Designing a Meaningful Reference and Instruction Internship
The MLIS Student Perspective

Tanner D. Lewey and Hannah Moody-Goo

Tanner D. Lewey *is Instruction and Outreach Intern at Loyola University Chicago Libraries and Reference Intern at Northwestern University Libraries.* **Hannah Moody-Goo** *is Instruction and Outreach Intern at Loyola University Chicago and a student in the Master of Library and Information Science program, San José State University.*

Correspondence concerning this column should be addressed to Marianne Ryan, Dean of Libraries, Loyola University Chicago, 1032 W. Sheridan Road, Chicago, IL 60660; e-mail: mryan21@luc.edu.

Many libraries offer graduate-student internships, and many librarians have written about them as the worthwhile opportunities they are. Less frequently do we hear about these valuable experiences from the perspective of interns themselves. In this column, interns Tanner Lewey and Hannah Moody-Goo share their insights about what makes for a solid reference and instruction internship. They recommend the inclusion of four straightforward components to make an internship experience meaningful, not only for the graduate student, but for all parties involved. Lewey and Moody-Goo also suggest that taking this approach can make for a lasting contribution to the LIS profession as a whole.—*Editor*

S tudents working toward a Masters in Library and Information Science (MLIS) degree are urged from the moment they begin their program to "get experience" in a library. MLIS students often get this experience through internships that come in a variety of shapes and sizes. In college and university libraries, internships serve as important introductions to the real world of academic librarianship and give students an opportunity to ground the theory of their reference and instruction education in a professional setting. If not mindfully designed and focused on the MLIS student, library internships can morph into something more closely resembling technical positions, with interns completing mounds of busy work while doing nothing to better themselves as future librarians. In this exploration, two current interns and MLIS students draw on their library internship experiences, against the backdrop of related literature, to suggest how academic libraries designing reference and instruction internships can best avoid this pitfall. For these authors, the ideal internship should be transformative and empowering for the MLIS student and, in turn, benefit all parties involved—intern, institution, library, librarians, and the LIS field as a whole. A meaningful instruction and outreach internship should have four key features: supportive mentorship, purposeful planning and training, simulation of an authentic professional position, and reflection and assessment.

BENEFITS FOR ALL

Internships will vary depending on a number of factors, but all library internships should strive to provide interns with a meaningful, transformative, and beneficial experience. Since internships provide on-the-job experience, students reap the most obvious benefits when the internships are

designed well. They can apply concepts and theories learned in MLIS coursework to day-to-day situations working in a library, developing a more in-depth and well-rounded understanding of the profession's expectations and conventions. Such exposure helps students plan their careers, network with library professionals, decide what types and areas of libraries best suit them, and define their professional goals. Interns also can showcase their strengths and work on their weaknesses, while analyzing problems and creating workable solutions in the type of supportive, non-threatening environment that Quarton deems the "heart" of the internship experience.[1]

If well-designed, an internship benefits more parties than just the students. Interns help complete library tasks and projects, including ones that otherwise may have remained on the back burner.[2] Interns can lessen the workload of librarians and other staff, allowing them to focus on more critical work. While this benefit is significant in the short-term, libraries must be careful not to let it become the centerpiece of the internship because such tasks do not allow interns to demonstrate their full potential or contribute their fresh, unique perspectives. The presence of interns also allows librarians to see their own jobs from the vantage point of a relative outsider familiar with the LIS field, and to stay updated on current LIS research and theory. Ultimately, investment in designing meaningful and transformative internship experiences with these four key features contributes to the improvement and sustainability of the profession.

SUPPORTIVE MENTORSHIP

For the intern to get the most out of the internship, and for the internship to be successful overall, a mentor should guide and support the intern. Mentoring gets to the heart of the internship experience, allowing the intern to practice and hone skills in a nonthreatening environment. Although the mentor technically also may be the intern's supervisor according to the library's organization chart, mentorship requires a slightly different mindset than supervisorship. The intern should be able to see the mentor as a supportive coach rather than as a reprimanding boss. In such an environment, it is okay for the intern to make mistakes or even fail. These instances can serve as teachable moments, not punishable offenses. Mentors must not assume they always know what is best—or that only one way exists—and be open to what the intern can teach them.

The role of the mentor should be evident from the start and should set the tone for the overall internship experience. Expectations and responsibilities should be clarified between mentor and intern, including the amount of hands-on and hands-off mentor involvement, whether they will collaborate on projects, and how frequently communication will occur. In the beginning, the pair should spend time getting to know each other both professionally and personally. The mentor should inquire about the intern's goals and

objectives for this particular experience, as well as broader career aspirations, while the intern may like to hear how the mentor ended up in this career and position. This bonding will help the intern feel comfortable coming to the mentor later, particularly if challenges arise.

Good communication and support must continue throughout the internship experience. Librarians have busy schedules, but the mentorship role should be a priority. Mentors and interns can keep in touch via informal or formal check-ins and meetings, during which they gauge progress on projects and tasks, provide one another with constructive feedback, and formatively assess the value of assignments and their alignment with the intern's skills and interests. The mentor should be continuously on the lookout for teachable moments while not micromanaging the intern, who should be expected to work independently. Importantly, a mentor's job should not end when the internship does. Since internships serve as crucial steps toward MLIS students landing meaningful postgraduate jobs, mentors can provide them with valuable guidance and assistance with crafting application materials, offer interview tips, serve as a professional reference, or lend a sympathetic ear during job searches. Mentors may even go the extra mile both before and after the internship's conclusion and help interns find professional development or publishing opportunities.

PURPOSEFUL PLANNING AND TRAINING

In addition to establishing mentorship support, creating an internship position requires careful planning. This planning should include consideration of the institution's needs and goals, the knowledge and the skills required of both intern and supervisor, and decisions about logistics, such as weekly scheduling. The internship should be created with forethought, rather than by simply listing assorted tasks for the intern to complete. As defined by Bird, Chu, and Oguz, internships should "include experiences that are intentional so that students, LIS program faculty, and practitioners have a clear idea of their purpose, the process that will be used to achieve it, and the role of each participant."[3]

This intentionality should be an outgrowth of the internship's job posting. The description should clearly outline the library's goals for the internship, including knowledge and skill development and potential projects with learning outcomes. A clear and specific job posting can help guide the supervisor, the mentor, and the intern, once hired. Throughout this process, internship designers should communicate with library schools, who can help identify potential gaps in the internship posting. An internship also can help inform the school's curriculum, contributing to the education of current and future MLIS students. Building this type of relationship gives the institution the potential to recruit students as future interns, ensuring the program's sustainability.

The training that interns receive should be deliberate, beginning with a goals discussion between the internship

supervisor and the intern, to ensure that the library's goals align with the intern's learning objectives. Training should then be ongoing, with projects and tasks scaffolded in a way that allows learning to build onto itself. After an initial goals discussion, the supervisor should orient the intern to fundamentals, including information about the institution, the physical layout of the library, and the technology that will be used. Throughout the orientation, the supervisor should ensure that the intern has a basic understanding of library operations within the context of both the library's and the university's philosophy, mission, and strategic plan.

Preparation for this type of internship should include training on the specifics of reference and instruction. Before the intern's first solo reference shift, it is important to discuss reference desk policies and procedures and to establish clear expectations. The supervisor should next orient the intern to day-to-day duties at the desk, set up observation of librarians' reference shifts, and team up with the intern to conduct some reference interactions. A reference worksheet with a combination of common questions and more in-depth and difficult research questions also could be provided. Every reference interaction is different, so supervisors should allow the intern to build skills and develop a personal reference style. Interns should be allowed to make mistakes in reference interactions and be encouraged to reflect on what they would do differently and how they will learn from the experience. Instruction training is especially important for MLIS students because instruction experience, often required for full-time, academic librarian positions, is not provided in most MLIS programs. It should focus on presentation skills, curriculum development, and assessment—and on building relationships with faculty and students. Curriculum creation in particular gives the intern a chance to experiment with active learning and assessment techniques and to create and use various instruction tools, including LibGuides, presentation software, and online learning components.

SIMULATION OF AUTHENTIC, PROFESSIONAL POSITION

Once trained, the intern should be entrusted with responsibility comparable to that of someone in an actual, full-time librarian position. The intern should not be viewed or treated as a student employee but rather as a fellow LIS professional from whom other staff can learn. It is critical that interns be assured of their value as members of the library team. Even actions as simple as including them on the website's contact list of library faculty and staff, adding them to e-mail lists, or inviting them to staff meetings and social gatherings can make them feel respected, valued, and welcomed. Early on, the internship should include meetings with various library faculty and staff members—not just those the intern will see and work with regularly. Ideally, the intern also will be allowed to serve on at least one library committee. This opportunity gives interns a taste of academic library service,

allows them to work on impactful team projects, and builds their professional network while providing the committees with a fresh set of eyes to help solve problems and improve library services.

Interns should not only be treated as an integral, respected part of the team, they also should be given responsibilities on par with those of full-time, academic librarians. While a real-world librarian position does come with regular, sometimes monotonous tasks, internships are condensed, concentrated experiences and, thus, should contain as many substantive experiences as possible. However, internship designers and supervisors should be careful not to overburden the intern; they should be realistic about the workload the intern can successfully manage within set hours. The "have to" tasks should not stand as the centerpiece of the internship, nor should assigned projects be primarily busy work or duties a librarian does not want or have time to do. All work done by interns should have a purpose; they should be able to see how their accomplishments fit into the big picture of the library and the university. Through meaningful endeavor, interns learn to work both independently and as part of a team. With a better understanding of the holistic library and its culture, they will be more motivated to produce high-quality work.

One of the most effective ways to simulate an authentic, professional librarian experience is to allow the intern to work on realistic and impactful projects. Ideally, this would include project planning, execution, and assessment—for example, a usability study of the library's research guides. This type of project would entrust the intern with significant responsibility while giving them a chance to learn from relevant, existing LIS literature, to create something new, and to have a profound impact on the library and its users. From the project's start, the intern sees the real stakes of the study and how the results may influence design and content decisions on research guides and the library website. Such an assignment not only can draw on the intern's prior knowledge and demonstrated skills but also can provide exposure to something new. Successful accomplishment of a well-designed, realistic project can help build both an intern's résumé and their self-confidence.

REFLECTION AND ASSESSMENT

If the library hopes to continue the internship program, overall assessment must be done. Mentors should encourage, or supervisors should require, interns to keep a journal during the internship to reflect on their experiences. These reflections should explore whether the internship met interns' goals, used their existing skills, highlighted their interests, and helped them develop new competencies that would be helpful as they embark on their careers. These reflections are important for the library's ability to assess the usefulness of the internship overall, including what elements worked well and how the experience

could be improved. Additionally, these reflections could breed program testimonials to attract future interns. The library and the internship supervisor should evaluate the program based on observation of the intern, the intern's feedback, how well the internship met the library's goals, and the four key features outlined here. Assessors should be able to answer the following questions:

- Did the institution design the internship with the student/intern as its focus?
- Did the institution clearly outline its goals for the internship in the creation of the job advertisement and later align those goals with those of the intern?
- Did the intern have an assigned mentor throughout the program who provided support as a kind of coach? Did the intern feel free to come to that mentor to discuss concerns, seek advice, and ask for feedback?
- Did the internship have sufficient, efficiently structured training, particularly in reference and instruction?
- Was the intern treated with respect by the library team?
- Was the intern given authentic, significant experiences, including projects, consistent with those of full-time, professional librarians?
- Was an effective plan for formative and summative assessment of the internship in place?

The assessment process will show the value of the internship for the intern, the library, library faculty, and library staff and will allow the program to continue to provide other MLIS students with highly sought library experience for their careers as academic librarians.

CONCLUSION

Library internships for MLIS students should aim to give students the most meaningful, transformative, and beneficial experience possible. Providing this kind of impactful and empowering internship begins with exemplary, intern-centered design. Such a plan for an academic library internship, especially one focused on instruction and outreach, should include the four key features of supportive mentorship, purposeful planning and training, simulation of an authentic and professional position, and reflection and assessment. If mindfully designed, the internship will be broadly beneficial: interns will walk away with the experience they are urged to get, and other members of the library staff will learn from the intern. Ultimately, well-designed internships can result in a more experienced and motivated pool of future librarians who can better contribute to the LIS profession as a whole.

References

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