Is Experience the Best Teacher?: Field Experience and Student Learning in LIS Education Programs

Susan E. Searing and Scott Walter
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The Practice Pre-Requisite

“Library experience is as important in getting hired by a library as the MLS, maybe even more so.”

The Practice Pre-Requisite

“My field experience was by far the most important aspect of my LIS education and I draw on it every day as a professional librarian.”
The Practice Pre-Requisite

• How many people in this room participated in a “field experience” as an LIS student?
• Did the field experience help you to achieve your learning goals as an LIS student?
• Did the field experience help you to obtain your first position?
What is a “Field Experience”?

Practicum - A limited period of hands-on work in a library or other information service agency structured to provide an opportunity for a novice to relate theory to practical experience, usually in the student's field(s) of specialization. Compare with internship.

What is a “Field Experience”? 

• Graduate Assistantship 
• Research Assistantship 
• Internship 
• Practicum, Field Work, or Directed Field Study 
• Independent Study 
• Service Learning 
• Volunteer
What is a “Field Experience”?

“The student engaged in a field experience is engaged in a form of apprenticeship. This mode of learning can be especially valuable in the context of a degree-granting program, as one is able to gain active guidance on both the practice and on integrating the skills and competencies learned through practice into one's overall education.”

What is Learned in a “Field Experience”? 

The Practicum . . . . allows students to integrate the theory and knowledge of course content with the application of principles and practices in a work environment, including these specific objectives:

• To gain practical experience based on the understanding and application of theoretical knowledge.
• To observe the analysis of and solutions to problems arising in professional work settings.
• To interact with colleagues in a professional work environment.
• To participate in a representative range of professional activities in the work setting.
• To develop a professional self-awareness.

“Field Strength”

• Field Strength: Enhancing Collaboration in LIS Education through Field Experience
  – a study of the field experience at Illinois and of perceptions of the value of the field experience to placement in the first professional position
  – a study of prevailing practices at other institutions that facilitate substantive collaboration between LIS education programs and library partners in the preparation of future LIS professionals
“Field Strength”

• Student Survey
  – 31 items
  – Administered in Fall 2012
  – Administered to 388 graduates of the University of Illinois Graduate School of Library and Information Science who held a Graduate Assistantship, Research Assistantship, or completed a practicum in the Library between 2006 - 2012
  – Response rate = 26.3% (n=102)
Type of Field Experience

- Graduate Assistantship (Paid) 98%
- Practicum, field study or directed field study 44%
- Volunteer (unpaid, not for Credit) 27%
- Internship (paid & unpaid) 14%
- Service Learning (for academic credit) 12%
- Other 11%
- Research Assistantship (paid) 10%
- Independent Study (for academic credit) 7%
Number of Types of Field Experience

- Only one kind: 33%
- Two Kinds: 28%
- Three Kinds: 23%
- Four Kinds: 15%
- Five Kinds: 1%
What Works in Field Experience?

- My field experience provided the background to better understand coursework by comparing course concepts to real world library experience (SA = 76%)
- My field experience provided an opportunity to select future courses based on a more informed perspective on the profession (SA = 51%)
- My field experience provided an opportunity to learn valuable skills that would be difficult to learn in a classroom (SA = 81%)
What Works in Field Experience?

• My field experience enabled me to gain an understanding of a wide range of job opportunities within the academic library (SA = 48%)

• My field experience provided an opportunity to gain real world work experience that is valued by my profession (SA = 78%)

• My supervisor in my field experience is (or was) a mentor to me (SA = 60%)
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>25. In what ways did your field experience help you get your first professional position? Please check all that apply.</th>
<th>Percent</th>
<th>Count</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>I defined more clearly my areas of interest.</td>
<td>62%</td>
<td>63</td>
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<tr>
<td>I got advice on job searching.</td>
<td>59%</td>
<td>60</td>
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<td>My field experience led to a job with the same organization.</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>10</td>
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<tr>
<td>I got leads on open positions or professional networking opportunities.</td>
<td>29%</td>
<td>30</td>
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<tr>
<td>I gained experiences that I mentioned in my application.</td>
<td>83%</td>
<td>85</td>
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<tr>
<td>I listed my site supervisor as a reference.</td>
<td>85%</td>
<td>87</td>
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<tr>
<td>I described my field work or project during my interview.</td>
<td>78%</td>
<td>80</td>
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<tr>
<td>I included materials from my field project in a portfolio or presentation.</td>
<td>34%</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>My field experience DID NOT help me get my first professional position.</td>
<td>3%</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>6%</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Answered</strong></td>
<td><strong>100</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Skipped</strong></td>
<td><strong>2</strong></td>
<td></td>
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Common Field Experience vs. First Professional Job

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Field Experience</th>
<th>First Professional Position</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reference</td>
<td>68%</td>
<td>55%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Instruction</td>
<td>31%</td>
<td>45%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faculty Liaison</td>
<td>10%</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Collection Development</td>
<td>23%</td>
<td>24%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
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What May Not Be Working in Field Experience?

Too few experiences in emergent areas of focus in academic libraries:

- Technological innovation
- E-resource management
- Scholarly communication services
- Data curation
What May Not Be Working in Field Experience?

Too few opportunities to plan and carry out projects.
What’s Next?

- Surveying alumni of other schools.
- Reviewing program documentation.
- Listening to site supervisors and field experience administrators. How do they:
  - Develop learning outcomes
  - Design work responsibilities and projects
  - Match students to sites
  - Evaluate job performance
  - Evaluate student learning
- Listening to academic librarians
  - Emerging needs for knowledge and skill sets
Questions
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