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Integrating Research into LIS Field Experiences in Academic Libraries

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Field experiences function as a link between LIS theory and practice. Students should be given an experience that is a true reflection of the professional environment. The increasing focus on research by academic librarians provides an opportunity and responsibility to integrate research into the field experiences of LIS students.

INTRODUCTION

Since the inception of library schools by Melvil Dewey in the late nineteenth century, the creation of successful and meaningful field experiences (FEs) for library students has been a consistent challenge. Academic institutions are common locations for FEs, but have consistently faced obstacles in providing useful practice experiences for students. It is essential that academic libraries offer students practical professional experiences that are a true reflection of the professional environment in which academic librarians operate. With increasing attention on scholarly and research activities as an expectation of academic librarians, there is an opportunity and responsibility for academic libraries to provide library and information science (LIS) students with experiences that will help prepare them for these expectations. This type of experience is especially relevant when one considers that the research expectations of academic librarianship are often perceived as daunting and overwhelming by LIS students. In order to understand how and why academic libraries may incorporate research and scholarly activities into the LIS FE, this paper will explore the history and purpose of FEs, provide an overview of the current research environment in academic libraries, and describe how academic libraries can best provide this experience to students. The paper will end with an overview of the anticipated benefits to students, supervising libraries and librarians, and the academic library community as a whole, as well as discuss barriers to implementation, and future directions.

BACKGROUND

Field Experiences

There is no consensus about what to call the practical experiences that LIS programs can provide or what these FEs include and exclude. Practicum, internship, work-study, co-op, field experiences, and service learning have all been used to describe different lengths, formats, and components of practical experiences occurring as part of LIS education.[1] The lack of consistent terminology reflects the fact that the purpose and importance of FEs are not well understood. For 125 years, from the inception of formal LIS education in 1884 to the current day, the role of field experiences has been surrounded by controversy.

The popularity of offering practical experiences as part of LIS education has fluctuated over the years, largely due to differing opinions on the importance of such programs to LIS education. When Melvil Dewey designed the curriculum for the first library school at Columbia College, classroom training was balanced with actual experience in libraries. In an 1884 prospectus, Dewey acknowledged that "lectures and reading alone will not achieve the best results in training without the conference, problems, study of various libraries in successful operation and actual work in a library."[2] The curricula of early LIS programs reflected Dewey's philosophy by including fieldwork in LIS education, and creating a “school of experience.” However, in the 1920s a push to make the library profession more scientific resulted in a call for the demise of field work, as it too closely resembled vocational training.[3] For almost 50 years,

FEs were near obsolete. In 1968, Samuel Rothstein's article, "A Forgotten Issue: Practice Work in American Library Education," re-opened the conversation about the importance of FEs in LIS education. Rothstein's article argued the necessity of reintroducing practice work as a means of enhancing theory and its application to practice. Over the next 20 years, a series of articles urged the inclusion of practical experience as a central part of LIS education. In the 1970s, the FE was slowly reintroduced as a supplement to classroom teaching, and a decade later practical experience was central to LIS education. In the 1990s, as more information professionals were being trained in a variety of disciplines and arenas, the LIS practicum became an invaluable asset in the competitive job market.[4] During this time, FEs became a selling feature of library schools.[5] In 2000, the International Federation of Library Associations made the following statement on practicum, internships or fieldwork: "The programme should incorporate appropriate means to allow students to appreciate the interplay between professional theories and their application in professional practice."[6]

The primary purpose of FEs is to provide a link between theory and practice.[7] Using FEs as means of linking theory and practice is an accepted approach in many professional training programs including education, social work, nursing, and medical programs. In these professional programs, practical experiences are seen as a critical component of professional education; as a result, educators in these programs invest a lot of attention and energy in ensuring the success of these experiences.[8] In contrast, within LIS education, the value of FEs has been well-debated in the literature; consequently, only modest efforts have been made to ensure consistently sound FEs. Since the inception of library schools, LIS education has faced obstacles in the creation and maintenance of LIS FEs.[9] Enduring challenges to FEs in LIS education include a) finding a balance between theory and practice and b) ensuring meaningful and well-constructed experiences for students participating in FEs.

Because the purpose of FEs is to prepare students to be professional librarians, supervising libraries cannot merely assign mundane tasks to students. Charles Williamson's 1923 critique of the inclusion of fieldwork in library education stresses that the purpose of higher education is "not to impart skill in the routine processes which belong to the clerical grades of library service."[10] Fieldwork can be made more meaningful by emphasizing "purpose and analysis, not merely routine performance."[11] Far too often the experiences of current FE students continue to mirror the experiences outlined by Ernest Reece in 1936: "fieldwork often has seemed faultily planned and carelessly directed, and . . . sometimes it has resulted in casual treatment and waste of time, and even exploitation and neglect." [12] Thus, this conversation persists. Reece's words were echoed in the Canadian Library Association's (CLA) 2009 report from the *National Summit on Library Human Resources* by stressing that FEs "can't be exploitative for students, [and] must provide practical, useful, meaningful employment."[13] A successful FE provides students with a structured educational opportunity that is carefully balanced with professional responsibilities and autonomy. Proper preparation and supervision are important for achieving this balance.

The CLA report also identified the provision of practical work experiences as a priority and as such, included the recommendation that "co-op programs should exist in all library schools."[14] The report suggested that co-op placements could become a requirement for obtaining one's LIS degree. Currently, there is a variety of models across the seven Canadian universities offering the professional masters degree. Table 1 provides an overview of the format and extent of FEs available through Canadian LIS programs. Only two schools offer a co-op program. In light of the discussion at the national level about the value of FEs, and particularly

of co-op experiences, there are opportunities in Canada for LIS schools and supervising libraries to consider how best to offer practical, meaningful FEs.

Table 1. Field Experiences in Canadian LIS Programs

University	Title of FE	Length of FE	Credit Units	Required
Dalhousie University	Practicum	One term[a] 500 total hours	None	Yes[b]
McGill University	Practicum	One term 10 h/week	3 cu	
University of Alberta	Practicum	One term 10 h/week	3 cu	No
University of British Columbia	Practicum	2 weeks	None	Yes[c]
University of British Columbia	Co-op	One or two terms full-time	None	No
University of British Columbia	Professional Experience	One term 10 h/week	3 cu	No
Université de Montréal	Internship (le stage)	One term, 36 days full-time	6 cu	Yes[d]
University of Toronto	Practicum	One term	3 cu	No
University of Western Ontario	Co-op	One or two terms full-time	None	No

Source: Course listings found on LIS program websites.
[a]A term is 12-14 weeks.
[b]Required unless the student gains the equivalent of four months' suitable employment while attending the school.
[c]Required unless one term of co-op has been completed.
[d]Students may apply for exemption from the internship if they have at least six months' professional work experience, full-time or equivalent.

Research Expectations in Academic Libraries

Contributing to the professional and scholarly conversation is recognized as a professional responsibility, and one that is increasingly emphasized in the library literature.[15] The membership of librarians within faculty associations across North America has increased the expectations placed on academic librarians to engage in scholarly and research activities. The maturity of this role of librarian-as-researcher varies: in some institutions these expectations are relatively new, while in others, research requirements have been securely in place for many years. As early as 1974, Association of College & Research Libraries (ACRL) issued the *Joint Statement on Faculty Status for College and University Librarians*, specifying that librarians should go through the same evaluation process and be held to the same evaluation standards as other university faculty.[16] These standards of evaluation have been cited as a persistent concern. In particular, questions have arisen as to whether or not librarians and archivists are able to establish records of research and publication that meet their institutions' requirements and criteria for promotion.[17] This is especially important since at some institutions publication can

account for up to 80% of promotion criteria,[18] and an insufficient publication record is the most frequent reason for librarians to be denied tenure.[19] The pressure to publish is a major source of stress for new tenure-track librarians.[20]

Unlike faculty, few librarians enter academia having had the opportunity to participate in the activities of scholarly communities. The pressure to publish is therefore creating an environment where the opportunity to do research is met with much anxiety and little eagerness. Much of the apprehension surrounding publication is attributed to librarians' lack of research training.[21] Many librarians within the profession feel as though they "were not trained to do research and do not know what research projects are worth doing."[22] Research methods courses are not always mandatory requirements in LIS education;[23] and many students who do take a basic course in research methods often cannot see the practical applicability of the course, leading to a loss of research skills and confidence during their practice as a librarian.[24] Far too often students fail to recognize the need to "demonstrate knowledge and skills in research beyond the campus and into the workplace."[25]

When considering that professional masters programs do not consistently emphasize research methodologies, statistical analysis, or the practical application of research, the question emerges as to how academic librarians will gain the skills needed to meet the research expectations of their academic positions. LIS educators are beginning to recognize that they need to play a greater role in providing training in research; however, having the skills may not be enough. As Hallam and Partridge point out, "whilst education can commence the process, success will only be achieved when all stakeholders in the profession actively work together to build the desired culture."[26] Although Hallam and Partridge were specifically referring to evidence-based practice, this statement can apply more broadly to a research culture. Research culture goes beyond research methods to a wider awareness of the research landscape. Librarians should not only have an understanding of research methods, but should also have confidence in their knowledge of the entire research and publication process: from inception of a research question, to the application of multiple research methodologies, to dissemination, to the integration of scholarly achievements in the tenure and promotion process. Librarians within the profession must reflect on how they can enhance the culture of research in academic librarianship.

Professional academic librarians report multiple barriers to completing research activities including ambiguous guidelines, lack of time, and, of course, lack of research training.[27] As a result, institutions are struggling to find ways to support their librarians in building a culture of scholarship.[28] Academic libraries have attempted to support librarians undertaking research. Reviewing articles from various library publications, Bonnie Gratch identified several ways in which academic libraries supported scholarly activities, including the organization of support groups, development of mentoring programs, the provision of release time, acquisition of funding for research, and provision of opportunities for collegial interaction such as colloquia, guest lectures, and informal "brown bag" discussions.[29] Since the 1970s, supporting librarians in their academic activities has proved to be a substantial challenge to libraries across North America, and far too often, it is not until issues arise relating to quality and quantity of scholarly activities that supports are developed. It is critical that multiple proactive strategies be developed in order to encourage academic librarians to be successful, contributing members of the university and library communities.

There are clearly attempts by educators and practitioners to develop a research culture within the library profession. However, there is also the untapped opportunity for libraries to

provide LIS students with practical research experience in FEs.

INCLUDING RESEARCH IN FIELD EXPERIENCES AT ACADEMIC LIBRARIES

Field experiences help students transition from student to professional.[30] This transformation involves testing one's knowledge and skills, applying theory to practice, contributing to the organization, and embracing decision-making roles. In addition, FEs also provide the opportunity to gain an understanding of the evolving roles of librarians.[31] The role of academic librarian-as-researcher is relatively new; however, it is quickly becoming a key part of performance evaluation, and it is a role that can be challenging and stressful for new librarians.

Introducing research into the FEs of LIS education provides students with first-hand insight into the role of academic librarian-as-researcher. Research experience at this early stage plants the seeds of research culture and expectations early in librarians' career. It is likely that new librarians with this type of experience will recognize that scholarly and research activity is a valuable part of their professional role and will cultivate a stronger research culture in academic libraries in the future. When one considers that much of the anxiety surrounding publication is attributed to librarians' lack of research training and a lack of confidence in research skills, it can be anticipated that having the experience of contributing to a successful research project early in a librarian's career will provide a firm research foundation.

Creating a Successful Research Project Within the Field Experience

Considerations in creating a successful FE include providing professional, not clerical, experience, proper critical supervision and guidance, opportunities for learning, and an environment that recognizes the student as a colleague. The following discussion of a successful research experience explores points related to preparation for the student's FE, student supervision, and interactions following the FE.

Many of the details presented here reflect the authors' experiences during Ms. Dawson's co-op placement in 2008. The co-op placement was in conjunction with the University of Western Ontario's Master of Library and Information Science program in London, Ontario, Canada. The eight-month (two terms), full-time co-op experience took place at the Allyn & Betty Taylor Library, which supports the science, technology and medicine subject areas at The University of Western Ontario.[32] Ms. Dawson's FE included reference shifts, instructional support, and other duties, in addition to participation in the authors' research project.[33] The success of this experience must also be attributed to having a highly motivated and very professional student. It is acknowledged that not all students bring these qualities to FEs.[34]

Before the Field Experience

Successful FEs rely on proper preparation and construction, and therefore require the supervising library's and librarians' commitment to the FE. Preparing a research experience for an FE student is a time-intensive process requiring exploration, reflection, and planning. It is critical to recognize that an FE student does not have the skills or time to develop a research project from the beginning. Even experienced librarians struggle to develop a well-constructed research question and choose appropriate methodologies;[35] therefore, this should be done in advance. Supervising librarians must construct a research project with defined objectives, methodology,

and timelines, while taking into account the need for flexibility to accommodate the student's own motivation, interests and competencies. A reasonable and flexible timeline for completion should also be developed. Although the preparation for the student research project is likely to be extensive and time-consuming, it will ultimately save time and energy and result in a more effective experience for both the student and supervising librarians.

Funding and ethics approval are two specific aspects of the research project that should be in place prior to commencement of the FE. The supervising librarians must ensure that any funding required for the project is in place prior to the beginning of the FE, so that the student's experience is not delayed because of financial constraints. If the proposed research project involves human participants, approval from the institution's Research Ethics Board (REB) may be required. Obtaining ethics approval can be a lengthy process; therefore, the supervising librarians should ensure that REB approval is in place or well under way prior to the FE, in order ensure the student is able to participate in the research project in a meaningful way. This is of particular concern if the FE is short, lasting one term or less. For these short FEs, research projects that do not require REB approval may provide a better opportunity for the student to fully participate in the research.

During Student Supervision

The purpose of FEs is to link theory and practice in a meaningful way. Students have been given the theoretical foundation to become successful professionals, and it is during the FE that they are given the opportunity to apply what they have learned to practice. It is critical that the FE balances opportunities for supervised learning and professional autonomy. When describing her experiences with internships, Warren reminds readers that "interns are simultaneously students and colleagues."[36] The purpose of FEs is to build independent and critical professionals, and therefore the treatment and responsibilities given to students should reflect this goal. At the beginning of the FE, before moving ahead with the research project, the students must be given the opportunity to explore the research approach, proposed methodology, and other research questions on their own, as well as with the research team.

When students are involved in a research project, they should be recognized as contributing members of the research team. Student involvement should not be limited to a supporting role or carrying out mundane tasks, but instead, the project should be a true collaboration. All team members should be involved in decisions about how to implement the proposed methodology. Data collection, data analysis, and write-up should also be shared among all members of the team. Regular contact and updates are critical to ensure both student and project success. These simple strategies are likely to dissipate student fears of research, increase the students' understanding of research in the LIS field, and spark interest in professional research.

After the Field Experience

Researchers recognize that projects often exceed anticipated timelines, continuing long after data collection. Maintaining contact with the student after the FE will ensure student involvement to the end of the research project. Every effort should be made by both the student and supervising librarians to complete data analysis and preliminary write-up during the FE. However, dissemination of research results (e.g., conference presentations, peer-reviewed publications) can

take months or years following completion of data analysis, and the student's involvement in this step will provide her with a complete research experience. It is likely that following the FE, the student will either return to school or begin her job search; in either case, she faces significant external pressures such as time, motivation, and geographical distance. As such, before the end of the FE, the research team should work together to develop a plan and timeline for completing the research project.

BENEFITS OF INTEGRATING RESEARCH INTO FES

The mutual benefits of FEs for supervising librarians and students have been recognized for decades.[37] Students gain practical experience to support their studies and facilitate their subsequent employment. Supervising librarians gain a competent, motivated colleague and enjoy the satisfaction of becoming partners in education. FEs also help to keep library school faculties in touch with the field. While these are general benefits that pertain to any FE, including research in FEs will impart additional benefits for the student, the supervising librarians and the profession.

In very practical terms, students will be able to add LIS research experience (and possibly a conference presentation and/or publication) to their curriculum vitae, which will increase their marketability during the job search. In addition to the development of research skills and experience, the research project gives students the opportunity to build strong relationships with members of the research team. Such informal mentoring will benefit students throughout the research project, as well as following the FE. Students should recognize that the relationships built throughout the field are invaluable and provide the opportunity for support in the future; for example, supervising librarians can be professional references during the student’s job search.[38]

Supervising librarians can gain both personal and practical benefits. The relationship built with the student provides mentoring opportunities that can be incredibly rewarding. A concrete benefit of including a research project in the student's FE is that the defined length of the FE can provide supervising librarians with the motivation to follow a timeline for completing the research project. When time is a highly cited barrier to research, the student is an invaluable additional member of the research team. Because the supervising librarians have primary responsibility for formulating the research question and methods, including a research project in the student's FE can help to meet the librarians' research agenda. The supervising library and librarians should also welcome the opportunity to impart to library schools a greater understanding of the importance of research in academic librarianship.

If more students who take part in academic library FEs are given the opportunity to gain sound, practical research experience, it is anticipated that their improved research skills will contribute to a stronger research culture within librarianship. It is possible that the pressure to publish, combined with a lack of training and opportunities, has impacted the body of professional library literature. Some critics claim that there has been a substantial decrease in the quality of the body of literature pertaining to library and information studies as a result of the increase in the number of publications by professional librarians.[39] As professionals, we must not accept poor scholarly work as a norm, but rather aim to create a scholarly base that is supported by a strong research culture and strong research skills. Providing research projects as a key component of an FE is one step towards this goal.

BARRIERS TO INTEGRATING RESEARCH INTO FES

Although there are numerous benefits to including research in LIS FEs, there are also significant barriers to doing so. Foremost among these is the fact that a successful research project depends on having confident, competent researchers as supervising librarians. FE research projects should not be seen as an opportunity to impart research skills to supervising librarians. Since librarians' research anxiety is well-documented, it may not be feasible for all libraries who offer FEs to include research projects as part of those FEs.

As well, it may not be practical to offer research projects within all types of FE. Canadian LIS programs currently offer FEs that range in duration from a two-week practicum to a two-term co-op placement. It is unlikely that any significant research project could be undertaken in two weeks, and for a research project to be included in a ten hour per week FE, the student would need to spend most of his time on research and would get limited experience in other aspects of academic librarianship. Supervising libraries and LIS schools must therefore consider whether the FEs they offer are conducive to incorporation of a research project.

Once the supervising librarians decide that they would like to include a research project in a student's FE and that it is feasible to do so, further challenges may exist. If the supervising librarians have under-prepared, timelines may not be met and the student’s experience may be compromised. Even experienced researchers may not be able to predict the problems that may arise with the proposed research. While learning to overcome problems during a research project is valuable for the student, this uncertainty, combined with the defined timeline of the FE, can lead to complications. It can also be risky to bring an unknown individual into a research team. Even if the supervising librarians participated in the selection process of the FE student, the FE is a relatively short period of time for members of a research team to learn to work together effectively.

FUTURE DIRECTIONS

Given the numerous barriers to implementation described above, it is not likely that integrating research into FEs will quickly become widespread practice. At present, there may be only a relatively small number of academic libraries that both offer FEs and have strong researchers who could act as supervising librarians for an FE research project. As those libraries start to offer research projects as part of FEs, the discussion initiated in this paper will continue, and there will be opportunities to develop best practices for FE research projects. These best practices should address issues such as what types of research are conducive to FEs, how to build an effective student-practitioner research team, and how to expand the integration of research into FEs in settings where supervising librarians may lack extensive research experience.

Although this paper has focused on research in academic library FEs, integrating research into FEs is certainly applicable to other environments, including special and public libraries. For example, there is currently interest in adopting evidence-based librarianship (EBL) across library settings.[40] Librarians who adopt EBL philosophies need to be able to successfully formulate questions, and gather and critically evaluate research evidence in order to incorporate it into daily practice. They also need to be able to conduct research and disseminate research findings, in order to add to the profession's evidence base.[41] These are all skills that could be imparted to students through work on a research project as part of an FE. EBL is a means to improve the practice of librarianship in all environments, and new librarians will be more likely to embrace

the principles of EBL if they have confidence in their ability to apply findings and contribute to the evidence base.

Research is an important part of the professional environment in librarianship, and is likely to become even more relevant because of increasing emphasis on the academic librarian-as-researcher and interest in EBL. By incorporating research projects into FEs, librarians can help to articulate this changing role and focus of research to LIS educators. This is yet one more way in which FEs can be used to link theory and practice. A natural partnership will also unfold because research, like FEs, is a link between theory and practice, and therefore can provide a strong educational and practice experience for both student and supervisor.

Finally, not all types of FE are conducive to incorporation of a research project. Library Association recommendations for LIS education indicate that there is some impetus for expanding co-op FEs across all Canadian LIS programs. In order for such FEs to be of maximum benefit for both students and supervising libraries, they should be consistent in length and in quality of the experience provided. Consistent benchmarks for FEs across LIS programs could serve as a means of encouraging supervising libraries to incorporate research into the FEs that they offer.

CONCLUSION

The literature on LIS educational practices is nearly silent on the creation and maintenance of practical FEs in librarianship. This gap is surprising when one considers the popularity of FEs as a means of linking LIS theory and practice. In order to be truly successful, students must be given a practical experience that is a true reflection of the professional environment. In academic librarianship, there is an increasing focus on the role of research, not only in achieving tenure and advancing one's career, but also in improving and developing the practices and processes of librarianship. When considering the current importance of research by academic librarians, and the lack of skills and confidence that new librarians enter the profession with, perhaps there is not only an opportunity to incorporate research into the field experiences of LIS students, but also a professional responsibility.

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[31] Ibid., 309-310.

[32] The University of Western Ontario is one of Canada's largest and oldest universities, with over 1,300 full-time faculty members and approximately 24,000 undergraduate students and 4,000 graduate students. Through its twelve Faculties and four affiliated Colleges, Western offers more than 400 different majors, minors, and specializations in a full range of disciplines.

[33] The research project was a qualitative study using think-aloud methodology to determine the usability of electronic books. Publication on the research findings is forthcoming.

[34] Richey, “Reference Librarian’s Perspective,” 110-112.

[35] Hinchliffe, “Gift of a Research Agenda,” 75.

[36] Warren, “Student’s Perspective,” 123.

[37] Neil C. Van Deusen, “Field Work in Accredited Library Schools,” *College and Research Libraries* 7 (1946): 249-255.

[38] Richey, “Reference Librarian’s Perspective,” 113.

[39] Hoggan, “Faculty Status,” 437-438.

[40] Hallam and Partridge, “Whose Responsibility,” 88-93.

[41] Ellen Crumley and Denise Koufogiannakis, “Developing Evidence-Based Librarianship: Practical Steps for Implementation,” *Health Information and Libraries Journal* 19 (2002): 61-70.