

Virtual LIS practicums

Student and supervisor experiences during COVID-19, part 1

Pre-professional fieldwork helps graduates pursue specialized library careers, addressing the well-documented experience barrier that many graduates lack. Because COVID-19 required remote learning, virtual practicums may continue, offering LIS graduates the chance to learn from experts and develop skills beyond traditional LIS curriculum.¹ Virtual practicum benefits have been addressed in previous literature,² but student perspectives are not usually included. In this two-part series, the student and supervisor describe challenges with their virtual practicum experience so others may replicate similar experiences.

Part 1 will set the stage for the structure of the practicum, introducing background information about participating institutions, preparation for the experience, student learning objectives, and reporting for course credit. The host institution and practicum site agreed to modify the existing in-person experience into a virtual format because of COVID-19. The virtual activities aligned with the student-defined learning objectives. Structure was essential to the success of this virtual practicum. Expectations were established early on about workload, communication, file management software, and designated virtual meeting spaces. Others who seek to replicate a similar experience may use part 1 of this series as a template for designing a virtual practicum. Part 2 will reflect on the student and supervisor's experiences and lessons learned.

About the institutions and services during the COVID-19 pandemic

The University of Illinois Chicago (UIC) is a Carnegie Classified Research 1 institution with a health science library supporting research and education at three regional locations (Chicago, Peoria, and Rockford) and three satellite locations (the Quad Cities, Urbana, and Springfield). The health sciences library at UIC supports six health science-specific colleges (medicine, nursing, pharmacy, dentistry, public health, and applied health sciences) of the sixteen at the institution. Health science student enrollment in 2020 was approximately 7,500 and full-time health science faculty was about 1,200.³ The institution is a federally designated Minority Serving Institution, an Asian American Native American Pacific Islander-Serving Institution, and a Hispanic-Serving Institution.⁴

In March 2020, in-person library operations halted because of the COVID-19 pandemic. Libraries reopened with extreme changes that June. Building hours were reduced from twenty hours, seven days a week, to twelve hours, six days a week. No group study was allowed. Patrons who wished to enter the building were required to make reservations and comply

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with precautionary measures. All instruction, reference, and research consultation services became virtual. To minimize risk, library faculty and staff were encouraged to work from home.

The Information Services and Research (ISR) department operates under a liaison model where librarians are assigned to health science colleges as subject specialists. Liaison work includes reference (virtual and in-person); research support through consultation; teaching through curriculum embedded instruction, guest lectures, and independent workshops; collaboration on projects such as systematic reviews; collection development for curricular and research support; and committee work at library and campus levels.

In spring 2021, reference, instruction, and consultation services were still only virtual. For student supervision, an online meeting space was used for all supervised work. This space facilitated weekly meetings and provided a forum to observe reference interactions in real time. After two weeks, the student assumed reference responsibilities where the supervisor provided guidance while the student worked with patrons.

Student preparation

Registration and student learning objectives were required prior to the start. The virtual format was not conventional for the host LIS program, as was experienced by many institutions in response to the pandemic.⁵ The student, the supervisor, and the LIS faculty advisor established expectations for the practicum. Practicum objectives had to consider the student's pre-professional status relative to this setting where many patrons had advanced degrees.⁶

The student selected the 120-hour/3-credit practicum option. The objectives effectively serve as the course syllabus that address individual learning goals, which can be quantified or demonstrated through related deliverables that document the student progresses in their practicum work. Table 1, which focused on medical librarianship competencies, lists the goals and objectives agreed on by everyone.

Table 1: Student goals and learning objectives

Student Goal	Learning Objective
Gain experience in virtual reference services.	Observe chat reference and then provide supervised chat reference service. Observe research consultations. Provide email reference service through LibAnswers. Document reference encounters for internal statistics.
Construct health sciences literature search strings.	Explore health science databases. Practice developing search strings in health sciences databases based on observed research consultations.
Gain instruction experience.	Observe instruction sessions. Develop instruction materials (lecture outline, handouts, assessment, marketing). Conduct online instruction and assessments. Document instruction sessions for internal statistics.
Engage in library research.	Unify literature corpus between citation manager and Box files. Process and annotate the literature corpus. Contribute to writing/editing manuscript through preparation of the literature review section. Observe the manuscript submission/peer review process.
Gain understanding of collection management.	Review Health Disparities LibGuide content and evaluate for currency and relevance. Review Science Career LibGuide content and evaluate for currency and relevance. Attend monthly collection management meetings. Meet with the collections coordinator.

Supervisor preparation

UIC has a history of hosting practicum students interested in learning health science librarianship. Department colleagues have a standing program that compares two health care environments, giving students experience in each setting in person, sequentially at each location.⁷

For this practicum, the supervisor met with the student in May 2020 to determine if the student’s learning needs could be met by their current service model. The supervisor then met with library management to gain approval to ensure the practicum experience did not interfere with library operations in a precarious COVID-19 environment. Human resources onboarded the student as a “volunteer” with single sign-on credentials. Paperwork was processed and accounts were created in fall 2020.

The supervisor worked with the student to define learning objectives, created an organizational structure in Box to document student work, and gathered materials for student training such as graduate hourly training manuals, educational literature, and curated lists of essential health sciences materials.

Outcomes took a scaffolded approach as outlined in table 2.

Table 2: Student tasks

Date	Activity
January	Onboard to library system (single sign on, Box, Springshare, email). Respond to LibChat questions. Refer or respond to LibAnswers email tickets. Log statistics for reference interactions (patron type, time spent, reference type). Observe research consultations. Watch online tutorials about search strategies. Attend collection development meetings with health sciences librarians. Examine Health Disparities and Health Science Career Options LibGuides.
February	Provide a research consultation to undergraduate nursing students. Explore controlled vocabulary for EMBASE and PubMed. Explore database functions like saving searches and exporting results. Practice searching using controlled vocabulary, keywords, and Boolean operators. Engage in discussions about products, platforms, and vendors to understand the distinctions with collections coordinator and other faculty. Recommended LibGuides updates (written reports). Observe health science librarian instruction sessions. Onboard to health informatics research project, orient to background literature on the topic. Attend research meetings. Maintain and update research project citation manager. Annotate articles stored in research project citation manager. Continue reference service, instruction, consult observations. Continue attending collections meetings.
March	Determine workshop topic. Write an instruction outline; include participant learning objectives. Develop and revise PowerPoint instruction slides, with institutional branding. Explore free resources for downloadable figures that could be used in instruction slides. Analyze potential workshop times to maximize attendance. Design a flyer using Canva and draft email communications for promotion. Develop participant handout. Create a feedback survey using Qualtrics. Identify background music for experiential learning portions of the workshop. Practice instruction session with liaison librarians. Meet with other library service units to learn about library operations. Continue reference service, instruction, consult observations. Continue attending collections meetings.
April	Extract statistics data from Springshare products. Conduct four workshop sessions for students, staff, and faculty. Retrieve full-text PDFs for research project. Write the literature review for research project. Continue reference service, instruction, consult observations. Continue attending collections meetings.

Scheduling and communication

Communication is a well-established key to positive practicum experiences.⁸ The supervisor and student agreed on a weekly schedule for supervised work (reference, observations, instruction delivery, etc.) and unsupervised work (research, LibGuides evaluations, instruction preparation, developing search strings, etc.) during weekly Zoom meetings. The student led weekly meetings with consistent prompts: project or task updates, what was challenging or needed to change, what went well or highlight of the week, general questions and planning the next week's task distribution. The student would make selections to

balance educational activities across all learning goals. Practicum work was not scheduled more than one week in advance because of their irregular schedules.

Virtual spaces allowed the student to ask project-related questions before the next scheduled weekly meeting. Email was the primary communication method, and if time-sensitive opportunities were available, prompt responses helped coordinate schedules and manage time and project expectations. Also, between chat questions the student received individual attention to explore other student interests such as diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives, overarching issues within librarianship, career development, and tenure-track liaison responsibilities at research universities.

Reporting

The student and supervisor created separate reports for the LIS faculty advisor in April 2021. The student's report reflected on experiential lessons learned and recommendations for future students and the practicum course. The supervisor's report covered the student's performance. The faculty advisor and supervisor met over Zoom at semester's end to discuss progress, strengths and weaknesses, and other aspects.

The practicum guidelines clarify the expectations of the LIS program. A specific number of hours must be completed, paperwork must be submitted, correspondence maintained throughout the semester, and reports from the student and practicum supervisor must be submitted by the end. For a three-credit practicum course, the student needed to keep a log of dates, hours, and activities completed throughout the practicum, completing 120 hours of work by the end. Providing an evaluation of the experiences, and offering suggested improvements for the practicum experience, were also due by the end. Throughout the semester, consistent reflection, writing, and research reports were needed as progress reports for the LIS program.

Conclusion

As noted in part 1 of our series, moving a practicum to the virtual environment required a lot of planning and logistical work. But the work is worthwhile for the benefits to both the institution and students to ensure a positive outcome. While this series focuses on special librarianship competencies, the conceptual design of this experience should be applicable to other types of libraries as well. Other practicum experiences may differ in the allotted duration or credit hours, available practicum sites, rigidity of student learning goals, and professional rapport that develops throughout the practicum. Not everyone is matched with an ideal organization or a mentor who can invest such individualized time and interest in the student's development. However, students should pay attention to communication styles of potential practicum supervisors in the early phases of practicum planning and ask questions about what experiences would be possible at different institutions to improve their chances of having a positive experience in their practicum studies.

While part 1 of this series emphasized the design and structure of this practicum, part 2 will be a discussion about lessons learned and important elements for others to consider when replicating such offerings to LIS students in the future. In part 2, we will reflect on the experience and outcomes from both the student and supervisor perspectives. ❧

Notes

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