

The Impact of Professional Associations on the Careers of LIS Professionals

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Abstract

Within the library and information science (LIS) community, as well as in the general career counseling community, conventional wisdom holds that belonging to and participating in professional associations will help the careers of professionals and students alike. The usual argument maintains that these groups increase one's networking opportunities and therefore one's exposure to job opportunities. Additionally, career experts sometimes say that being a member provides evidence of passion and engagement or an interest in continued self-education. Little research exists to back up these assertions, though graduate students are encouraged to join and to use the networking and educational opportunities to help them as they start on their career path. However, without data, only anecdotal evidence and opinion can be used as arguments to support these claims.

This exploratory study examines survey data from currently employed LIS professionals holding MLIS (or equivalent) degrees to investigate how belonging to and participating in a professional association as a student impacted their careers. In addition, data collected via online survey illuminates other previously unanswered questions: How common is it for MLIS students to be members of professional associations? In what ways did student-members of professional associations participate? This study investigates the impact that joining and participating in one or more LIS associations as a student has on the careers of LIS professionals in the United States to derive relevant information for current MLIS students and LIS associations.

Keywords: professional associations, career-impact, student library association participation

Introduction

Professional associations for library and information science (LIS) professionals have a history that begins with the American Library Association's founding in 1876 (American Library Association n.d.). Since then, LIS professionals and Masters of Library and Information Science (MLIS) students have formed hundreds of these groups¹. Professional associations provide opportunities for networking, professional development, research, publication and speaking, and much more. The commonly held belief is that membership and participation in one or more of these groups benefits the careers of LIS students and professionals. However, very little research currently exists to refute or support this claim.

Research Topic

Professional associations exist for nearly every conceivable group of professionals, including those in the LIS field. There are associations of all sizes working to serve the needs of both general and niche subsets of the profession. Notably few academic research studies have been carried out, however, regarding either participation or outcomes. This study investigates how belonging to and participating in a professional association as a student impacts the careers of LIS professionals in the United States.

Research Problem & Purpose of Study

A lot of professional associations exist within the library and information science profession - everything from ALA to SLA and CILIP to SCIP (respectively, American Library Association, Special Libraries Association, Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals, Strategic and Competitive Intelligence Professionals). These groups serve a diversity of interests and populations within the LIS community. However, these organizations also display a diversity of participation levels, engagement, and organization.

Within the LIS community, as well as in the general career counseling community, the conventional wisdom is that belonging to and participating in professional associations will help the careers of professionals and students alike. The usual argument maintains that these groups help by increasing one's networking opportunities and therefore one's exposure to job opportunities. Additionally, career experts sometimes say that being a member provides evidence of passion and engagement or an interest in continued self-education. This study attempts to contribute credible data in addition to the conventional wisdom regarding student association membership.

¹ See: <http://ischool.sjsu.edu/professional-associations>

Research Questions

Main research question: How does belonging to and/or participating in a professional association as a student impact the careers of LIS professionals in the US?

Sub-questions: How common is it for MLIS students to be members of professional associations? How did student-members of professional associations participate?

Literature Review

Most of the existing literature consists of blog posts and opinion-based essays, rather than scholarly research articles. The “conventional wisdom” is that joining and participating in professional associations is generally good for career development, networking, and job-finding (Cherwin 2010; Slade 2002; Wise 2012). Graduate students in Master of Library and Information Science programs are often encouraged to join by their schools and instructors, and associations themselves offer deep student discounts on membership dues and conference admission prices. Similarly, conference attendance is promoted as being beneficial to the careers of LIS students and professionals (Jenkins 2015; Slade 2002; Spaulding 2016); the same opinions are promoted in other disciplines as well (Cherrstrom 2012; Escoffery, Kenzig, and Hyden 2015; Leslie 2015; Palmer 2011).

On the other hand, very little published, academic research explores questions regarding benefits of professional associations for professionals or students either in the library and information science field or another one. Davidson and Middleton (2006) explicitly state, “very little research assesses the actual value members find in these [organizations]” (206). Frank (1997) “was not able to find a specific study that correlates activity in professional associations and success in one’s career as a librarian” (317). Most authors agree that professional associations offer valuable opportunities for networking to members; in fact, finding one that disagreed would be notable. The few studies that do exist looked at opportunities for professional development, and several examined the value of attending conferences.

Professional Development

Frank (1997) conducted three focus groups to try to understand the impact that participation in professional associations might have on an LIS professional’s career. In the article, Frank (1997) presented both personal opinions and observations alongside feedback from focus group participants, and began with the supposition that “active participation is likely to facilitate professional success in one’s job and career” (308). The article discussed the generic “conventional wisdom” regarding the benefits of joining professional associations, and opportunities for research and publication as well as leadership were highlighted to demonstrate how they might contribute to professional development. Specifically, Frank suggested participating in poster sessions at conferences, contributing to or editing association journals, and serving as committee chairs in order to develop leadership and communication skills. Members of the focus groups agreed, and they “noted the relevance of participation to one’s career.... All of the members stated that the librarians who participate actively are more ‘marketable,’ more

likely to be promoted, and more likely to succeed in their careers” (Frank 1997, 318). No data was presented to back up the focus group members’ declarations.

Fisher (1997) suggested that professional development is one of the most important benefits professional associations have to offer members. His research revealed a wide variety of educational opportunities for members, including annual conferences, regional and virtual meetings, and local chapter workshops and events. While the research did not clearly illuminate the value these organizations provide, Fisher (1997) argued that “if these...groups were not providing some value to someone, they would be out of business” (320).

Davidson and Middleton (2006) surveyed 265 science and engineering librarians who worked in academic, government, corporate, and other special libraries. In answer to a question about what they gained from their activity in a professional organization, 109 of 184 comments, or 59%, were related to learning and continuing education (Davidson and Middleton 2006). Interestingly, Kamm (1997) asked 116 librarians why they joined professional associations, and she did not report any respondents who listed learning or continuing education as a reason. Cornell and Farkas (1995) agreed that knowledge sharing was a main benefit of joining professional associations, but they also mentioned “financial benefits, and career opportunities” (44).

Bradley, Dalby, and Spencer (2009) argued that new LIS professionals can benefit from simply observing and interacting with colleagues: “In order to build their own sense of professional value, new professionals need to see their peers being treated with professional respect – presenting at conferences, writing papers, speaking about issues that they can relate to” (236). Whether from active learning opportunities or more passive observation, professional development figures prominently in the literature about LIS professional associations and members.

Conferences

Benefits of conference attendance is the second major theme within the scholarly research regarding LIS professional associations. The generally agreed upon outcomes of attending conferences, like expanding one’s professional horizons and network, acquiring new skills, being exposed to a variety of viewpoints, and learning from colleagues, exhibitors, and presenters are mentioned frequently (Bradley, Dalby, and Spencer 2009; Frank 1997; Slade 2002; Vega and Connell 2007).

Vega and Connell (2007) surveyed 794 librarians to learn why they do or do not attend conferences and what they thought about various conference offerings like roundtables and poster sessions. 75% replied that they attend one or two conferences per year; 21% attend three or more each year, and less than 5% do not normally attend any (Vega and Connell 2007, 506). As for *why* librarians attended conferences, 40% listed “professional rejuvenation” (509) as the most important reason, which, of course, ties back into professional development, and 23% said networking was the second most important reason. Davidson and Middleton’s (2006) survey of 265 science and engineering librarians produced somewhat higher numbers. 82% of the respondents attend their organization’s nation conferences “as often as they are held” (Davidson and Middleton 2006, 210). Interestingly, only 9% of these librarians chose conference activity,

which included “presenting papers, organizing programs or workshops, facilitating discussion groups or other conference-related activities,” (210) as one of their forms of “active participation” in their organization, though the study’s authors reported 71% chose “attend conferences” (211), so perhaps there was some confusion on the part of survey respondents. Nevertheless, it is clear that many members of professional, LIS associations attend and participate at conferences; however, these authors could find no studies that measured concrete career benefits attendees derived from attending conferences, such as a promotion, a raise, or a job.

Literature Review Conclusions

These authors could not find any academic research investigating or explaining how belonging to and participating in a professional association as a student impacts the careers of LIS professionals in the United States. While there are countless informal articles and posts online extolling the benefits of joining professional associations and attending their conferences, there is not any science backing up such claims. It makes sense, intuitively, that learning, networking, presenting, and filling leadership positions within such organizations could, or maybe should, help one’s career, but without any evidence, it is much harder to make the argument. Joining and participating in professional associations are high cost endeavors, both in dollar amounts and in time, so a clear, research-backed answer would be appreciated by students and professionals alike.

Methodology

The study population consists of LIS professionals working in the LIS field in the United States who have an MLIS (or equivalent such as MIS) degree. The following operational definitions will help define the terms used in this study:

- **LIS professionals** – Those working in the broad field of library and information science – from public librarians to competitive analysis professionals to metadata librarians and everything in between – who have received an MLIS or equivalent at ALA-Accredited programs² in the USA or Canada and who currently work in the United States.
- **Professional Association** – Local, state, or national or international nonprofit organization that seeks to “further a particular profession, the interests of individuals engaged in that profession and the public interest” (Professional Associations n.d.).
- **Student** - Graduate school attendees enrolled as either part-time or full-time students at an ALA-Accredited program in the USA.

Sampling Design & Technique

This research study relied on an online survey to collect data³. The study was primarily quantitative but also had some qualitative components. The initial survey questions had Yes/No answers to determine eligibility. Follow-up queries for “Yes” answers solicited data to determine

² <http://www.ala.org/accreditedprograms/directory>

³ See Appendix A

which specific organizations participants were members of, how they participated, and if membership impacted their career.

This research relies on non-probability sampling using the convenience sampling method. Surveys were distributed via social media, including Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn. Researchers also relied on professional association email lists and listservs. Finally, researchers contacted State Librarians (or equivalent) in all 50 states and the District of Columbia and asked that they distribute the survey via their state's internal listserv.

Ethical Considerations

Because human subjects are involved, there are ethical considerations. Although the researchers determined that the study did not meet the threshold for Institutional Review Board evaluation⁴, survey participants were presented with a consent form (Appendix B) and had to agree in order to enter the survey.

Participant privacy protection is an ethical consideration in this study because participants were asked questions about their education and career history. Researchers protected confidentiality by keeping data in password-protected and private computers. Bias is another ethical consideration. Although the survey and data collection methods should have eliminated bias in those steps, during the analysis phase of the study, researchers exercised care to keep personal opinions from coloring their work.

Findings

This study relies on data collected between February 28, 2017 and April 17, 2017. Researchers solicited responses via social media, listservs, direct contact, and other email lists. Discounting duplicates, 1,869 individuals started the survey. Of these, 1,223 (65%) LIS professionals from 49 states and the District of Columbia passed three screening questions and answered all the questions (Figure 1). These 1,223 participants are currently employed MLIS-holding (or equivalent) professionals who were members of LIS professional associations as students. Among this subset, 472 (39%) reported that their membership and/or participation in a professional organization as a student positively impacted their job search (Figure 2). Within this group, 42% (n=200) of participants who chose to answer *how* their membership and/or participation in a professional organization as a student positively impacted their job search mentioned networking. Gaining industry knowledge and a job list were both listed in 20% of survey responses (n=98 and n=97, respectively). 66 (14%) responders cited conferences, and 44 (9%) gained experience. 10% (n=47) specified that their membership and/or participation in a professional organization as a student helped them get a job.

⁴ <http://www.sjsu.edu/research/irb/irb-forms/index.html>

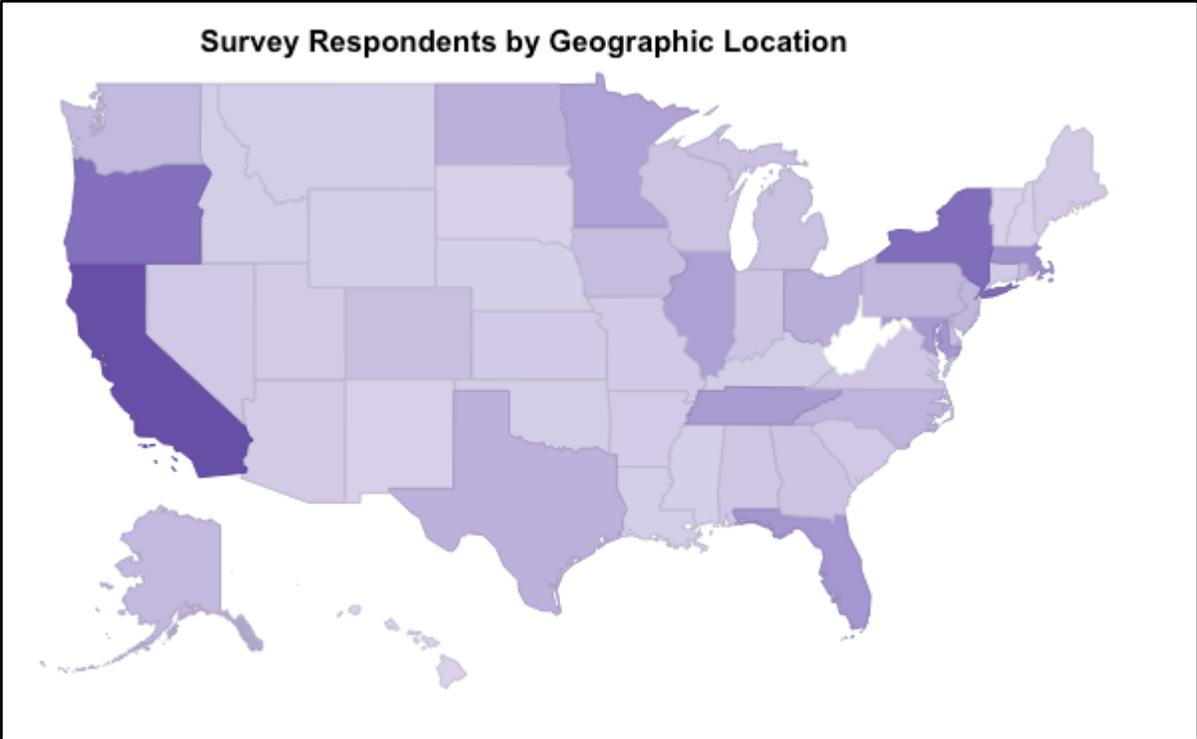


Figure 1. Survey Respondents by Geographic Location; darker shading indicates greater numbers of survey participants. Link to interactive map: <http://bit.ly/2q4KPqr>

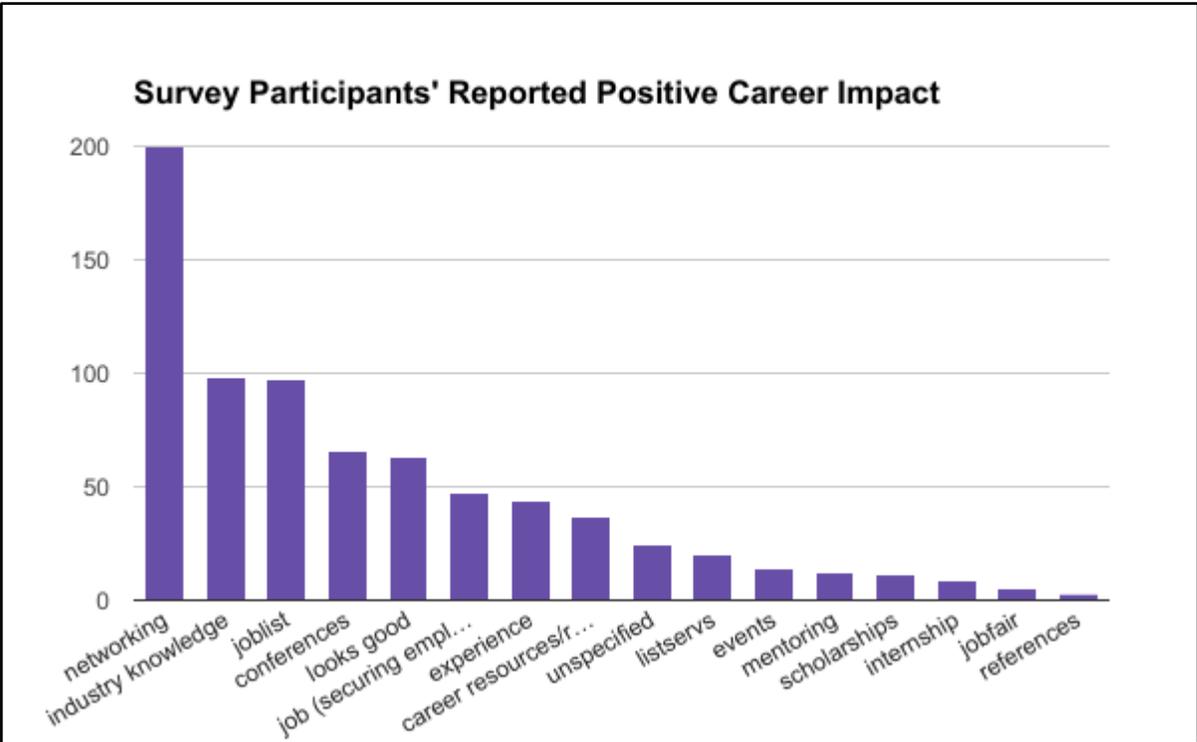


Figure 2. Survey Participants' Reported Positive Career Impact by Category.

272 participants reported that they were student members of the Special Libraries Association (SLA). Of those, 123 (45%) reported a positive impact on their job search; 149 (55%) reported no impact (Figure 3). Within this group of former SLA student members, 27% (n=73) of participants who chose to answer *how* their membership and/or participation in a professional organization as a student positively impacted their job search mentioned networking. 40 respondents' (15%) answers included a job list; 19 (7%) wrote about gaining industry knowledge, including highly specific library environments, industry trends, and previously unknown opportunities; and 15 (5.5%) listed conferences. Of those survey participants who were SLA student members, 5% (n=13) credited their membership and/or participation in a professional organization as a student with helping them secure employment (Figure 4).

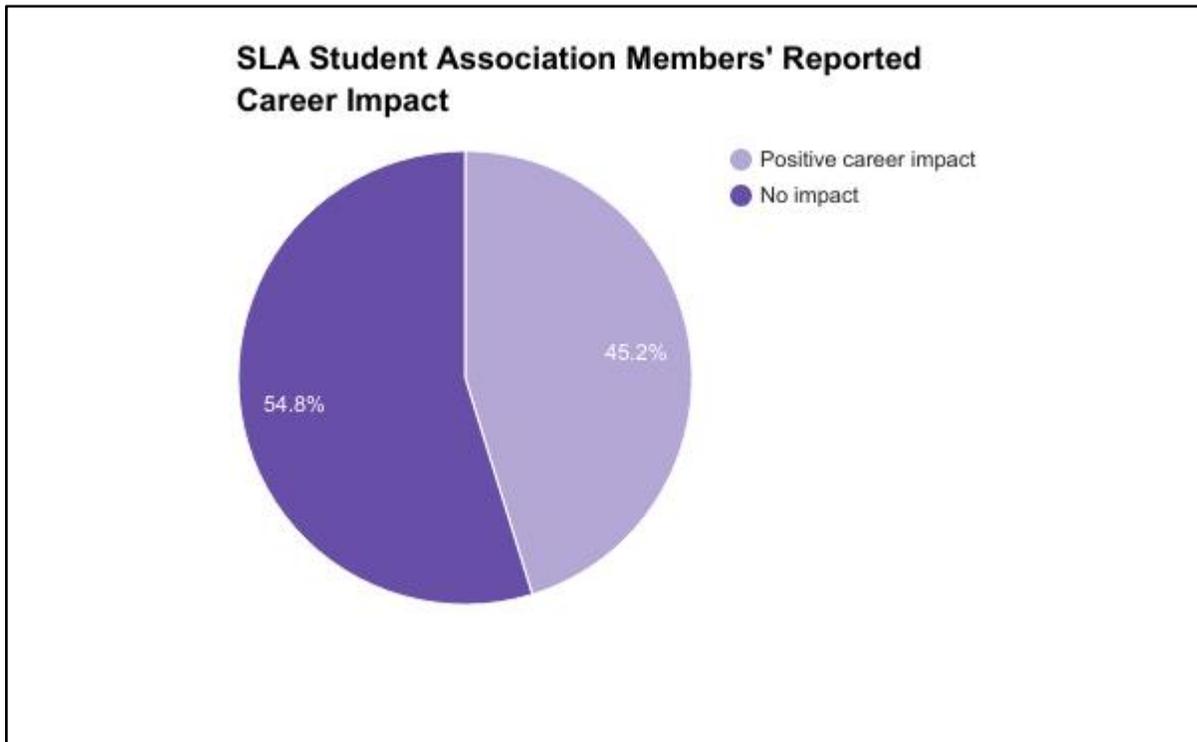


Figure 3. SLA Student Association Members' Reported Career Impact.

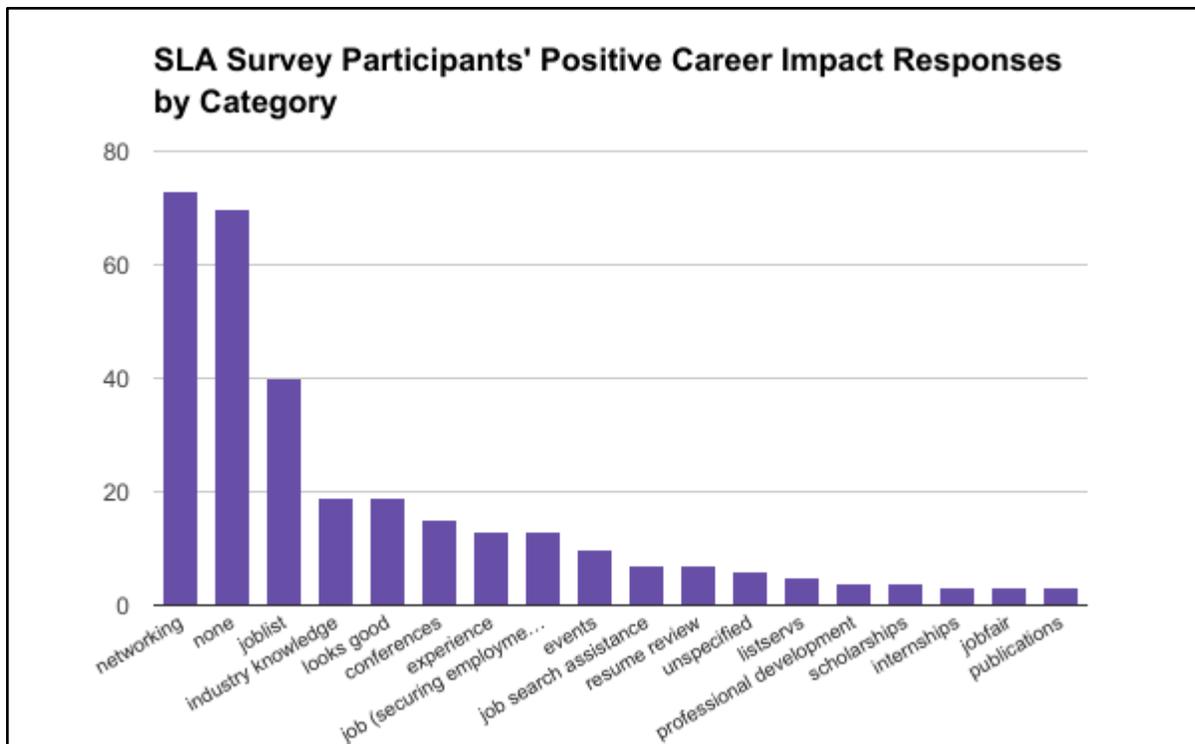


Figure 4. SLA Survey Participants' Positive Career Impact Responses by Category.

Of the 1,223 people who fully completed the survey, 15% (n=186) are current SLA members, and 47% (n=129) of individuals who were SLA members as students are current SLA members. The collected data could indicate that post-graduates specialize their professional memberships by honing in on local and niche associations, with increasing numbers of memberships seen in some of these categories (Figure 5).

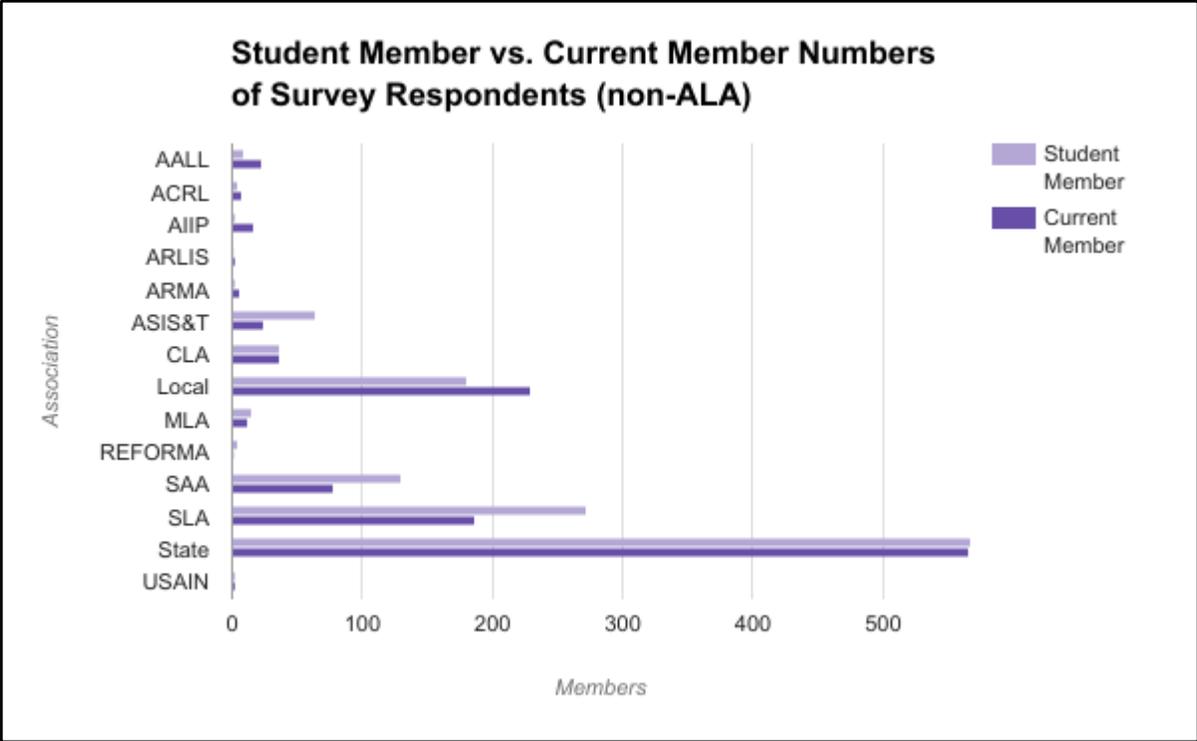


Figure 5. Survey Participants' Student Membership to Current Membership Comparison.

The survey required responders to indicate what other benefits, career or otherwise, they derived from their membership or participation in a professional association as a student. Among those who were SLA student members, 56% (n=152) listed networking; 39% (n=105) gained industry knowledge; 11% (n=30) cited professional development; and 10% (n=27) mentioned a job list (Figure 6).

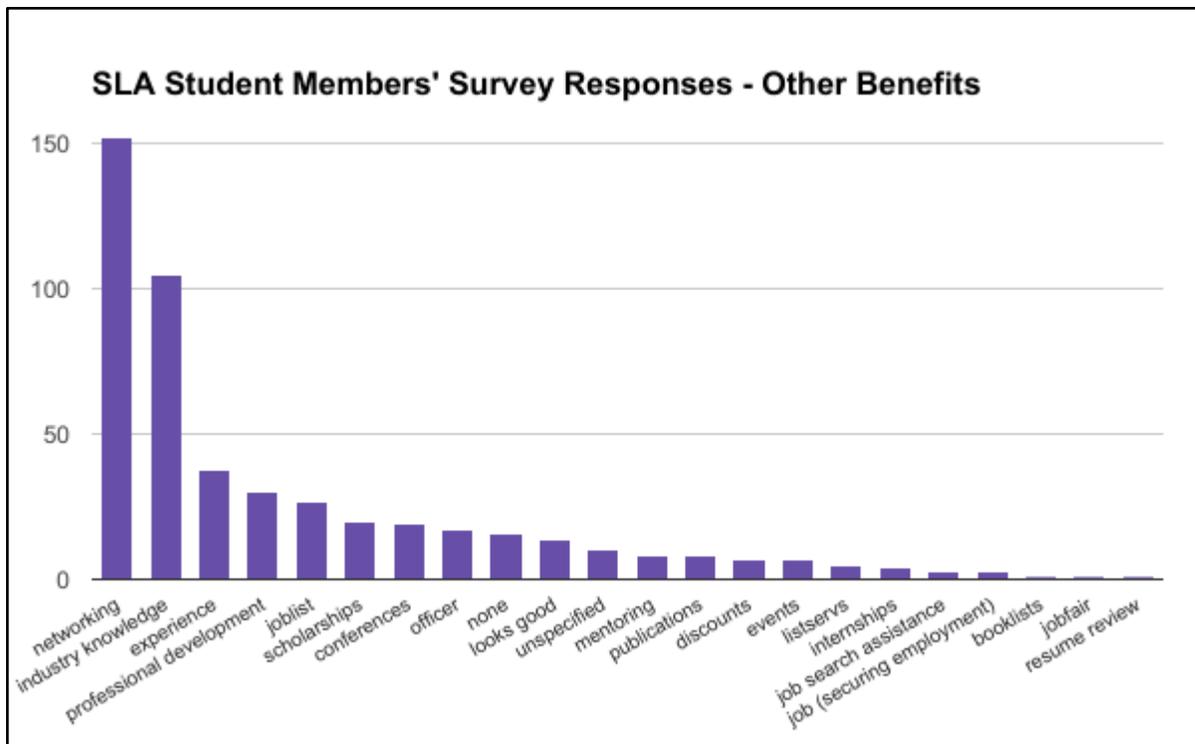


Figure 6. SLA Student Members' Survey Responses - Other Benefits.

Finally, participants had to answer, “What would be the best/most rewarding career or professional development opportunities that LIS organizations could offer to students?” Former SLA student members weighed in: 30.5% (n=83) of responders suggested networking opportunities, and an equal number suggested mentoring programs. 69 LIS professionals (25%) believed that opportunities to gain experience – such as fellowships, volunteering, shadowing, presenting, and serving as an officer – would be helpful; 19% (n=52) wanted job search assistance; 38 respondents (14%) suggested holding events; 37 people (14%) called for monetary aid in the form of scholarships, stipends, grants, and awards. Another 34 participants (12.5%) suggested internships (Figure 7).

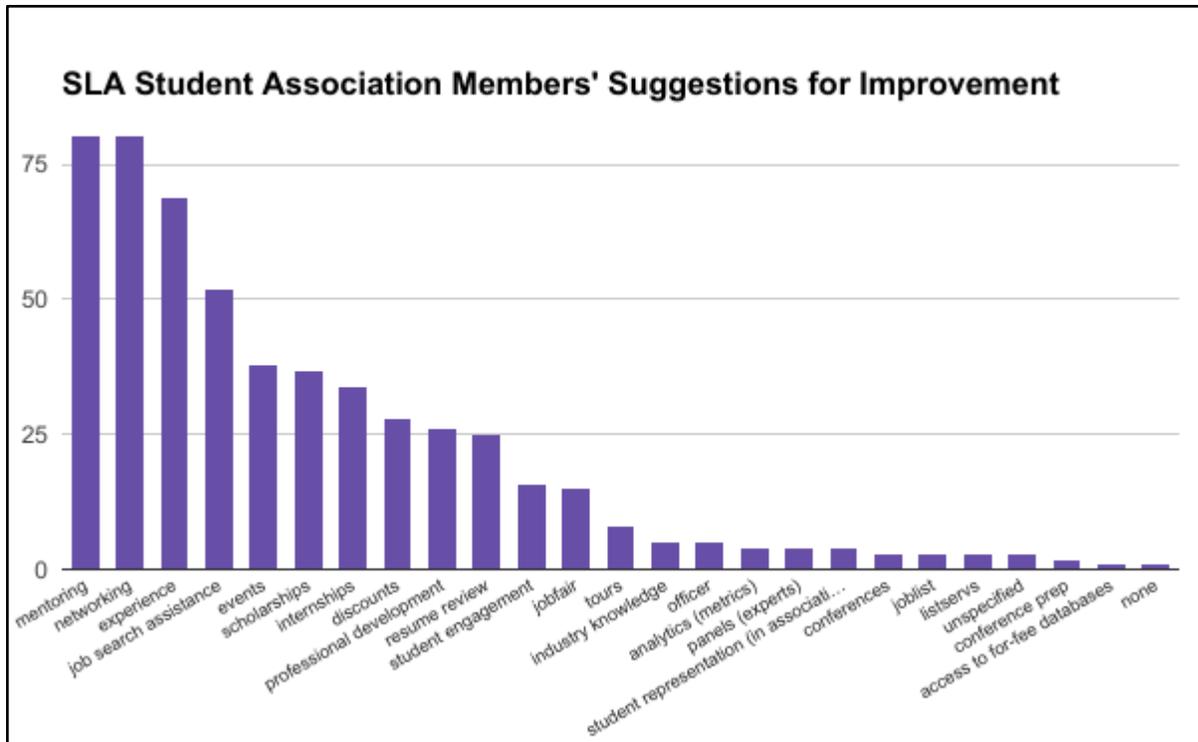


Figure 7. SLA Student Association Members' Suggestions for Improvement.

Limitations of the Research

This study investigated one aspect of the job search and careers of library and information science professionals. It can not and should not be expected to completely explain job search success or failures; the impact of professional association membership on the career path of these individuals is merely a piece of the puzzle. The results of this study should not be applied to other professions. Every profession has its own culture, norms, mores, and communities; thus, any conclusions from this research are not necessarily representative of other populations.

Due to the nature of the method researchers used to solicit survey participants, certain biases are present in the data. Researchers targeted professional association members, particularly those of ALA and SLA, via social media and listservs. The data collection instrument also impacted the data; graduation years before 2000 are not separated, just grouped as "1999 or earlier," and there was no option for those currently employed in the broad LIS profession without MLIS degrees (or equivalent) or retired LIS professionals to participate. Furthermore, this was the researchers' first study of this kind; it was an incredible learning experience and it illuminated the intricacies of survey writing. In some instances, questions could have been written more clearly, and collecting more demographic data could have yielded further insight.

In addition, some users reported problems with survey functionality on mobile devices. Finally, because the researchers relied on Google Forms for the survey delivery, and also used

Google's URL Shortener, some potential survey participants were blocked from the site while attempting to access the survey from their work computers. Many LIS professionals use their work email accounts to subscribe to professional association news and listservs, and it is impossible to know how many people were blocked.

Conclusion

The results of this study are significant to MLIS students, but also to LIS professionals and professional associations themselves. For students and professionals alike, knowing what return on investment the often-steep costs of membership, along with optional activities like conference attendance, provide is invaluable information. Currently, very little data about this question exists, yet membership and participation in such groups is promoted by schools, faculty, career counselors, and professional associations as being useful, if not critical, for professional success. For those advocates, having supporting data makes their arguments stronger.

This study investigated the impact that joining and participating in one or more professional associations as a student has on the careers of LIS professionals in the United States. The good news for both individuals and organizations is that 472 (39%) responders reported that their membership and/or participation in a professional organization as a student positively impacted their job search. 10% (n=47) of survey participants specified that their membership and/or participation in a professional organization as a student helped them get a job.

Perhaps the biggest takeaway from this research is for professional organizations themselves. Most of the suggestions for improvement collected in the survey are for programs or services that these organizations are already providing, like networking, mentoring, and volunteer opportunities, as well as holding member events. LIS professional associations must do a better job of marketing their services and engaging potential student members. Although marketing efforts should be broad, connecting with students and retaining their membership as they transition to working professionals will help these groups grow in size, influence, and importance within the profession.

There is more information to be gleaned from further analysis of the data collected in this study. Other questions for future consideration include: do students benefit more from participation in one professional association or another? How does geography impact the efficacy of membership or participation? In addition, the authors encourage future researchers to contribute credible data to the existing body of knowledge regarding the impact of LIS student and postgraduate association membership. Further research opportunities include ascertaining why MLIS students join professional associations, why students and professionals choose to discontinue their membership, and how membership and participation benefits LIS professionals.

Appendix A

Survey Questions

Part 1

1. Did you join a professional LIS organization as an MLIS student? Yes/No
2. Are you a graduate of an ALA-accredited MLIS (or equivalent) program in the United States? Yes/No
3. Are you currently employed in the broad LIS profession in the United States? Yes/No
4. Did you join a professional LIS organization as an MLIS student? Yes/No

Only if the respondent answers “yes” to all four questions will they be able to answer all the remaining questions. If “yes” for 1-3 but “no” to 4, respondent is directed to Part 3.

Part 2: As a student

5. What organization(s) were you a member of when you were a student? (select all that apply)
 - o ALA (American Library Association)
 - o SLA (Special Libraries Association)
 - o SAA (Society of American Archivists)
 - o ASIS&T (The Association for Information Science & Technology)
 - o AIIP (Association of Independent Information Professionals)
 - o Your state library association (please specify in the "Other" option below)
 - o A local chapter (please specify in the "Other" option below)
 - o Other: _____
6. How did you participate in a professional organization as an MLIS student? (select all that apply)
 - o No active participation; membership only
 - o Attended member meetings
 - o Attended virtual events (webinars, meet ups, etc.)
 - o Attended in-person events (lectures, tours, lunches, meet ups, etc.)
 - o Served as an officer, or equivalent
 - o Attended association conference(s)
 - o Other (please specify) _____
7. Did your membership and/or participation in a professional organization as a student impact your job search? Yes/No
8. If yes, how? _____

9. What benefits, career or otherwise, did you derive from your membership or participation in a professional association as a student? _____

10. What would be the best/most rewarding career or professional development opportunities for students? _____

Part 3: Last page!

11. When did you receive your MLIS?

- o Choose from 2000 through 2016 or “1999 or earlier” from dropdown list

12. Where, geographically, do you work?

- o Choose state (or District of Columbia) from dropdown list

13. Where do you work?

- o Public Library
- o Academic Library
- o Corporate Library
- o Government Library
- o Medical Library
- o Law Library
- o School Library (elementary, middle or high; public or private)
- o Museum
- o Archives
- o Other: _____

14. What is your current job title? _____

15. Are you currently a member of a professional organization? Yes/No

16. If yes, which one(s)? Select all that apply.

- o ALA (American Library Association)
- o SLA (Special Libraries Association)
- o SAA (Society of American Archivists)
- o ASIS&T (The Association for Information Science & Technology)
- o AIP (Association of Independent Information Professionals)
- o Your state library association (please specify in the "Other" option below)
- o A local chapter (please specify in the "Other" option below)
- o Other: _____

Exit:

Your response has been recorded. Thank you for your time and participation! We would appreciate it if you would share this survey with anyone you think might qualify. Please share this link: <https://goo.gl/vP4faE>

Appendix B

REQUEST FOR YOUR PARTICIPATION IN RESEARCH

TITLE OF STUDY

Career Impact of Student Participation in Professional LIS Organizations

NAMES OF THE RESEARCHERS

Kate Spaulding & Ame Maloney

We are conducting this study independently of any institutional affiliation. However, we are both currently graduate students at San José State University's iSchool.

PURPOSE

We hope to determine the career impact that participating in LIS professional organizations has for LIS students.

PROCEDURES

Please read through the following information about your rights as a research participant. It is available online at: <https://goo.gl/vP4faE>

If you agree to take the survey, please select "yes" and click "next" at the bottom of this page. (Note: Please use the BACK and NEXT buttons at the bottom of every page to navigate this survey. Do not use your browser to return to a previous page, as you will be automatically redirected to the first screen.)

POTENTIAL RISKS

There are no direct foreseeable risks anticipated other than those normally encountered in your daily activities.

POTENTIAL BENEFITS

Participation in this survey will help contribute to the body of knowledge about LIS education.

COMPENSATION

There is no compensation for participation this study.

CONFIDENTIALITY

Although the results of this study may be published, no information that could identify you will be included. Your responses are anonymous and kept in password protected storage.

PARTICIPANT RIGHTS

Your participation in this study is voluntary. If you choose to participate, you may quit the survey at any time.

QUESTIONS

You are encouraged to ask questions at any time during this study.

For further information about the study, contact Kate Spaulding at kate.spaulding@sjsu.edu

AGREEMENT TO PARTICIPATE Please select from the choices below. If you click “yes,” it is implied that you have read the information above about the research and your rights as a participant, and that you give your voluntary consent. Please print out a copy of this page and keep it for your records.

Endnotes

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