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Assessing UNC-Greensboro's Reference Interns Program

Enhancing the employability of LIS students

For decades libraries have been highly dependent on student interns to provide reference and other library services. In recent years, the roles and responsibilities of reference librarians have undergone significant changes. With the emergence of technology and development of virtual communication channels, reference service is no longer limited to a single physical space. In many academic libraries, the reference desk is either staffed by highly trained paraprofessionals or by student workers. In other instances, the reference desk has been dissolved or merged with other service points such as circulation or access services. Some libraries have moved to a system where patrons are referred to subject librarians or liaisons when specialized expertise and in-depth research techniques are required.

Background

Since 1988, reference interns have provided professional-level reference services to patrons of the university libraries at the University of North Carolina-Greensboro (UNC-Greensboro). Interns worked at the reference desk, with a librarian during most hours. However, in 2003, the university libraries decided to only hire LIS students as reference interns. As a result, the university libraries bolstered their efforts to work

with the School of Library and Information Studies to develop competent and efficient librarians, thus epitomizing the libraries' commitment to furthering the library profession.

The aim of the internship program is to provide a nurturing environment where LIS students can gain professional experience in reference (digital/virtual and face-to-face), collection development, and library instruction. Interns also receive weekly training from teaching librarians, who also help conduct mock interviews, and offer résumé writing workshops. They also receive the added benefit of listing the librarians with whom they work as professional references on job applications. All of these elements are expected to improve the skills and marketability of the LIS interns upon graduation.

In 2015, the University Libraries conducted an assessment of the internship program. The purpose of the assessment was to evaluate the effectiveness of the program and its impact on LIS students' transition into the profession. To that end, a survey was sent out

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to 28 interns who participated in the program from 2010 to 2015. A total of 21 responses (75 percent response rate) were analyzed and the feedback was encouraging.

Effects on academic performance

Ninety-five percent of respondents agreed or strongly agreed that the internship experience expanded their knowledge of reference and instructional services beyond the classroom. It also helped to improve their academic performance by adding context and clarity to theories learned in classrooms. Mary Ellen Starmer firmly states that internships/practicums do more than fill a knowledge gap, they fill a “gaping hole.”¹ Stacy Creel and Elizabeth Pollicino further reiterate that there is an inherent gap between what is taught in LIS programs and the practical skills needed to work effectively in libraries.²

Mentorship and networking

All of the respondents indicated that the reference internship was a huge confidence booster. It allowed them to face their fears of answering tough research questions and addressing problematic patrons. It boosted their courage to perform various librarian duties, such as standing in front of a class and teaching information literacy skills to students, which also helped them to overcome imposter syndrome and general self-doubt. The internship provided adequate interview support such as mock interviews and other interview prep tips. Interns could opt to participate in a mock interview session(s) in front of a panel of librarians having varying ranks and roles within the library.

Eighty-three percent of respondents felt that the program helped them develop skills that made them highly competitive on the job market. However, nearly 35 percent of the respondents felt that the program could have done more to provide networking opportunities to build their professional networks. Although the interns were paired with at least one librarian who served as a

mentor, they remarked that they wished that they could have met with and developed relationships with other librarians within the state or region prior to entering the profession. S. J. Cunningham and I. J. Ruffin identified networking as a best practice for LIS programs to support students' transitions into the profession.³ Therefore, it is essential that LIS programs and internship coordinators integrate a networking component into their programs.

Jennifer E. Nutefall emphasizes that to be successful, an internship will most likely be very demanding of the librarians involved, requiring a major time commitment to mentor, supervise, and provide orientation and continuous training.⁴ In addition, there is a significant amount of logistics that goes into scheduling weekly sessions where liaisons/subject librarians are invited to provide specialized training.

Employability and starting salaries for reference interns

Suzie Allard found that 83 percent of LIS graduates were successful in finding a job, although not all were librarian positions.⁵ Seventy-four percent of UNC-Greensboro's interns indicated that their first job post-MLS was a professional position, although only 53 percent were employed full-time as librarians. Similarly, it took 55 percent of interns six months or less to acquire a full-time professional position after graduation. However, 22 percent took over a year to achieve the same feat, with two-thirds of those citing personal circumstances that contributed to the delay in acquiring a full-time professional position. Allard found that 54 percent of graduates were employed in either public (29.9 percent) or college/university libraries. Conversely, 95 percent of UNC-Greensboro's interns accepted a position in either an academic (74 percent) or public library.⁶

According to Allard, graduates with jobs in the Southeast reported the lowest average salary of \$41,073, 12.6 percent below the overall national average.⁷ Though marginally,

UNC-Greensboro's reference interns were able to surpass regional statistics with an average salary of \$42,390, 3.2 percent above the regional average. A closer analysis of the reported salaries showed that the majority (68 percent) of UNC-Greensboro's reference interns earned between \$33,000 and \$62,000. This equates to an average salary of \$47,270, which is 0.6 percent higher than the national average.

Benefits of the reference internship program: Insights from interns

All of the respondents indicated that they were either satisfied or very satisfied with their internship experience. One of the most valued aspects of the reference internship program was the opportunity to develop, enhance, and optimize their reference interviewing skills. In addition, an overwhelming 83 percent of respondents shared their satisfaction with the training opportunities on reference best practices and subject-specific databases. They emphasized that acquiring those skills was vital to them in gaining employment as librarians.

The second most valued aspect of the internship program was the exposure to library instruction during the weekly training sessions and the ability to do mock library instruction at the end of each semester. Many reiterated that those teaching experiences helped them to gain confidence and improved their overall ability to present. Those teaching experiences were also instrumental when interns were asked to do a sample teaching session or presentation during job interviews.

Some of the interns were unable to cite one specific thing about the internship program that contributed to their success. However, they used the following terms to summarize the program: comprehensive, most formative experience, career shaping, and confidence building. S. Crissinger states that networking, mentoring, guest lectures, and resume reviews aren't enough to support LIS students as they make the transition from student to professional.⁸ Therefore, it is es-

sential that LIS students immerse themselves in a library environment where they will be able to learn to address common and unique situations, and help them develop and reinforce skills that are vital to librarians.

Recommendations: Insight from interns

When prompted for suggestions on improving the Reference Interns Program, respondents offered the following:

- The most common suggestions were on the topic of library instruction. Nearly 42 percent of respondents suggested that it would be helpful to incorporate into the program more opportunities to observe, teach, and co-teach. Some also said that teaching multiple library instruction sessions should be mandatory for all interns because it also helps to prepare them to deliver presentations during job interviews. This stance was further supported by interns who opted to do only one required teaching session but later wished they had been mandated to deliver more than one. Respondents generally thought it would have been valuable to gain more experience in delivering library instruction.

- Mock interviews should not be optional, and a stronger emphasis should be placed on conference attendance/participation. In addition, some respondents also suggested that it would be helpful to incorporate more soft-skills training into the internship via required readings and webinars.

- There are some other areas that respondents felt could use some improvements. They believe that interns can improve their marketability by gaining familiarity with liaison roles and responsibilities, collaborating more frequently with mentors, and gaining collection development experience in specific subject areas. They thought it would be beneficial to meet with or work alongside mentors beyond the reference desk.

Following each recommendation, respondents often gave high praise to the quality of the program and many credited the internship as the foundation their current success.

Conclusion

The literature indicates that there are many great library internship and mentorship programs. However, it appears as though UNC-Greensboro's Reference Interns Program is unique in its combination of robustness and selection criteria. The internship was meant to be a learning and professional experience—although the interns are employees, the library also has an obligation that goes above and beyond the usual employer/employee relationship. The internship is a learning experience, not just a job.

Upon successful completion of UNC-Greensboro's reference internship, interns will be able to perform and have a good understanding of most liaison duties and responsibilities. The program trains interns to design lesson plans, teach and assess information literacy sessions, administer online tools such as LibGuides, conduct reference interviews (email, chat, phone and face-to-face), etc. They will also have a firm understanding of learning management systems, familiarity with ACRL Framework for Information Literacy, and an aptitude to work with a diverse community. Those skills were taught and reinforced during weekly training sessions.

According to Patricia Silva work-based learning can be used as a successful strategy to bridge the gap between theoretical knowledge and practice to enhance graduate employability.⁹ There is a vast amount of literature that calls for and supports the integration of experiential learning into LIS students' education. The findings of this assessment demonstrate that experiential learning can have a significant impact on LIS students' employability, earnings, and overall job readiness. It further shows that the program is exposing interns to real life situations in librarianship, hence preparing them for the job hunt and life as a librarian. This is indicated by the overwhelming success of the interns.

Nutefall cautions that although internships provide a valuable experience to students, not every internship experience is a positive

one.¹⁰ Therefore, it is important that LIS educators, practitioners, and administrators fully understand the requirements and commitment needed to establish a successful internship program. A successful partnership between educators and practitioners greatly benefits the next generation of librarians. These partnerships are absolutely necessary to merge theory with practice, helping to close some of the "gaping holes" in LIS education.

Notes

1. Mary Ellen Starmer, "Benefits of Practicum Students in Preservation: The Value of the Experience to the Department, Students, and Field," *Collection Management* 29, no. 2 (2004): 33–40.

2. Stacy L. Creel and Elizabeth B. Pollicino, "Practitioners' & LIS students' perceptions on preparedness in the New York metropolitan area," *Education for Information* 29, no. 1 (2012): 53–69.

3. S. J. Cunningham and I. J. Ruffin, "Experience Mandatory: Assessing the Impact of Previous Career and Educational Experience on LIS Education and the Academic Library Job Hunt," *Southeastern Librarian* 62, no. 4 (2015): 12–20.

4. Jennifer E. Nutefall, "Structuring a Successful Instruction Internship," *College & Undergraduate Libraries* 19, no. 1 (2012): 80–94.

5. Suzie Allard, "Placements and Salaries 2015: Salary by Library Type," retrieved December 1, 2016, from <http://lj.libraryjournal.com/2015/10/placements-and-salaries/2015-survey/salary-by-library-type/>.

6. Ibid.

7. Ibid.

8. S. Crissinger, "Practitioner Engagement in LIS Education," ACRLog, retrieved December 1, 2016, from <http://acrlog.org/2016/01/07/practitioner-engagement-in-lis-education/>.

9. Patricia Silva, et al., "Stairway to employment? Internships in higher education," *Higher Education* 72, no. 6 (2016): 703–21.

10. Jennifer E. Nutefall, "Structuring a Successful Instruction Internship," *College & Undergraduate Libraries* 19, no. 1 (2012): 80–94. 