Evidence Based Library and Information Practice

Field Experiences Provide Value for Library Students, but More Research Is Needed into their Administration

A Review of:
Malik, A., & Ameen, K. (2010). Effectiveness of library practicum: Perceptions of LIS graduates in Pakistan. *Library Review, 59*(8), 573-584.

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Abstract

Objective – To evaluate an eight-week practicum requirement for library and information science students.

Design – Survey questionnaire.

Setting – The University of the Punjab and participating libraries in Pakistan.

Subjects – A total of 118 graduates of the library and information science program at the University of the Punjab who had completed an eight-week-long practicum experience in a public, academic, or special library between 2002 and 2006.

Methods – Snowball sampling was used to select the subjects. Surveys were delivered and collected through personal visits, email, and postal mail, and the authors asked follow-up questions of some subjects whose surveys were collected in person. The survey contained questions about several topics, such as the type of professional tasks (e.g., acquisition, circulation, reference service, etc.) that students did during the practicum, professional skills developed, practicum length, comfort in sharing problems with supervisors, and the evaluation process. The authors used statistical analysis software (SPSS, version 12) to analyze the survey results.

Main Results – The majority of subjects reported that they had received the opportunity to train in several sections and functions of the library, and they felt that the practicum was important in improving their professional skills. Most reported being comfortable sharing problems with their supervisors and were satisfied with the evaluation process. The survey also included open-ended questions about problems and suggestions, but only 28% of the subjects responded with comments.

Conclusion – The authors concluded that the library practicum plays an important role in the professional development of future library professionals, and that the length of the practicum should be extended from its current eight-week requirement.

Commentary

Within the library profession, there has been much discussion about how best to prepare library students for work in 21st century libraries. Some critics of traditional library school curricula assert that too much emphasis is placed on theory and not enough time is devoted to practice (Ball, 2008; Coleman, 1989). But theory and practice are not necessarily antithetical; in fact, practical experience can help to reinforce concepts taught in the classroom (Coleman, 1989) while providing students with professional skills that are highly valued by library employers (Orme, 2008). However, high-quality field work experiences can be difficult for library schools to administer and may take time away from an already full curriculum of classes (Ball, 2008; Grotzinger, 1971; Coleman, 1989).

Because many studies of field work experiences are several decades old, new studies are needed to determine the value of these programs for the training of new librarians (Ball, 2008). The present study contributes to the literature by explaining how the practicum experience is conducted at one institution and by raising questions about how these programs should best be administered to

ensure that students participate in high-quality field experiences.

For the study design, the authors surveyed 118 out of 367 graduates and asked in-person questions of some of the subjects. Unfortunately, the survey instrument is not included in the article, so the reader is unable to see how the questions were worded and understand how the results were interpreted. The authors also make no mention of providing anonymity to the subjects. This is of some concern, especially since only 28% of the subjects were willing to respond to open-ended questions. This failure to guarantee confidentiality may have compromised the validity of the results.

The authors provide feedback from subjects whose responses indicated areas that were lacking in the practicum. For example, some subjects were not provided with opportunities to train in all areas of the library, such as circulation or computer technologies, while others did not gain experience with important professional tasks, such as work with audio-visuals, reference service, or written communication.

While the feedback described above is of value, some of the authors' conclusions do not follow logically from the data. For example, the authors asked whether the practicum experience met with expectations, and all subjects responded that it did, at least to some extent. The authors conclude from this that the majority of the subjects had a satisfactory practicum experience, but their conclusion does not consider that some subjects may have expected a negative experience.

Often the data analysis seems incomplete. In a question about a journal-writing activity, for example, the authors reveal that some students responded with "we copy from others." The authors conclude that more efforts are needed to make journal writing a worthwhile exercise. Since this type of self-reflection activity can be an effective means of bridging the gap between theory and practice, a more thoughtful analysis of the value of this activity could have been instructive.

The main problem with this article, however, is its lack of a clear research question. The authors state that their objective is to evaluate their program; however, they would have been better served by more clearly and specifically relating library field experiences to a question that contributes to a more general understanding of the issues. The authors conclude definitively that field experiences provide value to library students, but the literature already supports this assertion. In addition, the authors wish to derive suggestions for improving the practicum experience; however, the only suggestion they make is that the current practicum requirement be lengthened from eight weeks.

Despite the problems with the study design, questions surrounding the role of field work in educating new library professionals remain important. Thus, this article contributes to discussions about the best ways to administer field work experiences so as to ensure that library students receive practical training that adequately prepares them for careers in a rapidly changing profession.

References

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