

## Supervising Academic Library Internships for non-LIS Undergraduates

### Structured Abstract

**Purpose:** This paper articulates roles for librarian supervisors of non-LIS undergraduate internships in academic libraries by drawing on ideas from Alderman and Milne’s “facilitated mentoring” model. Further, it draws attention to this specific type of internship, which is relatively uncommon even though it could potentially be implemented in all kinds of academic institutions.

**Approach:** The ideas outlined here are based on both the themes and ideas identified in the professional literature and experiences of supervising undergraduate internships offered in partnership with an academic department at a large university library. Elements of the facilitated mentoring model are outlined and then applied to internships at the Murray Library at the University of Saskatchewan.

**Findings:** Very little literature is devoted to exploring the details of a supervisor’s role in library-based internships, especially those for non-LIS undergraduates. Elements of models from other types of library internships generally apply, but this topic is worthy of more attention because elevating supervisors to roles of mentors requires thought and guidance, and certain adaptations are useful when working with non-LIS interns specifically.

**Originality/value:** This work is unique in that it focuses specifically on the supervisory role of librarians who host interns, and because it outlines this role particularly in relation to undergraduates in non-LIS programs. It builds on a model articulated in the literature and applies it to a related internship experience in order to provide insight and guidance for others contemplating or entering this type of role.

**Keywords:** undergraduates, interns, internship planning and management, mentorship, academic libraries

**Classification:** Case study

## **1. Introduction**

Internships in academic libraries expose students to the many facets of librarianship, provide them with professional on-the-job experience, and aid in recruitment to the profession. Good supervision in the workplace is an essential element of a successful internship, regardless of the academic program in which the student is enrolled, and is something for supervising librarians to be mindful of and learn more about. Though it is common for internships to be offered, or even required, in both graduate and undergraduate library and information studies programs (LIS), both students and libraries can also benefit from well-designed internships for undergraduates who are *not* in LIS programs. Such internships, housed within subject-based academic departments of the university, fall outside of the structures and/or curricula of undergraduate and graduate LIS programs. Therefore they are not directly related to the students' class work, which focuses on their chosen discipline rather than librarianship. Despite this, non-LIS internships can be implemented based on models used both in LIS programs and other academic departments. This paper focuses on exploring the role of the supervising librarian. It will outline a useful model and particular considerations necessary to mentor undergraduate interns from non-LIS programs, and share details of an undergraduate internship program in which the Murray Library at the University of Saskatchewan participates.

There are several reasons for academic libraries to serve as host sites for internships offered to undergraduates within their institutions. Libraries may become more attuned to undergraduate perspectives of the library, and benefit from an intern's enthusiasm and ideas. Also, as greater importance is placed on experiential learning, even in universities, it is vital for institutions to provide such opportunities, and useful for campus partners such as libraries to

participate. Further, partly in response to this focus on experiential learning, internships are available in many other professional fields of study and librarianship should be no exception. The specific type of internship under consideration here is defined as work-based learning carried out by a student in exchange for some sort of credit (academic or otherwise) from the student's home department toward his or her program of study. In contrast to casual student assistants in libraries, undergraduate interns do not primarily perform basic functional tasks, and should have greater opportunities to share their perspectives and ideas within the library. In the case of non-LIS internships, participating students may be studying in any department in which an internship is offered. While those in the library profession sometimes lament that there are not undergraduate feeder programs for LIS graduate programs as there are in other disciplines, our advantage is that we can draw on students from all disciplines through this type of internship program, even at universities that do not offer degrees in library science.

## **2. Literature Review**

The literature reveals that, in contrast to the type of internship being considered here, academic library internships for undergraduates are most often designed and managed by the libraries themselves rather than in conjunction with academic departments. Brief articles about undergraduate internships that appear in local library newsletters announce new internships or report on pre-existing ones rather than outline the guiding principles or details of the programs (*Top Shelf*, 2007; Sweet, 2005). They do not contain enough information to assist librarians who are preparing for their important role in supervising and mentoring interns. Some internships are designed for undergraduates in LIS programs (Brown and Murphy, 2005;

Alderman and Milne, 2005), while others target students in a variety of disciplines (Harwood and McCormack, 2008; Asher and Alexander, 2006; *Moveable Type*, 1999; *Top Shelf*, 2007) or those who are already working in libraries (Echavarria, 1990). The purposes of these internships vary. Those designed for LIS students are generally intended to provide students with professional work experience, while those directed at undergraduates from other fields often focus on exposure to the profession and recruitment, especially among minorities (Echavarria, 1990; Kendrick, 1990; Asher and Alexander, 2006). Many librarians have investigated the impact that working in libraries as undergraduates (as either interns or student assistants) has on recruitment to the profession (Warren, 1997; Ard *et al.*, 2006). Regardless of the purpose of the internships highlighted, the articles seldom focus on the details of the internships themselves or the role of the supervising librarian.

While some literature does provide information about structuring internships and effective practices, none of it touches on internships in which academic libraries host interns as part of programs run out of academic departments. Therefore it too fails to address the type of internship under consideration here. Pellack (2006) advocates providing internships for academic credit, but suggests that they be run out of university or college career centers and does not mention the possibility of them being offered in conjunction with academic departments. Harwood and McCormack (2008) describe a credit-based internship in collaboration with the business program at the University of Washington Bothell, but the internship was initiated and managed by the business librarian in response to her own needs, rather than being offered by the business school as part of its program for students. Asher and Alexander (2006) also describe a program managed wholly by their library. However, their

work is relevant here because the internships are designed specifically for non-LIS students, and a list of projects and specific details about the structure of the internships are provided.

Further, though the programs they highlight are designed for undergraduates in LIS programs, both Brown and Murphy (2005) and Alderman and Milne (2005) outline the basic elements of their internship programs and are relevant sources of information for structuring and supervising effective internships. These works serve as useful starting points for librarians planning to supervise a non-LIS intern as part of his or her course of study in an academic department.

### **3. Roles of an Internship Supervisor**

In non-LIS internships in which the program is run by academic departments, the students placed in the library may come from any field of study. The library itself is likely to have little control over any elements of the internship apart from the actual work assignments given to the student. The overall requirements and rewards will be set and administered by the department, leaving the library to focus on the work experience itself. *Experience* is the second of three central elements in David Boud's model for work-based learning, adapted by Alderman and Milne (2005). The others are *preparation* and *reflective processes*. The three players in this model are the *educator*, who plans and administers the work experience; the *student*; and the *mentor*, who is the workplace supervisor. In the type of internships under consideration here, the departmental academic supervisor (educator) guides much of the *preparation*, and the *reflective processes* are primarily the domain of the student (though they must be built in and supported by the educator and mentor). It is in shaping the *experience* --

the learner's interaction "with the organization, staff, events, and all that takes place" (Alderman and Milne, 2005, p. 13) -- that the mentor plays a pivotal role. The mentor "becomes an active partner in designing and facilitating learning experiences to ensure quality learning outcomes for the student" (Alderman and Milne, 2005, p. 30). This paper will focus on illuminating the role of the mentor (in this instance, the librarian who hosts and supervises the intern) specifically in the context of non-LIS internships in academic libraries.

Alderman and Milne contend that a critical aspect of work-based learning experiences is mentoring and they advocate a "facilitated mentoring model":

The mentoring relationship requires more of workplace supervisors than simply providing projects for the student to work on or day-to-day supervision of the job. It implies taking students into organizations as members of workplace teams, assisting their socialization into the organizations, devising plans that facilitate customized learning experiences, and giving feedback that will allow students to reflect on their own learning and development. (Alderman and Milne, 2006, p. 31)

With this in mind, the mentor's role in developing a plan of learning; engaging in the evaluation process; and providing challenge and support, both critical components of successful mentoring relationships, will be considered.

#### *i. Developing a Plan of Learning*

A plan of learning "outlines the work areas where learning will occur, tasks to be learned, strategies to achieve these learning outcomes, and how the learning will be supervised" (Alderman and Milne, 2005, p. 41). In order to make an individualized plan the mentor must first meet with the student in order to discuss interests, abilities, and goals.

Ultimately the plan must meet the learning needs of the student but also be manageable from the perspective of the library, and may change over time. The educator, student and mentor should all be involved in the development of the plan and any changes that are made to it.

Interns appreciate having projects that are both well-defined ahead of time and achievable within the time available (Brown and Murphy, 2005, p. 242). Projects for which an expected outcome is clearly defined provide good opportunities for interns to produce concrete results.

Challenges with developing learning plans for non-LIS students may stem from the fact that students have little or no relevant work experience, and a limited understanding of the library profession and the specific opportunities for learning that are available through an internship. It is fair to expect that in this situation the mentor will play a larger role in developing the plan. He or she may be required to devote more energy to identifying possible synergies between the background of the intern and the learning opportunities to ensure the plan is appropriate and relevant. Further, since the student is in a non-LIS program, the internship will not be linked to library- related course work, meaning that that the intern will not be exposed to theories and principles on which library work is based. Consider addressing this gap in the plan of learning by including learning outcomes related to understanding the profession, key competencies, and values. For example, tasks may align with the categories in which librarians are assigned duties according to current standards in place at the institution. This exposes interns to the broad range of professional skills practiced by librarians, and fosters understanding of their administrative commitments, service work and research. If no standardized categories of work and professional duties are in place, consider assigning

projects that align with a broad range of typical librarian duties in order for interns to experience a suitable sample of the work of librarians.

*ii. Evaluation*

In order to turn experience into learning, learners must reflect on that experience. While the actual reflection can be done only by the learners themselves, there are ways for educators and mentors to support this practice. The internship can be structured to include requirements for reflection such as group seminars for all interns; recording reflections in a journal; the creation of a portfolio; writing a self-assessment statement; and using case studies, role plays and problem-based learning (Alderman and Milne, 2005, p. 17-30). The facilitation of these activities falls primarily under the domain of the educator, though they will be supported by the mentor as well. They allow educator, mentor and student to evaluate how well goals are being met and what learning has occurred. But the mentor must also participate in the processes of reflection and evaluation by providing both on-the-spot and periodic formal feedback. Doing so encourages reflection on practices and events; assessment of the learning plan and progress toward set outcomes; and the identification of areas of practice, learning, and communication that need attention. Further, the mentor's overall assessment of student learning and performance at the conclusion of the internship is necessary to inform the educator's formal assessment and may be provided either in writing or through discussion with the educator.

*iii. Challenge and Support*



The relationship between an intern and mentor should include elements of challenge, which “puts pressure on [students] and emphasizes the gap between what they are capable of at present and what they need to be capable of in the future,” and support, “which affirms the students and lets them know they are cared about” (Alderman and Milne, 2005, p. 32). Brown and Murphy’s study revealed that interns consider their relationship with their supervisors to be an important factor in their internship experiences, and that establishing a level of trust was a necessary first step to developing a “mutually respectful relationship” (Brown and Murphy, 2005, p. 241). Interns must feel both stimulated to learn and affirmed in what they are doing. To accomplish this they should be involved in significant ways in real projects. Making meaningful contributions to the work of the library is an essential part of an internship and requires that the work assigned be important and relevant rather than unskilled, repetitive or tangential to the higher purpose of the library. As Harvey notes, “A well-designed assignment can reap benefits for your organization as well as provide real-life job experience for the student” and help him or her develop new skills (Harvey, 1996, p. 2). In order to achieve the right balance between challenge and support, it is important to be mindful of the abilities and past learning experiences of the intern. Mentors can help prevent interns from experiencing feelings either of being in too deep, or of not being given enough responsibility, by being aware of student needs for learning and achievement, and the limitations of their knowledge. Alderman and Milne suggest that “a high amount of support combined with a high amount of challenge” is best (Alderman and Milne, 2005, p. 32).

A non-LIS intern may know very little about library services, practices, and structures. One strategy for mentors in this situation is to surface interns’ preconceptions and determine

the breadth of their knowledge early on. Doing this before developing tasks related to specific learning outcomes will ensure that the tasks are pitched at a level that facilitates learning and an appropriate amount of challenge. Further, these interns may not yet have decided to pursue a career in librarianship and may require additional support to feel comfortable taking ownership of their learning and exerting their influence in a setting where they are very much outsiders.

*iv. Mentoring for the Future*

Alderman and Milne focus on mentoring specifically in light of the work to be done *during* an internship, likely because their focus is on students who are already in undergraduate LIS programs. But there is an additional component to mentoring when non-LIS students are involved. A curious intern, possibly interested in pursuing a career in librarianship, may need as much information and perspective as work experience. The supervising librarian is a knowledgeable link to the profession and might be asked to share information about library school programs, applications for admission, career paths and library values. Because supervisors are an intern's personal link to the profession, they have a role to play in shaping an intern's understanding of academic librarianship, developing specific interests, and connecting interns to relevant groups and associations. Asher and Alexander made "professional development and mentoring" one of the four components of their internship program, and maintain that "formal undergraduate internships can help build a mentoring infrastructure," as those who are initially mentored continue on and mentor others (Asher and Alexander, 2006, p. 18 & 2). Internship supervisors are also possible references and advocates. Further, along with having worked in a library, knowing and respecting a librarian is another significant factor that

influences students to become librarians (Pellack, 2006, p. 60; Ard *et al.*, p. 241). This personal mentoring connection is a valuable outcome of internships and can benefit the supervisor as well as the student (Harwood, 2008, p. 209).

#### **4. Internships at the University Library, University of Saskatchewan**

The University of Saskatchewan (Saskatoon, Canada) was established in 1907 and offers 58 undergraduate and graduate degrees, diplomas and certificates in over 100 disciplines. Of the nearly 7,500 faculty and staff, approximately 40 of those faculty members are librarians. In the 2008-09 academic year almost 19, 000 students, including 1,271 international students, were enrolled either full- or part-time. The University Library consists of seven branch libraries which hold over 1.9 million printed volumes and over 3.5 million periodicals, government documents, microfilm resources, videos, recordings and kits. The Learning Commons, located in the Murray library (the largest branch, which houses the humanities and social science collections) opened in 2009. It provides access to technology, academic resources, and support. It also serves as a place for learning, research, and discussion.

In 2009 the Murray Library hosted its first intern. The internship is administered out of the Department of English, which offers a work-experience class for senior honours students annually (English 496.3 *Career Internship*). Students enrolled in the class are given a work placement in an appropriate setting, either on or off campus. Interns are required to work for approximately 80 hours over the course of the winter term (January – April), participate in a bi-weekly tutorial, complete a term paper, and be assessed in order to receive a grade for the course. Because the internship is coordinated through the English department, a faculty

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member from that department oversees the internship placements and assigns final grades, based in part on the final evaluation provided by the workplace supervisor. Planning for the library internship began in 2008, when the English liaison librarian learned of the program and proposed to the English department that the library host an intern.

Working approximately six hours per week allows the intern to complete 80 hours within the 13-week period. The supervisor is available during the majority of those hours, though the intern and supervisor work independently on projects for up to a third of that time. Time together may include conversations about the library profession and organizational culture, as well as teaching and learning the necessary skills to complete projects and determine action plans. Various meetings and library events are also attended together. Interns work independently to collect background information on initiatives and to advance projects on their own when equipped to do so. One suggested break-down of time is to have interns working 50 percent of the time and learning 50 percent of the time (Harvey, 1996, p. 3). Interns are given office space, use of a computer, and access to a printer.

Considering Alderman and Milne's model for work-based learning, the faculty coordinator of the internship program from English department is the *educator* and is in charge of the background *preparation* for all of the internships. The English liaison librarian, as workplace supervisor, is the *mentor*, who focuses on guiding the *experience* of the student during the internship. The mentor's role in developing a plan of learning, engaging in evaluation, providing challenge and support, and mentoring into the future will be explored in light of experiences at the Murray Library.

### *i. Plan of Learning and Projects*

The educator places all interns and notifies mentors early in the fall. The mentor (the English liaison librarian) meets with the student assigned to the library shortly afterward so that planning can begin before the internship starts in January. The purpose of the initial meeting is to gauge the student's level of knowledge and interest in librarianship as a profession, learn about his or her relevant background and experience, and get a sense of what type of projects may be suitable and of interest. All three interns so far have had a keen interest in librarianship but little understanding of the range of professional practice. Therefore at the start of this process they have had few suggestions or requests of their own and have been quite open to ideas. Our plan of learning is shorter and less formal than the one outlined in Alderman and Milne (2005, p. 159-164), but the basic elements such as student learning outcomes and specific projects are set out and agreed upon once the internship begins.

Projects should be chosen carefully by the mentor in order to:

- ensure a broad-based work experience that reflects liaison librarianship in an academic library
- allow for the intern to pursue a particular area of interest that develops after he or she has begun the internship
- suit the level of independence and confidence displayed by the intern
- be manageable within the timeframe

It is sometimes difficult to determine how to meet all of these criteria, particularly the last two, especially before the work habits and independence level of the interns are well known.

It has been helpful to set out a range of projects of varying levels of complexity and urgency in

order to adjust the plan as the internship progresses. For example, the mentor has learned to keep in mind that projects requiring coordination of staff or resources, reliance on a personal network of campus contacts, or detailed knowledge of professional issues are likely to be too complex. Some projects may be on a scale that they can be managed primarily by the intern after the necessary training is provided. Others may require closer guidance or joint participation, but can be seen through from start to finish within the timeframe of the internship, so that an intern can experience all elements of planning and implementation. For example, an undergraduate intern will not have the requisite knowledge to undertake an independent de-selection project, but one interested in honing research skills could be well-suited to conduct a literature review on the topic, learn how to generate useful circulation statistics, and work alongside the librarian leading the project as the collection is assessed. Further, after the first internship the mentor made sure to identify at least some projects that do not require continuous supervision so that the intern can gain independence and the supervisor can protect a portion of his or her time. All of these considerations are essential when developing a plan of learning.

At the Murray Library interns ideally work on projects that support initiatives within the Library and the profession at large. They fall into the following five categories, which are based on the *University of Saskatchewan Library Standards for Promotion and Tenure*, which form the basis of practice for librarians at the University Library. Sample intern projects in each category are provided.

*Professional Practice:*

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- aid in the creation of a collection development policy for the Department of English
- participate in reference/research consultations with students enrolled in English classes
- update and develop online guides and finding aids for research in English studies

#### *Scholarship:*

- write an article or bibliographic essay on either the internship experience or a specific project undertaken during the internship for submission to a trade magazine focused on librarianship

#### *Teaching:*

- participate in the development of lesson plans for library instruction sessions, develop course-specific resources for students, and attend at least two in-class sessions

#### *Administrative Service:*

- participate in the work of one of the Library's committees by volunteering for a sub-group of the committee or by taking the lead on a small initiative

#### *Public Service:*

- review, rank and discuss conference session proposals or grant applications submitted to a professional body of which the supervising librarian is an executive member

The overall approach of the mentor is that the internship is primarily a learning experience for the student rather than an opportunity for the library to get lots of projects done quickly and

cheaply. Therefore, it is fine if some projects are not selected and never even begun if others are done completely and successfully. Student learning outcomes articulated in the plan of learning should be consulted to guide selection when choices have to be made.

*ii. Evaluation*

Evaluation conducted during the internships at the University of Saskatchewan Library has been done primarily informally. The educator did not provide guidance regarding this element of the internship and the idea of pre-scheduling sessions to provide periodic formal feedback was simply overlooked by the mentor. The mentor and student did review the set learning outcomes at the start of and part way through the internship, though not in a way to assess the student's development. Rather, the focus was on whether or not the task was accomplished. It is possible that this occurred due to the nature of the learning outcomes, which themselves were more task-based than developmental in nature. Therefore in the future the mentor will be more attentive to the type of outcomes that are determined and work more closely with the educator to ensure their appropriateness. Brown and Murphy suggest that both task-based skills and higher-order intellectual skills should be incorporated into internships (Brown and Murphy, 2005, p. 244). Developing a learning plan and specific outcomes that reflect both trajectories is one way to ensure that the intern's overall development remains a central part of the work experience. Regardless of the specific outcomes that are set, on-the-spot feedback is another central component of evaluation and facilitation of the student's reflective processes. Because the students and mentor do spend at least some time together during almost every work shift, on-the-spot feedback could be easily incorporated if attention is paid to this element. Without intentional efforts and practice with



offering constructive feedback, however, the mentor found that this part of the evaluation was easily overlooked, especially in cases where critical feedback was called for.

The mentor's formal evaluation is completed after the internship ends. The program guidelines provided by the educator call for an assessment of the intern's learning experience and usefulness to the organization. Though the guidelines do not explicitly ask for an assessment of how well learning outcomes were met, the mentor's formal reports do refer back to the expressed expectations for the internships. This written response, worth 50% of the intern's grade for the class, is first shown to the intern and then submitted to the educator for her consideration when determining the final grade. Over time the mentor has become more attuned to the formal evaluation process, but a growing awareness of the need to engage in reflective practices (for both the intern and the mentor) suggests that more of both formal and informal evaluation should be provided in future internships.

### *iii. Challenge and Support*

In the first internship an appropriate balance between challenge and support was not found until several weeks in. The mentor incorrectly calculated the importance of initially developing a supportive relationship with the intern and started out with a task-oriented focus. Since the intern seemed so capable, the level of challenge was high. This appeared to put some undue pressure on the intern, who clearly had the initiative and ability to work on any project successfully, but who worked perhaps more independently than necessary (and possibly even in isolation) due to limited communication channels and a failure on the part of the mentor to intentionally establish a level of trust. When the mentor noted more timidity than expected

after a few weeks of working together and began to focus on building the interpersonal relationship, the working relationship eased and the intern showed more comfort and engagement than she had previously. Challenge was present from the start, but support was initially low.

In the second internship the levels of both support and challenge had to be revised. More attention was devoted to relationship building, but the level of challenge was too high. The intern failed to take notes when projects were discussed, asked for direction at nearly every step, and had a difficult time making choices when decisions had to be made. In response the mentor tried to break projects into smaller parts, helped determine a narrower focus for some of them, and worked alongside the intern more frequently than initially. Once the intern was given an appropriate amount of responsibility and independence a balance between support and challenge was achieved.

In both cases projects were added, revised or rejected according to the abilities and interests of the interns and how effectively they worked. While it was important to plan their learning outcomes at the start, it was equally important to make adjustments as we worked together. Doing so prevented the interns from being stuck too deep in a project that could not be handled, and allowed them to complete the internship with a sense of accomplishment.

#### *iv. Mentoring for the Future*

One former intern plans to apply to Masters-level LIS programs, and had the intention of doing so even before his internship began. He was able to gather first-hand information about various programs, curricula, and application processes during his internship. He has also

requested that the mentor serve as a reference when he applies for part-time work in the interim. Further, the intern and mentor also discussed the likelihood of consulting when applications for graduate programs are being prepared. Another former intern has decided not to pursue a career in librarianship at this time, but has also asked the mentor to serve as a reference. In both cases the possibility of further communication was encouraged and has occurred. Particularly in the case of non-LIS interns, for whom librarianship is still either unfamiliar and/or not necessarily the career of choice, the insider knowledge and future assistance that a mentor can provide are valuable benefits that extend beyond the life of the internship itself.

## **5. Conclusion**

Internships in academic libraries can provide even non-LIS students with valuable work experience and exposure to the library profession. Within a facilitated mentoring model, the librarian supervising the work experience engages in more than just planning and assigning projects. Instead, he or she pays specific attention to developing a learning plan, evaluating the learning of interns, providing both support and challenge, and mentoring for the future. While this model can be applied to all types of internships, some specific considerations regarding internships for non-LIS students have been raised here. These students are not likely to have as much knowledge of the profession or related work experience before starting an internship. They may therefore require more guidance and mentoring from supervisors, especially regarding the creation of a learning plan, working to an appropriate level of challenge, and planning for the future. Planning and executing an internship with these considerations in mind

can raise the librarian supervisor to the level of mentor in the life of an intern, establishing the groundwork for rich learning and relationships.

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