

Personal Essay for the MLIS Portfolio

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“A library is not a luxury but one of the necessities of life.” Henry Ward Beecher’s line has followed me throughout this degree because it speaks to what brought me here in the first place. Education only works when we choose it, when we feel a reason to stretch ourselves, when something inside us calls out for a deeper, more deliberate life. I wanted this degree because I see the country changing in ways that threaten our cultural memory. With democracy under strain and authoritarianism gaining ground, I have begun to understand my purpose with clarity. I want to help protect our shared culture. I want to take part in defining what is preserved, how it is described, and how it reaches the people who need it. I want to stand in the gap between the past and the future and keep the record honest.

Archival work has to be done with honesty. It cannot be skewed or censored. It has to reflect the times in which materials exist, including their tensions, contradictions, and the voices that might otherwise be lost. Before beginning my courses at Dominican, I was adrift. I was thirty-seven, searching for a meaningful path at a moment when many jobs felt meaningless. The world of work felt unstable. On November 12, 2025, Verizon announced fifteen thousand layoffs in the name of “streamlining,” calling the decision “scrappy and necessary.” These are employees who already struggle to make enough to keep pace with inflation while wealth concentrates at the top. I am part of that “everyone else,” the people who want steady work, dignity, and the chance to build a life that makes sense. Those things feel increasingly out of reach for many Americans, especially those of us who have spent years in customer-facing jobs that demand emotional labor but never pay what they should. All of this is connected to why libraries matter. People

need places where they can engage with each other, think critically, and find balance between their convictions and the world around them. Libraries provide that space. They remain one of the few public institutions where community, inquiry, and care still exist without a profit motive. They are a kind of civic anchoring point.

When I started this program I was unsure if it was the right move. It became the most necessary decision I have made. The MLIS courses gave me purpose, sharpened my values, and pushed me to be better in ways I did not expect. This degree represents a period of honest self-examination at a time when misinformation and political dishonesty dominate public life. The program grounded me in professional ethics, community responsibility, and a commitment to preserving access for everyone. It helped me understand that my work in libraries is not just a job. It is a contribution to the cultural record and to the future public. I learned that librarians are caretakers of a society's memory, and that the choices we make—about metadata, about access, about classification—carry weight far beyond the walls of a reading room.

Across the program's goals, I can see how I have grown into someone ready to work in this field. In learning about information resources and services, I developed the ability to support users with clarity, patience, and care. The reference coursework taught me how to listen before answering and how to recognize the emotional dimensions behind many information needs. What someone asks for on the surface is often not what they truly need. The course challenged me to slow down, to ask the right questions, and to see reference work as a form of partnership. My needs assessment project in LIS 885 expanded that understanding by forcing me to evaluate a community's gaps with nuance and intention. I learned to interpret not just what a group says, but what their patterns of behavior reveal. Working at the University of Chicago Library deepened this understanding even further. Daily interactions with students, faculty, and visitors showed me that each question is an opportunity to support inquiry and help people

navigate the systems built to serve them. Those conversations; small, brief, sometimes chaotic, became practice in empathy and professional presence.

Through the study of cataloging and classification, I learned the importance of structure, consistency, and ethics in the organization of knowledge. MARC, LCSH, LCC, and DDC demanded precision, but they also taught me to see the catalog as a cultural tool. Each record is a small act of preservation and interpretation. Authority control, subject headings, indicators, punctuation; these are not just clerical functions. They shape how information is discovered and understood. They determine who is visible and who is not. As I worked through multiple quizzes, corrections, and revisions, I learned to approach this work with patience and respect for the intellectual scaffolding that allows people to find what they need. Cataloging humbled me. It forced me to slow down, to pay attention to details I never noticed before, and to respect the lineage of professionals who built these systems long before I arrived. It also made me confront the biases embedded in classification systems. Understanding those biases sharpened my sense of responsibility. It reminded me that neutrality is a myth, and that librarians must be intentional in recognizing and addressing the inequities that shape the informational landscape.

My research courses taught me how to ask meaningful questions and how to evaluate information with a critical and systematic lens. In my work for LIS 885, I conducted a needs assessment that required gathering input from stakeholders, identifying patterns in their responses, and translating those insights into practical recommendations. Through that process I learned how to listen closely, interpret what a community is communicating beneath the surface, and present findings in a way that leads to real improvement. Research is not just the gathering of data. It is a practice of listening, structuring, and presenting evidence so that communities can grow in thoughtful and intentional ways. I also learned how research acts as an ethical tool. When done well, it reveals inequities that might otherwise go unnoticed. It helps institutions understand who is being served, who is being overlooked, and what needs to

change. Research sharpened my ability to think critically about information behavior, user needs, and the larger systems that shape access.

Technology and digital literacy played a central role in my development as well. Working with Zotero, WebDewey, Omeka, and Historypin taught me how digital tools extend the reach of library work and how they shape user experience. My Tools and Technology projects pushed me to think critically about equitable access, user design, and the challenges of integrating technology into learning environments. In a rapidly changing world, I learned that my responsibility is not just to adopt new tools but to evaluate them thoughtfully and use them in ways that support community goals. Technology is not neutral. It magnifies existing inequities if not implemented with care. Through hands-on practice, I learned to identify the strengths and weaknesses of digital platforms, to understand how metadata travels across systems, and to evaluate whether a tool truly serves the community it claims to support. These experiences demystified technology for me. They made me more confident and more curious about what tools can do when used with intention.

Leadership, ethics, and diversity tied all of these threads together. This goal aligned directly with my values and helped me better understand what ethical stewardship looks like in practice. Coursework, discussions, and my work at the University of Chicago Library taught me that leadership in this field is grounded in service, inclusivity, communication, and accountability. I learned how frontline labor supports entire institutions and how crucial it is that workers feel respected and safe. The program pushed me to examine my own positionality and to commit myself to equitable, user-centered work that honors the diverse communities libraries serve. It taught me that leadership is not always loud. Often it is quiet: listening more than talking, showing up consistently, stepping in when others step back, doing the work no one sees, and centering the people whose voices get ignored. I learned that librarians cannot separate ethics from daily practice. Every decision is an ethical one; when to intervene, how to describe

something, whose experience is prioritized, whose story is preserved. These are not hypotheticals. They are the real work.

As I prepare for the future, I want to bring what I have learned in this program into the world of law libraries. I want to work with case law, legislative history, and legal archives in ways that preserve access and support public understanding of how justice is shaped. I want to connect my cataloging skills to the structure of legal information, my reference skills to the needs of law students and researchers, and my commitment to cultural stewardship to the preservation of records that govern people's lives. The MLIS program helped me understand that librarianship and law are not separate pursuits for me. Both are rooted in access, civics, truth, and the responsibility to preserve the materials that shape public life. Law libraries stand at the intersection of transparency and power. The accuracy of a record can affect the outcome of a life. I want to be part of the chain of people who maintain that accuracy, who ensure that information remains findable, understandable, and open to the public.

This degree has given me a foundation I did not know I needed. It helped me find purpose in a moment of uncertainty. It taught me how to think carefully, work ethically, and contribute to the cultural memory that holds communities together. It showed me how each goal: professional identity, information in society, organizing knowledge, research, technology, and leadership, builds a skill set grounded in responsibility and public good. Libraries are not luxuries. They are necessities. They remind us who we are, what we value, and what must be protected. Earning this MLIS has shown me that I want to spend my life defending those things.