

Five steps to an effective internship program

Providing a meaningful experience for interns and librarians

by Barbara Quarton

Top-notch graduate students in library and information science (LIS) programs can become effective reference interns to lighten the workload at busy reference desks. The key is in providing excellent training. Our library recently updated its intern-training program to help meet service needs at our reference desk and to provide a unique educational experience for library school students.

Our library hires LIS students to help at the reference desk and has done so since 1991. Reference interns during the 1990s, however, had little structured training. On the eve of our tenth anniversary of hiring interns, we decided that our program needed revitalization, particularly in the face of rapid technological change and a fast-growing student population. We recognized that, in the increasingly complex electronic environment, interns needed focused guidance and concentrated attention to prepare for the rigors of reference work. Our challenge was to come up with ways to provide this.

Step 1

We solicited feedback from our past interns and from internship supervisors at LIS schools around the country. Some of the information came to us informally, in telephone conversations and over lunch, and some of the information came to us by way of a brief sur-

vey we sent out. From our past interns, we hoped to collect appraisals of their experiences as interns in our library and their suggestions for improvement. From internship supervisors, we wanted feedback about what constitutes a worthwhile, educational internship experience.

We learned that all of our past interns were satisfied with their internship experience. They were delighted to have been able to get some reference experience under their belts and to add to their résumés. Pre-1995 interns suggested improvements such as more networking opportunities and extra help with the job search. Post-1995 interns noted that their internships would have been better if the program had included a concentrated training period. This information seemed to corroborate our sense that the more electronic resources we had, the more structured training interns wanted and needed.

The internship supervisors emphasized the importance of training, regular contact with the site supervisor, and the opportunity to practice professional-level duties. We hoped to incorporate all these ideas into a new internship program that was dedicated to meeting interns' educational needs as well as the library's service needs. Our next step was to look carefully at what kinds of assistance our library wanted from the interns.

About the author

Barbara Quarton is reference librarian/internship coordinator at the John M. Pfaum Library at California State University, San Bernardino, e-mail: bquarton@csusb.edu

Reference interns can begin to practice their interviewing skills under watchful eyes, in a non-threatening environment. This dynamic is at the heart of an internship in our library.

Step 2

We wanted responsible, capable interns to share in front-line duties, from answering directional questions to answering the telephone. Because our library has no formal information desk, students ask all kinds of questions at the reference desk, from "Where are the magazines?" to "What is a scholarly journal?" We need friendly, helpful people at the desk to answer these types of questions. More important, we need people who will listen actively and who can encourage those with research questions to consult a reference librarian.

We knew from experience and from the literature¹ that we wanted our interns to work in tandem with our reference librarians rather than on their own with no supervision.

We created two levels of reference internship: the reference rover and the reference intern. The reference rover position is available to LIS students who have completed the core LIS courses but who have not taken a formal reference course. The rovers assist students in the reference area, answering basic and directional questions. They refer students with complex questions to librarians behind the desk. They rove the reference area and troubleshoot computers and printer problems. The strength of the reference rover is his or her ability to develop rapport with students who may be reticent about approaching a librarian.

Reference interns, on the other hand, have completed the core LIS courses and have taken one or more reference courses. They understand the basics of the reference interview and have a good foundation in the organization of reference materials. They answer the telephone, retrieve interlibrary loans, and check out reference desk materials to those who request them. Interns answer questions about database coverage and instruct

students on how to perform basic searches. Like the reference rovers, reference interns are trained to refer students with complex reference issues to the librarian at the desk.

Reference librarians on desk duty are thus freed to focus their expertise on students, faculty members, and others who have complex reference issues. They also have more time to teach in-depth research skills.

As Carol Anne Germain points out in a *C&RL News* article, working with student interns provides reference librarians the often enlightening opportunity to see their own jobs from a different perspective.² In exchange, interns work as partners with reference librarians, from whom they learn the rhythms of public service in our library. They experience the essence of the profession by witnessing exchanges between the librarian and the patron. Reference interns can begin to practice their interviewing skills under watchful eyes, in a nonthreatening environment. This dynamic is at the heart of an internship in our library.

Step 3

The next step was to establish training criteria. We wanted our interns to have a strong foundation in the basic aspects of the library's operation. We also believed they needed an essential awareness of the public service philosophy of the library. Beyond these basics, we wanted to provide a comprehensive orientation to the library's policies, procedures, and popular databases. It did not seem to be enough to take first-time interns on a tour of the library and expect them to "learn as they go." Not only would this lead to an uncomfortable situation for both the interns and the reference librarians, it also would undermine interns' confidence and sense of place. A good orientation tells interns they are important members of a strong team.

Step 4

Once we knew what the interns wanted from their work experience and we had articulated our library's needs and standards, we were able to develop the framework for our orientation. Our new program is highlighted by two weeks of training in which interns have a structured program of orientation and observation. Interns engage in four active learn-

ing modules: getting to know the library and the campus, an introduction to the reference desk, using the library catalog, and using the popular databases. Prior to working on each module, interns complete a brief survey about their knowledge or prior experience with the module content.

Modules 1, 3, and 4 are self-directed. Module 2, introduction to the reference desk, is completed with the library's internship coordinator. Each module has an introduction, an activity, practice work, and advanced options. Each module takes about two hours to complete, after which interns meet privately with the library's internship coordinator to discuss specific issues and to ask questions or share concerns. These meetings are very informal. Interns also spend time observing the reference area and the practices of the reference librarians. They are given time to explore the stacks and learn to operate the computers, printers, copy machines, and stand-alone terminals.

Step 5

We expect that, in addition to engaging in the structured orientation, interns will take responsibility for learning as much as possible on their own. We therefore provide them with written orientation and instruction about the library. Interns are given an intern orientation packet containing all the basic information they need.

This packet has maps, rosters, campus information, and a telephone directory; our new *Intern Handbook*, which has a checklist of training modules and an overview of interns' duties and responsibilities; and more importantly, the handbook has a listing of frequently asked reference questions, an introduction to library instruction sessions, and an introduction to interlibrary loan. The handbook also offers suggestions for projects that would be particularly useful for the library and the interns. The packet includes all of the library's instructional handouts, so interns can practice their database skills.

Lessons we learned

Our library's program has been in place for about one year. Five interns have participated in the orientation as described here. Our interns are paid, and they receive graduate credits based on the total number of hours they

A word of caution: the training internship takes a considerable amount of planning and implementation time for developing materials, interviewing candidates, and training the new interns. The person responsible for the internship program will be busy!

work during the quarter. We have received great feedback from these interns, who are very happy to have been part of the pilot program. They are pleased with the level of training they received, and they report feeling confident about their ability to provide effective reference service.

We also surveyed our reference librarians about the quality of the interns' work, and we have made small adjustments along the way as a result of their good suggestions. For example, we learned that scheduling one intern at the reference desk at a time works best, and that interns (like librarians) are more focused if they work at the reference desk for no more than four hours a day.

A word of caution: the training internship takes a considerable amount of planning and implementation time for developing materials, interviewing candidates, and training the new interns. The person responsible for the internship program will be busy!

Our interns are telling colleagues at their library schools about our program, and we are getting more and more applications for the few positions we have. We are in the process of putting our internship training materials online, and we hope to continue to improve and expand our training program.

Notes

1. B. S. Woodard, "The effectiveness of an information desk staffed by graduate students and nonprofessionals." *College & Research Libraries* 50 (July 1989):455-67.

2. Carol Anne Germain, "Are we overlooking our most vital resource?" *C&RL News* 62 (July/August 2001):720-22. ■