LIS: INVESTIGATIONS

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Accidental information professionals: Pathways to selecting our courses

FROM OUR COLLECTION:

Simon, Anoush and Marianne Taylor. 2011. Career History and Motivations for Choosing LIS: A Case Study at Aberystwyth University. *Library Review* 60: 803-815.

Combes, Barbara, Jo Hanisch, Mary Carroll, Hilary Hughes and Aliese Millington. 2011. *Are We There Yet? Students Have Their Say about Library and Information Science Education in Australia and Twenty-first Century Learning.* Paper presented at the International Association of School Libraries 40th Annual Conference, Kingston, Jamaica, August 7-11. [This paper is drawn from the findings of the *Re-conceptualising and Re-positioning Australian Library and Information Science Education for the Twenty-first Century* report, available at: www.liseducation.org.au/resources/index.jsp]

Why do people choose to become information professionals? This question is important to educators and to the profession more widely. For educators, it relates to how we attract students and, for the profession, it is associated with perceptions of information professionals and the value afforded to our role by parent organisations and the community.

One of the biggest information studies schools in the United Kingdom set out to discover the career history and motivations behind their students' enrolment in undergraduate and postgraduate courses. They found that many students described the pathway to information studies as circuitous and often related to prior experience. A love of books is still important as is the desire to work in a 'helping' profession.

Using focus groups to gather their information, Simon and Taylor (2011) used qualitative methods to report their results. According to the researchers, many students had ended up enrolled in information studies 'accidentally'. Returning to the workforce after having a family or finding previous jobs unfulfilling were cited as reasons for turning to information studies. But importantly, this decision was influenced strongly by their experience working in an information service, a feature common to students at both the undergraduate and postgraduate levels. Some students felt they were "born librarians". Although the surveyed students recognised that they needed to be "multi-functioning" in an information environment steeped in information communications and technology (ICT), many still reported that a love of books led them to information work. This motivation was connected to a more general notion about the profession: that the work involves helping others to research and learn.

When the students were asked why they had decided to enrol in their degree, the students (particularly those who had been working in an information service for some time) described a feeling that their studies contributed to gaining confidence and enhancing their self-worth. For example, one student is quoted as saying "I want to do it for myself ... I feel I'm capable of more than I'm currently doing". In addition and connected was the belief that they would advance their careers on completion of the degree and that the perceptions of their role in the workplace would improve with the professional status gained by a degree.

Some of the conclusions from the Aberystwyth study are supported by a recent Australian report *Re-conceptualising and Re-positioning Australian Library and Information Science Education for the Twenty-First Century.* Combes and others discussed the report's findings for information studies students and new graduates in their paper at the 2011 International Association of School Libraries conference. They note that 50% of current students are already working in the library and information sector and one of their reasons for enrolling in a degree was to get the piece of paper that would qualify them for a library job. Encouragingly, there was a sense of optimism about the future of the profession.

How can the profession and educators use these research findings to attract students to information studies courses? 'Accidentally' arriving at a decision to become an information professional doesn't suggest many strategies for marketing and 'working with ebooks' doesn't have quite the same ring to it (if we were to be honest about the nature of materials that our profession now manages). However, motivations relating to helping people could provide a direction for promotion and the fact that many students had previous experience in information services indicates that publicity about degree courses may be useful in those workplaces.

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