


2021

Thriving Places, Thriving People: A Look at USM's Master of Library and Information Science

Karlie Herndon
University of Southern Mississippi

Follow this and additional works at: <https://aquila.usm.edu/slisconnecting>

 Part of the [Archival Science Commons](#), [Collection Development and Management Commons](#), [Information Literacy Commons](#), [Scholarly Communication Commons](#), and the [Scholarly Publishing Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Herndon, Karlie (2021) "Thriving Places, Thriving People: A Look at USM's Master of Library and Information Science," *SLIS Connecting*: Vol. 10 : Iss. 1 , Article 4.

DOI: 10.18785/slis.1001.04

Available at: <https://aquila.usm.edu/slisconnecting/vol10/iss1/4>

This Column is brought to you for free and open access by The Aquila Digital Community. It has been accepted for inclusion in SLIS Connecting by an authorized editor of The Aquila Digital Community. For more information, please contact Joshua.Cromwell@usm.edu.

Thriving Places, Thriving People: A Look at USM's Master of Library and Information Science

At the start of 2020, Gallup released a [report](#) that revealed a stunning fact: Americans visit libraries more than they participate in any other cultural activity. Delving into the report reveals that Americans visit libraries roughly twice as often as the next most popular activity—going to the movies—and that the youngest group, the so-called digital natives and tech-savvy millennials, were the most frequent library users.

Libraries aren't what they used to be: hushed and stuffy spaces ruled by strict spinsters with no tolerance for noise or rule-breaking. Libraries today offer classes, makerspaces, books, movies, magazines, and video game loans. Library cafés have only added to what many in the field call the "community living room." In the midst of a global pandemic, libraries quickly pivoted to provide curbside pickup, online story times, and social media updates from library cats practicing social distancing from their purple-haired and tattooed staff. With so much on offer, library and information science professionals' work is more important than ever.

No longer gatekeepers, librarians, archivists, museum curators, and other information specialists now act as guides in an overwhelming sea of information, technology, and change. USM's Master of Library and Information Science (MLIS) prepares students for the demanding work of finding the unfindable, ensuring inclusion and equity for underrepresented groups, and preserving the past for future users. The MLIS is the only American Library Association (ALA) accredited program of its kind in Mississippi, and it has been excelling in student research, job placement, and satisfaction for years. In 2020, [Online Schools Report](#) named USM's MLIS number one in the nation. With no out-of-state tuition, diverse course offerings, three different specializations to choose from, and

all-online, all-evening classes that can fit into most working professionals' lifestyles, it's no wonder the program earned this honor. Since becoming director in 2015, Dr. Teresa Welsh has seen steady growth in the program and in "the quality and diversity of our students who are located across the U.S. We have a few Canadians in the program along with some Americans stationed abroad in China and Japan."

With roughly 280 MLIS students currently enrolled, the program represents a huge number of graduate students here at USM. Some of the main things that have encouraged the program's growth include "our wonderful, dedicated faculty who actively engage with our students," Dr. Welsh explains. In addition, she says that USM's program is unique for two key reasons: first, "a British Studies class on Libraries, Archives, and Special Collections offered each summer in London; since 2007, 227 LIS students have earned credit

in this study-abroad program," she explains. Another unique feature is that the "Kaigler Children's Book Festival held at USM each spring since 1968 is sponsored by the School of Library and Information Science. Major children's and young adult authors and illustrators are featured as keynote speakers, and about 500 librarians, teachers, scholars, and students attend each year."

Even just this sampling of facts demonstrates the variety and diversity of the program's offerings and the types of people it attracts, and while many people with the childhood dream of being a librarian enter the program, it pulls a lot of mid-career students and professionals in, too. Even Dr. Welsh completed "an undergraduate degree in anthropology with a minor in classical studies from USM," as well as a year of graduate work in anthropology, before moving into an MLIS at the University of Tennessee. Like many, she had a "lifelong love of libraries and archives," and she continued on to an LIS PhD at UT.

One graduate of USM's program, Carrie Mastley, now works as the manuscripts librarian at Mississippi State University Libraries, but she didn't start out knowing she'd like to pursue information science either. She earned both a BA and MA in English, a secondary teaching certificate, and a Teaching English as a Second Language certificate. After a few years teaching seventh grade and then university English courses, Carrie and her active-duty military husband relocated to Scott Air Force Base in Illinois, where there isn't reciprocity for teaching licensure. With few job opportunities ("It's literally situated in a cornfield," Carrie says.), she began to explore her interests to find something she could happily spend her time on. "I grew up reading books. If I showed an interest in reading, my mom was going to get me the book I wanted;



Carrie Mastley, MLIS



Carrie processes oversized prints from the Frank and Virginia Williams Collection of Lincolniana.

course papers have recently been published, something she couldn't imagine at the beginning of her coursework. "The ability to do research," Dr. Welsh explains, "is so important in our field in areas such as collection analysis, content analysis of literature, publication pattern analysis, citation analysis of scholarly impact, patron surveys or observational studies, and historical studies of libraries or archives." Carrie notes how well the program succeeded in preparing her: "They really got me comfortable with the processes involved in developing a formal research topic in our field. That is huge for the work that I do now because I work in an R1 research institution where I have to complete research for my job."

Research is an essential part of information science, but Carrie also notes how important service is to this career field. "Everything we do is service-based. If you don't have a heart for service, you need to find something else to do because librarianship and working in an archive, it's all about providing a service. That's your top priority: connecting your patrons with the information that they need to be successful." With her background in English, much of her previous graduate work had been theoretical. The MLIS was a surprise for how much practical information it provided. In addition to the MLIS, Carrie completed a Graduate Certificate in Archives and Special Collections, which included a practicum at the Columbus-Lowndes Public Library's (CLPL) Local History Department. Her lifetime mentor and friend, Mona Vance-Ali, not only inspired her love of archives and history, but she also worked as Carrie's mentor throughout the practicum and helped her network. Carrie eventually landed a job as a collection processor of the Frank and Virginia Williams Collection of

Lincolniana at Mississippi State University, which led to her current position. There, she processed a lifetime's worth of books, memorabilia, statues, and everything else you can think of related to Abraham Lincoln. With hands-on experience that also applied to her coursework, Carrie became an ideal candidate for her newest job.

Many other students come into LIS as their first career choice. One such student, Laura Valliant, has found the MLIS to be one of the most challenging and rewarding tasks she'd ever undertaken. After 23 years of being a homemaker and mother, she realized she needed more. Hailing from Mexico, Laura notes that her husband was a very traditional man, and he wanted her to be a supporting presence rather than pursue her own interests. And so, with just \$20 in her hand, she left her life with him behind and began working as a page for a small public library in Los Angeles. "The community was 99% Hispanic, and the librarian needed a bilingual employee. Spanish is my first language," Laura explains, but she had some basic English skills. "Once I started working, I realized that I needed to learn formal English to communicate effectively, so I decided to enroll in college." Much of her work included language acquisition, but "[she] worked hard to accomplish [her] academic and professional goals." Laura's life as a single woman putting herself through college was never easy, she explains. On "some occasions, I had three part-time jobs in a week combined with part-time classes. Other times, I had a full-time job combined with full-time school (16 credit units), but zero free time for me. However, I enjoyed every moment

that's just the kind of family I grew up in. My aunt was a librarian for a middle school for nearly 30 years, so libraries have always been a special part of my life." After researching schools, she found nothing but good things about USM, particularly its fully online aspect, but Dr. Welsh sealed the deal. "I talked to Dr. Welsh on the phone, and she was just so friendly. I called the general line, and she was the one who answered the phone. I didn't have to go through three people to get to the director. She asked me about my goals, what did I want to do with this degree, to help me figure out what path I needed to go down, and she just really helped me figure it out."

One thing that made Carrie nervous was the online aspect: she had never taken or taught an online course, and she was concerned about the learning curve, but she's amazed by how well she, her professors, and her classmates all got to know each other. Carrie was also a little concerned about doing social science research, but in the end, the program was carefully designed to prepare her to write publishable articles. In fact, three of her



Laura Valliant stands beneath a FAREWELL sign from her colleagues.

in school and at work!” As her English improved, she also moved up the ranks of the library staff. Eventually, her colleague Stuart Goldman, a reference librarian at the Los Angeles County Library and USM MLIS alumnus, recommended this program.

One of the things that has amazed Laura about the program is just how much she learned that she applies directly to her work in libraries. “I started as a page. I was promoted as a library aide, and then supervisor I, and supervisor II, and paraprofessional, and now having my degree, I can become a professional librarian. I have passion for this career.” From her duties of checking the book drop to supervising over 20 employees, Laura’s work on the MLIS is nothing short of inspiring, but she credits so much of her success to the way the program works. In her classes, she designed websites and instructional videos, created materials for users that have gone onto her library’s website, and put her knowledge of library management theory to work nearly every day. “I was telling my [new] husband, I was excelling in my skills washing dishes and going to the grocery store. I didn’t know that I would be able to learn and manage a computer and be in a library because when I started as a page, I didn’t know what a book drop was!” Laura remembers receiving her first paycheck and realizing the kinds of things she could do with it, and her first thought was to buy herself a bed. “It’s easy for someone who has everything in life to not value those little things. For me it’s a big step; it’s a big jump in my life, thanks to the program.”

Part of her work on the MLIS involved an extensive research paper, titled “A Collection Analysis of the Mexican American Literature in Los Angeles County Public Library System.” Collection analyses examine the types and numbers of materials a library or library system contains, using those figures to assess the value of the collection for the library’s specific community. “It’s very important to develop the collection for the needs of



Laura stands by an inviting children's display during her time as a public library employee in Florida.

the population. If you are in California, in a small city, 90% Hispanic population, the collection needs to be focused in that direction,” she explains. “It’s good to offer all kinds of [materials], because we need to be aware of what is in the global world,” she says, but she notes that a library should primarily aim to meet the needs of the local community in terms of interests, languages spoken, level of education, and other factors. Her research found that the Los Angeles County Public Library System is doing a good job of meeting the needs of the local communities, and she learned a lot from this enormous system’s exemplary policies, even implementing similar policies in her management roles.

The endless support from the program’s director, Dr. Teresa Welsh, has been a big part of her empowerment and rise to success. Laura calls Dr. Welsh “an exemplary woman with high ethical values, and she’s always available to her students. She is a resilient leader and a lovely person who guided and supported me to achieve my academic and professional goals. She’s always encouraged us to understand the global world. She’s patient, and she encouraged me to apply to a grant. I got

the grant, and it has been a wonderful, wonderful journey.”

Though Laura feels inspired by women like Dr. Welsh and Sky Patrick, director of the Los Angeles County Public Library System, one of the most inspiring parts of Laura’s story is her impact on her daughter. Now in her late 20s, Laura’s daughter first studied biochemistry with the plan to become a doctor. Recently, marriage and motherhood, as well as a freeze on positions in California due to the pandemic, have caused her daughter to consider a different career, and she looked no further than Laura for inspiration. Of course, Laura suggested that her daughter pursue an MLIS here at USM. “She’s going to do well if she chooses to join the program, but let’s see, let’s see.”

With so many people reassessing their priorities in 2020 and 2021, USM’s MLIS is poised to receive any number of new students, eager to begin a career of service and learning. But like Laura says, let’s see what this exemplary program has in store.

By Karlie Herndon