

professionally underpaid: systemic issues in the LIS field

A presentation by Michelle Montalbano, Simmons SLIS MLIS Candidate, Summer 2016
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Overview: This presentation will discuss the perpetuation of exclusive, bourgeoisie class and power structures through a model of work that includes intrinsic reward and unpaid labor, the mapping of larger societal inequalities--race, class, and gender disparities--onto our profession, and the local issue of the administration at SLIS maintaining these inequalities not only in its curriculum and admissions policies, but also in its hiring practices, while also making connections to these issues at other major LIS institutions and in society at large

- **Conversation Starters**

- Big Issues Facing the LIS Profession Today

- Identity crisis: Are we librarians, or information professionals?
- Recent talk from Provost's office about changing the name of the school and dropping "Library"
- What kind of cachet do these terms carry with them?
- What are the implications?

- DIGITAL everything

- Part of the shift away from libraries and the emphasis on digital are professionals who possess much broader skill sets, so that fluency in the LIS/IS world means not only being able to design projects from start to finish, but also to actually do it all (e.g. identify and classify the problems in a terrible dataset and write the Python script you need to fix them).
- Which means we're more highly skilled than ever before, and yet still making the same unimpressive wages

- Culture of volunteerism and resulting deprofessionalization entrenched in the LIS field

- In response to vociferous critiques from the student body, Simmons recently decided to abolish the capstone experience, formerly a requirement for all students (the semi-opacity about what exactly is required to fulfill degree requirements has been at issue as well). An internship was required for the archives track, and everyone else had the option of pursuing either an independent study project or a research paper. In actual practice, pretty much everyone does an internship, and that's because Simmons promotes the city of Boston as an excellent place to get hands-on experience in the field. Very admissions brochure, not great otherwise.

The deprofessionalization involves erosion of characteristics of the profession, dequalification, and class formation. The process of deprofessionalization is underway in several ways, namely, the erosion of the monopoly of technical knowledge; the beginning of professional accountability; suspicion of service orientation; the violation of the professional code of ethics; the refutation of the professionals' claim of being liberal and humanitarian; the cutting of the professionals' control; and the creation of class antagonism.²⁷

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- Why? What's so bad about internships for graduate students?

- Simply put, why should organizations budget for hiring entry level workers when they can get interns to do the lackey work for free (or in exchange for credit)?

- Equally problematic is an academic system run on adjuncts, teaching assistants, and other low-paid, highly-qualified individuals
 - Which thereby contributes to depressed wages for the whole workforce, and the general diminishment of the professional status of the field
 - On top of that, the bar is set insurmountably high for supposed entry level positions, i.e. requiring 3-5 years experience+2 foreign languages+subject field masters
 - Surprise, in some cases "professional" experience does not include unpaid internships, either

- Historical backdrop, women dominated field=depressed wages because women's work is just undervalued

- Charts, graphs, income inequality over time
- Quick peek at numbers w/r/t gender, race, and class in librarianship - [ALA statistics](#)

- Class struggle, cementing class lines - class structures through which power dynamics are communicated

- Low wages are directly connected to these power structures, and if our profession is overwhelmingly women, people of color, and marginalized populations.
- Perpetuating an academic mode/field where unpaid internships are the norm means only the people who can afford it can pursue some opportunities
- Noble pursuits/do what you love/There is a connection to the "do what you love" culture (Tokumitsu, 2014) prevalent in the contemporary labor market worth noting. This ethos has created conditions for workers in the creative class, women in particular, much like those experienced by women in the early years of American libraries.
- [Women's work is generally devalued - NY Times](#)

- THIS IS NOT A ZERO SUM GAME
 - A victory for students does not mean a loss for the institution, it means contributing to a better, more enlightened approach to the academic system, library operations, and communities at large
 - Understanding the larger systemic inequalities w/r/t race, class, and gender that are perpetuated by an academic system that requires unpaid internships to fulfill graduation requirements is essential
 - Also understanding how professionalization/deprofessionalization is influenced by external economic, political, and social dynamics
- Comparison with other major/prominent LIS grad programs and required "field study" or "internship" components, proportion of paid work study/fellowship-based financial aid, etc.
 - Spreadsheet w/ exhaustive data provided by Irina
- **Curriculum/administrative/policy reform to address systemic issues**
 - Problem really begins with the library schools
 - Counteract by refusing to run on the labor of underpaid adjunct professors and interns
 - Let's be clear: the solution isn't NOT employing adjuncts, it's paying them enough.
 - Narrowing the gap between the highest paid and the lowest paid members of an institution ("[The College President-to-Adjunct Pay Ratio](#)", *The Atlantic*, 2015)
 - Does employing adjuncts necessarily diminishes the quality of the education we're paying top dollar for?
 - No, because overworked tenure-track/ladder profs don't have to give a shit
 - More rigorous admissions and graduation standards
 - Oversupply of entry level workers is also a contributing factor
 - Over-recruiting candidates based on the myth that mass retirements will lead to mass job openings (as if it ever happens that way)
 - Ensuring that a huge percentage of the student body have paid work study/tuition remission positions as opposed to 5 graduate student assistants a year, 6 fellowships
 - Anyway, recent change in Simmons pay system means no guarantee of full funding
 - Shorten program to 2-3 semesters (as at Pitt, the iSchool at Illinois), reduce cost of living
- **Questions**
 - Predict major trends in the next 3-5 years?
 - If you were designing a new curriculum, which classes would you include? Omit?
 - What about a Project Management requirement?
 - Hands-on, lab experience in classes like Digital Stewardship
 - Technology requirements that don't rely on Code Academy or Khan Academy without applying skills to a final product/project
 - More technology on hand in school facilities, like Ripstations
 - More projects that mirror actual work experiences and include outreach to organizations in the community
- What other kinds of solutions would you propose to alleviate the reliance on interns, volunteers, adjuncts, and other no/low paid workers?
- What can we do?
 - For one, stop taking low-paid jobs and/or demand pay commensurate with your experience and qualifications
 - Put together a cohesive list of suggestions/demands for reform and get it on the desks of Dean Abels, Em Claire, etc.