Outsiders Turned Insiders:
Expanding Skill Sets through Non-MLS Hiring

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According to the 2015 Association of Research Libraries (ARL) Salary Survey, an increasing number of library professional jobs rely on expertise outside the traditional field of librarianship. More libraries are hiring candidates who do not have a library degree. With library services expanding to include resources such as maker-spaces, writing centers, and emerging media, it can be challenging to find someone who has both an MLS and the specialized experience needed for a particular position. As Buschman reasons, “librarian work is changing. It seems only logical that the backgrounds and skills to pursue those different ends (both mundane and strategic) would, therefore, be somewhat different” depending on the service area. When these new positions are comprised of skills not always taught in ALA-accredited programs, why not reach across disciplinary boundaries to flesh out these roles?

The discussion of hiring non-MLS candidates to fulfill new and evolving roles is not new. Although some debate exists whether non-MLS candidates should be considered for librarian positions, research shows that this hiring is increasing in academic libraries. Even this past year, the ALA election for a new president spurred a “contentious debate” over whether the executive director should require an ALA-accredited master’s degree. Although others have attempted to better understand non-MLS hiring, less has been written from the perspective of these candidates. The three of us—a writing center director, a studio librarian, and a former studio librarian at a mid-sized public university—have distinct backgrounds and were hired for different specialties; a background in librarianship was not one of them. As library faculty with core librarianship duties, we offer an outsider/insider perspective to this discussion.

Our Perspectives
We all currently work at the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga (UTC): Beth is the director of the Writing and Communication Center housed within the Library, Wes is a current studio librarian, and Becky is a former studio librarian in the Library Studio (she has since moved departments within the university). All three roles hold faculty status, have research and service expectations on the tenure-track, and are expected to complete librarianship duties such as assisting patrons at the circulation and reference desks and serving as liaisons for academic departments. As a director, Beth’s duties also involve sitting on the Library’s management council. However, it is interesting to note that despite these expectations, Beth’s official title omits the word librarian.

In January 2015, UTC’s Library opened a new 190,000 square-foot building. The Writing and Communication Center (WCC) and Studio offer students expanded resources that are not seen in every library setting. The WCC has student and staff consultants ready to provide writing assistance at any stage of the process. The Studio is a multimedia space that includes equipment to check out, audio recording and video/photography spaces, a suite to explore virtual reality, 3d printing, and the most visible—a computer lab with design and media soft-

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ware. Both the WCC and Studio teams offer support in the form of preparing and leading workshops, teaching single or multiple instruction sessions to classes, and one-on-one consultations with students, staff, and faculty. This brief introduction to these spaces and services offers some context to better understand why non-MLS candidates were considered for these positions.

Beth, the writing center director, holds both an MA and PhD in Rhetoric and Composition. This position was the only library position she applied for during her tenure-track faculty job search. She was intrigued by the opportunity to direct a writing center that reported to a library because she saw valuable overlap between library instruction and writing center philosophies. Beth joined the library with administrative experience in writing programs, writing across the curriculum, and writing centers. She is also an experienced teacher, teaching courses in composition and professional writing for six years. Her experiences teaching traditional courses positioned her to better understand faculty and student support needs, and her previous experience working in various writing administration settings allows her to think programmatically about how to best support students.

Wes, a studio librarian, holds an MA in Higher Education, has a background in professional video editing, and most recently, was the Media Resources Consultant at an R1 institutional library. Working as the sole manager for a space very similar to UTC’s library made Wes a uniquely prepared candidate for the Studio. Having developed two media spaces at his previous institution and working at another media space during his graduate career, Wes has the distinct perspective of working in libraries for multimedia services that are still being developed. The opportunity to bridge the gap between theoretical and practical underpinnings of multimedia production and literacy is what originally drew and continues to draw Wes into the multidisciplinary space that libraries provide.

Becky holds an MFA in Design and previously worked in an administrative role and taught multidisciplinary design classes at an R1 university. Working in design for over a decade has put accessibility and communication at the forefront of her mind, and working within academe has cultivated her interests and experience in program and curriculum development, critical media literacy, and teaching. Working in a hub that serves many fields, promotes information and media literacy, and takes seriously the commitment to making resources accessible, made the library appealing to Becky as a natural extension of both design and education. With the language and discourse of “design thinking” increasingly entering other disciplines in recent years, information studies scholars and professional library organizations are also identifying areas of overlap and parallels between the fields.

As each of our backgrounds demonstrate, skills and experiences cultivated outside of a library science program can complement emerging library spaces. As library services expand, it can be a challenge for ALA-accredited programs to keep pace and offer the specialized training that would be necessary for new services. In our next section, we review current scholarship on the evolution of the MLS requirement in hiring practices.

Review of the Literature
The discussion surrounding academic library hiring practices—specifically considering hiring librarians without a traditional library science background—has been long and heated. By the mid-1990s, the phenomenon of hiring non-MLS candidates was enough of a trend that the ARL sponsored a survey in 1994 on this topic. In their survey report, Zenelis and Dorrian acknowledged an increase in professional literature “argu[ing] in favor of moving beyond the standard M.L.S. pool of applicants and considering equally, if not giving preference to, candidates … who possess other requisite education qualifications.” Survey results indicated that 59% of the respondents were willing to consider non-MLS applicants for professional positions, especially for system and administrative roles. While this 1994 survey indicated a willingness to consider applicants without a library
science degree, Blixrud found in another ARL-sponsored survey in 1999, that “ARL libraries still do not hire nonlibrarians (i.e., non-M.L.S. degreed individuals) into librarian positions.” These surveys remind us that a willingness or open attitude does not necessarily mean changes to institutional hiring practices are immediately forthcoming.

Mindsets regarding the acceptability of non-MLS candidates continue to evolve. Over ten years after Blixrud’s survey, Simpson surveyed library deans and directors from academic and public library systems and found that although the MLS degree was still highly regarded for its shared values, “there is a growing acceptance that librarian status is not solely degree-based.” Although Simpson acknowledges a slow paradigm shift, many still have assumptions about what is lost by hiring individuals without an MLS. For example, Neal argues that non-MLS professionals “are needed” because the MLS may not provide the skill set needed for emerging services. Even so, he offensively compares them to feral animals with an untrained mindset that come into libraries knowing nothing at all about the terrain. More recently, spirited debates over degree requirements for the ALA executive director demonstrate that these hires are still often controversial.

This paper builds on the work of Zenelis, Dorrian, Blixrud, and Simpson, exploring current hiring practices by surveying two populations: librarians who have recently served on a hiring committee and non-MLS professionals who have recently been hired as librarians or library faculty. Our research questions are:

1. What are the current perceptions of hiring non-MLS librarians/library faculty?
2. What aspects of the library science degree are believed to be most important?
3. What are some additional skills that would complement those typically taught in ALA-accredited programs?
4. What are the experiences of non-MLS librarian/library faculty?

Overall, we are interested in exploring the ways in which an expanded conception of librarianship has benefited and/or challenged participants’ institutions. Our own experiences position us to take an outsider-turned-insider perspective of this issue.

**Survey Design**

In order to investigate how mindsets toward library hiring practices have evolved in recent years and to collect perspectives of other non-MLS librarians, we designed a multi-path survey. The first path was for librarians or library faculty who had recently served on a hiring committee. This path consisted of 17 questions (a mix of closed- and open-ended) that covered institutional hiring and training/onboarding practices, skill sets associated with librarianship, and other questions aimed at assessing receptivity to non-MLS hiring. The second path was for individuals who held librarian or library faculty positions but did not have a library science degree. This path asked participants questions focused on understanding why they applied for a library position and what their experiences have been. We recruited participants through various professional listservs throughout October and November 2018.

Of the 61 participants who successfully completed our survey, only five took the survey as non-MLS librarians or library faculty. Although this response rate was small, their perspectives and experiences are valuable, and we incorporate them later in the paper. The other 56 participants took the survey as librarians who had recently served on a hiring committee.

**Hiring Committee Survey Results**

In the following, we summarize the most relevant sections from our hiring committee survey path.
Hiring Beyond the Library Science Pool

Questions in this section were focused on understanding whether participants consider skill sets beyond the library science degree when filling positions, their thoughts on when it might be appropriate to look at applicants beyond the MLS pool, whether they have considered such applicants in recent searches, and whether their library or university had guidelines in place that prohibited them from looking outside of the library science pool.

First, we asked participants whether they ever considered skill sets beyond the library science degree when they are filling open positions.

Those who selected “yes” to the above question were invited to elaborate on which skill sets they consider. This was an open-ended question, and many respondents listed more than one type of skill or experience. Some answers indicated respondents were considering skill sets that would be valuable to have in addition to a library science background (e.g., a second masters degree that would be valuable for liaisons). Additionally, it’s important to note two of the skill sets mentioned—”Technology or IT Related Skills” and “Multimedia Related”—may be comprised of overlapping skills for some respondents.
We also asked participants if they had considered candidates without a library science degree in one or more recent search. Only 23% of respondents (n=13) answered yes. The other 77% responded that they had not recently considered non-MLS candidates.

Degree requirements are sometimes mandated via library bylaws, institutional guidelines, or other similar constraints. Because of this, we also wanted to collect responses on whether participants were aware of any such guidelines at their own libraries.

Finally, we asked, “when do you feel it is appropriate to look beyond the library science candidate pool?” Because this was an open-ended question, responses captured a range of mindsets. Five respondents were against such hires, with comments like “I do not think it is ever appropriate; our field requires a terminal masters degree for a reason.” Ten respondents indicated library or university policy has prohibited their search committee from considering the possibility, but did not indicate they were opposed to the idea. One such respondent indicated these restrictive policies may be changing soon at their institution. For both groups of respondents, the MLS seemed to make the difference between whether the position would be considered a faculty position or not. For example, one respondent indicated: “We hire librarians for a tenure track position. They must have the degree.” Another stated: “Our librarians are faculty so we are not allowed by university policy to hire anyone without the MLIS.”

Several (n=31) expressed an openness to looking outside the library science pool depending on the nature of the librarian position, the specialized skills that may be required, the size of the potential MLS applicant pool, and the experiences of the candidates. Some of these responses specifically mentioned this would depend on whether the position entailed traditional librarianship duties. Responses particularly highlighted the specialized knowledge required for library IT positions and archivist positions.

There was also a group of respondents (n=9) who expressed it was appropriate to look beyond the library science pool only for non-librarian positions. This emphasis on whether the position had to do with librarianship is evident in responses such as: “[it is appropriate to look beyond the MLS] when the position does not need a librarian, per se,” or “we would only look outside of that pool for a support staff position.” In these cases, the MLS means the difference between faculty and professional staff.

Overall, our survey reflected a range of mindsets when it comes to hiring outside of the library science pool. While results were mixed in terms of what circumstances it would be appropriate to hire outside this pool, the majority of our respondents showed a willingness to consider skill sets beyond what is typically associated with a library science degree.

**The Library Science Degree**

We asked participants: “Is there a specific set of skills learned and cultivated in library school that you believe are non-negotiable in any library faculty role?”
We asked those who answered yes to elaborate on these non-negotiable skills. Several themes emerged. First, although we asked about skills, more respondents (n=26) emphasized a common set of values, beliefs, or philosophies that came from the library school experience. These non-negotiable values and concepts included an understanding of the history of libraries and the theoretical underpinnings of why libraries exist, information literacy, intellectual freedom, privacy rights, censorship, knowledge-sharing, transparency, a commitment to serving the community, and ethical guidelines in information. One respondent emphasized this distinction of values by saying: “To be honest, it’s not so much the skills as just the whole experience of progressing through school with like-minded faculty and students and getting a deep sense of the mission and purpose of libraries.” This sense of a shared understanding and common language was read in a number of responses, along with the importance of “a firm understanding of libraries as a whole.” However, despite accreditation, we were reminded of the issue of institutional variance in both degree content and quality, as “not all programs are created equal.” In particular, one respondent emphasized different content specializations in relation to the bigger picture: “Graduates coming out of a library program should understand that librarianship is ultimately about service to the public regardless of their tracks or concentrations during their studies.” While many pointed to the importance of a shared experience in school, some acknowledged this “shared” experience isn’t always consistent for individuals with the same degree, even when it comes to acknowledging the library’s core mission.

Values, philosophies, and beliefs were the most prominent theme, but 13 participants also discussed particular skills or experiences that the library science degree afforded. The idea of customer service and a commitment to the public was reiterated by eight participants. In addition to customer service, other non-negotiable skills and areas of expertise mentioned included user experience, reference theory and reference interview skills, cataloging, book preservation, metadata, bibliographic instruction, understanding information lifecycles, collection development methods, basic coding, and instruction. One respondent described particular librarianship skills as non-negotiable, but, “you learn far more about those skills when you have on-the-job experience, and for that you really don’t need a library degree.” Overall these responses allowed participants a chance to reflect on what they feel are important skills (and for many, values) for any library faculty member to possess.

In a subsequent question, we asked respondents to “elaborate on which faculty positions within your library might require or benefit from a different set of skills than what are typically taught in most library programs.” The responses identified areas such as writing centers, digital scholarship, makerspaces, multimedia studios, IT, data analytics and management, project management, and web development and design. Eight of the 36 comments referenced a different set of skills needed for subject specialist and liaison roles. One respondent felt many liaison roles could benefit from outside skills, but added, “I’d encourage them to get the library degree or at a minimum take some core classes—there are pieces of the liaison role that benefit from it—or that have to be trained.”
Participants expressed concern with the lack of attention pedagogy and instruction receives in library programs,
with comments such as: “And of course, way more emphasis should be placed on pedagogy in library schools as most
of use [sic] learned how to teach on our own, on the job,” with another individual adding: “Since even MLS programs
don’t equip most librarians with instruction skills or other knowledge relevant to be a subject liaison, someone with
relevant outside experience could easily gain this knowledge on the job just like MLS-holding librarians do.”

Training Practices
In an effort to gain an understanding of how new hires are trained and whether non-MLS librarians received
or should receive additional training, we first asked respondents to select all of the training they usually have in
place for new hires at their library.

For those that selected other, responses included shadowing, meetings or orientations with other university
personnel, and some clarification about mentoring if it wasn’t available for everyone.

Next, we asked our respondents if they felt that non-MLS librarians should receive more training. These
results were mixed. 46% responded maybe, 21% answered yes, 25% responded no, and 8% opted not to answer
the question. Thirty of our participants opted to explain their responses. Some of the “yes” and “maybe” respon-
dents reiterated the importance of shared values, for example, “it is important that we have common language
and understand the processes involved in the services relevant to the position.” Others emphasized that training
needs were context specific. We also received comments that indicated immersion in the job was the best mode
of training, for example, “most of what we all need to know in order to do our jobs is best learned by doing it.”
Overall, values and culture again rose to the surface, with on-the-job training as a popular mechanism to on-
board individuals to a particular institution.

Institutional Information
Finally, we asked participants to provide some basic contextual information about their institution type, their
library services, and how these services are staffed.
To gain a sense of whether specialized services were influencing library hiring trends, we also asked about what services these libraries offered and how they are staffed.
Perspectives from the Non-MLS Survey Path

While our hiring committee survey path reflects how insiders in the field perceive non-MLS hires, we also wanted to gain a sense of the experiences of non-MLS candidates. Although our own positionality represents this perspective, our experience is limited to one institution. Incorporating a wider range of experiences from non-MLS hires can help make this a multi-vocal discussion. Since we only received five survey responses, we chose to profile these individuals below. Rather than summarize the entire survey, we offer some insight into their backgrounds, why they applied for their current positions, and their experiences acclimating to their roles.

Our first participant, a science librarian at a doctorate-granting institution, applied for the position because it called for either the MLS or the subject area masters. Prior to taking the position, this participant had no prior professional experience in a library setting, and is unsure of what percentage of their current position is comprised of traditional library duties. We asked participants: “Does your current faculty position within your library require a different set of skills than what is typically taught in most existing library programs?” This participant answered: “experience with physical and life science research and lab environments has been very important in this position… I also teach scientific presentation skills and occasionally have to assist with technical hardware or software programs like molecular modelers, 3D scanning, and data visualization.” When asked what their biggest challenge has been coming into a librarian role without an MLS, they stated “technical knowledge about library systems,” but noted that this doesn't come up much in their daily duties.

Our second participant estimated that 25% of their position is focused on traditional librarianship. Like one of our authors, this participant is a writing center director who was not seeking out library jobs, but rather jobs that would allow them to utilize their doctorate in English. This participant did have prior experiences with
libraries, but noted their biggest challenge has been incorporating research support into the writing center and expressed some uncertainty about whether they are doing this as well as they can because “there are still … nuances of searching that I don’t know.”

Our third participant estimated that 50% of their position involved traditional librarianship. They applied for this position because they “taught at a library before as a graduate student and it seemed a natural extension.” This participant does not believe that their position requires a different skill set than learned at library school, and that the biggest challenge as a non-MLS librarian is that “tenure approval process is written as if you have an MLIS.”

Our fourth participant, who estimated 25% of their role is comprised of traditional librarianship, has experience in public education, public libraries, and brings an MA in Literature to their current role. This participant cited the ability to quickly learn new technology as the skill set that is most useful to them in their current position, and pinpointed “cultural stigma” as the biggest challenge they face despite their previous experience in libraries. They believe the lack of a library science degree angers their colleagues, but noted this anger “is assuaged by the fact that I am currently in a program and working towards the degree.” They emphasized they’ve never “encountered a knowledge gap” in their library experience due to lack of a degree, though did stress the importance of “understanding and embracing the ideologies of access” when asked about training needed for non-MLS librarians.

Our final participant, who also estimated spending 25% of their time focused on traditional librarianship, brings skill sets in the areas of “software engineering, virtual/augmented reality, machine learning, 3-D modeling/graphics” to their position. This participant had no prior library experience and was drawn to the position because of the projects the library was involved in. When asked about the biggest challenges acclimating, they cited “traditional library techniques and culture.”

**Discussion and Conclusion**

This survey was a way for us to check in with our colleagues and communities as services continue to evolve at a rapid pace. Broadcasting these conversations into the public realm helps keep hiring practices in the field’s purview. We found it compelling that some of our hiring committee survey respondents indicated administrative restrictions as the primary factor for limiting searches to MLS degree holders. These responses led us to the discussion of titles as they’re connected to status. While the distinction of hiring a non-MLS as a “librarian” is where many respondents had negative reactions, it’s the status that holds the tangible effects. Yet, due to administrative policies, it is this librarian title that is typically the institutional mechanism enabling individuals to hold that faculty status within the library. Though requiring different skill sets, the workload, experience, and level of expertise needed for particular non-traditional library roles may be comparable and we contend should be considered for the same tenure-track status as their MLS counterparts in more traditional roles—regardless of what title they are given. Administrative amendments may be needed to account for the evolving needs of students and universities—and thus the library—in order to even make this a possibility for discussion amongst hiring committees. Hiring practices should not be a static procedure that simply leads to fulfilling open roles, but is instead responsive and creates the opportunity for foundational questions of a search to be continually shaped, revised, and reimagined. As library services continue to evolve, hiring committees need to take inventory of not just what their library’s status quo has been, but truly identify current needs and speculate on the future.

A number of respondents, especially those less keen on broadening the requirements for their candidates, repeatedly mentioned the importance of values that are shared, discussed, and passed down in library schools. Although one of our questions asked participants to focus on skills taught in library science programs, the theo-
retical underpinnings of the field (e.g. information literacy, intellectual freedom, knowledge-sharing, a commitment to serving the community, etc.) rose as critical components of formal training. For the non-MLS survey respondents, a couple challenges they stated were both library culture and technical knowledge. In particular, library systems were something the three of us needed supplemental training on in order to understand and interface with the integrated library system.

Though the three of us cannot speak directly to the philosophical conversations happening in ALA-accredited schools across the country, we do want to encourage our colleagues to consider areas of overlap with other disciplines and fields of knowledge. From our limited experience in the library, all of our backgrounds have direct correlations to both our daily tasks and the library’s broader mission. Each of our disciplinary backgrounds, in different ways, has instilled us with mindsets that align with librarianship. In particular we identify areas of overlap through student-centered approaches to teaching, user experience methodologies, information and media literacy, multidisciplinary collaboration, public service, and access to knowledge and resources. This paper is not an argument for replacing the MLS with an alternative terminal degree—or more crudely, any degree—but to consider areas where cross disciplinary faculty hires within the library makes sense. Hiring people with backgrounds that complement traditional librarianship can be viewed as an asset. If we have an expanded conception of librarianship through the services we offer, why not truly leverage the backgrounds and experiences of the individuals we hire? Despite Neal’s aforementioned characterization of the non-MLS librarian as a feral, untrained animal, going through graduate programs of our own, we came into the library with our own areas of expertise as well as a sense of shared values and beliefs from our communities of practice. This is not about taking anything away from what currently exists, but simply adding to what is already in place.

We respect the significance of a community with shared values and common experiences. Our own experiences acclimating to the library make us question if this sense of shared values can truly only come from working through a library degree. We argue while an educational program is a strong foundation for building these shared beliefs and values, this isn’t limited to the confines of an MLS curriculum. In addition to this worthwhile path, cultivating this solidarity is also built over time collaborating with colleagues, working with patrons, and making connections with other library professionals.

Endnotes
2. For the purpose of this paper, we use the Master of Library Science (MLS) as shorthand for all ALA-accredited master’s programs in library and information studies.
6. Rachel Ivy Clarke, assistant professor at the Syracuse University School of Information Studies, argues “the field of librarianship is more appropriately viewed as a design field rather than a scientific one.” Clarke’s new book, Design Thinking (Library Futures Series, Book 4), will be out with ALA in 2019 (https://www.alastore.ala.org/content/design-thinking-library-futures-series-book-4). Additionally, the California Conference on Library Instruction committed their 2018 conference to the topic, “Library Instruction by Design: Using Design Thinking to Meet Evolving Needs” (http://www.cclibinstruction.org/2018-conference/), and one can find a number of general resources, workshops, and articles on design thinking through ALA’s website.
8. Zenelis and Dorrian, Non Librarian Professionals, 3.
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Bibliography