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Redesigning an academic library internship program with equity in mind

Reflections and takeaways

In the 2021–2022 academic year, the Columbia University Libraries piloted a new approach to internships for Masters of Library and Information Science (MLIS) students and recent graduates. Reexamining longstanding practices and recognizing the opportunities afforded by remote work led to the extensive redesign and relaunch of the program. Hosted by Columbia University Libraries, the Ask A Librarian Internship provides interns with hands-on experience in various areas of academic librarianship. The new internship is 10 hours per week with compensation of \$20 per hour, with duties split between staffing chat reference and contributing to a project. By working closely with a librarian supervisor who provides guidance on internship duties as well as navigating academic librarianship more broadly, interns can gain valuable advice and experience. In this article, we share the aims and process of redesigning the program and reflect on our experiences and takeaways for academic libraries.

Planning and implementation

The Ask A Librarian Internship existed for eight years as an opportunity where MLIS students in the New York City area could obtain course credit, but not a wage, for their participation. The working group managing the chat reference service felt that offering an unpaid internship was unethical and could no longer be supported, so the decision was made to suspend the program until interns could be compensated for their labor. Unpaid internships, or any agreement where someone works for free in exchange for experience, are exploitative and put students who do not have the financial ability to pursue unpaid work at a disadvantage.¹ If an organization considers a work duty important enough to be done, the people who conduct that work must be fairly compensated.

The working group members created a proposal for a redesigned internship program, highlighting key elements such as a dramatic increase in chat reference questions because of the hybrid learning environment, a need for increased evening and weekend reference hours, and providing financial support and meaningful social and professional engagement for students. The program was approved as a pilot for the 2021–2022 academic year, with three interns in fall 2021 and five interns in spring 2022.

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In light of the pandemic’s impact upon work/life balance and employment opportunities, it was decided that the internship should be

1. open to currently enrolled as well as recently graduated library school students;
2. offered completely remotely; and
3. advertised nationally, with a focus on encouraging racialized students and recent graduates to apply.

Additionally, the working group closely reviewed the required and preferred qualifications to ensure they reflected what was necessary to succeed in the internship, and they minimized other barriers in the application process by requiring only a cover letter and résumé. Applications were accepted for one month. While applications were being received, the working group also contacted Columbia librarians to identify potential intern supervisors. Expressions of interest and project ideas were collected through a Google form and later matched with selected interns’ backgrounds and interests.

A total of 342 applications were received, and 310 applicants met the required qualifications. Using a rating rubric, each application was reviewed by at least two working group members to ensure full consideration. We attribute the large volume of applicants to the internship being paid, offered remotely, and having a flexible schedule. It is also indicative of the need library school students and recent graduates have for gaining hands-on library experience, which is more difficult than ever due to pandemic-related complications. For a summary of the advertising and hiring timeline, see figure 1.

Figure 1. Sample timeline for internship advertising and hiring process

Date	Action
Late June	Draft and finalize internship posting
Early July	Announce and advertise internship
Late July	Application deadline
Early August	Application review completed and successful applicants selected
Early August	Successful applicants notified and hiring process initiated
Mid-August	Unsuccessful applicants notified
Late August	Hiring process finalized and interns paired with their supervisors
Early September	Interns begin

Selecting just several interns from the pool of applicants proved difficult, but by narrowing down candidates over multiple discussions and prioritizing racialized candidates, the working group members identified the successful interns. Considering the large and exceptional applicant pool, members also selected candidates to consider inviting for the spring 2022 internship to avoid the need to send another call for applicants in a short period of time and conduct another review.

Interns divide their time between operating the chat reference service and conducting special projects. Both tasks can be conducted entirely online and help supplement the efforts of librarians in not only staffing a highly used service point, but also in developing research guides and online learning objects, designing and teaching workshops, web archiving, and much more. Interns meet weekly with their supervisor and monthly with other interns, supervisors, and working group members. After the first semester of the internship a feedback

form was sent to interns and intern supervisors that will guide further planning efforts. One intern and one intern supervisor/former intern share their reflections on the program and related professional issues below.

Reflections

Karen Wang: I became an Ask A Librarian Intern shortly after graduating with my MLIS from the University of Washington. Burnt out from grad school and unwilling to jump straight into the job hunt, a paid internship sounded like a good stepping stone somewhere between the unpaid labor of being a student and the somewhat paid labor of being a full-time librarian. While earning my degree, I had a 20 hour per week graduate assistantship at the University of Washington Libraries. I feel that I learned the most there—in the actual practice of librarianship—instead of in my classes that assigned readings on reference, outreach, and more. The Ask A Librarian Internship similarly filled in many gaps that my curriculum left out. I gained skills in providing remote reference and learned how to answer questions about a library system that I had never stepped foot in.

I am grateful for the work opportunities I have had, not only for supplementing the knowledge I was earning the degree for, but for actually preparing me for the field of librarianship. At the same time, those opportunities are not available to every student, much less built into most MLIS programs. Indeed, the University of Washington MLIS program required students to pay for a credit-bearing Capstone project in which we provided labor and ideas to sponsors. *We paid to work!* No wonder a question that hounded many of us students was: Why is there such a lack of support for models such as funded apprenticeships and practicum, when such hands-on learning is beneficial? Why does hiring prioritize the LIS degree over work experience? How can we pivot away from a superficial professionalization of librarianship and disillusionment of early-career librarians, and toward genuine training and purposeful work? These big questions will no doubt continue to be raised, but libraries should lead by example by at least clearing the low bar of compensating students for their work.

Kae Bara Kratcha: Fall 2021 marked my second time supervising in and my third experience with the Ask A Librarian Internship program. My first experience was in spring 2016, when I was an MLIS student and interned with Columbia Libraries. It is certainly possible that having this semester-long internship on my CV helped me secure a full-time librarian position at Columbia in 2018 when I was hired, but the experience of interning was stressful, expensive, and, honestly, a bit bewildering.

When I was accepted for the internship, I was required to enroll in a course with my MLIS institution that would provide course credit in exchange for my time: one day working on a project on-campus and one 4-hour weekend or evening shift of chat reference per week. I enrolled in the internship and submitted the necessary paperwork to Columbia. However, when it came time to pay tuition for that semester, I could not afford the extra credits as a part-time student with two other jobs. I dropped the class, never told Columbia, and kept commuting the hour to and from campus and logging in for chat reference every week. Ultimately, I could afford to work for free as long as I was not also paying for internship course credits. I wonder how many smart, interesting, and innovative internship candidates have been missed out on because those potential interns could not afford to work for free.

Now that I work at Columbia Libraries full time, I see how valuable my labor and the labor of my fellow interns was to the institution. I am angry that we were expected to not only work

for free but to pay tuition money to provide our labor to an Ivy League library system. I am thrilled that the Ask A Librarian internship now pays interns for their work. Paying interns makes our internship program more equitable by ensuring that interns do not need to be able to afford to work for free and pay for course credits to participate. Paying interns also positions interns as what they have always been: capable library workers pursuing additional credentials who bring their own skills and ideas. In my most recent Ask A Librarian Internship experience I worked with Karen on an online curating project. This “supervisory” experience was actually an experience of gaining a colleague and learning through collaboration.

Takeaways and recommendations

Considering the first year of offering this redesigned internship program, we identified two major contributors to the program’s success: (1) offering the internship with compensation and fully remotely and (2) opening the opportunity to not only current library science students but recent graduates as well. Remote work during nights and weekends provides a flexible work mechanism for library school students, recent graduates, and undergraduates who are looking for a part-time paid job.² Reasonable pay combined with the ability to conduct the internship from anywhere in the United States not only creates an opportunity for applicants whose options for gaining experience may be limited by geography, but also results in an extremely strong applicant pool. We expect this would remain true for full-time professional positions as well; competitive pay and offering remote or hybrid work would greatly increase a job’s reach and the number of viable candidates. In fact, the most common question we received from applicants was, “Do you know of similar opportunities that are paid and remote?”

Opening the internship to recent graduates as well as current students was also highly beneficial. This allows interns to gain further experience prior to a full-time professional role and helps to fill gaps in the MLIS curriculum. An important component of the internship’s success was advertising the opportunity to library schools across the country, which made it possible to reach current students and alumni networks. This program represents just one attempt to provide new librarians with meaningful experience and connections, and is not without its faults—as a short-term position, it is still a form of precarious and unstable employment—but we hope it will encourage other libraries to consider how their existing programs and professional development can be made more accessible and equitable.³ ❧

Notes

1. Karly Wildenhaus, “Wages for Intern Work: Denormalizing Unpaid Positions in Archives and Libraries,” *Journal of Critical Library and Information Studies* 2, no. 1 (2019), <https://doi.org/10.24242/jclis.v2i1.88>.

2. Damaris Juarez and Elizabeth Blackwood, “Virtual Undergraduate Internships: One COVID-19 Side Effect That Academic Libraries Should Keep,” *portal: Libraries and the Academy* 22, no. 1 (2022): 81–91, <https://doi.org/10.1353/pla.2022.0010>.

3. Adena Brons, Chloe Riley, Ean Henninger, and Crystal Yin, “Precarity Doesn’t Care: Precarious Employment as a Dysfunctional Practice in Libraries,” in *Libraries as Dysfunctional Organizations and Workplaces*, ed. Spencer Acadia (Milton Park, Oxfordshire, UK: Routledge Press, 2022).