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More than “Just an Intern”: Undergraduate Internships in Academic Libraries

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More than “Just an Intern”: Undergraduate Internships in Academic Libraries

Abstract
This presentation reports on the findings of a 2016 assessment of undergraduate internships at Musselman Library. The presentation will include the impact of these high-impact experiences on previous interns’ development of career goals, acceptance to and preparation for graduate education, and their early career.

Keywords
undergraduate internships, Musselman Library, high-impact learning, career goals, librarianship

Disciplines
Higher Education | Library and Information Science

Comments

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Good afternoon, my name is Kate Martin, I am Cataloging & Collections librarian at Musselman Library at Gettysburg College. I’m joined here today by my colleague and Research and Instruction librarian Clint Baugess. We are going to be talking with you about some of our findings from a 2016 assessment of our undergraduate internships at Musselman Library. We hope the findings of this assessment are helpful to you if your library has internships already in place, if you are thinking of starting an intern program, or how even without a formalized internship program you can support and mentor students who are interested in pursuing careers in libraries, archives or related fields.

So while most libraries employ student workers, formal internships for undergraduate students are less common. Since 1998 internships for undergraduate students and recent graduates have been a regular part of Musselman Library’s contribution to student learning and career development at Gettysburg College.

Over the course of these years the library’s internship program has grown from a single year-long internship to several endowed semester and summer-long internships.
Until recently we had never conducted a formal assessment of the program. By participating in the third cohort of ACRL’s Assessment in Action program during the 2015-16 academic year, we developed and implemented an assessment of the program’s possible impact in a few different areas. This assessment included an online survey sent to previous interns and semi-structured interviews.

The program enabled an institutional team to complete the year-long program, exploring an issue related to the library’s value and impact. The team included myself and Clint, as well as an institutional analyst and an administrator from our Center for Career Development. The team composition was important in that it kept us grounded in our institutions’ goals for student career preparedness AND enabled us to draw upon the skills our institutional researcher. We could also explore possible existing data on other campus internship programs.

We focused on a central question with three parts:

**What impact does completing an undergraduate library internship have on:**
- Preparation and success in graduate school or other advanced training
- Career and professional goals
- Early professional employment and success
To explore this main research question we relied upon the results of the online survey and the semi-structured interviews with previous interns. We designed an online survey with 29 closed and open questions. This survey was sent out to 83 previous interns from 1998-2015. Of the 83 participants, we received 45 complete responses.

To make sure we could obtain greater clarity and detail for some questions we had beyond what a survey would make possible, we identified possible participants for a series of follow-up semi-structured phone interviews. Six participants, who represented a range of graduation years, current professions, and internship types, were selected for these interviews.

Through the survey and interviews we were able to obtain a lot of information regarding the interns’ overall experience, impact on graduate school and their early career, and the skills they acquired. For today, however, we’ll just pull out a few of the major themes that appeared in both the survey and interviews. These major themes included obtaining a hands-on and tailored experience, an opportunity to explore a career as an undergraduate, having a close mentorship experience, and initiation into the profession.
Let’s take a look at two of these themes in more detail. The fact that interns were given projects and responsibilities that were based on their particular interests was of real value, as was getting hands-on practical experiences in different areas of academic librarianship. Our year-long Holley internship program has interns rotating through all departments of the library which our survey and interviews revealed was helpful in identifying possible areas of specialization that matched their personal and work-related interests.

One respondent also said that they “couldn’t have picked my career path without this internship showing me the way, and allowing me to delve into something unknown.”

Being treated as a colleague was also shown to be of value to previous interns. One respondent said: “You might feel like ‘just an intern’ but you are never treated that way. I was taught that my input and ideas were as important as the librarian’s ideas and was always given the opportunity to try new things.”
Two of the other themes include “close mentorship” and “initiation into the profession.”

As Kate mentioned, participants valued the practical, hands-on experience they receive. They also identified that it was valuable throughout graduate school and while job hunting for their first professional position -- 54.8% identified that their internship “very much” positively impacted their acceptance to their program. 25.8% identified “quite a bit.”

Similarly, when asked about how much it helped them to obtain their first position – 48.4% identified “very much” and 22.6% “quite a bit.”

Many respondents stated that the skills they acquired during the internship allowed them to bypass or test out of the general, introductory classes in graduate school and advance directly into higher-level courses. Others shared that it allowed them to know how to interact professionally, to understand the “big picture” of library organizations, to understand the interconnectedness of people’s work, and to learn how to work on a team.

Beyond experience working in a professional setting, others noted the internship as their entry into the larger profession. One previous intern commented, “It was the beginning of my professional network of librarians and library staff that I knew I could turn to for advice and guidance when needed. Professional networks are so important and it was nice to have that started even before graduate school.” Another wrote, “I value the contacts that it allowed me to make. I believe that because of the internship, I have another set of colleagues in the field that I can turn to for help and advice.”
Informing Practice at Gettysburg

• Aligning outcomes to intern experience
• Diversify the background of students applying to our internships
• Prepare interns for participating in professional organizations
• Expand the “big picture” beyond our academic library
• Updated the content of internships to introduce and prepare interns
  for tasks they may be asked to complete at different types of
  institutions

Today we have really only been talking about some of the responses related to our interest in interns’ preparation and success in graduate school or other advanced training, but we also collected a lot of data about their career and professional goals and early professional employment and success.

Given that larger context, we wanted to share a few of the ways in which we have made changes as a result of the assessment. As with all assessments, we want to make sure we are closing the loop and putting our findings into action.

1. In order to design the survey and interviews, we had to have a clear vision of what our collective goals are for our interns across the library. That was a helpful conversation to have and one that continues each year as supervisors for interns review exit interview feedback from interns and discuss what worked and didn’t, and so on.
2. As with all of our positions, we have been working to diversify our applicant pools, focusing on all areas of diversity, including the academic majors from which students are coming.
3. Looking at our interns’ later participation in professional organizations, we have been working to make sure we are connecting students to relevant organizations that will support them throughout their education and career. We have our interns attend conferences with us – from archives to user services – and present with librarians when possible.
4. We are also exposing interns to the bigger picture of librarianship beyond a small liberal arts college. This includes introducing places like the public library or our local seminary library to interns as well.
5. After the assessment revealed that while the majority of interns have worked in academic libraries, museums, and archives of all types, they had also worked in other types of institutions from religious archives to digital heritage centers and library services companies. We want to be sure we are preparing interns more broadly and situating their experiences within the broader profession.
For More Information

Internships at Musselman Library
https://www.gettysburg.edu/library/information/general/internships/


This presentation is only a sample of the findings from our AiA project. Our poster for the program, our final report for Gettysburg, and more information about our program is available on our website and within our institutional repository, The Cupola (http://cupola.gettysburg.edu).

Please also watch for our book chapter, which will be published in spring 2018 by ACRL.

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