

"It's about helping people": Co-op experiences of LIS students in academic libraries

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Professional Identity & Field Experiences

Professional identity is the set of attributes, beliefs, values, motives, and experiences that contribute to peoples' definition of themselves in a professional role (Schein 1978).

Development of professional identity can be seen as the result of socialization processes that occur both in education and in work environments.

Field experiences are uniquely positioned at the intersection of education and the work environment.

The current study examines the prominence of service/helping in the field experiences of LIS students.

This study aims to gain greater understanding of LIS students perceptions of helping as a feature of their professional identity.

Methods

Semi-structured interviews were conducted with 13 MLIS students from Western and UBC who had recently completed a co-op placement in an academic library.

Interview questions focused on three themes: daily activities in the co-op placement, students' perception of their professional identity, and their professional & career goals.

Interviews were audio-recorded, transcribed and coded. A grounded theory approach was used in the analysis.

Co-op student helping librarians

Co-op students described their role as being one of supporting and assisting the librarians with whom they worked. In many cases, students highlighted that projects assigned to them were ones that librarians did not have enough time to complete:

"everyone's kind of stretched... I was the person who... had the time"

Students appeared comfortable with taking on an "assisting" or "helper" role within the library. They often described instances where they sought out projects and other work from busy librarians:

"I was very willing to help in any way that I was asked to."

Librarians helping the co-op student

When students described their relationships with academic librarians, they frequently emphasized librarians' willingness to help and share their knowledge:

"everybody was really kind and really... went out of their way to say if I ever had any questions"

The guidance and assistance offered to co-op students appeared to be a replacement for a lack of formal training provided to students:

"touching base with folks who could potentially provide information, or... insight"

Helping at the core of librarianship

Students also referred to helping as lying at the core of the profession of librarianship -- "the most important thing we do":

*"what ..you do, you help people, right?
So... that would be the first thing that I would identify as being part of my job."*

The activities that were identified as ways that librarians actualized helping were wide-ranging:

"Because you [help] so many different ways through each of your duties, ...through one on one work, providing instruction, through the reference, and even the collections, you do help people directly or indirectly..."

Helping, described by one student as "encouraging and enabling and... supporting growth," was critical to the students' identity as a librarian, and was a part of the attraction to the profession:

"remember why I'm doing this, which is to serve and to help people"

Conclusions

Helping figured prominently in the co-op experiences of LIS co-op students.

Because professional identity is contingent on the attributes, beliefs, values, motives, and experiences of the profession, the prominence of helping in the experience of co-op students is significant to the professional identity of future librarians.



"...and the bottom line is that you have to help everyone"

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