Sharing Our Experience: A Joint Practicum Case Study

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Librarians at a private and a public institution collaborated to offer a health sciences librarianship practicum that emphasized public services. After advertising the practicum on library school internship Web sites, the librarians conducted joint interviews to select a student and determined what aspects of librarianship would be covered during the practicum. During the Fall 2010 semester, the student spent 60 hours at each library, working 2 days a week, gaining experience at each institution. The joint practicum was deemed a success by both libraries and the student. The libraries will continue with their collaboration. This model may be used by other libraries.

KEYWORDS academic libraries, collaboration, internships, library school students, medical libraries, practicum

Opportunities to mentor library school students may seem like a remote possibility for a hospital library, especially when that library has no affiliation with a library school and/or if there is not a library school in the immediate geographic area. However, some library graduate school programs offer an online only or a blended option, so library students in the area may
be seeking opportunities to gain experience and could benefit from such a mentorship, especially in health sciences libraries. The hospital library also may not have an abundance of staff, which presents challenges of how to coordinate a positive mentoring experience for the library and the student. This case study of two health sciences libraries, one public and the other private, will demonstrate how libraries with different user groups and resources collaborated on a practicum with a public service focus. This practicum may serve as a model for hospital librarians who want to mentor future librarians, and who believe they do not have the resources or time to do so on a solo or full-time basis.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Linda Smith set up the framework for understanding the educational theories and efforts to improve health science librarian training (1). Smith concluded that there were six important aims to sustain the library profession. One of these was to develop opportunities for practicums, internships, and residencies at cooperating medical schools and affiliated institutions, in health sciences libraries, and information services for clinical care. This would allow better preparation in the areas of information integration and medical informatics (1).

Because research shows that lack of teaching experience is a top challenge for new resident librarians, the opportunity for teaching experiences was incorporated into the practicum as one of the areas of student focus (2). Another lesson comes from Sargent, Becker, and Klingberg who analyzed the impact of academic library internships on participants (3). One of the survey findings was that the interns never felt integrated into the library’s organization. One intern said that she never felt like a part of the library as a whole (3). This survey finding was kept in mind during the planning stages as a situation to be avoided.

THE SETTINGS

The two libraries involved are notably different. The Library of the Health Sciences–Chicago (LHS) is the largest health sciences library in the Chicago area and is part of the University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC), a research institution. LHS is the Chicago Health Sciences Campus library; the campus includes the 496-bed UIC Medical Center Hospital (UIMC), an Outpatient Care Center, and other affiliated health care institutions. The Library of Rush University Medical Center (Rush) serves the communities of both Rush University, a private graduate-level academic health sciences institution, and the 676-bed Rush University Medical Center Hospital. Rush emphasizes
patient care, having achieved the MAGNET status several times, whereas UIMC nurses have just begun the MAGNET process. Although geographically close to Rush, UIC caters to a higher percentage of minorities (4). Whereas the Library of the Health Sciences is a standalone building on the UIC campus, Rush University Library is located within the hospital. LHS is also a Regional Medical Library in the National Network of Libraries of Medicine, which covers 10 states in the Greater Midwest Region. In addition to the LHS location in Chicago, there are site libraries in Peoria, Rockford, and Urbana, Illinois. Doing a practicum at LHS and Rush gives the practicum student a more rounded experience.

BACKGROUND AND OVERVIEW

In December 2009, Chicago area health sciences librarians met to discuss issues relevant to health sciences librarianship. Rush University librarians had begun hosting a practicum student and had brought the student to the meeting. Both the librarians and the student answered questions about the practicum and expressed that it had been a positive experience. LHS librarians were interested in this idea and met with the Rush librarians to explore how they could collaborate together on a practicum. Together, LHS and Rush librarians wrote a description of the practicum and advertised it on library school internship opportunity Web sites. Prospective candidates were interviewed jointly by the librarians during the summer of 2010. Once the student was selected, the librarians determined which aspects of librarianship they would cover during the practicum as well as how it would be logistically implemented. The inaugural practicum occurred during the fall semester of 2010, and the student who was selected chose to do the practicum without receiving academic credit due to administrative challenges.

THE PROCESS: THE CHALLENGES OF TIME, SPACE, STAFF, AND RESOURCES

Among the many details to consider for such an undertaking was the practical one of time: How much time would the librarians realistically be able to provide a student in order to achieve the optimum experience? The primary focus from the beginning was the student experience; the practical benefit to the libraries were a secondary, though still important, focus.

Students taking a practicum for credit at most library schools are required 120 hours of experience per semester. This number was used as the guideline for our practicum with the 120 hours divided in half so that over the course of a 12-week semester, each library would host the student for 6 weeks, with the student working an average of 2 days a week, for a total of
10 hours per week. This was a time commitment that not only fully met the student’s academic needs, but was also more manageable for a busy library than a full-time or even half-time practicum arrangement. Further, with two libraries involved, discussion during the practicum between library staff from one library with the other enabled an easier adjustment for the supervisors in terms of understanding the student’s areas of strengths. Projects and training could be planned more easily in such an environment.

It was important to prepare and involve any staff members who were interested in contributing to the student’s experience. Once interest was assessed, by a simple e-mail message to all staff, it was assured that at the very least the student would have a chance to interview staff members about their particular jobs within the library. Public Services staff were the most involved in the mentoring and training of the student, including service desk workers who were encouraged to help the student with the intricacies of serving patrons in person, by phone, e-mail, instant messaging, or texting. If the student had a particular interest in areas outside of the Public Services department, such as Archives, a more involved tour was arranged. The time invested in preparing the entire library staff for the arrival of the practicum student made for a more enriching experience for all involved.

Another consideration was the actual physical workspace available to the student. The practicum is meant to be as integrated as possible into the structure and routine of the library’s daily activities. Having a dedicated workspace that includes a desk, chair, computer, and phone for the student strengthens the perception to the student and the library staff that this position is important and valued. Also, if discussions or impromptu meetings need to take place with the student, conducting those events within the practicum space saves time and the disruption of finding another meeting space. A dedicated space also gives the student an important sense of authority over the work he/she is providing to the library and even over the student’s presence within the library. These measures helped to ensure the student’s integration within the library and avoided this particular negative outcome of Sargent, Becker, and Klingberg’s study (3).

Spending time on staff buy-in as the library prepares to host a practicum student is a wise investment. Library staff gets a chance to think about how they want to interact with the student as well as an opportunity to mentally prepare for working alongside a new person. In addition, staff are encouraged to offer suggestions and ideas for ways in which the student might be able to contribute to improving library processes. Not only does this exercise help improve library functions, but it also enables the current staff to envision possible solutions to problems they may be encountering. This provides the coordinating manager with ideas for future library-wide projects as well as projects for the practicum student.

When possible, it makes good sense to provide a junior librarian with very valuable mentoring and supervisory experience by pairing him/her with
the practicum student, overseen by the coordinating manager. If it is not possible to provide a monetary stipend for the student’s time, it is important that this is clearly understood by the student during the interview process. Depending on the institutions involved, prerequisites, such as free parking, access to library resources, and networking opportunities might substitute for a financial stipend.

If a student chooses to pursue academic credit, the librarians should set aside time to meet together with the student and the academic advisor to discuss the format and learning goals of the practicum as well as assessments the degree program requires. Compensation (or lack thereof) is always an interesting area for discussion among education theorists, given that the student is paying the school to work without compensation in a third-party setting (5). However, it is important for the Masters of Library and Information Science (MLIS) programs and the practicum settings to have a dialogue about the benefits to all concerned. The student undoubtedly gains valuable experience and contacts, the practicum setting(s) gains a voice in the training and education of future librarians, and the academic program gains good public relations when it engages responsibly and in good faith with such an endeavor.

STUDENT PROJECTS AND PROGRAM ACCOMPLISHMENTS

In the joint practicum, the student was assigned complementary projects at each of the institutions in order to provide for a well-rounded experience and to take advantage of the unique aspects of each library. Whenever possible, the librarians avoided assigning projects that were simply rote or not useful for substantive learning, as the focus was on the student as well as the libraries gaining value from the projects.

The student was introduced to the reference desk at Rush, and built on that exposure at LHS, where she eventually took on solo reference desk shifts and also provided instant messaging and texting services for LHS patrons.

At both institutions, the student created research and subject guides using Springshare’s LibGuides platform, a content management system that allows libraries to connect with patrons and share information online (6). The student started with a simple guide and advanced to create guides with more complexity. The topics for the guides were chosen based on the particular library’s need, so that the guides could be used by library staff and patrons long after the student’s tenure.

Another focus was teaching. The student participated in database workshops at both institutions and solo-taught a PubMed workshop at Rush. The PubMed workshop was one of a series of workshops open to anyone with a Rush affiliation (usually faculty, staff, and students) interested in learning
more about library resources. The student also observed a one-on-one con-
sultation session with a LHS patron. Individual consultations are offered
at LHS as a way to introduce library resources to patrons and to provide
personalized assistance with patron research.

The student benefited from site-specific meetings as well. At Rush, the
student was introduced to the Morning Report meetings, and was able to
attend most of the monthly cycle of the Internal Medicine Morning Reports,
providing exposure to how a librarian in a hospital setting might interact
with patrons. The student attended meetings at LHS such as the LHS outreach
meetings and research discussion meetings.

Other projects included organizing LHS’s Delicious page, develop-
ing one-sheet American Psychological Association and Modern Language
Association style guide references, and assisting with Rush’s serials migration
project (7). At both libraries, the student was asked to provide feedback on
existing processes and procedures as someone with a unique perspective:
a quasi-proxy for patrons as well as someone with training in librarianship.
The student wrote a weekly summary of experiences to give the librarians
perspective on the practicum. The student also gave a final presentation to
library staff from each institution at the end of the semester that outlined her
experiences.

BENEFITS TO THE LIBRARIES

The libraries benefited in a number of ways. The practicum student brought
new talent, skills, and insight to the libraries. Projects that were well suited
to the student’s talents and the libraries’ needs were brought to fruition. The
libraries also benefited from the dialogue they had with each other regarding
the student, and in this way were able to build on the student’s work from
one library to the other. Librarians and staff got involved in training and
the opportunity to select, interview, and “hire” a new person for the library.
When the libraries brought the student to meetings outside of the library,
as with Rush’s Morning Report and other such meetings, others within the
institution were introduced to a person who was studying for an MLIS and
the active role its own library was taking in the student’s education. Hosting
a student taking a practicum for credit allowed the librarians an opportunity
to discuss and influence what they viewed as important to the education of a
health sciences librarian during dialogue with the student’s academic advisor.

THE FUTURE OF THE RUSH-LHS COLLABORATION

Librarians from both institutions plan to continue hosting one or two
practicum students a year, meeting periodically to refine the practicum based
on student feedback. They will also explore different methods of assessing the practicum such as a standardized exit interview and conducting a longitudinal follow-up survey within the next 5 years.

Currently, the majority of prospective students for this joint practicum have been gathered from one local library school. With the availability of distance education programs to obtain library degrees, there may be a larger student population available that could take advantage of this opportunity. The librarians involved in this project would like to explore other options for advertising the practicum, such as professional networking sites, LinkedIn (8), or working with library associations headquartered in the Chicagoland area.

CONCLUSIONS

The Rush-LHS partnership shows that a joint practicum can introduce collaboration between health sciences libraries with different environments. A student gains a full semester of experience, while the mentoring librarians are able to provide more quality time and attention to the student due to the short 6-week time span at each institution. Librarians are able to mentor a library school student, who in turn offers librarians a fresh perspective on their workplace. The library school student is able to network and gain valuable workplace experience for his or her future career, gaining an understanding of multiple institutions. Hospital librarians with busy schedules may use this type of practicum as an opportunity to strengthen bonds between other hospitals or academic institutions. In this way, they can give back to their profession, showing future librarians that health sciences librarianship is a viable career choice.

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