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ACADEMIC LIBRARY MANAGEMENT



The Value of Using Interns in Academic Libraries

by Antje Mays
Winthrop University

Librarianship is rooted in theories of information and knowledge management, yet the work itself is carried out in practical contexts. The workflows are very similar to those in a business with client-oriented service activities and resource management. Successful work as a library professional requires practical know-how - a facet not naturally incorporated in MLIS programs. Why? Library schools do not have laboratory libraries where students can practice real-world librarianship in a manner similar to student-teachers' built-in hands-on experience at laboratory schools belonging to colleges of education. While MLIS programs deliver the important theoretical foundations, an internship in the library students' areas of interest provides crucial hands-on experience in a real-world setting. Theory and practice matter equally in shaping the skill base of librarians-in-training.

Library schools are filled with talented and knowledgeable professors who assign meaningful, thought-provoking projects designed to deepen student learning. Reference, library instruction, and web design as take-home projects give students a realistic feel for such work, but these areas come to life in a real-world library setting. Other realms such as cataloging and indexing, systems, collection development, acquisitions and working with vendors, supervision, planning, and budget administration tend to remain rather abstract in the classroom setting. The classroom is a powerful source of content knowledge and theory, but library schools depend on the goodwill of libraries for students' real-world learning.

In my library, offering internships to library students is considered an important part of professional stewardship. My affinity to libraries' willingness to offer library school internships is philosophical: I too had the good fortune of practical library work while earning my MLIS. Offering internships is akin to a covenant

with the next generation of professionals. As a side note, I feel the same about taking the time to publish: During my time as a library student, I benefited tremendously from the collective wisdom of the published librarianship literature - available because seasoned practitioners were willing to take the time to share their knowledge for the benefit of new generations of learners. I was one of those learners who took this lesson to heart. Similar to passing along the favor of publishing for the benefit of those who will come after us, libraries have much to offer library students as practical learning labs. Students see not only how we do our work and feel it out for themselves, but they also see the contexts in which our libraries operate, issues we face and how we navigate them, how we interact with our libraries' internal and external constituencies, and how we fit in with our campus life and communities overall. All these factors combined bring students a rich learning experience.

But we professionals in our libraries benefit as well: as practitioners in well-established work groups, we can become insulated and even entrenched. Students bring new life, fresh ideas and perspectives, youthful enthusiasm, perhaps even skills and insights from previous professions if librarianship is a second career for them. They see us in a different light from the way we see ourselves. They are not encrusted in organizational traditions or preconceived notions. If we have established a positive, trusting working relationship with our interns, these students' observations may lead them to offer us creative solutions that may have never occurred to us. In a good match between the intern, the intern's skills and interests, the work to be done (provided that the library put purposeful advance planning into the internship projects), the library also benefits as some of the work gets done through an extra person while the student gains meaningful practical experience. Those of us who plan and oversee the internship projects see our work in a new light, perhaps rethink some of our processes, and gain valuable teaching and training experience. The result? Both students and libraries come away enriched by the internship experience.

Antje Mays currently heads library acquisitions for books and AV materials at Winthrop University in Rock Hill, SC. Her academic experience includes collection development, management, research and analysis, database programming, web design, and library instruction. She has also served as language translator, training plan designer, and freelance artist.