Earning a Master’s Degree in Library & Information Science: First Steps
by Fiona May, Gena Marker, Kristine Brumley, and Lizzy Walker

What would it take for you to embark on the great adventure known as a master’s degree? A panel discussion at the recent Southwest regional Idaho Library Association conference focused on beginning this journey. Several students in the University of North Texas Library and Information Science (UNT-MLS) program shared insights into pursuing a graduate degree. These Idahoans are part of UNT’s “SWIM” distance education cohort. The SWIM cohort includes students from South Dakota, Wyoming, Idaho, and Montana. They take core classes together, meet in person for two 4-day “institutes,” and share the ups and downs of online education as a 68-person unit. Panelists agreed that camaraderie was key to navigating the first months of this demanding choice.

Two of the panelists received a substantial SWIM Scholarship, funded by a grant awarded jointly to the Idaho Commission for Libraries and the Montana State Library. Other panelists have received some scholarships and loans. Some panelists are recent recipients of bachelor’s degrees, while others are mid-lifers or grandparents. One student had already completed several graduate courses at the time of admission to the MLS program, but most began their first class together in Missoula, Montana, in September 2010.

Four panelists summarize their advice to prospective graduate students in this article. Fiona, whose experience already included some graduate coursework, talks about counting the cost of advanced education. She also discusses the opportunity for earning a mini-degree called a “Graduate Academic Certificate” through UNT.  Gena, a high school teacher-librarian, challenges prospective students to retain balance in their lives, despite long days and heavy demands on personal resources.  Lizzy, a recent Boise State University graduate, points to the need for being proactive about staying healthy while stressed. Kristine, whose background is in teaching and museum work, has researched many scholarships available for graduate study. Hopefully, the insights shared from “the trenches” of grad school will enlighten librarian-hopefuls in their quest.

**Fiona:** An important first step in choosing an ALA-accredited distance MLS program is to count the cost. Please don’t stop at counting the dollars and cents. Idahoans face a tricky situation:  there are no ALA-accredited programs available in-state. Many library students choose to utilize distance education rather than moving out of state. Western universities offering online courses include University of Washington, San Jose State University in California, University of North Texas, Emporia State in Kansas, and several others.

When comparing universities, there are many variables to consider. How many credits are required to graduate? Does the university’s focus and core course load mesh with your interests?  How many face-to-face meetings are required (if distance education)? What is  the overall tone of student comments about the program? Can you sign up for a listserv that allows you to receive student comments in real-time? How will your commitment to education affect your family and job? Who will take care of the jobs you usually do? The costs of time, travel, and stress matter immensely in the quest for grad school survival. For me, the UNT program was a good fit on all counts.

Students returning to college after years away may also have concerns about coping with the rigors of graduate school.  Consider testing the waters with UNT's Graduate Academic Certificate (GAC) program. With a prescribed constellation of four graduate classes, students can earn a certificate that shows  a level of dedication to library work above the norm. GACs are available for Storytelling, Youth Librarianship, Management, and Digital Imaging. It's acceptable to work slowly, taking a single course at a time if desired. Note, however, that loan and scholarship eligibility are often dependent on taking a certain minimum courseload.

I decided to take the plunge and enroll in the master's program at UNT after surviving a single graduate level course.  At that point, I knew I could do it. My Graduate Academic Certificate credits counted toward my degree, which meant I was one-third  of the way to completion when I began with the SWIM cohort in Fall 2010. What a deal! I’m working really hard, but thanks to prior planning it’s been survivable.

**Gena:  *BALANCE*.**That’s  the answer I gave when someone asked what my New Year’s resolution was for 2011.  I knew that starting an MLS program would be time-consuming and potentially exhausting, but I was ill-prepared for how I would react to the rigors of working full time as a high school librarian, taking on a leadership role in ILA and beginning my master’s degree -- all at the same time.   In addition to feeling tired all the time, I also got so run-down by the end of the semester that I spent the entire winter break sick.  With the beginning of second semester, I had a new game plan: attempt to keep a better balance between work, school, and life. So far, although I’ve only gone skiing twice this winter and I’ve had the same Netflix movie sitting on my desk for over a month, I feel like I’m doing a better job of meeting my New Year’s resolution.

One thing that has helped in this endeavor is embracing my new reality.  At the beginning of this program I was beating myself up for not continuing to do the same things as I used to.  Many of the work-related things I formerly did in my spare time at home (write grants, read library journal articles, learn new Web 2.0 tools, etc.) have fallen by the wayside.  Now, I just tell myself that work has to stay at work; I know if I bring it home it won’t get done, as schoolwork always needs to take precedence.   I’ve  also realized that there are certain nights that need to remain homework-free.  Friday nights, for example, are usually full of guilt-free TV watching and catching up on some much-needed sleep.

I began the MLS not because I needed it in order to land the perfect job, or even to advance in my current job; I’m already fortunate enough to be doing the thing that I love.   For me, the SWIM cohort  came along at the right time in my life, and it felt like the right thing to be doing.  There have been many things I’ve learned in classes that I could apply to my job, and I know that ultimately, students are benefiting from what I’m doing.  For me, that’s what it‘s all about.   Pursuing your MLS takes determination, sacrifice, and a lot of support from those around you.  If you can manage those three things, and you want to better yourself in the field of library science, then you’re ready to tackle your MLS.

**Lizzy:**When embarking on a master’s program, it may be necessary to consciously decide to stay healthy.  Unfortunately I had to experience the negative effects of ignoring this aspect of my life during the first semester with the SWIM cohort.  I worked two jobs, one full time and one part time.  My husband, Arthur, was clearly concerned about my decision to keep both jobs while working on my master’s, but he left the choice up to me.  For awhile, I was able to handle the workload and demanding strain that my busy schedule put on me.

Several things changed as I ignored my health.  I took to drinking coffee rather than water most of the time.  This affected my sleep, which in turn affected my ability to function during the day.  I stopped taking vitamins, simply because it was something else I had to keep track of. Also, I stopped working out and taking time for myself;  I was exhausted at the end of the day.  There were evenings that my husband would, thankfully, invite me go for walks with him even though I had a stack of homework waiting for me on my desk. Fatigue, constant allergy attacks and getting sick easily, and the inability to stay alert were signs that I was in poor health, but I chose to ignore them.

By the end of the first semester, I was ready for the winter break.  I had a list of things I wanted to accomplish, books I wanted to read, people I wanted to visit.  I didn't get one thing on that list done. My immune system was taxed to its limit.  By the time the spring semester rolled around, I still had not recuperated.  It was clear I had to do something.

I've recently reassessed my situation and made changes accordingly.  I was offered a full time position at the library where I work, thereby giving me the wherewithal to leave my other full time job.  I now have more time to devote to my family and myself while working on my Master’s.  Yoga, walking, and a good cardio work out will also be added to my schedule so that I am sure  to keep my mental and physical health in good working order.  I'm seeing a wonderful holistic doctor, allowing me to get my immune system back in gear. The best advice I can give to someone looking into working on a master’s is to take the time for yourself, eat right, get plenty of rest and exercise, and be happy.

**Kristine:**  There are a multitude of scholarships and grants available for students pursuing an LIS master’s degree. A good starting place is the following overview; it is an  up-to-date resource which lists scholarships and grants for specifically for LIS students. Maybe you can check it out from the library!

* Schlachter, Gail, and Weber, R. David. (2010). *How to Pay for Your Degree in Library & Information Studies*.  El Dorado Hills, CA: Reference Service Press.

Other resources are available on a case-by-case basis. Some good ones to consider:

* Idaho Library Association (ILA): Gardner Hanks Scholarship. <http://www.idaholibraries.org/awards>
* Idaho Commission for Libraries:  Library Services and Technology (LSTA) Continuing Education Grants. <http://libraries.idaho.gov/page/lsta-library-services-technology>
* Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) Laura Bush 21st Century Librarian Program - Scholarships for Master’s Level Programs. 2010 Examples: Drexel University (PA), Mansfield University (PA), Pratt Institute (NY), Regents of the University of California at Riverside (CA), San Jose State University Research Foundation (CA), University of Alabama (AL), University of Maryland (MD), University of Memphis (TN), University of North Carolina (NC), University of North Texas (TX). Search for schools that offer scholarships by selecting: Grant Recipients/ Search our database of grant recipients or Grant Search/ Grant Name: Laura Bush 21st Century Librarian Program
* American Library Association (ALA) has more than fifty scholarships available: <http://www.ala.org/ala/educationcareers/scholarships/index.cfm>
* Don’t forget to check with your employer, Friends of the Library, your university, and of course the federal government.
* Scholarship Search Sites. The sites ask a series of questions to develop profiles that are then used to match students with scholarships. [www.fastweb.com](http://www.fastweb.com) [www.scholarships.com](http://www.scholarships.com) [www.petersons.com](http://www.petersons.com) [www.apps.collegeboard.com/](http://www.apps.collegeboard.com/) (click on Pay for College)

In conclusion, there are lots of opportunities for learning more about the library profession. Our best advice is to think carefully about all your options. Why do you want a degree in library and information science? Is it worth the sacrifice? If so, then do your research and take those first steps!