Evidence Based Library and Information Practice

Structure May Be Key to Incorporating Library School Interns in Academic Library Environments

A Review of:
Sargent, A. R., Becker, B. W., & Klingberg, S. (2011). Incorporating library school interns on academic library subject teams. *The Journal of Academic Librarianship*, *37*(1), 28-33. doi: 10.1016/j.acalib.2010.10.004

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Objective – To evaluate the effectiveness of the San Jose State University Library internship program.

Design – Focus group; single point in time; qualitative design.

Setting – Large academic library in the United States of America.

Subjects – Nine former interns of the San Jose State University (SJSU) Library.

Methods - Nine former interns of the SJSU Library internship program participated in a single 90-minute session. No inducements for participation were offered. A moderator asked a series of 10 questions designed to gather feedback in three areas: 1) "the internship as part of the Masters program," 2) "the internship's role in the realization of personal objectives and professional development," and 3) "the experience of working in team based activities." A digital voice recorder captured the participants' responses, allowing for detailed analysis of the responses after the session.

Main Results – The interns deemed their overall experience successful, as all indicated they achieved their professional development objectives for the internship. However, the interns also indicated their experience could have been improved by the appointment of a single dedicated coordinator for recruitment and oversight, as well as more feedback on the quality of their work, especially for course-related instruction.

Conclusion – The SJSU Library determined that the internship program was advantageous to both the Library and the interns. All of the interns who participated in the focus group achieved their profession development objectives for the internship. Additionally, the Library received valuable feedback for improving the program. Suggestions included appointing a dedicated internship coordinator, allowing interns more of an opportunity to choose their projects, and ensuring that interns are offered frequent feedback about the quality of their work.

Commentary

This study evaluated the effectiveness of the San Jose State University Library internship program by gathering feedback from an intern focus group. The results of this study will be of interest to those libraries that have existing internship programs as well as those that are looking to begin programs. The authors clearly described the methodology employed for the focus group, including the fact that although a design of multiple focus groups of six to eight participants would be ideal, they were only able to hold one focus group due to the fact that only nine former interns remained in the San Jose area.

This single focus group design, however, raises potential anonymity and confidentiality concerns. The participants are likely to be easily identifiable due to their limited number and their discussion of specific internship situations and projects. Did this pose any issues for the study? Would the participants have responded differently if their anonymity had been guaranteed? The authors did not address these questions, nor did they mention whether this design posed a problem for their university research ethics board. Not all university research ethics boards require that all studies pass through their purview, but this could pose an issue for a library attempting to replicate this study.

The authors did not indicate how the coding or interpretation of the recorded responses was completed. Did the authors have a methodical way of selecting key responses? Regardless, the authors did make conclusions, specifically, that the program would be improved by appointing a dedicated coordinator and by offering more frequent opportunities for feedback. Other libraries would likely improve or establish more successful internship programs by providing such structure for their library school interns.

An internship program should ultimately be advantageous to both the library and the interns. The authors cite the primary benefit of the internship program as being the opportunity to hire experienced former interns. An additional benefit is the unique skills that some interns bring to the internship. Ultimately, further research could be done relating to a cost benefit analysis. Do the benefits received by the institution outweigh the costs involved in training and mentoring a temporary staff member? The authors acknowledge this area of further research and plan for a survey of both supervisors and faculty about their experiences.