

# A National Priority: LIS Faculty and Students as Library Advocates

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## ABSTRACT

Library advocacy is a long-standing tradition at UNCG's Department of Library and Information Science. The LIS faculty take leadership roles in advocacy and legislation both at state and national levels and make it a point to engage students in their efforts as part their students' learning experience while earning the MLIS. Over the years, practicum and independent research studies have been offered and student interns have served for years as the backbone of advocacy efforts for the state under the supervision of faculty including overseeing the North Carolina Library Advocacy's website ([nclibraryadvocacy.org](http://nclibraryadvocacy.org)) and social media, helping coordinate state and legislative days, and helping schedule visits with members of Congress. ALA's Committee on Library Advocacy discovered this educational partnership and has identified student advocacy internships in LIS programs as a high priority win-win advocacy activity for 2020-2021. What better way to learn about advocacy in your master's program then to actually do advocacy as an internship experience? What better way to add young, strong advocates to speak on behalf of libraries then by having them earn credit as part of their degree?

Students enrolled in UNCG's advocacy internships learn to be advocates and advance legislation while providing critical logistical support to increase advocacy for libraries. This arrangement represents a win-win for students, for LIS programs and for libraries in general. Overseen by Dr. Anthony Chow, a COLA member and longtime co-chair of advocacy for the North Carolina Library Association (NCLA), these internships reflect an essential logistical "support and operational layer" typically provided by interns in any field. This means weekly strategy meetings and then lots of activity focused on ensuring NCLA's advocacy efforts are strategic, operational, and are moving. This includes putting together accurate lists of legislators at the state and national level, identifying the most strategically important members to advocate to, the documentation, helping with the logistics of state and national legislative days, and overseeing NCLA's advocacy website (<https://nclibraryadvocacy.org/>) and social media channels.

As Dr. Chow notes, "One of the significant problems with library advocacy is that our leaders

are in high demand and typically in other leadership roles as well (Dr. Chow is Chair of UNCG's General Faculty and Faculty Senate and his co-chair LaJuan Pringle manages a library branch in the North Carolina's library system, Charlotte-Mecklenburg), which means we often do not have the time to focus too much on the day-to-day logistical activities required of effective advocacy efforts. Advocacy interns provide invaluable support and help turn into action many of the ideas and strategies we want to implement. As a faculty member, hands-on experiential learning is always highly coveted because it represents "real world" application and a truly uncontrolled learning environment. It gives me tremendous pride and joy to see our students learn the ins and outs of advocacy by actually doing it under our supervision. This also includes once in a life time experiences like advocating for libraries on Capitol Hill."

Dr. Chow's current and former advocacy interns agree. Former Intern Morgan Pruitt who just earned her MLIS reflected, "I learned more about how public libraries are funded and how citizens can participate more in local and state politics. I also learned how to advocate for libraries through social media and through dialogue with the representatives' offices, including inviting representatives to libraries, contacting their offices, and presenting my talking points to them. Prior to my internship, I was uninformed about how to make my voice heard about issues that I care about. As much as I learned about my responsibility to be an engaged citizen, I learned even more about my rights as a citizen to bring my talking points to my representative." Former intern Martha McGehee feels that learning to be an advocate is useful for any career: "I feel that learning how to be an advocate for libraries first hand has contributed immeasurably to my development as a future professional in the field. I witnessed the benefits that can be achieved for libraries when enthusiastic LIS students have an opportunity to put the passion that lead them to Library School into action." Former intern Alexandra Voorhees is in charge of NCLA's advocacy website and social media and emphasizes the importance of sharing the library message: "If we want libraries to exist and continue to prosper in American society, we need to be able to effectively communicate their value and importance to stakeholders. So many individuals and groups just don't know what libraries can do for them and building that awareness is critical." Voorhees feels that the internship gave her many opportunities, "It teaches us critical communication, data reporting, storytelling, and advocacy skills. It builds our network and interpersonal relationships and it emphasizes the collaborative nature and process of advocacy which I think will be very useful in a professional environment later on."

### **SYNERGISTIC THINKING: MERGING FUTURE AND CURRENT STATES**

Advocacy is clearly an important activity for all LIS professionals, especially in the rapidly, disrupted post-COVID world. What role will libraries play in their reconfigured local communities? Bringing LIS curriculum and graduate student learning opportunities together with the needs of libraries and state associations presents a win, win, win, win situation at local, state, national, and international levels. For students, they "learn on the job" while earning academic credit. For faculty, they learn more about the needs of the field they are preparing their students for. For libraries and the field, they get badly needed support both logistically as well as fresh, new ideas from graduate students. Finally, for the field itself, LIS programs will be providing better prepared students to start advocating for their libraries immediately and likely take on a leadership role within their future organizations. Stronger, more prepared students will mean stronger advocates for the field in the future and faculty learn right alongside with them.

## **ALISE RESEARCH TAXONOMY TOPICS**

Education programs/schools, students, curriculum

## **AUTHOR KEYWORDS**

LIS education; student internships; library advocacy