Creating Undergraduate Internships for non-LIS Students in Academic Libraries

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Abstract

This paper provides a framework for creating undergraduate internships in academic libraries, specifically those offered in collaboration with subject-based academic departments at universities where no degrees in library science are offered. Very little of the scholarly literature addresses this type of internship in particular, and broadly applicable elements of planning and implementation have not been clearly articulated in the literature. This paper proposes that there are several basic elements to consider regardless of situation-specific conditions. These include incentives and compensation for the intern, structure of the internship, projects, and documentation. Each element is considered and described, using internships hosted at the Murray Library of the University of Saskatchewan as examples.

Keywords: Student interns; work-study students

Introduction

Though internships in academic libraries are most commonly designed for students in LIS programs, students studying in any discipline may be suitable interns. Interested non-LIS undergraduates can benefit from the work experience and exposure to the profession that internships provide. Internships can also serve as a recruitment tool, which benefits both libraries and the profession. However, undergraduate internships in academic libraries for non-LIS students are housed outside of the established internship programs of library schools and may require more planning and effort to create. Though specific circumstances of non-LIS internships may vary from location to location, certain considerations are applicable in a wide variety of situations and can assist libraries with planning processes. Incentives and compensation for the intern, the structure of the program, project design, and documentation are central elements. An internship program managed by the Department of English at the University of Saskatchewan, which places student interns in the Murray Library, serves as a case study of the application of these essential elements and offers practical ideas that can be employed elsewhere.

Literature Review

Much of what has been written about internships designed for either library school students or general undergraduates in academic libraries fails to provide details about the development and structure of the internships. Newsletters generally only announce or provide updates on internship programs,[1] while other literature focuses on the work of student assistants rather than on internships specifically.[2] The focus of some authors is the specific purpose of their internship programs, such as recruitment to the profession, especially among minorities.[3] One highlighted initiative is a program begun in 2003 by the Mellon Foundation, which designated ongoing funds to aid in recruitment to librarianship with a special concern for increasing the ethnic and racial diversity of librarians. One component of the program is a "selective undergraduate internship experience designed to give students at each [participating] campus a thorough understanding of librarianship as a profession."[4] Recruitment, rather than planning and design, is a common topic in the literature about internships. Others authors, such as Warren and Ard et. al., examine the outcome of internships and determine that working in libraries as either interns or student assistants has a positive impact on recruitment to librarianship.[5] Pellack

takes a broader look at the complete range of recruitment activities in which academic librarians can engage and suggests providing internships for academic credit. However, her focus is not on the details of creating such a program.[6]

Literature that does provide some insight into the creation of an internship program includes that of Harwood and McCormack who highlight the credit-based program at the University of Washington Bothell, run by a librarian but offered in conjunction with the business program; Asher and Alexander, who outline the structure of a program and the activities of their interns; and Harvey, who defines internship, highlights costs and benefits, and outlines an internship program in a corporate library.[7] While these are useful starting points, none address the specific situation of planning for a collaborative internship run by an academic department and hosted in a university library. Since this structure can influence the options available for compensating the intern, the structure of the program, project design, and documentation, it is useful to address this type of situation specifically even while drawing on the work of others where possible.

Internships at the Murray Library, University of Saskatchewan

Internships for either one or two students are offered annually at the Murray Library at the University of Saskatchewan. The University enrolls nearly 19,000 students and employs roughly 7,500 faculty and staff, approximately forty of whom are librarians. The Murray Library is one of seven branches at the University, which together hold over 1.9 million printed volumes and more than 3.5 million periodicals, government documents, microfilm resources, videos, recordings and kits. The Murray Library houses the humanities and social science collections as well as the University Learning Centre, which is a collaborative entity that provides access to technology, academic resources, and support; and serves as a place for learning, research, and discussion.

The first library internship was offered in 2009. It is administered by the Department of English and is listed in the University's course calendar as English 496.3 *Career Internship*. It is open only to honours English students and is intended to provide them with an eighty-hour work placement. Along with the work placement, students participate in a bi-weekly seminar and write a term paper. They are assessed by the workplace supervisor and the faculty advisor from the English department and receive course credit upon completion. Planning for the library internship began in 2008. Available incentives and compensation for the intern, the structure of the program, project design, and necessary documentation were all considered in the planning stages.

Incentives and Compensation

For students who are not in LIS programs, an internship is not a component of their professional education, removing that as a possible incentive. It can be a challenge to identify other enticing incentives and to find the resources to offer them, but positions that offer little tangible rewards may be difficult to fill. An incentive for some students may be the acquisition of valuable, meaningful, and relevant work experience, though this will not be enough in all cases. But if the goal of the internship is to provide a significant professional experience and not merely to get the work of the library done (which is, in contrast, usually the reason for hiring student assistants), a budget to pay the intern may be difficult to justify. However, if available, financial compensation may come from either the library itself or the university, depending on the programs that are available (such as subsidized hire-a-student programs). An hourly wage, a pre-set honorarium, or no payment at all, are each an option when planning an internship, as long as the parameters for compensation are clearly outlined at the start.

Other, non-monetary incentives are made possible by attention currently being paid to experiential learning within academia. In the current learning environment universities are looking for ways to provide real-life, hands-on experiences for their students and some have established non-monetary rewards for students who participate. For example, a non-academic transcript, which tracks all of a student's extracurricular learning and volunteer experiences,

may be issued. Or, a university may offer either tuition credit or course credit for an internship or similar experiential learning activity sustained over the course of a term. While academic libraries on their own do not have the authority to offer this type of incentive, they may work within appropriate structures (departmental programs, for example) to make this possible. By offering such incentives, universities recognize and credit student learning that happens outside of classrooms and provide an established framework within which campus partners such as libraries can build experiential learning programs, including internships. In order to take advantage of existing expertise and administrative structures, it is certainly advisable to partner with other in-house organizations where possible,[8] especially when establishing incentives. Collaborating with other initiatives on campus can make it possible for libraries to offer internships without setting up extensive administrative structures or incurring heavy financial costs.

Murray Library interns are formally compensated in two ways. For completing the internship, students receive credit for a term-long (three credit-unit) course. Second, though not required by the Department of English, a $200 honorarium is provided by the Library to each intern. Depending on the intern, the wide-ranging but professional work and the establishment of a personal connection to a library professional may also be viewed as valuable compensation: in the first three years Murray interns have relied on the supervising librarian to provide employment and academic references as well as advice related to library school applications.

Structure

The structure of an internship may be dictated by forces external to the library, especially if the incentives or compensation are established at the university or department level. Requirements regarding the timing of the internship; the number of hours worked; and the accountabilities, outcomes, and evaluation[9] may all be designed to make the internship count for course credit or have some other value. If these elements are pre-determined, the hosting library must ensure that its plans meet all external requirements. If not, the library should consider how to address these fundamentals within the structure it designs.

The structural requirements for Murray Library internships are quite clearly defined by the Department of English and the University. Interns work eighty hours in a single thirteen-week term. The internship faculty advisor from the Department of English is responsible for finding and approving internship sites, overseeing internship placements, and assigning final grades. Part of the final grade is based on the final evaluation of the intern's value and contributions to the host organization that is completed by the supervisor. In general it is understood that the intern is supervised by the English liaison librarian, who drafts an internship proposal annually and assigns and supervises the work completed by the intern. However, interns may work with any librarian as available and appropriate. The intern also attends a seminar with other interns enrolled in English 496.3 *Career Internship* (placed in other host sites) every second week and writes a final paper, both under the tutelage of the internship faculty advisor from the Department of English.

While the actual projects and activities of the internship are determined and managed by the supervising librarian, she is conscious of meeting all pre-set requirements. Internships are offered only during the winter term. The specific timing of the intern's shifts within that term is determined jointly by the supervisor and intern, and the shift can be set either during a regular workday or at the convenience of the intern when appropriate (for example, at times when independent work is required). In order to put in the required number of hours for the term, interns work for an average of six hours per week, either alongside the supervisor or independently. Interns manage accountabilities related to class attendance and submission of a final paper on their own, but the supervising librarian takes some responsibility for helping students meet individual learning outcomes and the objectives outlined in the annual internship proposal. Interns are familiarized with librarianship in general and the culture within the organization in particular through conversation

and attendance at meetings. Other time is dedicated to teaching interns specific skills in order for them to work on the initiatives to be completed. One reasonable suggestion is that interns work fifty percent of the time and learn fifty percent of the time.[10] In order to complete their work interns are assigned office space and have access to a computer and printer when working on site. At the end of the internship the supervising librarian completes a formal written evaluation, which is submitted to the faculty advisor and used as the basis of a portion of the intern's final grade for the *Career Internship* course.

Projects

Internships designed to expose students to the profession and to the many facets of academic librarianship will include projects that align with a broad range of duties that librarians take on or are assigned. Such variety allows interns to gain an understanding of the professional skills and the scholarly, administrative, and service work carried out by librarians. Further, in order for the work of interns to mirror that of professional librarians as much as possible, interns must be useful contributors to significant library projects. Such work also sets interns apart from general student assistants who often carry out unskilled work without having a sense of how it serves the greater mission and goals of the library. Shelving, minding service desks, data entry, etc. are necessary tasks and are suitable for student assistants, but since they are not generally the work of librarians in academic libraries they should not be the basis of an internship.

As long as they allow interns to meet the requirements set by the parties that govern the internship, projects can be designed and assigned according to the needs of the host site. It is beneficial to both the library and the intern to assign work that helps develop his or her skills in a real-life work situation.[11] Therefore, when planning projects, the abilities and past experiences of the intern should be taken into account, which will help supervisors balance the intern's need to learn and contribute with his or her existing abilities. Consider all of these factors with an undergraduate student in mind:

- scope: assign projects that allow for a varied experience and can be completed in the available time,
- complexity: design either small or scalable projects that require knowledge of only the resources, issues and people that the intern can reasonably become familiar with within the timeframe of the internship,
- ability: observe the intern's work habits, aptitude for different kinds of work, and levels of independence and confidence in order to facilitate his or her learning, and supervise him or her appropriately.

The supervising librarian has sole authority for selecting projects conducted by interns in the Murray Library, though they are chosen and designed with each intern in mind. In light of the above-stated principles, interns primarily assist with projects that support the work of the supervising liaison librarian and the library in general. For example, interns participate in the planning and delivery of library instruction, create online help resources such as database guides, conduct literature reviews and develop project proposals for new initiatives, and contribute to the work of one of the library's committees. To further their learning, interns are also taught advanced research skills, trained to use a content management system, exposed to the online selection tools of major book vendors, and given a grounding in collegial processes such as those for tenure and promotion. In general, projects can be scaled to an appropriate size, allowing room for either a relatively simple and basic learning experience, or one that provides a greater challenge.

Documentation

Documentation outlining the requirements and parameters of the internship will exist at the university, department, or library level, depending on where the program originates and is managed. At the University of Saskatchewan, the internship is documented in the university's course calendar among the offerings of the Department of English. Another necessary document is the internship proposal, submitted by the supervising librarian to the Department of English for approval of the library as an internship site. It outlines the outcomes, expectations,

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and projects for the internship. A new proposal is submitted annually, and it is consulted periodically throughout the internship in order to ensure that the initial intentions of providing an internship are carried out. The final administrative-level document that is required (by the Department of English) is an assessment of each intern, written by the supervising librarian after the internship is completed and submitted to the faculty advisor.

Other useful documents are less formal but designed to guide and enhance the internship. A one-page work agreement, drafted by the supervisor, outlines the expectations that the supervisor has of the intern and what the intern can expect from the supervisor. It focuses on communication, responsibility, and commitment. Further, the intern is expected to write several personal learning outcomes for the internship, which are often drafted in consultation with the supervisor and ultimately submitted to the faculty advisor. Together these documents play an important role in formalizing, coordinating, administering, and evaluating the internship both for the Department of English and for the interns housed specifically at the Murray Library.

Conclusion

Internships, even for non-LIS undergraduates, provide students with valuable work experiences and expose them to the library profession. However, the necessary structures for internships of this type are not readily in place, in contrast to situations in which internships are part of the curricula or offerings of programs in library science. Nonetheless, if offered in conjunction with other academic departments, these non-LIS internships have the potential to become more widespread in academic libraries. While the parameters and scope of internships in different locations will vary, certain elements remain central. By addressing these key elements at the planning stages librarians can build on the knowledge and understanding of others, gleaned through both the professional literature and practical experiences of developing internships in an academic library, and can avoid the need to 'reinvent the wheel' when developing new programs. The example of a collaborative internship program provided here demonstrates the place of these key elements in planning and is shared with the ultimate goal of aiding in the creation of new and successful internships for non-LIS undergraduates elsewhere.

Endnotes

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[6] Lorraine J. Pellack, "Uncle Albert Needs You! Individual Recruiting Efforts are a Necessity and an Obligation," *Science & Technology Libraries* 27, no. 1/2 (2006): 64.

[7] Doreen Harwood and Charlene McCormac, "Growing Our Own: Mentoring Undergraduate

Students," *Journal of Business & Finance Librarianship* 13, no. 3 (2008): 201-215; Asher and Alexander, "Library Internship and Expo."; Audrey C. Harvey, "A Corporate Library Internship Program," *Library Personnel News* 10, no. 4 (1996): 1-4.

[8] Harvey, "Corporate Library," 2.

[9] Ibid. In particular a mechanism for two-way feedback, which allows both the intern and the supervisor to evaluate the experience, is recommended by Harvey.

[10] Ibid., 3.

[11] Ibid., 2.

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