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Reflective Essay

Ever since I was a child, I have always come back to the library. At once my safe place

and an environment that challenges me to grow, the library has consistently provided me with

everything I need. Books to read, of course, but also a "third place" to gather and find

community, and an oasis of accessibility and care in a world never more concerned with profit

above all else. As I entered adulthood, it seemed that it would also provide me with that pinnacle

of security and achievement: a job.

Yet it was not quite that simple. I struggled to commit to the career paths I found in the

public library, and I felt intimidated by the requirement to obtain a Master's before I could hope

to achieve any real stability in the field. So I left, entered the corporate world, and grew a unique

skillset of self-taught software design and various office management tasks – while all along

something was missing. The ethos of community, the concern for people above profit, and the

celebration of education and literacy… These were pillars of the institutions that I wanted to

serve with my time and skills, and the opposite of where I had found myself. And so I did what I

do best, and I came back to the library.

Choosing the Dominican University Master's program in Library and Information

Science was surprisingly simple. It was a respected, distinguished program that was close

enough to where I lived that I could take full advantage of in-person experiences. I had already

found a job in Circulation at the College of DuPage Library, but I knew that if I wished to

advance any further in the field, a Master's degree would be required. But I also knew that my interests were more expansive than traditional library roles alone. Dominican's program offered not only the expected library foundations, but I could also pursue a Certificate in Data and Knowledge Management to continue developing my skills with software and data analysis.

However, it was important to begin with the foundations of library practice, and in the first three required courses of the program I learned to appreciate just how surprisingly complex the fundamentals of librarianship can be. In LIS 701, we had the opportunity to develop the Core Values research project, about any core value or ethic in the library and information science field and how it has evolved and will continue to evolve. I chose to explore how information literacy has been impacted by social media and misinformation, given the current political climate we are drowning in. What I found was not only extensive research on the topic, mostly echoing the expected results (yes, it's bad, and getting worse), but also something that surprised me – a paper which argued that librarians are not the ones to save us. Or rather, that they shouldn't be *expected* to take on that burden without also being given more resources, which they rarely are. Instead librarians are so often left with lofty values and meager support to "save the world" on their own. Confronting the nuances of being in a field devoted to strong ethics forced me to think deeply about how best to pursue my own values in my career. What am I willing to sacrifice, and what is too much to ask? What I will take most from this early project in the program is to keep asking myself those questions.

The other two early courses in the program, LIS 702 and LIS 703, both fleshed out key components of working in libraries. User Information Behavior, colloquially known as Reference work, is arguably the most well-known function of librarians in the public eye. But just as with so much else in the library world, there is much more that goes into it than most

patrons would realize. Learning more about the ACRL Framework for Information Literacy for Higher Education taught me to appreciate that information does not just arrive to us fully-formed, for us to evaluate or reject on its face, but that it must be considered in the full context of its creation and authority. Likewise, the power of the library catalog can only be given the respect it's due once you've learned the art and science of cataloging. What may be dismissed as "alphabetizing" by the uninitiated contains all the finicky and challenging details of the objects humans create and how we complicate them – and then seeks to serve them up to a computer so they can easily be found. As someone who appreciates the internal works of a technological system, I found the course on cataloging to be a fascinating glimpse behind the curtain. I will never take browsing the OPAC for granted again. In all three of these courses, learning more about the depth of library practice and the fundamental philosophies that inform that practice will help me to apply them to my own developing profession (Goal One).

The second round of courses showed me how that library practice could expand, by showcasing some more specific roles and tasks within libraries. I have always been intrigued by library marketing, because it would seem to be the easiest product in the world to market: "free books." At least, that would get *me* interested in just about anything. And yet we know from various studies that many people in a community may not even know much of the library, let alone utilize its vast services. LIS 707 was thus an interesting deep dive into the particulars of advocating for libraries, which is surprisingly more difficult than hanging a sign on the door that says, "Free Books!" The Marketing Plan which I included as an artifact challenged me to consider not only what goes into marketing a specific library service, but how we must measure and quantify that marketing campaign to verify if it works. The course taught me more about

advocacy and leadership in libraries, and how to effectively communicate that advocacy for a variety of audiences (Goal Five).

Beyond just the metrics of marketing, I learned far more about assessment and its nuances in LIS 708. I have long been interested in data analysis, but getting to apply those skills to libraries and their services was fun and engaging. For my Service Evaluation Presentation, I studied how we assess specific collections within the library, in this case a leisure reading collection within an academic library. Though we didn't perform the hypothetical evaluation itself, researching the parameters of how such assessment is performed and thinking through the kind of work librarians could do to measure their work showed me a path I'm very interested in. The ability to bring together my previous life in software and data with my passion for libraries would be ideal.

The last course of my second semester proved a study in contrasts: in many ways it illuminated a career path I would *not* be interested in pursuing, but it also proved to be my most challenging class where I arguably learned the most. LIS 886, Records Management, was a rigorous and difficult course from the beginning. Extensive readings and discussion assignments on highly technical details about all facets of records management, primarily in corporate or administrative environments, led us through a rapid pace of absorbing the details of this field. Our two capstone projects from the course, included as artifacts in my portfolio, challenged me to work harder than any other work in the program thus far. For my Choose Your Own Adventure project, we had to condense the first eight weeks of our learning into an informative creation of our own design; I chose to make a "video essay"-style YouTube video, which stretched me to not only write the script and film myself reading it, but also edit the footage, add in titles and stock video, and upload the final product to YouTube (privately listed). It was a fun

but exhausting amount of work. The final project, by contrast, was a "simple" paper – but it required giving deep thought to how I would handle a complex scenario with a long list of moving parts. I had to draw on the entire semester's worth of learning, and to put myself in the shoes of an experienced professional in the field of records management. Ultimately, I wouldn't want to wear those shoes every day, but I believe these two projects were some of my best work in the program, and above all they forced me to *learn.* Managing records is one of the most concrete ways we encounter the essential nature of information, and even if I do not do so professionally, knowing how to handle these complex tasks could help me in a variety of diverse environments (Goal Two).

The rest of the courses I have taken in the program continue the theme of exploring the technology of information science in depth, seeking to understand how we navigate and curate information in various environments (Goal Three). From advanced metadata for digital resources, to knowledge management, to programming in Python, I have sought out topics that teach me to work with information contained within data, records, and software. The goal of taking these classes is not just to achieve a Certificate in Data and Knowledge Management, but also to prepare myself for a wider variety of potential professional environments. I love libraries, and I hope to make use of my talents in one of them, but they represent a dynamic and ever-evolving space of their own. Both the technologies within them and the possible career paths throughout and beyond them will always be changing. Applying my ability to synthesize theory and practice to respond to these changing environments will be key to my ultimate success (Goal Four). Building out a professional skillset that includes software skills, database management, and most importantly of all the ability to adapt quickly to new technologies as they arise – this will help me craft a professional identity that best represents my talents and passions.

Throughout the Master's program at Dominican, I have been thinking about the professional path I would like to pursue. During my time in the program, I was promoted to the role of Electronic Resources Coordinator at the College of DuPage Library. This job allows me to combine my interest in software and data analysis with serving the goals of an academic library, from troubleshooting databases to collating and analyzing usage statistics. Both my previous professional experiences and my projects throughout my Master's classes helped prepare me to take on this role, and I have been enjoying its opportunities and challenges. If I do stay in the library field, I believe it will be in the academic library, as I enjoy its educational focus and more rigorous standards. If I find a role that suits me better in a corporate or other setting, it will be my experiences with information science and contributing to a well-resourced learning environment that will give me a professional portfolio to support my success wherever I go.

As I hope is evidenced in my portfolio, I have sought to build a professional identity around several key qualities: data-driven, self-motivated, creative, and grounded in a thoughtful ethos of community. These are the qualities I have tried to bring to all of my assignments, and which I seek to pursue developing throughout my professional life. Stretching my skills in a variety of directions throughout this experience has only increased my sense of who I am. But the pursuit of the Master's is about more than just what I can develop within myself. Again and again, I have been impressed by the breadth and depth of knowledge in this field, the thoughtful professional philosophies, and the entire library ecosystem pushing to take on the evolving technologies that the entire world is facing. Librarians are on the forefront of understanding, organizing, and sharing the world of information that we are all struggling to control – and as I

learned from my very first paper, they are being asked to take on a burden that they are not being fully equipped to handle… except by programs like the one I am now completing.

My love and passion for libraries and all that they provide has not changed, and if anything has deepened. But now, as I come to the end of this program, I have stopped asking what the library can provide for me. More than a job, more than a career, more than free books and community and the vital effort towards information literacy for all: libraries provide all that and more. Now it is time for me to ask myself what I can *give* to the library. With the completion of this Master's program, I hope to give it the skills I have learned, the data-driven and community-oriented philosophy I have curated, and the remainder of my professional life. I will always come back to the library. This time, I am returning with a Master's degree and much more to give back.