

**The Changing Terrain of Special Librarianship:  
A Report from the Workforce Issues in Library and Information Science (WILIS) Study**

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Abstract

Gathering feedback from graduates of LIS programs can be helpful in understanding the changing environments in which professionals work. Such feedback is useful to practitioners, educators, employers, and other stakeholders in assessing workforce trends and anticipating skills that will be needed in the future. We present detailed findings that are based on the results of an IMLS-funded grant known as WILIS. The WILIS researchers developed a comprehensive web-based survey of over 8,000 graduates (between 1964-2007) of all six LIS programs in North Carolina. This paper focuses on the responses of master's graduates who are employed in special libraries (approximately 16% of total responses). Although the mean and median age of the special librarians is slightly younger (median=47) than those who work in other types of libraries (median=50), about 11% plan to leave the workforce (mostly due to retirement) in the next three years. In addition to changing demographics of the field, the paper discusses reasons for leaving the profession (or returning to it), career trajectories, attitudes towards the future of the profession, skills and competencies that may be required, and areas of interest for continuing education. Comparative data from respondents who work in other information service environments are also presented in order to highlight potential issues and trends of unique concern to the members of SLA.

## Overview

The library workforce is aging (Lenzini, 2002; Lynch, 2000; Marshall, in press). Although the economic recession of 2008-2009 may postpone any potential workforce crisis as professionals delay plans for retirement, we will soon face a significant shortage. Analysis of this trend in special libraries poses particular challenges. The closing of corporate libraries has been a trend for ten years or more (Helfer, 2000; Housewright, 2009), and some special libraries may be affected more than others. For example, reduced revenue and circulation of newspapers have caused many of those organizations to cut staff or close their research divisions entirely. Yet, in many ways special librarians are among the most versatile of information professionals, particularly in one-person libraries and in situations where librarians are embedded within work groups where they perform unique information management functions (Shumaker & Tyler, 2007). That versatility should offer some degree of security during times of economic stress, but we know very little about the careers of special librarians as a group or how those careers compare with professionals in other fields.

Preparing information professionals for the future requires that educators have an understanding of changes taking place in the field and of the challenges that new graduates will face. The Workforce Issues in Library and Information Science (WILIS) study was designed to analyze the career patterns of graduates of the library and information science programs in North Carolina since 1964. The project, funded by the Institute of Museum and Library Services, is a collaborative research project of the School of Information and Library Science and the Institute on Aging at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. Participants in the program include

all of the library and information science programs throughout the state, including the Appalachian State University Library Science Program, the Central Carolina Community College Library and Information Technology Program, the East Carolina University Department of Library and Instructional Technology, North Carolina Central University's School of Library and Information Sciences, the UNC at Chapel Hill School of Information and Library Science, and the Department of Library and Information Studies of the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. The results of this project, known now as WILIS 1, will create a transferable alumni tracking model for institutions beyond North Carolina in WILIS 2. This paper focuses on a subset of the WILIS 1 data pertaining to special librarians.

## Background

WILIS 1 is a comprehensive survey of the graduates of all the information and library science programs throughout the state of North Carolina between the years 1964-2007. While other studies have looked at careers, salary, and/or job satisfaction of particular programs (Hulme & Wilson, 1988; Kigongo-Bukenya & Lutwama, 2004; Loughbridge, 2003) or particular types of libraries (Bengston & Shields, 1985; Burd, 2003), and even graduates of particular programs in North Carolina (Reaves, 1964; Thomas, 1964), the WILIS project is the first to cover all of a state's graduates over what is potentially their entire careers. Additionally, WILIS includes responses from graduates who are no longer working as information professionals as well as those who are still actively employed in the field.

The approach for the WILIS study is the life course perspective, a sociological framework for studying the personal life choices and pathways from birth to death. In career studies, the life course perspective helps to clarify career transitions by examining the context for

the change events in a person's life. (Elder, Johnson & Crosnoe, 2003; Marshall et al., 2001; Marshall & Mueller, 2003; Rathbun-Grubb, 2009). This approach has been used in other studies, including the Workforce Aging in the New Economy (WANE) project (<http://www.aging.unc.edu/programs/wane/team.html>).

The WILIS study is funded by the Institute for Museum and Library Services (IMLS). IMLS recognized the gap in our knowledge of the workforce trends and projections as early as 2002 when the call for proposals was issued for studying the national LIS workforce. As a result of that initiative, the WILIS team proposed a project that would apply the life course approach to studying LIS graduates over their careers. Unlike the national study, WILIS focuses on the graduates of particular schools within North Carolina and complements the National Workforce study. Additionally, since many of the graduates of the North Carolina programs are employed out-of-state, WILIS has the potential to confirm National Workforce study findings through example. The WILIS survey was informed by the WANE project mentioned above as well as the Canadian 8Rs study (<http://www.ls.ualberta.ca/8rs/home.html>).

## Methodology

The WILIS 1 study surveyed 1964-2005 graduates of the five LIS programs to assess career patterns. All graduates were invited by letter to participate and an additional 169 UNC-Chapel Hill graduates from 2006-2007 were included to assess the usefulness of contacting graduates via email only. The WILIS methodology included a pilot survey, a survey of non-respondents, and the full WILIS survey, all of which were conducted in 2007 via a Web-based interface. A major initiative prior to launching the surveys was the verification of alumni contact information to ensure that we would reach a large enough sample to obtain an adequate response.

A number of approaches, including the use of an alumni search service and “return requested” postcard allowed the study team to update the alumni databases of each participating school. Additionally, during the survey the respondents were offered the option of updating their programs with a current email address.

A pilot study of 750 graduates and a survey of 400 non-respondents informed the final survey of the remaining 7,566 graduates of the partner schools. The purpose of the pilot study was to test the survey, assess the quality of the alumni contact information, and gather feedback for correcting and refining the final instrument. The non-response survey was conducted to assess the representativeness of the pilot sample, but there was an additional benefit as many of the initial non-respondents then completed the full survey, increasing the final response rate by 8%. Results of the non-response survey found no significant differences between respondents and non-respondents on any of the following variables: race, marital status, U.S. Citizenship, employment status, type of work, whether they had left the LIS field, salary, career satisfaction, and LIS program attended. A significant difference existed for gender: sixteen percent of males completed the pilot survey, whereas 10 percent of males completed the non-response study ( $\chi^2=4.24$ .  $p<.05$ ). As a result of the pilot and non-response survey, the survey instrument was fine-tuned and an additional mailed letter was added to the full survey design.

#### WILIS survey

The WILIS survey consisted of some 17 sections containing 326 questions and nearly 1700 variables that follow the careers of LIS professionals. Respondents received only the sections which pertained to their career histories. For example, three sections surveyed recent graduates (2001-2007) and helped to provide a point of comparison to assess the types of

positions our current graduates are seeking and to confirm or highlight differences in responses from the full WILIS population.

Participants were asked questions concerning the following events:

- Educational background and work experience prior to enrolling in an information and library science program;
- Reasons for selecting a particular academic program and some assessment of the educational experience;
- Circumstances surrounding their acceptance of, experience with, and (if applicable) reasons for leaving:
  - The first job after graduating from the program,
  - The current job,
  - The most prestigious position ever held, and
  - The position held for the longest amount of time.

## Results

The response rate for the WILIS survey was 35.1%, or 2,627 of a possible 7,566. 245 special librarians (16% of all responses) replied to the WILIS survey, and an additional 249 respondents work in “non-library” settings. Demographically, most special librarians who responded (n=233, or 95%) have a Master’s degree in library science, are female (77%), and are Caucasian (89%). The mean age of the respondents is 46.3 with a standard deviation of 11.4, and the median age is 47, a bit younger than the population of the full study (50). Most special librarians who responded (94%) work full time, and 54% have responsibilities for supervising others. The average reported salary is \$62,259 (sd=\$25,463) and the median salary is \$57,835.

Table 1 illustrates a comparison of demographics for special librarians and the WILIS study as a whole.

<b>Population</b>	<b>Female Gender</b>	<b>Median Age of Those Still Working</b>	<b>Median Salary</b>
WILIS Study	82%	50	Librarians-\$50,000 Non-Lib.- \$62,400
WILIS Study: Special Librarians	77%	47	\$ 57,835

**Table 1. Demographics – Special Librarians Compared with All Responses**

The WILIS survey addresses factors that brought people into the profession, factors that influence their careers over time, and the factors that may cause them to leave. The sections that follow summarize some of those findings and address some of their feelings about the future. In the discussion section of the paper, we will compare these results to findings related to another group in the study and highlight the differences among the special librarians.

*Factors Influencing Entry into the Profession*

Participants were asked to rate several factors according to the influence these factors had upon their decision to become a librarian. Answers were gathered based on a Likert-type continuum, ranging from not at all important to “a lot.” For this report, answers were grouped so that ratings of “not at all” important and “a little” important were combined, and ratings of moderately important and “a lot” were combined. The factors rated most important by those who responded were:

- It seemed like a good fit for my interests (95.7%)
- Like working with people (64.9%)

- Wanted a job where I could make a difference (64.2%)

Some respondents were influenced by having worked in a library or information center (56.9%)

or were attracted by flexible career options (55.7%). Factors rated least important include:

- Guidance counselor in high school (2.0%)
- Recruited by LIS program (1.6%)

Participants were asked about other factors that may have influenced choice of career, and characteristic comments included:

- “Wanted a practical (applied) degree after completing an MA in Scottish Studies”
- “A passion for reading, knowledge, and disseminating knowledge”
- “Admired a librarian in my college library”
- “After working in an information center for several years, I found that I genuinely liked the work and wanted to advance my career. Was an ever changing field, so not likely to get stuck in a rut.”
- “As a military spouse I wanted a career that I felt I could always find employment both in and outside the federal government.”
- “Didn’t know what else to do. Libraries had always seemed like ‘home’ to me.”
- “I thought what libraries did was important.”
- “Quality of life of a librarian – collegiality of the profession.”
- “Requirement for my job.”

### *Factors Influencing the Career*

A number of questions in the WILIS survey focus on professional identity and the current working environment. When asked whether they consider themselves to be librarians, information professionals, both, or neither, “both” was the most common answer (see Figure 1). Most (93%, n=241) indicated that they have control over their workload, that it is their own responsibility to decide how work gets done, and 55% indicate that they have a lot of control or complete control over scheduling their work hours. Respondents were almost evenly divided over whether there is enough time to get work done, with 51% saying there is not enough time

and 49% who disagree. Seventy percent agree that their employer does a good job of helping to develop their careers.

**Professional Identity:** Do you consider yourself to be a librarian, information professional, both, or neither?

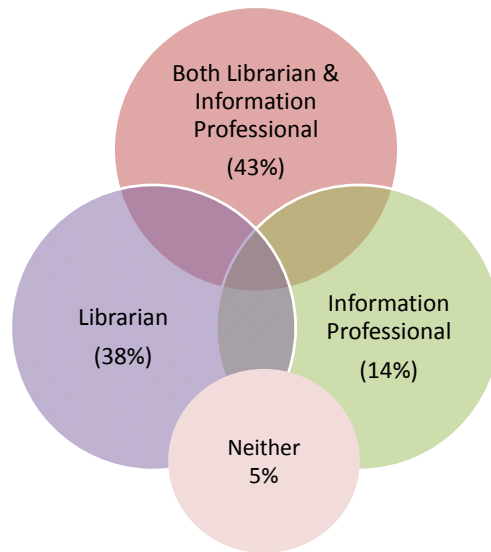


Figure 1. Professional Identity of Respondents Employed in Special Libraries

A comparison of salary and financial situation by gender is shown in Table 2.

Additionally, 58% of the females and 52% of the males have some administrative responsibilities in their current jobs. Most of these special librarians are permanent employees (230, or 92%) and most (243, 97.2%) do their work on site. About half (47.6%) are expected to work overtime hours at least some of the time. Although participant comments suggest that overtime is expected

often without compensation, most respondents (64.4%) indicate they would prefer to keep their working hours the same.

Typical comments from those who indicate that they want to change their hours include:

- “All of my free time goes to maintaining a home and seeing about my elderly mother so there is little time to ever relax.”
- “Because I am getting tired but there is a lot to do and I need to keep this library integrated with the constant changes in our environment.”
- “Currently I feel that in order to feel like I’ve accomplished a lot during the day or week, I need to work extra hours.”
- “I’m getting older and am ready for a life change.”
- “I am a new parent.”
- “I like to have time for other activities such as exercise, hobbies, etc.”
- “Too many hours, no overtime pay.”
- “We’ve had several reductions in force and I have taken on more support work as a result with little re-education in other responsibilities. I just want to restore a work-life balance.”

	Males (n=52)	Females (n=191)
Mean Salary (and standard deviation)	\$ 71,506.96 (29,641.85)	\$ 59,031.43 (23,997.34)
Median Salary	\$ 70,000.00	\$ 56,394.00
I and/or my family depend completely on my paycheck	29 (51.8%)	105 (54.7%)
I and/or my family can live better because of my paycheck	26 (46.4%)	79 (41.1%)
I and/or my family do not depend on my paycheck	1 (1.8%)	8 (4.2%)

**Table 2. Financial Situation of Special Librarians by Gender**

Respondents who have held more than one position with their current employers have held an average of 1.7 positions (standard deviation=1.2) with those employers. When asked how

they would describe their work history with that organization, 56.7% indicated that they have held two or more positions, moving up in the organization; 35.6% indicated that they have held two or more positions, moving up and across the organization; one person has held two or more positions, moving down in the organization; and two persons have held three or more positions, moving both up and down in the organization.

Special librarians were asked a series of questions about the quality of their jobs, and about their satisfaction in those jobs. In terms of job quality, respondents reported:

- It is not too hard, or not hard at all to take time off during work to take care of personal business or family matters (83.3%);
- They have some control (36.1%), a lot of control (42.1%), or complete control (13.1%) in scheduling their work hours;
- They agree or strongly agree that it is basically their own responsibility to decide how their work gets done (93.2%); and
- They have opportunities to develop leadership skills (77.9%).

They are satisfied with what they do in their jobs (88.7%) and most (75.8%) have no plans to leave their job in the next year. When asked how many more years they will likely work for their current organizations, 8.25 years was the average response (s.d.=7.16), with a median of 5 years. 73.8% of respondents view their job as part of a career “to a great extent” and 50.8% indicate it is, to a great extent, “a way to make money.”

Most special librarians who responded (82.6%) reported that they have sufficient training to be effective in their jobs. When asked about the types of training that they find most effective, 99% rated “learning on the job” as somewhat or very important, with attendance at conferences and workshops (91.4%) ranking second, and formal continuing education courses (70.3%) a distant third. They reported attending an average of 2.4 (s.d.=2.0) conferences in the last 12 months and receiving 11.0 (s.d.=21.1) hours of formalized training in the same timeframe. The

reasons cited most often for not receiving training was that it was not offered (42.4%). The next reason given most often was “other” (32.9%). The cost of tuition and training, time constraints, and “didn’t see any I liked” were mentioned most often in the “other” category.

#### *Factors Influencing Professionals to Leave*

There were 134 professionals in the WILIS study population who started out in special libraries immediately following their LIS program, but left for jobs in other settings. 81% of these professionals were women and 19% were men. 59 currently work in non-library settings, 48 in academic libraries, 18 in public libraries, and 9 in school libraries. These professionals are working in a wide range of positions, including professional roles as attorneys, CPAs, professors, and analysts, business owners and product managers, information technology technicians and developers, and graduate students. Reasons given most often for leaving were better opportunities for career development or growth (62.3%) and pursuing more challenging or interesting projects (55.6%). Although most respondents indicated that seeking a better quality of management was not a reason for leaving, it was a major reason for 25.5% of those who left. Specific comments concerning “other factors for leaving” support this as several participants indicated having issues with a supervisor. Another reason frequently cited was marriage – to a soldier, to a co-worker, to someone who was living out of state – or to follow a spouse whose job required a move.

WILIS respondents were asked to reflect on their careers and to indicate how they would describe their job history. Most special librarians have had two or more jobs, but a higher percentage of males (52.8%) than females (27.3%) reported a consistent upward trajectory. 93.7% of respondents reported being satisfied with LIS as a career.

Most special librarians (77.7%) in this study plan to retire from paid work at some point, but 26.6% definitely expect to be working after age 62 and 12% definitely expect to be working after age 65.

### *The Future*

Respondents were asked their opinions about the future, and most librarians agree that:

- Use of internet from home will increase (100%)
- Libraries will be more user friendly in the future (90.4%)
- Use of commercial finding services will increase (88.5%)
- Use of commercial providers of journal articles will increase (87.3%)
- Libraries will collaborate more on collection development and preservation (86.9%)
- Paraprofessionals will take on more responsibility for day-to-day operations (86%)
- Libraries will not replace all of the positions of librarians who retire (81.2%)
- Libraries will increase outsourcing of functions (76%)
- Belief that information on the internet is as reliable as information found in a library will increase (74.2%)
- There will be increasing demand by non-library employers for information science graduates (73.8%)
- The LIS degree will remain the most important stepping stone into the library (72.8%)

Between 60-70% of those responding indicated that libraries will hire more subject specialists with advanced degrees, that libraries will hire more staff without a master's degree in library science, and that librarians will be considered leaders in the information age. Approximately 55% of the responses agreed that there will be increasing demand by non-library employers for library science graduates and that the library as a place will be more important, and 58.1% agreed that libraries will become more central to their communities. Special librarians disagree that libraries "cannot compete with commercial services" (18.4% agree).

Providing remote access (77.2%), demonstrating the value of the library (75.9%), marketing services (71.1%) and partnering with other libraries (72.8%) were areas of concern for

the future. As one person noted, librarians need to become “fierce fighters for part of the fiscal pie.”

## Discussion

Several trends in the results of the special librarian responses merit closer analysis. We will address three of these in this section, including motivations for (1) entering the field of special librarianship, (2) staying in the field, and (3) leaving the field. These motivations will be discussed in comparison with some of the responses of “non-library” employees as this group includes at least some professionals who may represent new models for information services.

The reasons that special librarians enter the profession are not that different from those entering other types of libraries. A love of books, joy in helping people, love of research, a pleasant work environment, and a collegial atmosphere are familiar to those of us who read the essays of applicants to our schools. Few reasons given were negative in tone, such as “did not like teaching.” Several responses made reference to a role model or mentor who influenced their thinking, such as the participant who credited a librarian who “took me to lunch and introduced me to librarianship as a profession – this was the critical point.” Special librarians seem to have a more proactive approach toward their careers. While many of the same motivations apply to non-library employees, a more varied and more extensive list of reasons were noted by the latter group and include the following more passive explanations:

- “I was stuck in a job I didn’t like and I was ready for a change.”
- “Could not think of anything else to do.”
- “I didn’t really know what I wanted to do.”

These results indicate that special librarians have, for the most part, been successful and satisfied with their careers. However, a theme of stress emerges from the WILIS data suggesting that many are feeling pressured to work longer hours and are required to shoulder additional responsibilities as positions are cut. Much of this pressure is self-imposed, working extra hours to “keep things rolling” or to have a sense of accomplishment and “no one can show you which projects to eliminate. One librarian voiced concern that positions were cut, duties were reassigned, yet there was no training in how to perform those newly-assigned duties. Sixty-four percent believe that they are required to work harder and 77% are required to perform more technology-related tasks compared to five years ago. Thirty-seven percent of special librarians are more concerned about job security compared to five years ago; and 30% of non-library employees are more concerned about their job security. We did not ask how their organizations are planning for the future, but continued pressure in a climate of economic crisis is likely to take its toll on the health of the professionals as well as the organizations where they work.

#### *Leaving the field*

Twelve percent (n=26) of special librarians do not think they will still be working in the field three years from now. Most of those who plan to leave (65%) will be retiring. The others express disparate reasons for wanting to leave. Several mention burnout, overwork, and low salaries, while others plan to transition to other occupations in which they can use their LIS skills. Of the respondents who are not working in libraries but consider themselves to be working in the LIS field, 16% (n=34) plan to leave the field within the next three years, and 38% of them will be leaving for reasons other than retirement. There is no consistent reason given by this group for wanting to leave. Some plan to further their education or seek employment in related information or analytical fields, such as public health, clinical data management, or education. Others intend

to start a business or take a break from full-time work to spend more time with their young children.

While special librarians are slightly younger than other librarians who responded to the WILIS survey, many are approaching retirement age and that number increases annually. We do not yet know the impact of the recession of 2009 upon many of these organizations, such as legal and corporate libraries and information centers, but it is likely that fewer new professionals will be hired this year. This will potentially magnify the coming shortage.

### *The Future*

Both the special librarians and the information professionals who work in non-library settings are optimistic about the future of libraries and future opportunities for information professionals. However, priorities for the future are somewhat different. Those working in non-library settings put most emphasis on focusing on user-defined needs, marketing services, and increasing the role of libraries as community centers while those working in special libraries were most concerned with providing remote access to services, marketing, and promoting the library's services.

### Conclusion

The WILIS study is an extensive resource for investigating career patterns and issues in our field. This report is a subset of that data, merely scratching the surface of what can be mined. Our early analysis has focused on differences by type of library setting to assess workforce issues. However, in the future, it may be beneficial to slice the data differently, comparing motivation, attitudes, and experiences of the baby boomers who are nearing retirement with the net generation who are beginning their careers for example to assess how their needs and

motives differ. This analysis can be done across types of libraries as well as within a specific type.

A more fine-tuned assessment of those who work in non-library settings may be helpful to distinguish positions that are most similar to, or potentially competition for, special libraries. Investigating trends in these organizations may help us to discover more about the qualifications and effectiveness of those we recruit to the profession. The message that comes through most clearly from the analysis of the WILIS responses of special librarians is the high degree of professionalism among the ranks. Although they are dedicated and satisfied with their careers, the reported stress and increasing workload are troubling, particularly among those who are most experienced and nearing retirement. Only 23.7% of special librarians and 16% of non-library employees feel that retaining older workers should receive increased focus.

Responses to the survey indicate the need for promotion and marketing of services to those in the organization who control funding, and finding time for these tasks is made more difficult as workloads increase. Time management, marketing skills, leadership skills, and innovative thinking are among the qualities that future professionals will need most in special libraries.

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