening now than in previous years, but 80% do not interview more candidates (2012). Search committee members can suffer from fatigue while reviewing such large numbers of applications and may overlook qualified candidates (Howze, 2008).

The Association of College and Research Libraries' Discussion Group of Personnel Officers “agreed that previous library experience was an important requisite for an entry level position. The majority also indicated that the experience should be in an academic library” (Neely, 2011, p. 4). Previous work experience is an indicator of future job performance, as Wheeler, Johnson and Manion highlighted when they suggested that questions about a candidate's experience are more effective than situational questions (2008). Demonstrated performance of job requirements is very important. In their 2010 study, Wang and Guarria found that 90% of the 243 survey respondents (individuals who served on faculty search committees) believed that a demonstrated ability to perform job requirements was very to extremely important (p. 83).

In addition to work experience and the ability to perform job requirements, candidates must demonstrate they are leaders, not just workers. Search committees want librarians who are creative, proactive, risk takers, innovators, independent yet collaborative, lifelong learners, and visionaries (Harralson, 2001). Reeves and Hahn (2010) reminded LIS students that employers prefer individuals who have good communication skills, work well with others, take initiative, are adaptable and dependable, and have a “service orientation, a predilection for collaboration and cooperation [and] a penchant for participating in teams” (p. 118). Employers also look for applicants who can acclimate quickly to organizational culture. In Wang and Guarria's survey, over 90% of the 243 survey respondents said potential fit is very or extremely important in an academic library (2010). For recent graduates with less work experience, this further emphasizes the importance of potential fit with the organizational culture.

#### METHODOLOGY

In order to learn more about the graduate school experiences and job search successes of recent LIS graduates, an electronic survey was created using SurveyMonkey (Appendix A). In March 2013, a link to the survey was emailed to 2008–2012 graduates from the LIS programs at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and North Carolina

Central University. The survey link was also emailed to members of the ALA New Members' Round Table (NMRT) listserv, distributed on index cards to ACRL 2013 conference attendees during a related poster presentation, and electronically posted on the ACRL New Member Discussion board. At the request of the LIS program at Dominican University, the survey link was not emailed to their graduates until July 2013. In addition to being the three universities from which the three researchers graduated, these institutions represent a cross section of different LIS programs around the United States in that they have different U.S. News & World Report rankings, program formats, enrollment numbers, and local job markets. Respondents from the three universities and the NMRT listserv provided a diverse sample of recent LIS graduates from ALA-accredited programs around North America. While the respondents graduated in different years throughout the last decade, the survey questions only addressed their time in graduate school.

The survey questions were divided into seven primary categories: basic information, job search, professional effectiveness, professional development, service, technological competency, and previous careers. Questions focused on the student's graduate program, the parameters of their job search, their academic and work experience, as well as other skills or professional involvement that might impact their success in landing a first job. In addition to these questions, the survey concluded with an open-ended response question that asked, “What advice do you have for current LIS students?” This question and all other free-response questions were coded by the researchers and differences in coding were resolved by mutual agreement. The inter-coder reliability averaged Kappa = .9, which represents an almost perfect agreement according to Landis and Koch (1977, p. 165).

#### LIMITATIONS

The results are based upon a limited sample size of recent LIS graduates since the survey was sent to three specific universities. This limitation was offset to a certain extent by also sending the survey to the NMRT listserv, posting it on the ACRL New Member Discussion board, and passing out links at the 2013 ACRL Conference, which allowed for gathering responses from graduates from many other LIS schools. Due to the numerous avenues by which the survey link was dispersed, it is not possible to calculate the response rate. The results are also limited due to the fact that survey questions were optional and not all elicited an adequate number of responses for the following analysis.

#### RESULTS

Out of 360 total survey respondents, 56% (N = 201) indicated that they wanted to work in academic libraries. Eighty-two respondents wanted to work in public libraries with smaller numbers selecting “special libraries” or “other”. The survey respondents provide a varied sample of LIS graduates. The 201 respondents who selected academic librarianship were recent LIS graduates from the years 2005–2013 with the highest percentage (28%) graduating in 2011. Respondents represented 33 different LIS programs with the highest number of students graduating from the University of Illinois (56) and Dominican University (39).

#### SUCCESSFUL RESPONDENTS

Successful respondents are defined as the subset of survey respondents who were able to find a full-time or part-time, tenure-track or professional academic library job after graduation. Respondents were asked about the outcome of their job search and 186 (n = 186) individuals responded to this question. Sixty-eight percent (126) indicated that their job search was successful and 23% (60) reported an unsuccessful job search. In the following analysis, percentages are based upon the number of successful respondents who answered each question. As

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