**A Study of Master of Library Science Candidates and Librarians at a Practicum Site**

**Library**

**Abstract**

**Purpose** – The purpose of this paper is to augment knowledge about perceived benefits and drawbacks of practicum programs in academic libraries.

**Design/methodology/approach** – Many library science programs require or encourage practicum experiences. The authors surveyed past practicum students and site librarians about experiences with their practicum program.

**Findings** – Practica in librarianship that balance structure and independence were reported to be beneficial, both for practicum students and for the libraries that host them. Students enjoyed the theory-to-practice aspects and the diverse populations of the academic library. The Auraria Campus's student body displays great diversity in terms of race and ethnicity, socioeconomics, age, and prior educational experiences. Practicum participants also made constructive suggestions for changes in terms of structure and content. Students and site librarians valued their interactions with each

other, even though the librarians were aware that mentoring and supervising practicum students consumes time.

**Originality/value** – At present, the library literature contains very few examples of evaluation strategies for library practicum programs. This article presents an easily adaptable model for assessing practicum programs in order to make improvements to their own programs. MLS programs, students, and libraries should consider these results when evaluating or considering practicum programs.

**Keywords:** Practicum, mentoring, MLS, LIS, surveys, library students

**Paper type:** Research paper

**Introduction**

The practicum often helps students confirm their choice of type of library or suggests that they would do better to select another option. Many will respond that they learned what they wanted to do and the basic skills for doing it through practica or internships completed during their master of library science (MLS) programs. Practicum programs provide a combination of training and on-the-job experience in various areas of librarianship. Some MLS programs currently require a practicum; many others strongly encourage it, especially for students without practical library experience. Three or more people are generally involved in each individual practicum experience: a student, a library school faculty coordinator, and a practicum site mentor librarian.. Students completing a practicum experience often also have significant interaction with other librarians and staff at the practicum library.

The researchers for this study each participated in positive, productive and informative practica experiences during their own MLS programs. Now they both work with practicum students at the Auraria Library, an academic library in downtown Denver, Colorado. In an effort to improve the structure and content of the Auraria Library's practicum offerings, they invited past practicum participants to give feedback on their experiences. The list of questions placed significant emphasis on how practica helped influence students' eventual careers in terms of choice and skills. The feedback proved highly instructive. In this article the researchers share their survey instrument, methodology, and findings so that colleagues at other institutions might lead similar efforts to evaluate and enhance their practicum or other internship programs.

**Background**

***About the practicum site library***

The Auraria Library serves three institutions of higher education: the University of Colorado Denver, Metropolitan State College of Denver, and the Community College of Denver. The profiles of these schools and the programs they offer vary widely. The University of Colorado Denver offers degrees on the bachelor's through doctoral levels, with a particular strength in engineering. Metropolitan State College of Denver has traditionally been a four-year college with open admissions. Within the past year, however, it has instituted admissions testing and standards, and opened several master's degree-granting programs. The Community College of Denver is a relatively standard community college. It conducts special outreach to Denver's prison and

homeless populations. Thus, the Library's patrons exhibit remarkable diversity. The Library serves a total student population of 50,000 (28,000 FTE) from these three very different institutions. Many students at Metropolitan State College of Denver and the Community College of Denver are returning to school after many years in the workforce. They bring with them a wide range of educational and work experiences, as well as a variety of educational backgrounds. They also vary greatly in terms of age and socioeconomic status. All three schools display tremendous racial and ethnic diversity. In addition, Library's urban location also brings in large numbers of the public users, which add even more diversity in terms of demographics and needs. Practicum students who work on public service desks interact with this group.

*Purpose*

The authors have both mentored practicum students in the reference and instruction departments. They wanted to understand the benefits and drawbacks observed by former practicum students and librarians at the Auraria Library. The roles and influences of library school faculty coordinators were not studied since the authors would not be able to make changes in that area. Information from this study will assist Auraria Library and other librarians and library science students in planning and assessing library practica or similar programs.

*About the practicum program*

While none of the three Auraria Campus institutions offers a library science degree, the University of Denver and Emporia State University's program in Denver provide a steady stream of practicum participants. In addition, students in library science programs from other states have applied and completed practica in the library. The typical Auraria Library practicum consists of 100 hours of unpaid on-site experience , over the period of one semester. Potential participants apply and interview prior to officially arranging a practicum.

Practicum students also receive guidance from a faculty coordinator from their MLS programs. This person coordinates interaction between the MLS program and the practicum site and makes on-site visits to discuss progress with the student and site mentor. He or she also performs some evaluation of the student's performance. Typically, he or she reads through a journal that the student keeps throughout the experience and evaluates samples of the student's work. He or she collaborates with the student's on-site mentor to perform more in-depth evaluation of student work

Each student's site mentor, an Auraria librarian, begins the practicum experience by working with the student to design a set of duties based on his or her career goals. The same librarian will guide and evaluate the student throughout the semester. Some students have worked with multiple mentors because their interests span multiple areas of librarianship. Mentors provide each practicum student with approximately ten hours of training before the practicum begins. Other librarians typically participate in this training as well so that the students may benefit from their expertise. For example,

students who design practica in reference and instruction participate in a series of training sessions with subject specialists and members of the instruction department.

**Literature Review**

From their inception until 1925, all library schools in the United States required their students to complete a practicum. By the 1940s, many schools stopped having a practicum as part of their required curriculum. By 1975 only two out of 60 of American library schools mandated that students were to do a practicum (Witucke, 1976). In 2002, nine out of 56 library programs in North America (16%) required their library students to do a practicum (Markey, 2004).

Several academic librarians have studied the practicum in specific areas of librarianship. After a study of practicum participants at San Jose State University found complaints about unstructured situations, librarians there restructured the reference department's practicum program and recommended instituting a structured cataloging practicum program that includes professional cataloging work. (Leonard and Pontau, 1991). In another study, a majority of recent MLS graduates who had done cataloging practica expressed an opinion that that their practica had a positive impact on future job performance (Damasco and McGurr, 2008). A later study of students and their practicum supervisors in the same program offered a list of ideas for improving the cataloging practicum (McGurr and Damasco, 2010). Practica in the area of preservation at the University of Tennessee were reported to be advantageous not only for the students but also for the preservation department (Starmer, 2004). Mardis (2007) reported the opinions of nine students with prior teaching experience as they

participated in a library media studies practicum. Two recent graduates from the University of Hawaii library program reported on their instruction practicum that was combined with an instruction methods course (Meulemans and Brown, 2001). The idea of introducing research as a component of the academic library practicum was proposed because of the emphasis within academic libraries for research by librarians (Berg *et al.*, 2009).

Several studies have also surveyed practicum students without focusing on particular areas of librarianship. A group from ALA's Emerging Leaders program perceived a practicum experience as an important part of their library science educations  (Krichten *et al.*, 2009). Richey (1997) offered suggestions to prospective practicum students based on her observations as a reference supervisor of library graduate students during their practica at her institution. Similarly, Warren (1997) related her experiences as a practicum students and proposed ideas to administrators, librarians, and students. One MLS graduate who had *not participated in a practicum* thought that adjusting to his first job would have been easier if he had done so (Holland, 2006). Speaking from a library director's perspective, Ketcham (1997) mentions some items for academic libraries to keep in mind when thinking of starting a practicum site. Clagett et al. (2002) present their opinions about the benefits of practica for students, site libraries, and library school programs.

Although many library schools offer the opportunity of a practicum, very few currently require them, according to a review of practical experiences and library education (Ball, 2008). Ballperceived a lack of available data from investigations and

surveys and concluded that there is a need for more research on library practica. The authors of this article seek to help fill that gap in knowledge about library practica, with a focus on evaluation. They intend for this information to be useful to librarians who have or want to start a practicum program, as well as library schools that administer them. They believe that MLS candidates may also benefit by better understanding the benefits of practicum programs.

**Objectives**

The researchers worked with several objectives in mind:

- To discover if past Auraria Library practicum students felt their experiences benefited their eventual careers.

- To identify ways in which Auraria Library practicum experiences could be improved.

- To examine site librarians' reactions to working with practicum students

- To develop a model for repeated assessment of the Auraria Library's practicum program that other libraries could easily adapt

- To share our methods and results with the ultimate goal of enhancing all practicum experiences

**Methodology**

The authors developed two surveys: one for past Auraria Library practicum students and another for librarians who have worked with these students at Auraria

(See Appendices 1 and 2). The researchers aimed to keep the surveys simple and quick. Responses were anonymous, although respondents were offered the chance to include contact information if they would be willing to participate in a brief follow-up interview. Both surveys were administered online using Zoomerang software. All potential study participants received an email invitation with a link to the appropriate study.

Prior to administering the study, the researchers asked a sampling of colleagues to critique the surveys. They also used the first few online survey responses by past practicum students as a field test. These two levels of pre-testing produced a few small changes in wording before finally releasing the surveys to the intended recipients.

The authors attempted to find as complete a list as possible of former practicum students. Unfortunately, the library did not keep a complete registry of past participants. Department heads and other librarians with major roles in the practicum program provided the working list of 23 former students' names. The authors found contact information for 19 of those names. Through Auraria's librarians, professional organizations, and/or social networking tools such as LinkedIn and Facebook.

The researchers obtained approval from the University's Institutional Review Board for this study. The nineteen former students they had located received the survey. The contact message contained a description of the study, a link to the online survey, and the researchers' contact information. After waiting a few weeks, the researchers sent the librarians' survey to their colleagues at the Auraria Library.

For each of the two surveys, the researchers sent a follow-up message with a link to the survey one month after the initial message. After each survey had been available

for approximately four months, the researchers closed them. Responses to explicit questions and any apparent patterns or correlations were compiled and evaluated. Since the numbers of respondents for both surveys were low, the researchers chose not to use any formal statistical analysis or software.

**Results and Discussion**

***Students' practicum data and current working situation***

A total of 10 past practicum students provided complete sets of answers to the survey. Those students had completed practica between 1983 and 2009, but responses came mostly from recent participants – 50% reported having completed their practica during the 2008-2009 school year. Only one respondent had attended an MLS program other than at the University of Denver. Since most respondents were recent participants and from one MLS program, the results of this study reflect the practicum paradigm described in the "Background" section above.

Most students who responded to the survey had completed work in reference. Other work was done in instruction, cataloging, collection development, and Web. Table 1 shows the specialty areas in which practicum students reported working at Auraria. Students were allowed to choose as many options as applicable. Options that received zero responses appear in the chart because students have participated in practica in these areas.
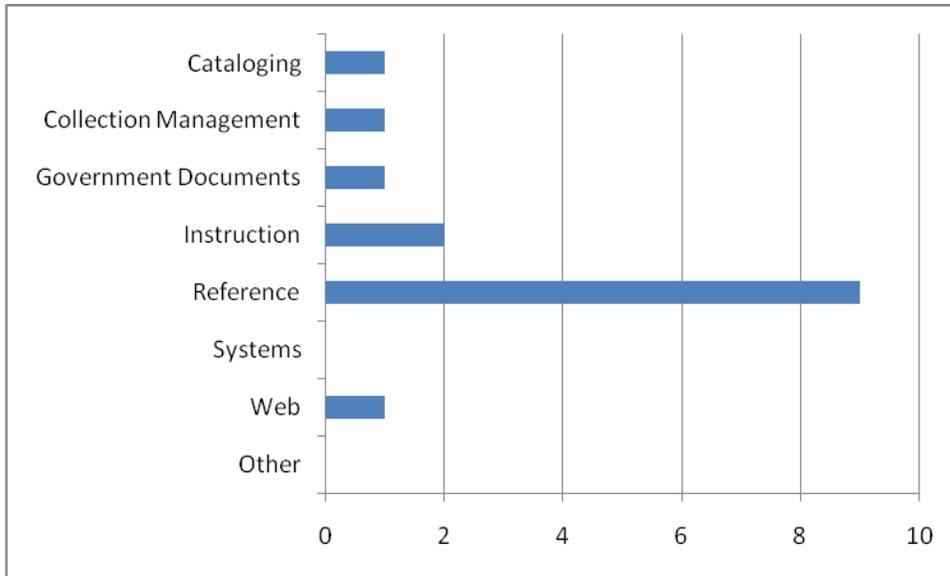
**Table 1: Areas in which practicum students worked. Students were allowed to choose all applicable answers.**

Seventy percent of respondents currently work in a professional librarian position. Specialty areas mentioned included reference, instruction, cataloging, administration, and government documents. Of these, 71% work in academic libraries, 14% in public libraries, and 14% in other types of libraries. No respondents reported working in school or special libraries. Their current library geographic settings were 57% urban, 29% suburban, and 14% rural. The numbers of patrons their libraries serve varies greatly. Seventeen percent work at libraries serving fewer than 5,000 patrons. Sixty-six percent serve between 10,000 and 50,000 patrons. The remaining seventeen percent serve over 500,000 patrons, suggesting that they work in major urban library systems. (Note that no respondents reported working at libraries with patron populations of certain sizes.) It can be seen that these student respondents had their practicum experiences with

reference services in a large, academic library; however, they work now in a broad spectrum of library jobs and settings. In addition these students, with a wide variety of current library careers, commented that the Auraria Library helped prepare them for their current positions. Apparently practicum experiences that do not match one's eventual field of work still prove useful. Based on free responses, it appears that practicum work with a diversity of patrons and information needs helped prepare this group of future librarians for the patrons they were to serve later in other types of jobs and setting.

### Students' opinions about their practica

Question four was intended to evaluate the amount of structure provided by the practicum program. The majority of the students (80%) indicated an appropriate blend of structure and flexibility. Ten percent indicated that their practica needed more structure, and 10% indicated that they had too much structure. In related free responses, one person indicated that there were "too many orientation sessions." Another student, however, stated that having more structure in the beginning of the practicum experience would have helped but that the rest of the program included a satisfying amount of guidance.

Two questions, nine and eleven, investigated the ways in which students felt they had benefited from program participation. Most responses (70%) mentioned the opportunity of putting theory into practice, 50% indicated highly positive interactions with Auraria librarians, 30% liked the diverse patron population, and only 10%

mentioned learning specific resources. All responses were positive to the specific query about Auraria's patron population and library atmosphere – indicating that they enjoyed the diversity and challenges. The positive applicability of these experiences was mentioned many times. The majority of respondents (78%) said that they applied the skills learned during the practicum in their current jobs (question 12).

Although no questions dealt explicitly with the concept of mentorship, numerous students brought this up on their own. Many students commented that they had either found strong formal or informal mentorship through the program. For example, one student thanked a supervisor for simply introducing him or her to a wide variety of librarians. This person appreciated how the program's strong centralized mentorship role that also branched out to minor, additional mentor roles. Others commented that they had not developed a mentoring relationship with an Auraria librarian; however, he or she recognized the potential for mentoring and wished that it had occurred. A third way that mentorship appeared in responses was when students commented that time spent with librarians at the reference desk constituted strong learning experiences. One simply commented, "I learned a lot by conversing with various librarians at the [reference] desk."

Students reported that the library's atmosphere prepared them for their future work. Variety in experience with patrons was the students' most frequent category for positive response. One commented, "I enjoyed the library's patrons. The patrons at Auraria Library have questions that seem to be a mixture of academic and public library questions, with varying levels of library and technology experience." Others expressed a

wish that such diversity could continue later in their careers. One remarked, "I wish I still had that kind of variety."

Another survey question asked about the effect of the practicum on students' eventual careers. For 40% of students the practicum was a major factor in successfully getting a job. Another 40% appreciated the confidence and knowledge that the practica gave them for doing their jobs and 20% said they were unsure or thought the practicum had no effect.

*Site librarians' opinions about practica*

The researchers surveyed Auraria Library colleagues who have either served as assigned mentors to students or who have provided other significant on-the-job guidance. Twelve librarians responded to the survey.

Questions two and three sought to define the nature of site librarians' interactions with the practicum students. Most responses indicated that they had worked with practicum students at the reference desk (63%) and/or for subject-specific orientation sessions (24%). Other interactions were for bibliographic instruction sessions or with cataloging activities. Specific supervisory roles were for reference and instruction services, collection development, cataloging, technical services and web development, and special projects.

Question four asked about what these site librarians felt that students gain from practicum experiences. The researchers aimed to compare librarians' perceptions with those of the students. Most librarians perceived the same benefits as the students

reported: putting theory into practice and learning if they like librarianship (61%), the diverse population (17%), and interaction with experienced field librarians (17%). One thought that it was useful for students to gain familiarity with online systems.

Question seven, "What, if anything, do you gain from interacting with practicum students?" probed the librarians' side of the relationship. All responding librarians thought that they benefited from interactions with practicum students. Descriptions of the advantages include "fresh perspectives," learning alternate methods, exposure to new ideas, and re-evaluating policies and procedures. Question five, "What do you think are the most important contributions of practicum students to the library?" explored related perceptions. As with the question about the benefits to librarians (Question 7), most responses (65%) mentioned students' fresh ideas, new perspectives, and pertinent questions. The remainder (35%) appreciated students' assistance with reference, instruction, special projects, etc., which helped with the library's workload.

Question six explored whether the practicum program had a down side in librarians' eyes. Responses indicated that librarians do see one negative aspect – all responding librarians commented that their responsibilities to the practicum students prove consistently time-consuming. This does not, however, reduce the value of the program. Interestingly, librarians focused less on the diversity of patrons and their needs than on the frenzied pace of serving these patrons.

*Suggestions for Improvement*

One of the researchers' major goals with this study was to help improve practicum programs for future participants. Question ten asked students, "What could have made your practicum better?" Responses to this question yielded both practical suggestions and more specific reactions to their experiences. A few respondents said that their practicum experiences were nearly perfect. Most others mentioned significant ways that the program could be improved:

- having more mentors

- giving each participant more responsibilities

- making sure that each participant produced some sort of product that could be shown at job interviews

- spending less time on subject-related orientation sessions provided by the reference department

- sticking to plans for practicum projects once they have been agreed upon

- offering a permanent job at the site library once the practicum had been completed

Individual comments on the breadth of their experiences and range of duties varied, which reflects the design of the program. Some students supported a highly focused internship; others suggested broadening the ranges of their experiences. Some students viewed the practicum as an introduction to librarianship in general, while others saw it as an intense introduction to a particular specialty.

Question eight on the survey for site librarians gathered their ideas for improving the program:

- Hire more practicum students so that the program proves more productive.

- Give individual students more time so they could be more productive.

- Coordinate the experience better between departments (no reasons given).

- Share responsibilities for supervising students among more librarians so that the project does not take so much of certain librarians' time.

- Include a report about the practicum program in the library's annual report.

- Offer paid practicum experiences for students.

- Have the library school programs that send their students to Auraria pay small stipends to the librarians who supervise them.

Notably, while Auraria's librarians frequently commented on the high value of their relationships with practicum students, few felt that they had enough time to teach all that they wanted. One eloquently commented, "Their time with us is always so short."

*Future Work*

Collecting more data would help inform future planning. Data and opinions could be gathered based on existing programs at individual libraries and shared in the library literature. A review of structures of practica would be beneficial and could be accomplished through comparison of programs or through controlled experiments at individual institutions. In addition, MLS programs might evaluate practica from their own point of view.

Results and comments gathered through this study suggest other projects for future work. Perhaps the most useful might focus on the concept of the library environment. Since many library school students do not yet know what type of library setting they will be working in, research on how to help students build a versatile base would assist students in preparing for their future careers, whatever those careers might be.

**Conclusion**

Both practicum students and host libraries tend to view practica as highly beneficial. All involved, including MLS graduate programs, should consider the benefits, disadvantages, and suggestions for improvement reported in this study.

- Students prefer a balance between structure and freedom in the practicum, with perhaps more structure in the beginning progressing into more freedom

- Students and site librarians viewed the opportunity to practice classroom learning in real-life situations as the most beneficial aspect for students, followed by the opportunity to interact with field librarians. In addition, both groups of respondents in this study saw the diversity and challenges of patron populations as a benefit for students.

- Practicum experiences assist students in their professional job searches. In addition, when they are hired as librarians, former students apply the confidence and knowledge gained in practica.

- One of best aspects for students is the insight, attitudes, and knowledge gained from interaction with site librarians. Similarly, although training and supervising the practicum students can be time-consuming, site librarians gain significantly from their interactions with students.

At this time the Auraria Library has been able to make changes in its practicum program as an outcome of this study.  Library administration has initiated a formal registry of practicum students. Students are able to set the amount of structure in their experience, within limits. Students generally now benefit from the input of two or three mentors, which also shares supervision responsibilities among several librarians. Some students now have greater responsibilities in special projects.

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**Appendix 1**

**Students' survey**

1. When did you do your practicum at the Auraria Library?

2. Where (name of university) and when did you earn your MLS degree or equivalent?

3. What area(s) of librarianship did your practicum focus on? (Choose all that apply)

       Cataloging

       Collection Management

       Government Documents

       Instruction

       Reference

       Systems

       Web

       Other, please specify

4. Did you feel that your practicum had the right amount of structure?  Too much?  Too little?

5. Are you currently working in a professional librarian position?

Yes

No

6. If you answered "Yes," to question 5, which of the following describes your library?

    Academic

    K-12 school

    Public

    Special

    Other, please specify

7. What is the setting of your library?

    Rural

    Suburban

    Urban

    Other, please specify

8. Approximately how many patrons does your library serve?

9. What was the one best thing about your practicum experience?

10. What could have made your practicum better?

11. How did you feel about working with the Auraria Library's patron population?

12. Do you apply skills you learned during your practicum at your current job?

13. How has your practicum affected your career?

14. Additional comments:

15. If you would be interested in speaking briefly with the researchers by phone or email, please enter your name and a telephone number or email address. (Your other comments will remain anonymous.)


**Appendix 2**

**Librarians' survey**

1. Have you spent time training or working with library practicum students at Auraria Library?

  Yes

  No

2. If yes, in what capacity?  (Choose all that apply.)

  At the Reference desk

  Cataloging

  During instruction sessions

  Orientations

  Practicum supervisor

  Other, please specify

3. If you supervised a student, what was the area(s) of librarianship?

4. What do you feel that students gain from practicum experiences at Auraria?

5. What do you think are the most important contributions of practicum students to the library?

6. What, if anything, is a disadvantage to having practicum students at the library?

7. What, if anything, do you gain from interacting with practicum students?

8. What changes would you suggest for the Auraria Practicum Program?

9. Any additional comments?  If you would like to speak with the researchers in person,

please leave your name. (Your other comments will remain anonymous.)