

CHAPTER 6

Interns in Action

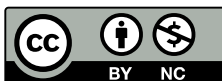
Exploring an LIS Internship Program at a Canadian University Library

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Introduction

The status and priority of library-related work experience in Canadian and American library school curricula have been much discussed and at times vigorously debated since the emergence of librarianship as a profession. In a paper first published in 1968, Rothstein traced a historical pattern of “shifting factors and weights” in the curricular ratio between library-based and classroom-based learning.¹ Despite a strong initial weighting toward apprentice-style practical learning in libraries in the last quarter of the nineteenth century, by the late 1960s a decided lean in the direction of theory-guided classroom instruction was evident.

Over fifty years after Rothstein’s review, it remains the case that most North American master’s degree programs in library and information studies (LIS)



accredited by the American Library Association (ALA) do not require completion of an experiential learning component, although many offer the option to do so.² Such components, often referred to as internships, can vary widely along many dimensions such as when they are offered, their duration, if they are credit-bearing, whether interns are paid, the type and quality of assigned work, if they take place alongside or after traditional coursework, if they involve full- or part-time work, whether a virtual format is permitted, and the extent to which stakeholders at LIS schools and host libraries are active participants.

In this chapter we use *internship* inclusively to mean on-site work appropriate for professional librarians that is performed by LIS graduate students during co-op or practicum placements occurring prior to completion of their master's degree studies. As one way of examining the current relevance of acquiring library work experience while pursuing an LIS education, we set out to explore features and experiences of an internship program for LIS students that evolved at a Canadian university library over a ten-year period.

Since the early 1990s, the University of Lethbridge Library has hosted internships for students pursuing master's degrees in librarianship. At first the internships occurred irregularly, usually in response to inquiries from LIS schools in search of work placements for students interested in academic librarianship. From about 2009, however, the library began to take a more proactive approach by annually seeking to fill at least one librarian intern position with a student completing an LIS master's degree at a Canadian library school.

We were interested in studying the goals, benefits, and outcomes of LIS graduate student internships and work placements hosted at our library from 2009 to 2019, as ten years in, the time seemed ripe for a closer look at what had become a more or less regularized placement offering. The internships introduced LIS students to many aspects of librarianship in practical ways and assisted the library in carrying out core services and special projects. In several instances, interns were later awarded tenure-track professional librarian positions in our library, but we wondered what more could be learned from a wider sample of past interns.

University of Lethbridge Internships: The Lay of the Land

The setting of our investigation is the University of Lethbridge Library over a continuous ten-year period ending in 2019. The library provides instructional programs, research and information services, collections access and management, and quality study space to advance the scholarly and creative endeavours of the university's students, faculty, and researchers. Established in 1967 on traditional Blackfoot land, the University of Lethbridge is a public university located

in Southern Alberta, Canada. Remaining guided by foundational liberal education principles, the university is a research-intensive institution that is home to about 8,800 students who pursue undergraduate, master's, and doctoral degree programs in a variety of academic and professional fields.

The library is staffed by a team of approximately fifty, including five administration staff, ten professional librarians, three operations managers, fifteen operations and systems staff, and about fifteen undergraduate student assistants. Among the responsibilities held by professional librarians are information literacy instruction, including the teaching of credit-bearing information literacy courses; subject librarian liaison work; collection management; research consultation and research support services; leadership and management in specialized areas such as archives and copyright; and research.

While LIS graduate students have completed paid internships hosted by the library since at least the early 1990s, in the beginning these offerings occurred irregularly and usually took place in the summer when the normal volume and variety of academic activities on campus were much reduced. In about 2009, however, the library initiated what became an annual process of recruiting an LIS graduate student from the MLIS co-op program at the Faculty of Information and Media Studies (FIMS), Western University, for a paid one- or two-term internship position.³ Student participation in the FIMS co-op program is optional and does not reduce the number of courses needed to graduate, although a pass/fail grade is assigned.

Besides annually offering one or more MLIS co-op internships for LIS graduate students between 2009 and 2019, in the same period the library also hosted one MLIS practicum placement for a student at the School of Library and Information Studies (SLIS), University of Alberta.⁴ Although we use the term *internship* inclusively throughout this chapter, it is important to note that some structural differences exist between the FIMS co-op program and the SLIS practicum placement. The University of Lethbridge internships for FIMS and SLIS graduate students thus necessarily differed in some respects.

The SLIS practicum placement is a three-credit (credit/no credit) elective course involving 100 hours of workplace experience, which SLIS describes as full-time work for a three-week period. The school's practicum guidelines prohibit remuneration for the work performed by students enrolled in this course. We included the student who completed an SLIS practicum placement at our library in the pool of individuals invited to complete the intern survey, as we were interested in exploring experiential comparisons between the co-op and practicum internships.

In addition to duration and eligibility for remuneration, another difference between the internships for our co-op and practicum placement students was their supervisory structure. The practicum placement was completed under the

supervision of one subject liaison librarian, whereas co-op interns were supervised by the associate university librarian and worked collaboratively with a variety of librarians and other library staff. Supervision by one librarian created a concentration of work in a narrower range of areas that were primarily associated with the supervising librarian's particular responsibilities.

The library's main reasons for hiring LIS interns were initially to provide assistance in staffing the reference desk and to advance priority projects such as the development of LibGuides. About three years later when supervisory responsibility for the interns changed hands, library administration sought input from librarians regarding the kinds of professional work that could be suitable for interns. This consultation resulted in intern job postings that were less prescriptive and more accommodating of students' own areas of interest, although reference service remained a core element of assigned duties. The new postings were intended to expose interns to a variety of areas within the library and to allow internships to take on aspects of a mentorship program.

Another outcome of the change in supervisory responsibility for our librarian internship program occurred in 2013 in the form of a mentorship initiative. In this initiative, the librarian intern spent two to three weeks with each librarian to learn about their areas of responsibility and particular research interests. This particular form of mentorship occurred only once, but the mentorship idea was maintained, albeit more informally, in subsequent years. After 2013, it was common for individual librarians to reach out to the intern to arrange meetings, suggest collaborative projects, and offer support and mentorship throughout the intern's work term.

A review of the library's LIS intern postings from 2012 to 2019 revealed that each posting listed a common range of responsibilities: providing reference service, creating and maintaining LibGuides, assisting with general library instruction, participating in outreach events, and developing online tutorials. Posted librarian intern positions have never been confined to one department or area of service. This has allowed successful applicants to explore multiple areas within the library and to work with a wide range of librarians and other library staff. The postings also indicated other duties would be assigned as needed. In addition, from 2014 onward, the postings mentioned opportunities to work in areas such as collections and assessment, with the possibility of working on special projects that aligned with interns' personal interests.

A Tale of Two Surveys

Our study probes the experiences of both librarian interns and library staff during LIS internships hosted by the University of Lethbridge Library from 2009 to 2019. The following two research questions guided our study. In what ways have the library's internships benefited LIS graduate students as they prepared for professional roles, and reciprocally, in what ways has the library benefited

from intern contributions? How can we better understand ways in which library internships might be further enhanced or refined in the future?

We conducted two online surveys to help us explore our research questions. We invited fourteen individuals who had completed an LIS student internship at our library in the period 2009 to 2019 to participate in an intern survey (appendix A). In addition, we sent an invitation to complete a staff survey (appendix B) to thirty-eight individuals holding library staff positions as of December 2019, which included librarians, operations staff, and administrative staff. Staff invitations excluded student assistants but did include librarians who had retired between 2009 and 2019, as librarian interns work most closely with librarians.

No individual received more than one invitation to complete a survey relating to this study. One member of our research team received an invitation to complete the intern survey, as they had completed an LIS internship in the library in the period 2009 to 2019. Another team member received an invitation to complete the staff survey. The third member of our research team held an LIS internship during our study, but was ineligible to participate in either survey as their internship did not draw to a close until the end of the spring 2020 term.

Study protocols were approved by the University of Lethbridge Office of Research Ethics. Both surveys were conducted on the Qualtrics survey platform and remained open for three weeks over March–April 2020.⁵ All survey responses were collected anonymously. Although the survey coincided with the early phase of the COVID-19 global pandemic during which academic activities and learning and workplace environments on Canadian university campuses were suddenly and drastically disrupted, the response rate for both surveys was robust: 50 percent for the intern survey and 45 percent for the staff survey.

Our data analysis methods were largely qualitative in nature. For each survey, the team member who took principal responsibility for analyzing the results was not a participant in that survey. The textual responses were first reviewed for meaning and then reviewed again repeatedly to identify common themes as well as unique perspectives and ideas among the survey participants' comments. We have anonymized quoted survey responses to protect the identity of participants.

Sifting the Responses

Intern Experiences

For all seven participants in the intern survey, gaining experience in libraries was a contributing factor in their decision to seek an internship. Only two respondents reported having little or no library experience prior to their internship. Four participants pursued an internship to gain experience in any kind of library, while two said they specifically sought placements in academic libraries. The five interns with previous library experience had worked in different types of

libraries while performing a variety of duties that ranged from shelving books to teaching classes and running programs.

All intern respondents expressed satisfied with the length of their internship. A clear preference was shown for the two-term internship, as all participants mentioned that the longer placement allowed them to pursue larger projects. Two participants noted that having their internships fall within the academic year was beneficial, one of whom commented that this enabled them to “fully experience the ‘busy-ness’ of an academic library.” In contrast, interns who had placements over the summer months spoke of fewer opportunities to teach and fewer projects to complete. Table 6.1 presents duration and timing aspects of the internships.

Table 6.1

Temporal aspects of internships.

Temporal Aspect	Number of Intern Respondents
Duration	
8 months	5
Longer than 8 months	2
Time period	
Complete school year (September–April)	4
Other than a complete school year	3

As for work activities, in addition to the common duties outlined in the library’s LIS internship postings, interns are typically involved in a selection of work teams or working groups. In some cases, interns are assigned to work teams, and in other cases, work teams are chosen by interns based on personal interest or a desire to gain particular experience or knowledge. Table 6.2 summarizes the work teams that were assigned to or chosen by interns.

Table 6.2

Intern respondents’ assigned and chosen work teams.

Work Team	Assigned to Interns (Number of Respondents)	Chosen by Interns (Number of Respondents)
Assessment	2	1
Collections	2	3
Community engagement	3	2
Digitization	2	1
Information literacy instruction within a writing course	1	0

Work Team	Assigned to Interns (Number of Respondents)	Chosen by Interns (Number of Respondents)
Reference service	1	0
Research services	1	3

Of the various skills, listed in figure 6.1, that interns developed or honed over their internships, teaching was the only skill mentioned by every respondent. Overall, intern respondents said the practical application of course material helped them grow their understanding of librarianship. Five participants mentioned that courses completed prior to their internship provided a good foundation for their understanding of LIS concepts. In addition, five respondents reported they were able to use skills acquired during their LIS degree program in other contexts.

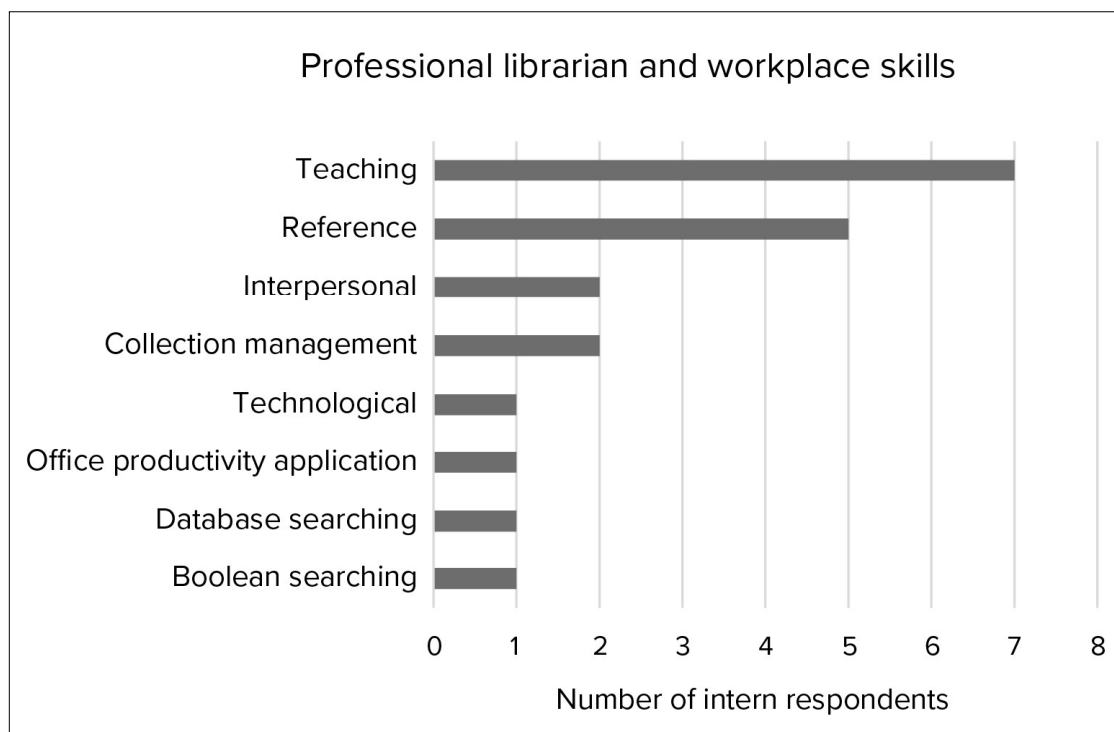


Figure 6.1

Professional skills developed by interns during their internships.

Respondents highlighted a variety of areas within the library and aspects of librarianship they would have liked to learn more about during their internships. These included public services, library management, professional librarians' discussion groups, librarian support of academic research, faculty liaison work,

collection development, electronic resource management, in-class instruction, and archives and special collections.

All intern respondents said they were currently employed as librarians or information specialists. Furthermore, some respondents noted they have taken on a mentorship role with LIS interns since becoming a professional librarian. Of five participants who answered the question about how their own LIS internship influenced their mentorship roles, two said they make a very conscious effort to reach out and aid new interns. The other three described ways in which the internship enhanced their understanding of the role of librarians as well as confidence in their own abilities, which in turn influenced the way they mentor interns or new librarians.

Staff Experiences

For the seventeen individuals who responded to the library staff survey, their reported interactions with interns ranged from indirect interactions in various activities to close working relationships. The identified activities included digitization work, event promotion and planning, technology outreach, collections projects, and subject-specific work. Table 6.3 outlines areas of staff-intern interactions.

Table 6.3

Library staff interactions with interns.

Context of Interaction	Number of Staff Respondents
Project work	7
Reference work	6
Work groups	4
Teaching	3
Mentorship	3
Librarian research	1
Indirect interaction	1

Staff respondents were asked to suggest activities in which they felt future interns could usefully participate, broken down by the library's work units. While many responses mentioned duties typically assigned to interns such as reference desk shifts, LibGuides development, general library instruction, online tutorials and outreach events, unique answers were also received, which are presented in table 6.4.

Table 6.4

Staff-suggested intern activities within particular library units.

Library Unit	Suggested Intern Activity	Number of Staff Respondents
Liaison Librarians	Teaching assistance	7
	Librarian project assistance	4
	Shadowing librarians	3
	Collection development	3
	Participation in librarian research	1
	Scholarly communication	1
Information Systems	Technological literacy instruction	2
	Information systems projects	2
	Digitization projects	1
	Other	1
Technical Services	Cataloguing	3
	Collections review	2
Access Services	Assessment projects	1
	Interlibrary loan service	1
	Other	1
Archives	Archives work	3
Administration	Event planning	1
	Mentorship/shadowing	1
	Administration projects	1
	Other	1

The importance of intern interest in the suggested activities was highlighted most often in reference to Archives work. A related concern was raised by a staff respondent who noted that, while interns could participate in Information Systems–related activities, opportunities are limited, and interns may not have the required skills. One notable comment suggested that interns could participate in Access Services work by “reviewing best practices for the delivery of front-line services.” In another comment relating to the Administration unit, a respondent wrote that interns could gain “an understanding of the role of Librarians in collegial governance.”

Evaluating the Internship Program: Mutual Reflections

In different ways, the surveys asked both interns and library staff to assess the value of the library's internship program. Instruction, working on LibGuides, and opportunities to shadow more experienced librarians are among the various experiences intern respondents said were the most useful in their internships. Regarding how interns have benefitted the library, eight staff respondents noted that interns have increased the library's staffing capacity in the areas of reference service and general operations as well as engagement in projects. Six staff noted interns' beneficial contributions to the library's information literacy instruction, and five staff highlighted interns' assistance with work team activities.

Reflecting on intern participation in library instruction, a staff respondent highlighted the value "for students in the classroom to see a fellow student and support them." Another staff member said, "It seems many interns have gravitated towards instruction but I'm not sure if that is based on their interests or whether there are more available opportunities in this area." Of four staff who remarked on interns' refreshing and positive perspectives, one commented that new viewpoints were helpful "whether it is the implementation of a new technology, a development in the field they studied, or their enthusiasm to be joining the profession." Another staff respondent recognized the value of new skills introduced to the library by interns.

In response to a question about aspects of the library's internship program that are particularly well organized, four staff noted the effectiveness of how interns are integrated into the workflow of library activities. Other staff members spoke positively about the detailed orientation process that introduces interns to staff across all library units, having interns shadow staff on the reference desk, inviting interns to library meetings, offering interns flexibility in their choice of projects, and involving interns in all aspects of the library.

In terms of aspects of their internships that interns considered to be the least useful, two said they thought the amount of time spent on the reference desk was too high. One participant mentioned that the lack of payment during their internship was a hindrance, and another participant believed they did not have enough duties to keep them busy during a portion of their placement. Other less useful aspects mentioned by intern respondents included being asked to participate in a work group that did not correspond to their particular skill set and having fewer opportunities to assist with in-class information literacy instruction than were desired.

Both staff and intern respondents were invited to suggest ways in which the library's internship program could be improved. Staff recommendations included allowing interns to be more involved in library committee work and university activities outside of the library. Two staff respondents also suggested that more

information could be shared with staff about interns before their arrival to facilitate project planning based on interns' interests.

A common area in which staff and interns offered suggestions for improvement was supervision, which was the purview of library administration in the ten-year period of our study. Five staff recommended changes to the supervisory model that included increasing the amount of structure and providing more direct supervision to support students who may struggle with self-direction or feel “unguided.” The main areas of potential improvement touched on by intern respondents were the “openness” of the internship and the style of supervision, which may not be suitable for all interns. Weekly meetings with a supervisor were appreciated by one participant as an important time to check in, and four participants noted more supervisor input might be beneficial.

Themes and Variations

The rapid onset of COVID-19 closures that began to ripple across the globe in mid-March 2020 preceded the launch of our survey by less than two weeks. And as we analyzed our survey results in a mandated work-at-home environment, we gained a new appreciation for the extent to which education, scholarship, and academic librarianship can in fact take place virtually. These unusual circumstances have coloured our analytical lenses in ways we could not have predicted at the outset.

Our examination of the responses to both surveys yielded five themes. One theme reflects the role played by proactive self-direction in the success of the library's internship program. Another theme highlights the value of allowing interns the flexibility to choose projects and work teams. A theme that surfaced in responses to both surveys is contrasting views of reference work. Additionally, themes of mentorship and employability are also evident in both intern and staff responses. In this section we consider how these themes help shed light on our two research questions.

Proactivity

A central research question for this study is how internships mutually benefit LIS graduate students and the library as host. Both interns' and staff responses reflected on the interplay between success and assertive self-direction.

From the staff perspective, several respondents identified motivation, initiative, and assertiveness as key ingredients for intern success. For example, one staff member said, “LIS internships have been beneficial to greater or lesser degrees depending on the students themselves (mostly related to their level of personal motivation and initiative).” Others expressed concern that insufficient initiative could lead interns to “drift into the gravitational pull of persons who first involve

them in their own activities” or leave them feeling “adrift and unguided, and unsure what they should be working on—depending on how assertive they are about seeking out relationships and projects with librarians, and how good they are at working independently.” Similarly, another staff member observed that less self-directed interns at times seemed to be “lost” and perhaps bored.

From the intern perspective, at times there was insufficient work. One respondent said, “I had very little to do [for the first four months] which I found frustrating and made me feel undervalued. Any work is better than no work. I was frustrated by hierarchies (i.e. this meeting is only open to professional librarians) which denied me some learning experiences.” Another intern noted that their internship felt very self-driven:

If I had an area I wanted to learn more about I had to pursue those projects myself quite often. Having a clearer program of what skills I needed to touch on would have been helpful. Previous interns gave me the advice to be self-driven and that was valuable to know going into the internship.

Additionally, one intern said their supervisor had a very “hands-off approach, which I found worked well, but it may work less well for others.” They also suggested “it could be helpful for the intern supervisor to have a list of different kinds of activities to offer to incoming interns for them to read, and then have a conversation early on about which activities they’d most like to become involved in.” Although McGurr and Damasco suggest it is ultimately up to the student to ensure that their internship runs smoothly, this may disadvantage students who are inexperienced in self-promotion.⁶ To offset such potential disadvantages, Dixon notes a “student centred” approach can help students feel empowered to find effective ways of meeting their professional and learning goals during the internship.⁷

Flexibility

On the other hand, intern responses showed an appreciation for the openness and flexibility of the library’s internships. Four participants said they enjoyed the “self-driven” nature of the placement, as it allowed them to pursue their interests and gain experience in areas they wished to explore. One intern who stepped away from less compelling archival work in order to pursue a LibGuides project said, “The great thing about this placement was that I was able to learn about whatever I was interested in.”

To increase the likelihood of an enriching learning experience, McGurr and Damasco advise students to pursue their interests by asking questions of everyone involved, including themselves, throughout the process of selecting and

completing an internship.⁸ A respondent to our intern survey who appeared to embrace the spirit of this approach wrote, “The openness of the internship really allowed me to pursue what I felt was relevant to my interests, yet there was still accountability ensured through weekly meetings with a supervisor.” Ferrer-Vinent and Sobel suggest that a balance between structure and flexibility is preferred by interns, “with perhaps more structure in the beginning progressing into more freedom.”⁹

A number of staff members commented that a flexible and self-guided approach supported interns’ learning processes. One respondent observed that allowing interns to interact with different groups in the library contributed to students’ professional growth:

The opportunity to be mentored by multiple individuals is something that benefits the intern immensely. Even if [library staff] have similar titles, we all have very different roles, backgrounds, perspectives, and approaches to our practice. It is important for the intern to see that there isn’t just one way in librarianship—and, in fact, that they should seize the opportunity to find their own path in their practice.

Reference Service

A core element of the library’s largely self-directed LIS internships is reference service. As interns are typically assigned a significantly greater share of scheduled reference service than other library staff, it was unsurprising to find that all staff comments about intern participation in reference desk work were positive. One staff member stated the “Co-op Intern helps tremendously,” and another said intern assistance with reference service is “absolutely necessary.” Furthermore, one comment pointed out the role played by interns in backup coverage: “Our LIS interns are the ones who most often are willing to take extra shifts in the event of illness etc., which gives the library a lot of flexibility we wouldn’t have otherwise.” This coverage allowed staff to attend to other work priorities.

While the contributions made by interns to the reference desk team are undoubtedly very valuable, it is important to consider what interns may be required to forego if they are asked to shoulder a disproportionately large share of hours at the reference desk. Reflecting on a personal LIS internship, Warren notes having had less time to train and pursue other projects as a result of scheduled hours on the reference desk.¹⁰ Based on those experiences, Warren encourages host libraries to include reference work in LIS internships, but cautions against using interns “to plug holes in scheduling or hiring.”¹¹

Some intern respondents appreciated the chance to gain reference experience, especially those who did not have previous work experience in academic

libraries. Two interns noted that their time at the reference desk was useful. The majority of interns mentioned reference consultation as a skill they were able to develop during their internship. One intern observed that “other things like reference interviews are developed the more you do them, so being able to learn about the principles first and then put them into action is key.”

Other intern respondents expressed variant views. While acknowledging the importance of reference experience, one intern felt “the amount of time spent on the desk was excessive.” A different intern noted, “There is a lot of desk time required, which is normal in most practicums, but I do think that ensuring that the individual overseeing the practicum is checking in often and in a compassionate way is very important.” Since reference is a key service in which most of the library’s professional librarians participate, it is appropriate to involve LIS interns in this work. At the same time, Lewey and Moody-Goo note the desirability of involving interns in a rich variety of professional librarian work to maximize the likelihood of a “meaningful, beneficial, and transformative” internship.¹²

Mentorship

Regarding how to improve the internship program, one intern suggested a peer mentor could be assigned to interns to field their questions. Another wrote that one of the most useful aspects of their internship was “watching and learning from very experienced colleagues... I was fortunate to be mentored by individuals who have 20+ [years of] professional experience.” Ferrer-Vinent and Sobel observe that respondents to their survey of former LIS practicum students said one way to improve the academic library’s practicum program might be to provide several mentors.¹³

Other interns said their internship led them to assume mentorship roles when they began work as a librarian. One such respondent observed that having previous experience helped them understand what would be valuable to an LIS intern. Reflecting on their experiences after landing an academic librarian position, another intern respondent noted that interns came to them with questions they were not comfortable asking other staff members. In an informal mentor role, the latter respondent said they were able to suggest “projects or work that would complement the theoretical work” the LIS interns had already completed.

McGurr and Damasco recommend open communication as a way of promoting successful internship outcomes.¹⁴ An intern respondent who was subsequently hired as a librarian at the University of Lethbridge wrote that their internship experience strongly influenced their mentorship role:

Since I started in my current position as a librarian... I’ve made it a point to have coffee with the intern two or three times during their

internship. We typically talk about what they've been involved in, what they'd like to be involved in, and gaps in their experience.

Additionally, this staff member said they strive to “ensure that [interns] are able to make the most of their experience.” Lacy and Copeland refer to this sort of mentorship as a repayment of “debt” to the profession.¹⁵

Ketcham advises libraries that are considering hosting an internship to first assess whether capable and interested staff are ready to act as mentors.¹⁶ A staff respondent to our survey suggested a more explicit mentorship model would improve the internship program. Other staff observed that mentorship tends to happen organically when interns approach librarians to discuss their area of expertise or to seek advice or assistance in working through issues related to library politics, professionalism, or managing difficult situations. Dixon notes this type of problem-solving can be difficult to learn in the classroom.¹⁷ Moreover, Holland experienced “professional surprise” upon discovering the theoretical knowledge gained through LIS graduate education was insufficient preparation for the practical challenges they faced as a new librarian.¹⁸

Echoing findings of an LIS mentorship study by Lacy and Copeland, a staff respondent observed mentorship to be beneficial for librarians as well.¹⁹ They commented that mentorship is “mostly informal, as ‘supervision’ of the intern seems to be under the umbrella of Library Administration.” Another staff member described mentoring interns as “a very rewarding aspect of professional work.” Lewey and Moody-Goo suggest the incorporation of supportive mentorship into an LIS internship can provide an enriching experience for interns and librarians alike.²⁰ They recommend that mentor-intern pairs regularly check in with each other to gauge progress on projects, allow for constructive feedback, and ensure the internship progresses in a way that is instructive for the intern and beneficial to the library as a whole.

Along with supportive mentorship, Lewey and Moody-Goo identify purposeful planning and training, reflection and assessment, and authentic professional librarian work as four key ingredients of a successful LIS internship.²¹ They view authenticity to be achievable by treating interns as integral members of the library staff and assigning responsibilities to interns that are commensurate with those of professional librarians. This approach allows for more variety in work assignments and avoids situations in which interns find themselves “completing mounds of busy work while doing nothing to better themselves as future librarians.”²²

Employability

Interestingly, when asked about highlights of the library's internship program, several staff mentioned the hiring of previous interns. Since 2016, four previous

interns have been hired as professional librarians at the University of Lethbridge. This turn of events arose from a unique set of circumstances: several librarians retired within a few years of each other and the resulting posted vacancies were all successfully filled by applicants who had completed LIS internships at our library. These circumstances allowed library staff to observe firsthand the benefits of strong relationships and institutional knowledge acquired through the internships as the new librarians began their work. One staff member wrote:

What an incredible opportunity for both intern and library to “test each other out.” This is an incredible source of future, experienced employees—and they’ve all done so well. I look at our current tenure-track librarians/former interns and reflect on how well-developed they are at this point in their careers and what they’re bringing to this library, the university, and the professions in terms of their practice, service, and research contributions.

Some staff described internships as “effective trial runs of a sort” and “an eight-month trial period for determining if an intern might make a good ‘fit’ for future employment.” A case report by Raszewski and Peterson corroborates the importance of LIS work experience, as some students felt their practicum projects helped them secure a librarian position.²³ Eckard, Rosener, and Scripps-Hoekstra note that academic library internships improve the chances of a successful academic library job search.²⁴ But as Rathbun-Grubb observes, “While much has been discussed about their potential benefits... little is known about measurable associations between LIS EPA [end of program assessments such as internships] and subsequent career success across the field.”²⁵ Additionally, while the relationship between LIS internships and employability is well discussed in the literature, research on long-term benefits of library investment in recruiting former interns into professional librarian positions is scarce.

Acquiring library experience was important for interns. One intern said having no experience when applying for jobs could be seen as a deterrent. Another wrote that gaining experience was “100% the reason I chose to do an unpaid practicum.” When asked to identify the most useful part of their internship, one respondent said,

Frankly, it was that I could put ‘academic library experience’ on my cv. The academic librarian culture is such that, even with an MLIS, commensurate experience, such as teaching & designing full term university courses, is not considered enough to qualify you for work as an academic librarian.

Discussions with LIS faculty and librarians led Dixon to a similar conclusion that experiential education is key to student learning and to “what employers expect from new librarians.”²⁶

Lessons Learned

In the end, what did we learn from staff and former LIS interns about the overall value of the library’s internship program and ways in which it might be improved? For interns, the program has evidently fostered a flexible and largely diverse learning environment in which they gained practical professional skills and learned about other aspects of an academic library’s workplace culture that tend to be less accessible in a classroom setting. Flexibility is valuable only to the extent that it is effectively leveraged by a student, however.

A student-centred approach aiming to help students make the most of their internship could include a more deliberate mentorship pairing. Mentorship could perhaps be expanded through the creation of an informal mentorship club involving interns and interested librarians that meets periodically to share interesting stories and experiences from the frontlines of intern and professional librarian practice. Additionally, while intern proactivity is highly encouraged, providing more structure in the early stages of an internship may assist students in meeting their personal and professional goals more effectively.

For the library, there is widespread recognition of the important boost that interns provide to the library’s staffing capacity in reference service and instruction-related areas. Staff also appreciate interns for their generally positive, fresh perspectives and for new skills, approaches, and knowledge they bring to their host community. Furthermore, mentoring interns is rewarding work for professional librarians, as it provides an opportunity to perpetuate a virtuous circle of reciprocal learning and sharing experiences and information relevant to professional practice. Looking to the future, the quality of new internships could be enhanced by regularly inviting librarians to assist with planning, particularly those who have completed LIS internships.

Conducting our surveys during the COVID-19 pandemic prompted us to reflect more carefully on the changing and adaptable nature of academic librarian work. While our library has traditionally hosted in-person LIS internships, one member of our research team finished her internship remotely due to the sudden closure of our library during the pandemic. This global health emergency occurred against a local backdrop of sustained deep cuts to post-secondary funding by the provincial government and plunging oil prices affecting the province’s coffers, all of which combine to place the future of our internship program in jeopardy for the time being.

For the first time in over ten years, our library began the 2020 school year without a new MLIS graduate student intern in place. In the event that this

internship program is reinstated in the not-too-distant future, we believe it would be fruitful at that time to review our survey respondents' ideas on how the program might be further enhanced and to make adjustments accordingly. Intern and staff respondents identified several ways in which internships could be better structured with more openness and inclusivity and a customized approach to intern supervision.

At the same time, the enriching benefits that our internship program has yielded to date for LIS students and the library (and the university) are clear and compelling. Is it time for our library to pursue other modes and options for hosting future LIS internships? Are there ways we can still mentor new students while giving them practical experience to complement their learning? Should virtual LIS internships become more common? Do internships delivered online require key ingredients beyond the four—mentorship, planning, authenticity, and assessment—that guide quality in-person experiences? Our study appears to have generated more questions than it has answered, which points to fertile ground for future investigation.

APPENDIX 6A

Survey Questions for Interns

1. To what extent was gaining experience in an academic library a factor in your decision to pursue an internship or work placement?
2. Did you have any experience working or volunteering in a library prior to the completion of your LIS internship or work placement at the University of Lethbridge Library?
 - If yes, what type of library work did you do? For how long?
3. How long was your internship or work placement?
 - Were you satisfied with the length of your internship or work placement? (Why or why not?)
4. Over which months did your internship or work placement occur?
 - Were you satisfied with the timing of your internship or work placement? (Why or why not?)
5. What did you find to be the most useful experiences in your internship or work placement?
6. What did you find to be the least useful experiences in your internship or work placement?
7. What are some ways that future LIS internships or work placements at the University of Lethbridge Library could be improved?
8. What professional skills were you able to develop or hone during your internship or work placement?
 - How did the practical application of your course material grow your understanding of librarianship?
9. Which Library committees or work groups (if any) were you assigned to during your internship or work placement?
10. Which Library committees or work groups (if any) did you choose to join during your internship or work placement and why?
11. Which areas of the Library (if any) would you have liked to learn more about?
12. Are you currently employed as a library or information specialist?
 - If no, have you been able to use skills acquired during your LIS degree program in other contexts?
13. Have you had the opportunity to mentor other graduate LIS students?
 - If yes, how do you feel your LIS internship or work placement experiences influenced your mentorship role?

APPENDIX 6B

Survey Questions for Staff

1. During the period January 2009 to December 2019, did you have opportunities to work with one or more LIS (library and information studies) graduate student interns or work placement students as they completed work-integrated learning at the University of Lethbridge Library?
 - If yes, briefly describe those opportunities.
 - If no, do you wish you had more opportunities to work with LIS graduate students?
2. How have LIS internships or work placements at the Library benefited Library programs, services, or operations?
 - Which Library programs, services, or operations do you believe have particularly benefited?
3. What has worked particularly well in how LIS internships and work placements have been organized?
4. For the following units within the Library, please briefly describe activities that you believe LIS interns and work placement students could usefully participate in. (liaison librarians, information systems, tech services, access services, university archives, administration)
5. What are some ways in which future LIS internships and work placements at the University of Lethbridge Library could be enhanced?
6. In your view, what are the highlights of LIS internships and work placements that have been hosted by the Library in the period 2009 to 2019?

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