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## Go the extra mile — it's never crowded

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### Go the extra mile — it's never crowded

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by [Heidi Blackburn](#)

My daytime alias is Reference and Instruction Librarian, but my real title is Master of Library Science. I am a newly minted MLS graduate (May 2008) and have worked full-time at Kansas State University at Salina for almost a year. As a type A personality, I had my midlife crisis early: the summer before I was to graduate with a BA in business administration. After I'd stubbornly pursued the business world since high school, I decided that corporate America held no interest for me. My family asked what I planned to do after graduation and I announced I would attend library school. I'd worked in Pickler Memorial Library at Truman State University for 3 years, and decided I never wanted to leave the library. A prescient supervisor encouraged me to pursue my passion with a professional degree.

#### **Not perfect, but better**

I began working on my MLS at Emporia State University's School of Library and Information Management in fall 2006. I'll admit I harbored no fantasies about the library science program. Just as I wasn't prepared to run a Fortune 500 company with my freshly minted business degree, I was positive library school would not hold all the answers for how to be the perfect librarian. Most of my peers came to the program after a few years in "the real world," and were looking for a change. Some people wanted to work in a library for the first time after trying other careers, while some had worked in a library for years before the timing was right to head back to school in order to move up the ranks. However, we all had the drive to become better librarians — library school was our golden ticket to the card-cataloged promised land.

#### **You want to do what?**

Library school is not an easy path and is not for everyone. Beyond the basics of applying, asking for time off from your current employer, sacrificing time, money, and energy, and convincing your significant other (and yourself) that you really, really want to do this, you'll hear the unavoidable question: "You need to go to school for that?" People will constantly question, not only your desire to

spend money to “learn how to shelve books,” but also the very existence of accredited programs that produce well-educated professionals. Someone will always respond with surprise and/or skepticism to the idea that yes, you need a professional degree to “shush people.” Instead of becoming irritated, use the opportunity to enlighten others on why librarians are some of the most diverse, educated, and helpful people on the planet. We don't just roll out of bed that way, it takes time and effort to learn how to find that elusive genealogy source for your great-aunt's family tree or to give a fantastic book talk for the Mommy & Me group.

Getting your degree is a rewarding process, and you'll get great satisfaction from receiving your diploma for a job well done. However, during these difficult economic times, many potential LIS students are asking themselves “is it worth my time and money, when my family is already struggling?” While continuing education is an individual choice, people tend to pursue this noble profession for similar reasons. I have compiled a list of my classmates' most frequently cited reasons for pursuing a professional degree in library science.

### **Top 5 reasons to go for the Golden Ticket**

1. *Payscale* are up, up, up and away. As the economy has slipped further into recession, librarians can hold onto the hope that their salaries will at least stay steady. According to *Library Journal*, starting salaries for MLS librarians have increased over the last ten years, from \$30,270 in 1997 to \$42,361 in 2008. The future looks especially bright for those MLS holders who are male, minorities, media specialists, or living in the Southeast/Western regions.
2. *Ain't goin' nowhere, somebody help me...* No master's degree often equals no job, especially for those of you trying to land specialized library positions such as Archivist, Media Specialist, or Law Librarian. Pursue the degree so you can pursue your passion for historical texts or AR readers.
3. *How many catalogers does it take to screw in a light bulb?* One, but they need to see how the Library of Congress does it first! Library school will help you meet all sorts of interesting (and equally nerdy) people who will become your support group. This is faster than meeting up with people from a list once a year at a conference, and they generally appreciate a good library joke more than does the average patron.
4. *What's up with that?* Perhaps you know the how, but not the reasons why, libraries operate the way they do. Sure, you can host an amazing Teen Anime night or Friends of the Library tea, but did you ever wonder why some of your patrons seem to have different learning styles? Why do we catalog using the subject headings we do? Learn about the mysteries of patron needs and the answers to other burning library questions you have.
5. *R-E-S-P-E-C-T*. Librarianship is a time-honored, professional position with a stubbornly old-fashioned reputation. A professional degree doesn't make us instantly cooler, but it helps show others that we're more than book-shelvers and shushers. We bring information and computer literacy to the masses, provide outreach services to the public, support those who need assistance, and promote intellectual freedom. We mean business, so step away from our bookcart, thank you very much.

### **Librarians will find a way**

I encourage anyone thinking about pursuing an MLS or similar degree to explore his or her options. Do you want a completely online program or one that has some distance classes? Do you need to ask about arranging a flexible schedule at work so you can attend night/weekend courses? Does your institution provide financial help for continuing education? Talk with recent graduates about how they went about juggling a career/family/time off while going to school. With the help of workplace

programs, scholarships, and government tax incentives such as Lifetime Learning credits, there are multiple resources to assist you on your way to becoming a better librarian.

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Heidi Blackburn is the Reference and Instruction Librarian for Kansas State University at Salina in Salina, KS and is in her first year teaching information literacy and reference skills. She received her Master's of Library Science degree from Emporia State University in 2008 and plans to enroll at Emporia State University in 2009 to begin her work on a Doctorate of Philosophy in Library Science. Special areas of professional interest for Heidi include implementing new technology to meet patron needs and the psychology of interpersonal and intergenerational relationships in the library environment. Her favorite fantasy books include *Wicked*, *Harry Potter*, *The Looking Glass Wars* and *His Dark Materials*. She can be reached at [hblackbu@ksu.edu](mailto:hblackbu@ksu.edu) or at <http://ksuslib.typepad.com/blog/>.

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