

“Who are ‘We the People’?”

Pilot Survey Investigating Government Information Professionals: A Conversation

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At the fall 2017 Federal Depository Library Program conference, a chance conversation regarding government information librarians’ average salaries evolved into a survey to learn who is working with government documents. In the course of the conversation, it became apparent the roles and duties of government information professionals were shifting. After some consideration, the authors determined that the best course of action would be to ask government information professionals about their perceptions of who they are and what they consider the future of government information librarianship to be.

Initially, the results of this survey were intended to be published as a peer-reviewed journal article. However, now it will be a conversation about the difficulties we encountered with the survey design and software, our experiences, the outcomes, and other problems we encountered along the way. The authors developed questions and solicited additional questions from other government information professionals and used the Qualtrics platform for the survey.

While developing the survey, the authors and their colleagues identified several unique groups for whom specific concerns would need to be addressed separately; these groups included vendors and government employees, and library affiliated professionals. Additional designations within library-affiliated professionals needed to reflect those who had supervisory roles and those who worked at depository libraries. These groups were identified based on certain assumptions. These include the impression that the needs and expectations of those not affiliated with libraries are different from those who were, and that the level of engagement of supervisors, nonsupervisors, and depository coordinators would be different. Overall, the authors wanted to develop a more comprehensive view of the world of government information professionals.

The survey was distributed through several government documents listservs and various other individuals and entities.

The listservs included FDLP Webmaster (the official FDL listserv), GOVDOC-L (discussion forum about government information and the Federal Depository Library program), the International Association for Social Science Information Services and Technology (IASSIST) and various other individuals and entities.

Results

Of the 417 surveys started, 284 were completed; the information that follows is gleaned from those completed surveys. The authors identified flaws within the survey design and implementation as results were being examined. While the validity and reliability of the numbers are in question, we believe there is still insight to be gained. The initial section of the survey focused on demographics. The results reflected general perceptions of librarianship: 208 females, 63 males, and 3 nonbinary persons completed the survey. Seven persons selected “prefer not to say” and 3 left that question unanswered; 247 identified as white, 13 Black or African American, 5 Asian, and 13 other.

We then inquired who had received a master of library science or master of library and information science degree. The results were separated into two groups: vendors/government employees, and those affiliated with libraries.

The authors were curious about the number of professionals who had the opportunity to take government information courses and how many took advantage of this opportunity. So they asked the questions “Did your program MLS/MLIS program offer any coursework specifically focused on gov docs/gov info?” and “Did you take any courses related to gov docs/gov info?” which revealed some noteworthy results (see tables 1 and 2). It appears that most knew their program offered such coursework (around 64 percent), but roughly half attended gov docs/gov info courses as a part of their studies.

Another revealing question was “How many years have you been working with government information?” Almost 30

Table 1. MLS/MLIS Degree Statistics

	Degree Status	Total	Female	Male	Non-Binary	Prefer Not to Answer
Vendor/Government Employee	MLIS - NO	11	9	2	0	0
Vendor/Government Employee	MLIS - YES	7	5	2	0	0
Library Affiliate	MLIS - NO	49	37	11	0	1
Library Affiliate	MLIS - YES	219	162	48	3	6

Table 2. MLS/MLIS Coursework in Government Information

	Was Course-work Offered?	Total	Female	Male	Non-Binary	Prefer Not to Answer
Vendor/Government Employee	No	6	4	2	0	0
Vendor/Government Employee	Yes	3	3	0	0	0
Vendor/Government Employee	Unsure	9	7	2	0	0
	Did You Take Coursework?	Total	Female	Male	Non-Binary	Prefer Not to Answer
Vendor/Government Employee	No	9	7	2	0	0
Vendor/Government Employee	Yes	9	7	2	0	0
	Was Course-work Offered?	Total	Female	Male	Non-Binary	Prefer Not to Answer
Library Affiliate	No	65	50	13	0	2
Library Affiliate	Yes	169	122	41	1	5
Library Affiliate	Unsure	30	24	4	2	0
	Did You Take Coursework?	Total	Female	Male	Non-Binary	Prefer Not to Answer
Library Affiliate	No	138	105	29	2	2
Library Affiliate	Yes	129	93	30	1	5

percent of our respondents have been working in gov docs/gov info for more than 20 years! (See figure 1.) This is amazing. It appears that once you come into the fold, you tend to stay with it, which is wonderful news for the profession. This is the highest percentage category. The second highest category is the newcomers to the profession with 0–3 years of experience at almost 23 percent. These numbers will be interesting to watch in the future.

We think the results of the questions “Do you foresee yourself remaining a documents librarian for the next 5 years?” and “Do you foresee your library remaining in the FDLP for the next 5 years?” might be worthy of further exploration. While most respondents plan to remain a documents librarian (52.8 percent), 32.7 percent were unsure.” We suspect this might be due to the changing nature of libraries and library work in general but this needs to be explored in a future study. Many respondents have had a title or role changes in the past 5 years (57.2 percent, while 42.8 percent responded that

their role/title has not changed). These changes may reflect the large percentage of “maybe/unsure” respondents in the previous question.

For the second question regarding remaining in the FDLP for the next five years, 86 percent said “yes,” 13.2 percent said “maybe/don’t know,” and 0.9 percent said “no.” These numbers appear to bode well for our profession as government information professionals. This could indicate the overall value seen in being a member of the depository library program, another area worthy of study.

Other Fascinating Information Gleaned from the Survey

There was at least one respondent from every state, as well as Puerto Rico, US Virgin Islands, and Washington, DC. Additionally, almost 95 percent of government information collections are mixed between print and electronic, with only 1.7 percent representing physical only, and 0.8 percent representing

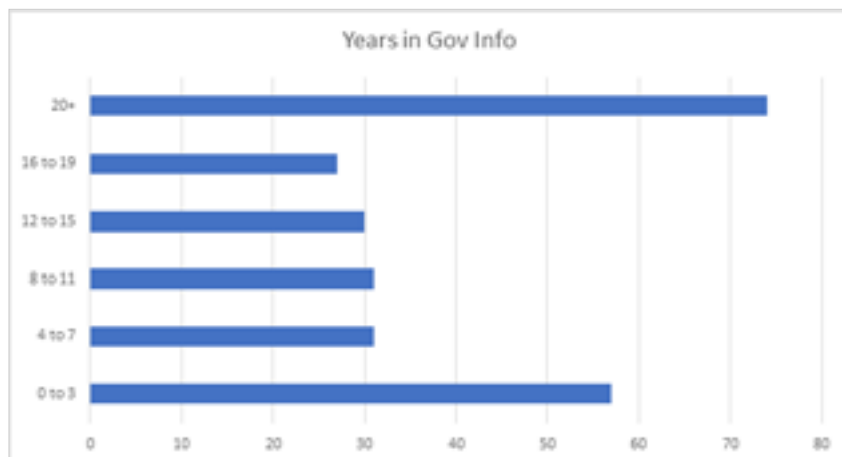


Figure 1. Years in Gov Info

electronic only. Over time, this will be an interesting data point—to identify whether more libraries are becoming electronic-only depositories. Of those completing the survey, 81.8 percent identified as selective depositories with 16.9 percent as regionals and 1.3 percent as court depositories. This came as no surprise, but it is good to have confirmation to support preconceived ideas.

When Asked about Position Titles, Here are a Few Things We Found

1. 89 of the respondents had the word “government” somewhere in their title
2. 167 had no mention of government or documents in their titles
3. 32 of the respondents’ titles focused on government documents/information alone
4. 21 had some attribute to technical services in their title
5. 10 had “cataloger” in their title
6. 43 included the term “reference” in their title
7. 171 had “librarian” in their title

The three longest titles listed were: (1) “Government Information Librarian for State, Local, British, and International Documents; Environment and Population Studies Subject Specialist; and Head of Social Sciences Group” (2) “Assistant Professor of Library Sciences Technical Services and Government Information Librarian and liaison to Education and Counseling/Psychology,” and (3) “Library Resources Manager; and Digital Library Resources Coordinator; and Government Information Coordinator; and State Documents Librarian.” The variety of responses demonstrates that working with gov docs/gov info is as diverse and unique as each of our titles.

Bad News about the Survey and Lessons We Learned

Both authors were asked whether this survey was simply for government documents librarians or if those who used government information extensively in their work could also take the survey. This should have been an indication that there were potential flaws in our survey clarity. We also realized that there was a problem early in the evaluation stage. The Qualtrics logic we used to delineate vendor and government employees from library affiliated personnel did not work the way we anticipated. Vendors responded in the library affiliated employee section and vice versa. We later attrib-

uted this to the fact that we did not make the question “are you a: vendor, government employee (not working as a librarian), library affiliated government information professional” mandatory in the logic process. Subsequently, if someone skipped answering this question, they were presented with duplicate questions. This was an issue in the questions regarding MLS/MLIS degrees and questions about coursework, training opportunities, and others. This caused the survey to be unnecessarily long and repetitive. For this, we sincerely apologize. However, we appreciate those who persevered and completed the entire survey. We are working to correct the problems we encountered with skip logic and blocks.

There were also challenges in the ways we faceted the questions. This presented issues in questions 30, 34, and 44. In question 30, which focused on the percentage of time dealing with government information, individuals provided their own percentages; this led to results far below 100 percent and some above 100 percent. While this could have provided insightful information had it worked as intended, we came to realize this question does not tell us much about government information professionals, but more about the library profession as a whole. For this reason, the question will be omitted from future surveys and replaced with a multiple-choice question asking about time spent dealing directly with government information.

The next major faceting issue was with question 34, which asked: “Are you a supervisor with regard to government information personnel?” Somehow both the authors and the testers missed that this should have been a yes/no question, not five choices ranging from “definitely yes” to “definitely not” with “might or might not be” as the middle choice. The authors take full responsibility for missing this error. The question will be clarified and made into a yes/no question in the future.

We noted in question 44 that the, “Type of library (academic, law, court, public, other)” multiple-choice selections did not include an option for “Public,” so we think people may have marked “other” as their choice. However, we were informed that agency librarians have also marked “other.” In the future, we will be sure to include the appropriate options and do a better job of proofreading.

A final issue we found was with Qualtrics itself. A key lesson is to identify early in your project if there are any upgrades the software may be going through and/or have planned, and ask how this may affect your project. During our project, Qualtrics had a major upgrade, which impacted the way we were able to utilize its analytical features and forced us outside of the tool.

These were the challenges that we identified in our study, and while the results are interesting, it would be hard to generalize about this data with all the issues presented. As a result, we have decided to consider this a pilot survey. It will serve as a means to hone and improve our methods and questions. We

are hoping to add an additional researcher and a consultant to the project and to reach out to people with more Qualtrics and survey building experience for future study iterations. We close this pilot having learned to ensure we are aware of any updates to the survey analysis tool, to properly engage our audience, and to ask relevant and pertinent questions. We thank you for joining us in this initial process. Despite the problems we encountered, the learning experience has been valuable, and we look forward to engaging you—the government information professional—with an improved survey in the next year to help identify “Who are ‘We the People’?”

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Appendix. Copy of Survey Questions with Duplicate Branched Questions Removed

Testing something Who are “We the People”?: A look into the world of government information professionals

Start of Block: Default Question Block

Q1 [Standard Consent Form]

Agree	Disagree
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Skip To: Q2 If PARTICIPATION Your participation in this survey is voluntary. You may refuse to take part in the... = Agree

Skip To: End of Survey If PARTICIPATION Your participation in this survey is voluntary. You may refuse to take part in the... = Disagree

Q2 Gender?

Male	Female
Non-Binary	Prefer not to answer

Q3 Ethnicity

Hispanic or Latino	Non-Hispanic or Latino
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Q4 Race

White

Black or African American

American Indian or Alaska Native

Asian

Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander

Other _____

Q5 State/Territory/Region _____

Q6 Are you a: vendor, government employee (not working as a librarian), library affiliated government information professional?

Vendor

Government employee (not working as a librarian)

Library affiliated government information professional

End of Block: Default Question Block

Start of Block: Librarian/Retired

Q25 Do you have your MLS/MLIS?

Yes	No
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Q26 Did you program offer any coursework specially focused on government documents/government information?

Yes	No	Unsure
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Q27 Did you take any coursework specifically focused on government documents/government information?

Yes	No
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Q28 Have you had any training outside of your current institution related to your government documents/information role? Please describe (ie. Webinars, conferences, library school) _____

Q29 Have training opportunities increased/decreased for you in the last 5 years regarding government information?

Increased	Decreased	Stayed the same
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Q30 What percentage of your time do you deal with the following (if 0, put 0)

Government documents/government document-related: _____

Public services (reference and instruction) : _____

Technical services : _____

Outreach/community engagement : _____

Marketing/social media : _____

Technological pursuits : _____

Management/supervising : _____

Data/data sets : _____

Assessment : _____

Collection development : _____

Other : _____

Total : _____

Q31 What is your title/position? _____

Q32 Has your title or role changed in the last five years?

Yes	No
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Q33 Are you full time or part time?

Full Time	Part Time
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Q34 Are you a supervisor with regard to government information personnel?

Definitely yes

Probably yes

Might or might not

Probably not

Definitely not

Q35 Has this changed in the past 5 years? If so, how? _____

Q36 Years working with government information?

0-3	8-11	16-19
4-7	12-15	20+

Q37 Do you foresee yourself remaining a documents librarian for the next 5 years?

Yes	Maybe/Unsure	No
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Q38 How do you foresee your role changing? _____

Q39 Is your library a depository?

Yes	No
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End of Block: Librarian/Retired

Start of Block: Depository Questions - transition question

Q40 Are you the depository coordinator?

Yes	No
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Q41 How many years have you been a coordinator? _____

Q42 How long has your library been a depository? _____

Q43 Is your library a regional, a court, or a selective depository?

Regional	Court	Selective
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Q44 Type of library (academic, law, court, public, other)

Academic

Law

Court

Law

Other

Q45 If you are Academic, are you tenure track?

Yes	No
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Q46 What is your faculty rank (if applicable)? _____

Q47 How many library personnel in your library work directly with government documents/information? _____

Q48 Do you have a physical, electronic, or mixed collection?

Physical	Electronic	Mixed
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Q49 Do you work in a main library or a branch library? _____

Q50 Do you foresee your library remaining in the FDLP for the next 5 years?

Yes (1)	No (2)	Maybe/Don't know (3)
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Q51 Why or why not? _____

End of Block: Depository Questions - transition question