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## **“Becoming a Geospatial Librarian: Is Graduate Library Education Doing What It Should Yet?”**

*By Kimberly A. Plassche*

### **Introduction**

Nearly 35 years ago, Julia Gelfand published a piece in WAML IB that pondered “Becoming a Map Librarian: Is Graduate Library Education Doing What It Should?” (Gelfand, 1988). Her article reported the findings of a survey of library schools conducted in 1987, focusing on the training of what many geospatial librarians today would refer to as traditional map librarians. During my own research over the last two years, I relied on Gelfand’s brief but illuminating summary of her survey results and personal views of the landscape of map librarianship education. The lack of education for map librarians has been acknowledged frequently since her 1988 WAML IB piece. One recent statistic appears in a textbook for map and geospatial librarians (Aber and Aber, 2017). The authors found that ten out of fifty-nine accredited schools offered a course specifically devoted to map librarianship in 2014-2015 (Aber and Aber, 2017, 104). My survey of map librarians revealed a desire for more specialized education for this role. More than half of the respondents (53 percent,  $n = 57$ ) to my 2020 survey of map librarians felt library schools did little or nothing at all to prepare them for their work with maps (Plassche, 2022, 14). It also highlighted the larger importance of geographic information systems (GIS) in today’s map libraries, as 61 percent ( $n = 62$ ) indicated they work with GIS data (Plassche, 2022, 24). Physical maps, atlases, globes, gazetteers, and similar resources are still common and necessary resources in our map collections, but geospatial librarians have taken on responsibilities supporting GIS users. Gelfand specifically mentions the now outdated “sophisticated technologies such as CD-ROM” (Gelfand, 1988, 220), just one indicator it is time to reexamine this issue and ask MLIS-granting institutions, yet again, if they cover skills needed for map librarianship in their curricula. Taking this further, it is time to consider how library schools are educating librarians for roles working with GIS.

### **Methodology and Results**

I created a survey consisting of 14 questions using Google Forms (Table 1). This



survey and my study protocol were submitted for review by the University at Buffalo Institutional Review Board (IRB). Following IRB approval, I emailed the survey directly to 63 ALA-accredited institutions in the United States and Canada on April 22, 2022. Two reminder messages were sent on May 4, 2022, and May 31, 2022. When the survey closed on June 3, 2022, it had garnered nine responses from participants affirming they were “a representative for or employee of an MLS/MLIS degree granting institution located in the United States”. The email addresses used were general addresses were pulled from the ALA Directory or departmental websites.

<b>Scope of Map and GIS Coverage in MLIS Program’s Curriculum</b>	<b>Number of Responses Confirming Institution’s Coverage of Topic Listed</b>
Offers a course specifically related to maps or cartography	2
Offers a course specifically related to GIS	1
Maps are covered in course encompassing many topics	5
GIS is covered in courses encompassing many topics	2
Offers a dual-program arrangement encouraging students to earn an MLIS and a master’s degree related to geography or GIS simultaneously	2
Allows students to take courses related to maps, geography, or GIS from other programs on campus	9

Table 1. Summary of Responses to Survey

A notable finding of the survey is that 77.8 percent of the responding institutions do not have a course specifically related to maps or cartography, and 88.9 percent do not have a course related to GIS. Those responding that they do include coursework related to these topics provided additional details, including course titles, as follows:

- Remote Sensing
- We are currently submitting a course proposal. The course has been offered several times as a special topics course titled GIS for Info Professionals
- GIS for Social Sciences



More than half of the respondents (55.6 percent) indicated maps are covered in general courses encompassing many topics or materials. Survey participants were asked to list the course titles for the courses incorporating maps, and provided the following information:

- Rare Books and Special Collections
- Drones for Info Professionals
- Information Organization
- Organization of Information, Cataloging, Archives

Only 22.2 percent of the respondents indicated GIS or GIS data are covered in general courses encompassing many topics or materials. The title of one of those courses was provided as *Introduction to Digital Humanities*. One respondent indicated the course titles vary by course, instructor, and semester.

All the participants responded that their programs allow students to take courses related to maps, geography, or GIS from other programs on campus. When asked to elaborate on which programs and courses are accepted towards the MLIS degree, eight participants responded as follows:

- Course in the Digital Mapping certificate/master's program
- I have had two students take a Geography course that focuses on GIS that they applied toward their degree (they were pursuing a specialization in digital humanities).
- Course from Geography and Planning (GOG)
- There is a course offered in the School of Geosciences titled "GIS for Non-Majors" that students may take.
- Students can use up to 6 credits of any elective GIS courses (at the graduate level).
- We do not limit the programs where students can take courses toward their MS ILS. It should be fine as long as the courses are relevant.
- History, Information Technology, Business
- Graduate level course from an accredited institution that fits with a student's professional goals.

Additional details were provided by those 22.2 percent of participants reporting a dual program allowing students to earn an MLIS and related master's degree:



- It promotes a dual master's degree with any programs on campus and allows programs to share up to 6 credit hours.
- Students can earn a "Coordinated" degree with our department of Geography. The coordinated program reduces total credits for both degrees.

Finally, when invited to provide any additional comments about the coverage of maps, cartography, and GIS in their programs, one participant offered that they have not seen any interest in these topics amongst their current students. The only other comment was from a "relatively new faculty member" that shared that their area of specialization is GIS and they have developed the Drones and GIS coursework detailed in their responses. MLIS students may take these courses to fulfill a technology elective requirement.

## Reflection

Compared to Gelfand's results, the largest difference is in the response rate. Gelfand sent her survey to "all accredited library schools in the United States and Canada" and received thirty-nine responses, compared to the nine answering my survey. My initial email solicited a small number of responses, so I decided to add the questions to the body of the email in the reminder messages, hoping this would encourage recipients to complete the survey with the knowledge it was short. Still, only 14.2% of the sixty-three schools were represented in the results. It is possible only those with a program incorporating geospatial coursework responded, but we cannot surmise the remaining 85.8% of the schools do not include maps and GIS at all in the curricula.

The low response rate may be a result of sending the survey to general email inboxes, where it may have been blocked by spam filters or ignored. Repeating the survey, this time sent directly to instructors responsible for science or general reference may result in a more robust view of the scope of geospatial topics in these reference courses. However, the survey will then need to be sent to instructors of archival science and cataloging, so using general email addresses not only followed Gelfand's example, but also ensured all courses were considered.

Gelfand notes the standard response was that maps were "'touched upon' usually not 'covered'" in courses related to reference, government documents, cataloging, management, preservation, and social sciences bibliography (Gelfand, 1988, 222). Due to the low response rate, we do not know if those institutions not represented in the results even have courses that "touch" on geospatial concepts. However,



more than half of the respondents to this survey did indicate maps are covered in general courses. Gelfand reports most personal responses to the survey indicated students were directed to internship or practicum opportunities for additional training with maps, or to take classes offered by geography departments. I did not ask a question specifically about internships or practicum credits, and unfortunately, none of the final comments indicated this was a path students could take for geospatial librarianship training. If we consider the substantial number of programs that did not respond to my survey, the findings of my 2022 survey mirror these efforts by library school programs in 1987.

Gelfand calls upon her WAML colleagues to “be encouraged by the rather bleak professional training our academic programs are offering and continue to sponsor continuing education efforts and welcome new interested and future map librarians.” (Gelfand, 1988, 222). Although the results of my own study paint a brighter picture, specifically related to GIS, I echo her sentiments 35 years later. By offering innovative and informative programs at our annual WAML conference and networking with new professionals, we will continue to help fill in the gap left behind by library school programs.

## References

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