

## Practice Made (More) Perfect

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Archer-Capuzzo, S. & Bird, N. J. (2022). Practice made (more) perfect. In A. Hartsell-Gundy, K. Duckett, & S. Morris (Eds.), *Learning in action: Designing successful graduate student work experiences in academic libraries* (pp. 117-130). Association of College and Research Libraries.



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### **Abstract:**

Educating the next generation of librarians requires a combined effort involving practicing librarians, library educators and the programs that they represent, and the profession represented through its many allied organizations. This chapter will examine the practicum program at the library and information science (LIS) program of the University of North Carolina at Greensboro (UNCG). First accredited by the American Library Association in 1982, the program focuses primarily on libraries, archives, and similar information organizations as the place where people and information connect through services provided by professional librarians. About one-third of the students specialize in service to higher education institutions at the community college, four-year liberal arts, and university levels. The program recently instituted a requirement for students to complete hours in a workplace setting as part of a capstone course, but this chapter is based on reports from students who completed a 120-hour practicum elective (also sometimes called an internship, field experience, or other names, depending on the institution).<sup>1</sup> Through the use of a survey and gathered testimonials, the students reported on their experiences with learning while doing in the field.

**Keywords:** LIS program | practicum | graduate students | librarians | libraries

### **Article:**

**\*\*\*Note: Full text of article below**

## CHAPTER 7

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Educating the next generation of librarians requires a combined effort involving practicing librarians, library educators and the programs that they represent, and the profession represented through its many allied organizations. This chapter will examine the practicum program at the library and information science (LIS) program of the University of North Carolina at Greensboro (UNCG). First accredited by the American Library Association in 1982, the program focuses primarily on libraries, archives, and similar information organizations as the place where people and information connect through services provided by professional librarians. About one-third of the students specialize in service to higher education institutions at the community college, four-year liberal arts, and university levels. The program recently instituted a requirement for students to complete hours in a workplace setting as part of a capstone course, but this chapter is based on reports from students who completed a 120-hour practicum elective (also sometimes called an internship, field experience, or other names, depending on the institution).<sup>1</sup> Through the use of a survey and gathered testimonials, the students reported on their experiences with learning while doing in the field.



## Background

The education of library professionals began as training programs or apprenticeships that were located within and managed by individual libraries and their librarian staff. The content of these programs was unique to each institution, as most shared few processes and procedures. As library standards were established and the demand for library workers increased, it became obvious that centralized education would be more efficient. In the early 1880s, Melvil Dewey established the first School of Library Economy at Columbia University. Although the curriculum was set, there was also a strong emphasis on apprenticeships, and other early library programs, including one at the Los Angeles Public Library, combined courses with frequent work in libraries.<sup>2</sup>

The move to the master's degree as the preparation for professional roles deemphasized the apprenticeship and focused on academic preparation. Indeed, library school programs remain mixed on whether to require a practicum. A recent unpublished review of program requirements showed that only 26 percent of the sixty-six ALA-accredited programs demand this type of experiential learning, but the numbers change frequently. Over the years, practicing librarians have criticized the strength of practical preparation among recent graduates and called on LIS programs to institute experiential learning requisites.<sup>3</sup>

Experiential learning can be transformative for all parties involved in the work if that goal is intentionally embedded into the design of the practicum, as shown in a multiyear project entitled Real Learning Connections.<sup>4</sup> In that study, the supervising practitioner, the library student, and the library program all learned something from the boundary-spanning that is required when students encounter work for the first time and supervisors reengage with the academy. In fact, the entire organization may evolve in these situations because the student or the library professor overseeing the experience may question current practice.<sup>5</sup> Rethinking, redesigning, or updating can emerge when naivete, knowledge, and experience converge. The curriculum can also change in response to the evaluations by the supervising librarian and the students, leading to modifications in existing courses and the development of new offerings.

Library education is now almost exclusively presented in various online formats. Although there are still in-person classes in some programs, 85 percent of UNCG LIS students, for instance, are registered as distance/online. This has created challenges and opportunities for arranging practicums. Academic libraries in institutions with LIS graduate programs sometimes offer a paid opportunity to practice reference skills,<sup>6</sup> but as LIS programs have switched to a primarily online mode of delivery, there has been a change in their ability to recruit. Some have started to use virtual student help, especially to do chat reference and create tutorials.<sup>7</sup> Many library activities can be done virtually, including social media creation and distribution; digital collection enhancement, including adding



metadata and creating new records; and embedded librarianship. One of our longest running virtual practicums has been hosted by a community college where library students are embedded in a class and produce tutorials, answer questions, and provide instruction for the students in that class.<sup>8</sup>

Additionally, students may not be confined by the location of a library school. Therefore, students may be looking for opportunities well beyond college towns and cities, allowing more rural libraries to enjoy the benefits of a student intern. The opportunity to work with multiple library schools also presents challenges, as each school may have unique requirements to be negotiated. Open lines of communication throughout the practicum with the LIS program can overcome many of these challenges. For example, at UNCG

1. A practicum liaison acts as the point person for questions and works directly with the students and sites to set up goals, expectations, and rules.
2. The practicum liaison keeps a database of potential practicums that may be available during any semester. Job ads can be shared with students via a departmental jobs board or the departmental electronic discussion list. While this does not guarantee that each site will find a student worker each semester, as our students are distributed around the country, it increases students' awareness of sites that will welcome their interest.
3. A faculty member supervises the practicum class, gives grades, administers evaluations, and handles problems that occur during the semester of the experience. The professor assigns learning activities such as reflective journaling and other short exercises that encourage students to connect theory with practice.

## Gathering Stories

To gain a deeper understanding of what students see as a successful practicum, we invited eighty-five current and former students in the UNCG MLIS program to take a survey (see appendix); all had completed the practicum in the past three years. Of those, twenty-two (approximately 26 percent) provided usable responses. All respondents were anonymous. We also asked eight current and former students to provide longer testimonials about their practicum experiences. All eight responded. Several central themes that led to practicum success emerged in the surveys and testimonials: preparation (on the student's part and on the part of the host institution and supervisor), communication, and respect.

### *Preparation*

In her testimonial, Alyssa Nance wrote,



One thing I heard from others in my cohort was that their placements weren't really prepared to help them meet their goals in some way, so I appreciated the preparation and thoughtfulness that my site supervisors put into crafting my experience.

Preparation for the practicum is the responsibility of the student and the site. Preparation for the student begins with their coursework in the MLIS program. Aspen Chang wrote,

The biggest thing that helped—and I am not exaggerating—was all the LIS class[es] I had taken up to that point.... There isn't a particular aspect of the class that helped, but [it] did help me to map out what objectives I needed to accomplish with the materials and time I had on hand.

However, coursework alone cannot prepare every student to step into a practicum without guidance. Soni Philip wrote that “the practical purpose of some... coursework... was unclear,” so for those students who have never worked in a library or similar organization, a practicum is an important way to gain experience and tie what they learned in class to what they will do as professionals. Joint preparation on the part of the site and the student can help students feel ready for this new and vital experience.

Sites can begin planning for student volunteers by carefully crafting job descriptions for practicums. This provides a starting point from which they and the student can work to set goals and design projects. Goal setting is central to a successful practicum. Fifteen of the twenty-two survey respondents indicated that they worked with their site supervisor to set goals unique to the student. Rebekah Hilton wrote, “My supervisor... worked with me to create **specific and measurable goals**, which were weekly in my case... this helped give me perspective, so I could see progress even in as little as a week” (emphasis in original). Hilton is not alone in these thoughts. Other students also cited goals “driven by [their] learning and career interests” as being highly beneficial, and many also emphasized the importance of having smaller weekly goals that helped them see progress throughout the semester.<sup>9</sup>

Sites must also plan for the onboarding procedures that will be necessary to have the student accomplish the planned goals. This might include specific training, information technology (IT) access and passwords, parking, and transportation. Training may include only what is necessary for the library work, but for one practicum in a medical library attached to a large medical center, the student was required to take a daylong safety course in order to be in the building. IT access may mean having an institutional email address, and that may require the student to be considered staff. It is important to consider practicum



participants' status. Are they more like work-study students or like staff? How will they be referred to during the experience? These issues should be clear as the practicum job description is being written.

If students are going to be considered more like staff, sites should consider requiring an interview before the experience. This will give students a chance to practice professionalism and communication skills as they research the institution that they are applying to and get ready to answer questions about their knowledge, skills, and abilities. An interview takes time but can avoid problems later.

Students were overwhelmingly positive about sites that specifically tied the tasks and projects students would work on to their goals. Kyle Burkett wrote, "I think the most important thing was having a specific project to work on. While I was working on the... project, the library and I had clear goals and expectations, so that part of [the practicum] ran very smoothly." A specific project or set of projects that a student is assigned for the semester is an excellent way for them not only to learn, but also to produce a final product that the practicum site can benefit from and that the student can point to as they enter the job market.

We cannot overemphasize the importance of tying projects to goals set by the student and site supervisor. This communicates clear expectations to the student, an important element of a successful practicum.<sup>10</sup> As Philip wrote,

The structure of my practicum experience, and the LIS [practicum] course, combined to make my practicum experience a success. The practicum... was structured to provide me with the skills and knowledge [I needed] to collaborate with [my] team to develop, present, and promote programs and professional services.

This clarity helps the student do better work (which benefits the student *and* the practicum site), but it has an added benefit. Feeling that the practicum is an experience designed by and for them encourages students to do their best work. It also helps the host institution utilize the strengths and interests of each student in the best way for that person and the library. Nance echoed these sentiments, writing,

I think the two main things that made my practicum a success were that I was well prepared and that my placements were able to be flexible and creative in creating tasks that would allow me to meet my learning goals.

In response to the emphasis students and site supervisors placed on setting goals, the UNCG LIS department has integrated goal setting into the preparation process students engage in for their capstone course field experience. All



students completing a field experience as part of their capstone course will now turn in a set of goals and associated projects before the beginning of their field experience semester. Students and supervisors are guided through the process with an open-ended list of questions and may call upon the practicum liaison as needed for feedback. If the program is successful, it will be expanded to include all students completing a practicum or capstone field experience.

## **Communication**

In their 2011 article, Ferrer-Vinent and Sobel wrote that “one of the best aspects [of a practicum] for students is the insight, attitudes, and knowledge gained from interaction with site librarians.”<sup>11</sup> McGurr and Damasco also emphasize the importance of communication, further pointing out that students need to communicate effectively with supervisors.<sup>12</sup> As stated above, communication should start with a conversation between the student and site that leads to goal setting and a planned project. After this, the communication must continue.

It can be tempting to design a single practicum experience and reuse it for every student. This, after all, can save the supervisor valuable time, and, truth be told, this strategy can work for many students. However, not all students want to have the same practicum experience or come to the practicum with the same level of skills or knowledge. It is important that the supervisor communicate clearly in the first meeting with the student what the site is looking for and then stick with the plan they make with the student. When this does not happen, students often feel dissatisfied with the experience. For example, Burkett found the ever-changing nature of his practicum and a recurrent lack of communication from his supervisor to be especially frustrating:

There were some miscommunications between the university and the library about who could oversee a practicum. Our original point of contact, who put together the cataloging project, had taken a position with another library soon after I started, but that wasn't really much of a problem. The leader of practica [at the library] did not have a clear vision of my previous experience, so she wrongfully assumed that I had never worked in access services before and felt that it was important for me to get that experience. She had the unstated goal of letting me see all of the ways that librarians and libraries do not live up to their promise, which I found unnecessary and even a little insulting. (To be clear, when pressed, she did admit to that goal, but only when I pulled her aside to talk about what was not working in the practicum.)... Most of the tasks I performed with access services were only practicing activities I had done as regular work duties in other libraries, and because of the lack of good



communication, it was highly unfocused—none of the clear goals and expectations that I had in the tech services department. It's not that they had expectations and weren't communicating them—they really had no idea what to do with me.... In the spirit of "making it up as we go along," at the later end of the practicum we cut hours from access services so I could work on more cataloging, which again created confusion based on mixed expectation.

Feeling that a supervisor is available, involved, and receptive allows students to build confidence in the workplace. Sujait Llanes wrote that one of the biggest strengths in her practicum was that

I had great guidance from my supervisors and support from everyone.... They were always very willing to [let] me shadow them and [be] part of meetings. They were very happy [to help] me gain as much experience and see as much of how the library works while I was there [as possible].

This feeling of connection with a supervisor is doubly important for those students completing practicums online. Hilton wrote that doing a virtual practicum was perfect for her schedule and allowed her to work somewhere she otherwise could not have. However, sometimes that distance left her "feeling somewhat isolated.... It would have been more difficult had the line of communication not been so open." Similarly, one survey respondent praised the availability of the supervisor for their online practicum, writing, "We had routine web meetings and consistent email correspondence."

A student's feeling that a supervisor was available was driven in large part by the supervisor. Two of the most important things supervisors can do to make students feel they are available are to schedule frequent check-ins and provide timely feedback. Hilton reported that she and her supervisor

corresponded several times per week for the first few weeks to make sure I understood what was being asked of me. My supervisor was quick to respond, gave plenty of detail and examples, and worked well with me to determine the timeline of my assignments. She also gave timely and constructive feedback as I submitted assignments.

For many students, their practicum is their first job in a library or similar setting. They come to this job with at least a semester of MLIS courses under their belts, but they are well aware of the fact that they do not know everything. Checking in frequently acclimates them to the new environment, while regular,



timely, constructive feedback helps them stay on track, learn new skills, and build confidence.

Checking in frequently also allows the site and student to adjust to changes. For example, one survey respondent wrote,

My supervisor asked in the beginning if I wanted to add goals, and I didn't have much to add, but when she asked again mid-practicum, I did. I think the midpoint checkup in the practicum is really very important and shouldn't be brushed over.

Frequent check-ins with students also encourage them to ask questions and ask for feedback when they need it. Nance put it well when she wrote:

I felt empowered to ask questions and to ask for what I needed to achieve my goals. I tend to, perhaps unabashedly, ask quite a lot of questions when I am learning new things, and the team of people I was working with didn't deter any of them. A few times during the practicum, I felt that I could get off course if I didn't remind someone on my team or ask for confirmation of the short- and long-term plans and expectations. Everyone at my sites was receptive to my questions, and I think together my focus on my goals with their support and flexibility helped make the practicum experience a success.

Effective communication is one of the many soft skills that are generally easier to teach students in a practicum than in a classroom, especially in the increasing number of online classrooms. Teaching soft skills begins with the example of how the supervisor and other employees work with the student and continues as the student tries out those skills on their own. Sarah Fetzer wrote about the many specific skills she gained during her practicum, from creating webinars about research methods to working one-on-one with students, but she pointed out:

The soft skills that I learned have proven to be far more important in my career. Working directly with students from a wide variety of skill levels provided an opportunity to practice tailoring my communication style for different needs.... The opportunity to work with many librarians in a fairly large community college grew my network of professional connections significantly.

As a result of this study and the changing needs of our students and site supervisors due to the COVID-19 pandemic, UNCG LIS has placed new emphasis on our communication with sites and students. We created two websites designed to communicate about field experiences with supervisors specifically (<https://>

sites.google.com/uncg.edu/lis-practicum/home) and with students preparing to take the capstone (<https://sites.google.com/uncg.edu/lis-capstone/home>). The practicum liaison has also stepped up efforts to recruit sites from a broad range of locations and disciplines (expanding beyond typical libraries, archives, and special collections) and to encourage flexible experiences that can be completed on-site, remotely, or both.

## ***Respect***

Feeling respected makes students feel more confident and empowered in their practicums. Showing respect for a student worker can begin with giving them “meaningful work to do” early in the experience.<sup>13</sup> One survey respondent suggested,

Sites should have a very clear idea of what daily work will look like for students and be willing and expect to sacrifice some degree of productivity for the student’s benefit. Some students in my cohort seemed to be working only for their placement’s benefit, possibly without concrete goals or an ability to advocate for themselves.

Hosting a practicum student is a time-consuming endeavor, which can drain individuals and the library. One way to offset this challenge, while providing students with needed guidance, is to share responsibilities. Philip was especially pleased that her supervisor did just that, writing:

My practicum supervisor created an inclusive environment at the library. I was able to observe and assist with all aspects of program development and delivery. The librarians took the time to explain their quartiles and programs of service and always included me in program delivery. This hands-on experience... gave me the confidence and the means to interview successfully.

Another way to marry respect for the student and time saving for the library is to allow the student some degree of autonomy. This is much easier later in the practicum but can be incorporated into the student’s work early in the experience. For example, one survey respondent reported,

My mentor did initial tutorials on various online systems, then had me assist her with the tasks associated with those systems. After I assisted her for a couple of weeks, she gave me my own tasks that I was to complete on my own. She had a good balance between instruction and allowing me to perform self-led tasks.



This terraced movement from more guidance to more autonomy over the course of the practicum provides students with an excellent balance that meets their changing needs. However, it is important to continue to provide guidance throughout the practicum. Chang cited the independence she enjoyed during her practicum as a positive and a negative, writing that “having a good bit of trust and autonomy from the library staff” helped her feel valuable, but also pointing out that “having no experience and no ‘assigned’ librarian to help me often led to me mentally questioning if what I was doing was right and of benefit to the library.”

Another way to help students feel respected and empowered is to encourage them to think critically about their practicum and share those thoughts with others. This can take the form of meetings with the supervisor or other employees. It can also be more formal. One survey respondent wrote, “My supervisor had me do a mini presentation at the end [of the practicum]. It was to show all my coworkers what I had learned, but it really helped me show myself all that I had learned.” This sort of self-reflection helps students as they zero in on the career they wish to pursue and keeps them excited about the field (not always easy at the end of two or more years of graduate study). It also helps them to see their strengths and weaknesses in a more objective light, often realizing that the uncomfortable moments during their practicum usually accompanied the moments of greatest learning. For example, Morgan Pruitt wrote that the practicum “helped me to figure out what I like to do best... [and] helped me to articulate some of my strengths and interests more effectively.”

## Best Practices

Several best practices can help sites work more effectively with practicum students. First, *setting goals* is essential for designing a meaningful experience. Goal setting should be a joint effort of the student and site supervisor but can be aided by a job description. Designing one or more meaningful, professional-level projects or tasks tailored specifically to the goals provides a tangible product that benefits the site and the student.

*Clear communication* helps students understand expectations and responsibilities. Scheduling regular check-ins can help keep the lines of communication open throughout the practicum. Further, providing timely, constructive feedback on student work facilitates the learning process. At the beginning of the practicum, many students need more guidance and oversight; however, as the practicum progresses, they can generally be given more autonomy. This balance between oversight and independence demonstrates a *respectful work environment* for students, making them feel valued and helping them gain confidence.

Field experience is a valuable part of LIS studies. While coursework can provide students with the theoretical backdrop necessary for a long, successful

career in this vibrant, ever-changing field, hands-on experience fills many gaps inherent in purely theoretical study. Making the field experience as meaningful as possible for students has benefits for not only the students, but also their practicum sites and supervisors, the universities at which they study, their future employers, and the library community as a whole. One survey respondent put it perfectly when they wrote, "Prioritizing practical experience really changed the way I saw myself as a professional, especially as someone coming from a non-library background. It helped me to build confidence in [a] way that my courses did not."

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- How did you set goals for the organization? Check all that apply.
- The organization was designed with particular goals in mind.
- The organization worked with me to set goals that were important to me.
- I approved my own goals.
- Can you describe the difference between the organization's goals and yours?
- How do you do the work required to meet the organization's goals?
- What made you want to work for this organization?
- Would you like to add anything else that would help you work for this organization better?
- Notes
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## APPENDIX

### Survey Questions

How did you find/arrange your practicum?

- Department practicum liaison
- Department list
- Listserv announcement
- Recommendation from faculty
- Recommendation from employer
- Own initiative
- Other \_\_\_\_\_

Was the practicum site prepared for you to work there?

- Yes
- No
- Other \_\_\_\_\_

Was the practicum supervisor prepared for you to work at the site?

- Yes
- No
- Other \_\_\_\_\_

Were you prepared for the work that you were expected to do?

- Definitely yes
- Probably yes
- Might or might not
- Probably not
- Definitely not

How did you set goals for the experience? Check all that apply

- The practicum was designed with particular goals that were advertised.
- The supervisor worked with me to set particular goals that were unique to me.
- I proposed my own goals.

Can you describe the balance between mentoring from the supervisor and their trust in you to do the work assigned?

What made your practicum a success?

What did not work?

Would you like to add anything else that would help supervisors and sites design better practicums?

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