

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

Susan E. Searing, University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign  
Scott Walter, DePaul University

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### Introduction

“Library experience is as important in getting hired by a library as the MLS, maybe even more so.”<sup>1</sup> In his 2005 essay, “The Practice Prerequisite,” *Library Journal*'s editor John Berry argued that professional education programs in Library and Information Science (LIS) must provide structured opportunities for students to complement their coursework with workplace experience gained through practicums, internships, graduate assistantships and the like. Berry may have based his conclusion on the persistent identification of the field experience as “crucial to job success” by respondents to the magazine’s annual placement and salary survey. His view is a common one; library employers take it on faith that field experiences produce better prepared entry-level librarians. But what is the evidence for this common claim? What, specifically, are the learning outcomes to which field experiences contribute? How can we maximize the benefit of the field experience for both the student and the supervising library?

It is often hard for new librarians to find work today. At the University of Illinois Library, which has enjoyed a partnership with the top-ranked LIS program in the nation for many years, we are assessing what we currently do--and asking ourselves what more we can do--to help our graduates to gain a leg up in a difficult job market. We began by asking ourselves: what contribution to established student learning goals in LIS programs do we make through the work we do as supervisors of internships, graduate assistantships, or independent study courses? Was Berry right that experience in the field prior to graduation is as important to getting hired upon completion of the MLS as the content learned in classes? If so, could we document it? If we could document it, could we improve it? And, equally importantly as we develop opportunities in our libraries for students to gain real-world experience, could we think more intentionally about incorporating the new skills and knowledge that tomorrow’s librarians need to sustain and transform academic libraries?

The fieldwork component of LIS education, Berry stated, should be developed collaboratively by librarians and LIS educators in order to bridge the gap between theory and practice and strengthen connections between faculty members and library managers.<sup>2</sup> In a recent study of emergent needs in the preparation of future academic librarians, Berg, Hoffman, & Dawson noted that “the creation of successful and meaningful field experiences for library students has been a consistent challenge” since the origins of LIS education over a century ago.<sup>3</sup> As earlier researchers found, prevailing practice is characterized by multiple forms of field experience; students’ lack of information about their options; unclear connections between field experiences and the content of LIS courses; and lack of communication between LIS educators and librarian site supervisors regarding the design and evaluation of the students’ work.<sup>4</sup> To lay the foundation for addressing these problems, librarians and library educators at three universities are collaborating to gather evaluations by recent LIS graduates who completed a field experience in an academic library setting as part of their pre-professional education and to assess the impact of those experiences on student learning.<sup>5</sup>

Neither author of this paper attended library school at Illinois, but we had both heard stories from our colleagues about the value of the field experiences that people gained there. In the words of a recent graduate of the Illinois program, “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.”<sup>6</sup> While employed ourselves at Illinois, we observed first-hand the powerful contribution that practical experience made to students’ acculturation to our profession. Whether it was watching how people who had been Graduate Assistants together formed an ongoing, professional network, or seeing how long-time Illinois librarians built a professional “family” of former students, we could tell that something meaningful was happening. Something that seemed, as Berry suggested, as important to the professional education, induction into the profession, and continuing professional development of academic librarians as anything they learned in the classroom.

Also, as librarians and faculty members at Illinois, we felt that we were “leaving something on the table” in terms of our promotion and tenure packets, our requests for new positions, and our annual reports to the Provost, if we couldn’t talk with authority about our contributions to student learning in our own field.

Finally, as researchers, we perceived a gap in the literature. There have been prior studies of field experiences in LIS education, but few, if any, have attempted to explore the creative and complementary way in which the classroom and the clinical setting (the academic library) work together

to promote positive student learning outcomes. Certainly, there is no standard view of that relationship in the manner found in other professional fields, such as teaching and social work.<sup>7</sup> In librarianship one is more likely to encounter hand-wringing and finger-pointing about the “divide” between the classroom curriculum and the needs of workplace.<sup>8</sup> We wanted to go beyond anecdote, to ask more concrete questions about how libraries and library schools can consciously craft field experiences that capitalize on the content learned in the curriculum and its application to the emergent needs of a changing workplace.

The purpose of our research is to uncover evidence of the value of field experiences to students, and to understand better the nature of the cooperation between LIS schools and academic libraries that host such field experiences. Our eventual goal is to design and pilot field placements that not only provide students with real-world experiences to list on their resumes, but also to help academic libraries respond agilely to the current and coming changes in higher education and information technologies.

#### Parameters of the Study

The “Field Strength” project is a multi-phase study. In this first phase, we are applying a mixed-method approach to develop a clearer picture of field experiences as they exist currently at our three institutions. To that end, we are undertaking: 1) a survey of recent LIS graduates regarding their field experience in academic libraries; 2) a content analysis of student learning outcomes identified by ALA-accredited LIS programs; and 3) focus group interviews of LIS educators, field experience site supervisors, and LIS alumni. This paper reports on the first two. The focus groups will take place in coming months in conjunction with the ALA, ALISE, and ACRL conferences.

We have limited our investigation to academic libraries for a number of reasons. First, as academic librarians, we are most naturally concerned about the preparation of LIS graduates to fill positions in our rapidly changing environments. Those of us who work at universities with strong LIS programs are arguably less pessimistic about the general state of LIS education today than our colleagues who don’t come into frequent contact with LIS professors and students, but we still worry that what’s taught in the classroom alone won’t be sufficient to produce the highly competent and creative entry-level professionals we so desperately need. Second, we focus on academic libraries for a practical reason: that’s where we, as academic librarians, can make a difference. By uncovering the strengths and weaknesses of current field experience programs, we hope to point the way toward improvements that will benefit both future students and our libraries. And third, we can focus on

academic libraries because, fortuitously, a parallel study is underway of public libraries by Sian Brannon, a doctoral student at Texas Woman's University.

### Definitions

What, exactly, is a "field experience?" An online education glossary defines field experiences as "practical experiential learning activities under institutional or organizational sponsorship, usually away from the classroom or campus".<sup>9</sup> The *Online Dictionary of Library and Information Science* doesn't include the term "field experience," but its definition of "practicum" is relevant: "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."<sup>10</sup>

For the purposes of our study, "field experience" covers any work experience in a library that occurs because of one's status as an LIS student. This broad definition covers graduate assistantships, research assistantships, internships, practicum courses, independent study, service learning, volunteering, and similar experiences. Routine employment in an academic library, however, is not covered by our study. Our focus is squarely on field experiences -- whether paid or unpaid, whether arranged by the school, the host library, or the students themselves -- that are intended to complement formal coursework in the masters program.

### Learning objectives

Our research interests led us to examine the ways in which field experiences are described by the LIS schools that promote them. Specifically, we were interested in discovering what learning objectives have been articulated for the LIS field experience. The description of the field experience component at the University of North Carolina (UNC) School of Information and Library Science (SILS) is illustrative. At UNC, a credit-bearing field experience "enables students to meet personal learning objectives and to gain professional experience in an information organization."<sup>11</sup>

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.<sup>12</sup>

UNC SILS is notable for clearly articulating the complementary nature of what a student learns in the classroom and in the field, but the identification of the learning goals is left to the individual student.

In a more detailed description from Illinois, learning objectives remain highly individualized, but potential outcomes are indicated, ranging from the acquisition of useful skills to more affective components:

This opportunity 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.<sup>13</sup>

In reviewing LIS program descriptions, it was notably difficult to find any sort of common statement of learning goals that articulated how field experience contributed to the learning outcomes and core competencies associated, for example, with accreditation standards and other guidelines. Just as we felt that we, as librarians and faculty members, may have been missing the opportunity to explain to our campus colleagues how we contribute to professional education in library and information science, we began to feel that our LIS colleagues may likewise be missing the opportunity to demonstrate how their field experience programs complement their classroom and research programs as a core component of their educational mission. Are core competencies and student learning outcomes better achieved when one looks at the professional education going on in the library and in the LIS classroom together? Is there a fuller story waiting to be told than the one we found in some of the “program presentations” prepared by LIS programs and available through the ALA Office for Accreditation?<sup>14</sup>

### Examples of Field Experiences

In drawing the boundaries of the field experience for the purposes of our study, we ran into some inevitable differences of terminology and practice among our three partners. It may be

illustrative to look in depth at how one institution, the University of Illinois, structures field experiences in its academic library.

The Graduate School of Library and Information Science (GSLIS) offers two main pathways to field experiences as part of the formal curriculum. Although not required, students are encouraged to enroll in the practicum course, LIS591, which entails placement in a library or other information workplace for a hundred hours. The practicum course combines a day-to-day work assignment with a special project that will benefit the host library. The student has both an on-site supervisor and a GSLIS faculty supervisor, and the practicum is structured to require a sort of contract at the outset and a formal evaluation at its conclusion. At Illinois in recent years, students have completed practicums in a wide range of functional areas, including reference, cataloging, archives, acquisitions, rare books, and preservation. For a more extended immersion in a workplace, also earning academic credit, students may arrange for an independent study. Because librarians are faculty, they can serve as the instructor of record for independent study courses. Upon occasion, librarians have organized group independent study courses, allowing students to engage in collaborative projects much as we do in our daily work as academic librarians. For example, teams of students enrolled in the independent study course have redesigned websites and developed new instructional workshops and topical guides. GSLIS also sponsors Alternative Spring Break, a work immersion experience which has placed students in week-long internships in Chicago, St. Louis, Washington, DC, and other locations. On their own, many students seek out opportunities to volunteer in local libraries, as a way to build their resumes and explore aspects of the profession that their course schedules don't allow for.

Within the University Library, in addition to hosted practicums and independent studies, the primary opportunity for gaining real-world work experience is to be hired as a pre-professional graduate assistant (GA). These positions are much coveted, since in addition to a salary, they come with a waiver of in-state tuition. (Out-of-state students have their tuition reduced by the in-state amount.) Most GA-ships involve 10 to 15 hours of work per week, and students often stay in the positions until they graduate. GAs work in many departments but are clustered in units that provide reference and instruction.

Elsewhere, academic libraries aligned with LIS programs offer similar opportunities for field experiences, but with different labels: internships, field studies, directed field work, and for-credit service learning, for example. As we dig deeper into the descriptions of the curriculum at ALA-accredited programs, we may unearth even more variations on the field experience.

### Assessing the field experience's impact on learning and careers

To begin assessing the effects of the LIS field experience, we proposed a study that was funded as a planning grant by the Institute of Museum and Library Services through the Laura Bush 21st Century Librarian program. The goal of the "Field Strength" project is to explore thoroughly the phenomenon of the LIS field experience and to discern how participants, librarians and LIS educators perceive its value in preparing new professionals to enter a changing workplace. As importantly, we hope to identify the specific benefits of such programs, as perceived by professionals, and the curricular and co-curricular connections between libraries and library schools that promote those benefits. We would like to advance the field experience as a key means of bridging the gap between theory and practice – classroom and library – that has been the sticking point of the dialogue between LIS educators and academic librarians in the past.

In the first stage of the study, we investigated the experience of recent alumni in terms of the field experiences pursued and their perceptions of the value of the field experience to their overall professional education, their induction into the professional community, and their pursuit of their first professional positions. A limitation of our study is an artifact of the way in which field experience is treated – because there are so many modes of field experience, and because it is tracked only in limited cases by LIS programs as a required component (e.g., for school library certification), it is difficult to: a) define the pool for our study; and b) compare the pool of those who completed field experiences with the overall pool of graduates. In this paper, we reveal the ways in which students who participated in field experience deemed them beneficial, but an obvious path for future research would be to examine differences in perceptions and early career paths between those who completed field experiences and those who did not.

### Methodology

In October 2012, a 31-item online questionnaire was administered to 388 graduates of the Graduate School of Library and Information Science at the University of Illinois. The target population consisted of students who were employed as graduate assistants in the University Library and/or completed a practicum course at the Library, between 2006 and 2012. These were students whose field experiences in our library had been recorded, and for whom we were able to obtain email addresses. (The GSLIS alumni database proved invaluable in this regard.) The questionnaire was developed using the University's web tools, with input from partners at Maryland and Washington, who will administer

the same survey to their alumni. As of October 18, 102 people had completed the survey for a response rate of 26.2%.

The survey asked about the setting and duration of field experiences, the relationship between field experience and classroom learning, the impact of the field experience on entry into an LIS career, and the nature of the first professional position.<sup>15</sup> Two open-ended questions were broadly framed to invite comments on other aspects of the respondents' experiences.

Creating a questionnaire that would work for all three partner institutions posed certain challenges, the foremost being to agree on a list of library departments. Our initial list was drafted after reviewing employment categories used by ARL, ALA, and others, but it didn't adequately reflect the organization of our actual libraries. After some discussion, we re-cast the question to be about responsibility areas rather than departments. That proved even harder to synchronize across our three organizations, and so we reverted to a departmental listing. In the end, we still weren't entirely satisfied with the list, but hoped that the availability of an "other" option with a blank text box would make it possible for any respondent to answer the question accurately. It does appear that some respondents may have answered not in terms of their home department, but rather the types of work assigned to them.

### Findings

Respondents indicated which types of field experiences they had had, choosing from a list of seven types plus an "other" option. More than one type could be selected. (See Fig. 1.)

[Insert Figure 1 here]

The most common field experience was the paid graduate assistantship. Ninety-eight percent of the respondents had worked as GAs in our library. Although there is a great variety in the way in which field experience is conducted nationally, Illinois is notable for the size of its Graduate Assistant program. Thus, it is not surprising that the vast majority of our respondents reported having held a Graduate Assistant position. Many of them reported other types of field experiences as well, the most common being the practicum course, in which 44% of the respondents had enrolled. Twenty-seven percent gained experience as volunteers. Two-thirds of the students had more than one type of field experience. (See Fig. 2.)

[Insert Figure 2 here]

These percentages will surely change when we survey alumni of other LIS programs, but it is worth noting how often, even at Illinois, students pursue a variety of field experiences. Given the nature of the responsibilities shouldered by our Graduate and Research Assistants, one might expect those experiences to be sufficient to meet the student demand for workplace experience, but that does not appear to be the case. In a crowded curriculum, people with a taste of field experience seek out more. There is evidence that that decision is not necessarily motivated by external rewards. For example, 27% of our respondents reported pursuing volunteer experiences for which they received neither pay nor course credit.

Anticipating that a portion of respondents would indeed have multiple field experiences, we instructed them to identify their single “most significant” field experience and to keep it in mind when answering subsequent questions. We defined “most significant” to mean “that you learned the most and/or it made the most difference to your subsequent career.” As might be expected, the vast majority of them (89%) identified paid assistantships as most significant. Assistantships permit the student to integrate most fully into the workplace and to be assigned a wider variety of responsibilities. At the opposite end of the spectrum were volunteer experiences. Although more than a quarter of the respondents worked as volunteers, none chose that type of field experience as their most significant.

The survey instrument presented a list of 22 library departments and asked respondents to check those that they worked in during their field experience. The most common jobs were in reference (68%), instruction (31%), and collection development (23%). IT positions—programmer, technical support, web developer—accounted for only 16%. Other newer areas of the profession—including digitization, e-resource management and licensing, and scholarly communication support—also scored low among the departments where field experiences occurred. While about 40% of the respondents worked in a single department, another 20% indicated two departments; and another 40% worked in multiple departments, ranged from three to ten. (See. Fig. 3.)

[Insert Figure 3 here]

The prevalence of reference and instruction, which reflects the way in which GA positions have traditionally been designed at Illinois, may be an important finding for us to bear in mind as we extend this research. We look forward to deploying this survey among the alumni of other LIS programs to determine if the emphasis on traditional areas of academic library practice in field experience

opportunities is widespread, and to consider if and how this should change if we are interested in providing experiences that prepare new professionals for emergent areas of professional practice.

We also asked whether the field experience was on-site, virtual, or a blend of on-site and virtual. We anticipated that a sizeable minority might be virtual – for example, the student might be involved in creating or maintaining digital information and communicating with her site supervisor via email and phone. Slightly over half of the masters students at GSLIS are in the LEEP distance education program and are rarely on campus. However, only one respondent reported a virtual field experience, while another thirteen had field experiences that were partly on-site and partly online.

We then posed a series of statements with a five-point Likert scale, to measure student perception of the degree to which field experience contributed to their personal learning. The responses overall indicated a highly favorable perception of the field experience and its outcomes. For example, 99% of the respondents agreed (12%) or strongly agreed (87%) that their field experience enabled them to improve their practical skills.

The survey respondents expressed very strong agreement with statements about the value of their field experiences as a practical counterpart to classroom-based learning. 97% agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, “My field experience provided an opportunity for the practical application of theory.” Whereas that question assumed a flow of knowledge from the classroom or textbook to the workplace, another question tried to gauge the somewhat different learning that happens when practical experience illuminates theory. 95% agreed or strongly agreed with the statement that “My field experience provided the background to better understand coursework by comparing course concepts to real world experience.” On the other hand, when faced with the statement, “My field experience was directly related to my courses in the LIS curriculum,” 9% disagreed, and another 11% chose “neither agree nor disagree.” This should not surprise us. Some students focus their coursework on specialties like children’s literature and youth services, but gladly accept work in our academic library as a form of financial aid.

Other notable responses on the relationship of learning through field experience to learning in the classroom include:

- My field experience provided the background to better understand coursework by comparing course concepts to real world library experience (A = 20%, SA = 76%).

- My field experience provided an opportunity to select future courses based on a more informed perspective on the profession (A = 32%, SA = 51%).
- My field experience provided an opportunity to learn valuable skills that would be difficult to learn in a classroom (A = 17%, SA = 81%).

Another set of statements on the questionnaire provide evidence of positive perceptions of value that alumni had of the field experience and its role in professional preparation distinct from the lessons received in the classroom. We especially noted the majority of respondents who saw their field supervisor as a professional mentor.

- My field experience enabled me to gain an understanding of a wide range of job opportunities within the academic library (A = 35%, SA = 48%).
- My field experience provided an opportunity to gain real world work experience that is valued by my profession (A = 20%, SA = 78%).
- My supervisor in my field experience is (or was) a mentor to me (A = 27%, SA = 60%).

Open-ended responses also highlighted the field experience as the initiation of the professional network to which one returns frequently for support; as one respondent noted, “The people in my department have given me professional advice years later.” Overall, the reactions to the statements, reinforced by comments, confirmed that field experiences are perceived as highly valuable and educational by students who participate in them.

[Insert Figure 4 here]

Through the survey, we also sought to determine how the field experience contributed to the specific objective of obtaining a job after graduation. Over 80% of the respondents either “agreed” or “strongly agreed” with the statement that “My field experience was a factor in my selection for my first professional position.” We asked people to articulate the specific ways in which the field experience helped. (See Fig. 4.) Some of the most important connections included the ability to use the field supervisor as a reference or a source of job-seeking advice, and the ability to describe specific, field-based projects during the application or interview phase. As one respondent commented: “Very few entry level positions require no experience. While I couldn't claim professional experience, my graduate assistantship provided the two years of reference and instruction experience that was a preferred qualification for the position.”

As mentioned above, the field experiences reported by our alumni were concentrated in traditional fields such as reference, instruction, and collection development. For the population overall, there was a visible correlation of field experience areas with the areas of responsibility in the first, professional position. (See Fig. 5.)

[Insert Figure 5 here]

It is interesting that reference experience—long a hallmark of our Graduate Assistant positions at Illinois—is not as strongly correlated with the first position’s responsibilities as are areas such as instruction and liaison work. This result may be specific to Illinois, where the majority of our GA positions are involved in reference and instruction, so that graduates are most competitive in those areas. We look forward to comparing our data to data from Maryland and Washington alumni, to ascertain how large an effect, generally speaking, the content of the field experience has on subsequent professional employment. We also speculate that the high numbers of first positions in reference (55%) and instruction (45%) among this population may simply reflect the greater frequency of openings in these areas for entry-level librarians.

#### Preliminary thoughts on the implications of the survey data

In keeping with anecdotal feedback from LIS students and our own observations of field experiences as they unfold, we expected respondents on the whole to view their field experiences positively. The results were even more positive than we’d anticipated, however. Answers to the open-ended questions brim with comments like “My field experience was the core of my LIS education.” One alum reported being told by a hiring committee member, “Book learning is great, but getting your hands dirty is what matters.”

Although our questions anticipated some of the specific ways in which field experiences are valuable to students, these emerged even more strongly in the two open-ended questions. One asked students to share thoughts about the “significance” of their field experience, and the other was a final broad invitation to share any other “opinions, memories, and thoughts about your field experience.” A number of themes were repeated. For example, students clearly value the intellectual and practical intersections of their classroom and workplace learning: “In class I get the theory, especially with practical things such as reference service, but it is so valuable to work at a desk in the Main Library. I got to apply the theory and test my limits...” The hope that the field experience will complement and amplify the LIS curriculum appears to be fulfilled: “This experience really gave me some context for

what I was learning in classes - I could apply it and think about it in a more concrete way. It really was invaluable.”

The comments also revealed that, for a few, the field experience is most valuable in clarifying that academic librarianship is not for them:

- “I learned through my field experience that I did not want to work in an academic setting. Skills that I learned in the academic setting have easily translated to skills I use in my public library job.”
- “My field experience provided me with a great glimpse of cataloging, and some insight into reference and collections. The experience was superb, but I realized that the field of library science was not for me...and as a result I changed paths and am now in medical school.”

We also confirmed what we had suspected regarding the types of library work to which students are exposed in field experiences at Illinois. Relatively few reported direct involvement in cutting-edge, technology-intensive areas of academic library work while earning their MLIS. The paucity of virtual or blended field experiences was also striking. We need to consider the implications—for the students and for the future of the profession—of continuing to offer fairly traditional field experiences, when our profession and the information world around it are changing so rapidly.

Looking back, alumni express very positive views of the field experience, but we should be concerned about the lack of significant involvement in areas of emergent academic library need—e-resource management, scholarly communications, data curation, digital preservation, web archiving, metadata, information policy, etc. The authors’ own student field experiences stand in contrast to the situation today. In the mid-1970s, one of us held a graduate assistantship in a library where she was able to ride the incoming wave of interest in bibliographic instruction, a topic so new that it wasn’t covered in her classes. When the other of us was studying for his MLS in the late 1990s, his field experience immersed him in the then-emergent area of Web design. Nowadays instructional services and Web design (or content management) are part of many field experience opportunities at Illinois, as are the use of digital reference tools, and, to a lesser extent, social media tools to provide traditional services such as reference and instruction. But where are the truly “cutting-edge” experiences?

Next Steps and Envisioned Outcomes

The immediate next step in the Field Strength project is to extend the survey to recent graduates of Washington and Maryland. A larger pool of respondents will generate more confidence about our findings. Interesting comparisons may emerge among the universities, or we may find that opinions about the field experience are consistent across the three campuses. The survey results will help to shape the topics for the focus groups in January and April. Those sessions, as we've mentioned, will include not only graduates who completed field experiences, but also librarians who have served as on-site supervisors, and faculty and staff of LIS programs who are planners, advisors, or evaluators of field experiences. The final phase of the project, for which we'll seek another grant, will design and evaluate new field experience opportunities, emphasizing areas of emerging need and importance in academic libraries. Such areas might include data curation, user experience, or mobile application development.

We also discovered that students valued having a defined project during their field experience, because this gave them a boost during the job search. 34% reported including materials from a field project in a portfolio or presentation for potential employers. But only two-thirds of our respondents reported having had such a project as a component of their field experience. A distinct project is a mandated component of the Illinois practicum course, and is a formal component of assistantships in some, but not all, departments of our Library. We need to look into these issues locally, but they also suggest interesting areas to explore as we deploy the survey across additional institutions and engage focus groups of field experience supervisors. Clearly projects benefit the students. But how much do they benefit, or burden, their supervisors in the field?

So, what have we learned? We have learned without a doubt that the field experience matters. The anecdotal reports we had heard for years about the importance of the field experience as a part of professional education and as a resume builder appear to be supported by the data. We need to see if this holds true across other institutions.

We have also learned that the current state of the field experience in LIS education is ill-defined. Unlike fields like teacher education, where there is an entire literature dedicated to the field experience and its place in the curriculum, LIS education addresses this facet of the program in varied, and often highly individualized, ways. We need to continue our study of program documentation and to explore whether there are best practices already in place that would help to promote the sort of benefits that alumni associate with the field experience.

We also need to design a complementary survey aimed at academic librarians, not as alumni but as practicing professionals. As mentioned earlier, our goal is not only to explore the student perspective of the librarian's contribution to student learning outcomes in LIS education, but to demonstrate the benefits of collaboration. Most field experience descriptions found on LIS program sites note that the student will be supervised both by an information professional and by an LIS faculty member, but, again beginning with anecdotal evidence, we do not know how often this is the case. Therefore we must ask: At the student level, what promotes collaboration between the LIS faculty advisor and the field experience supervisor? At the program level, what promotes collaboration between an LIS school or department and the academic library on its campus? In documenting, for example, the ways in which its program meets the *ALA Core Competences of Librarianship*, how much data is the library school receiving from the field about the experiences offered to their students?<sup>16</sup> As we deploy this alumni survey across additional programs, we will also be gathering data and insights from field supervisors, LIS field experience coordinators, and LIS program administrators by means of surveys and focus groups.

In the end, the goal of the Field Strength project is to identify and implement best practices for field experiences in academic libraries. Ultimately, this research should lead us to develop and test new models for field experiences in academic libraries. Such new models might emphasize work assignments centered on new technologies and concepts. And they might open more opportunities for students in online distance education programs. Before then, however, we have more fact-finding ahead of us!

#### Acknowledgements

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Figures

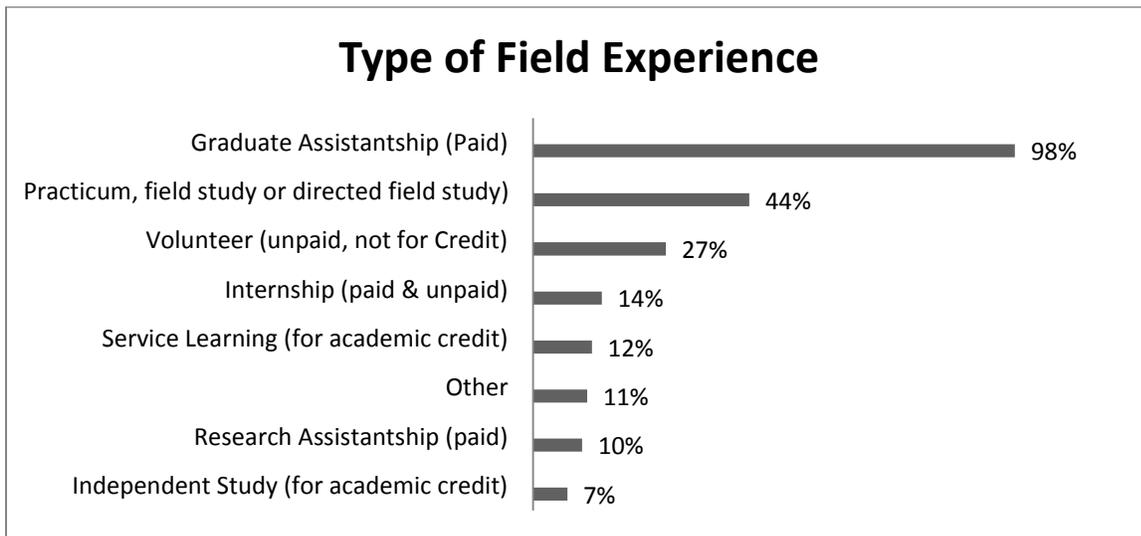


Figure 1

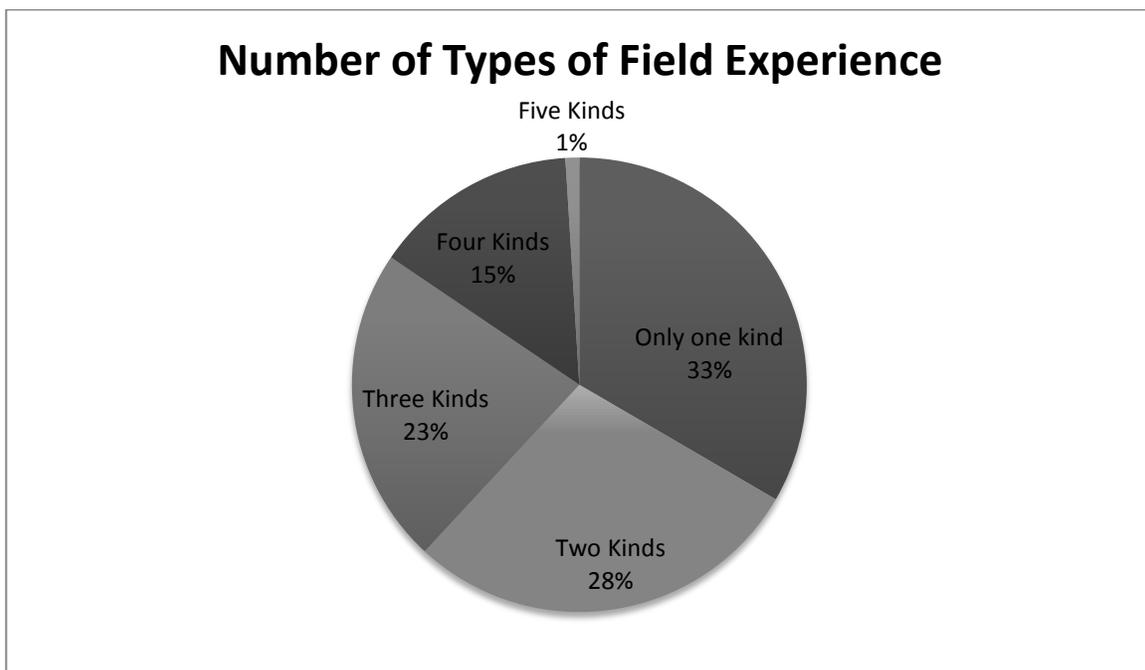


Figure 2

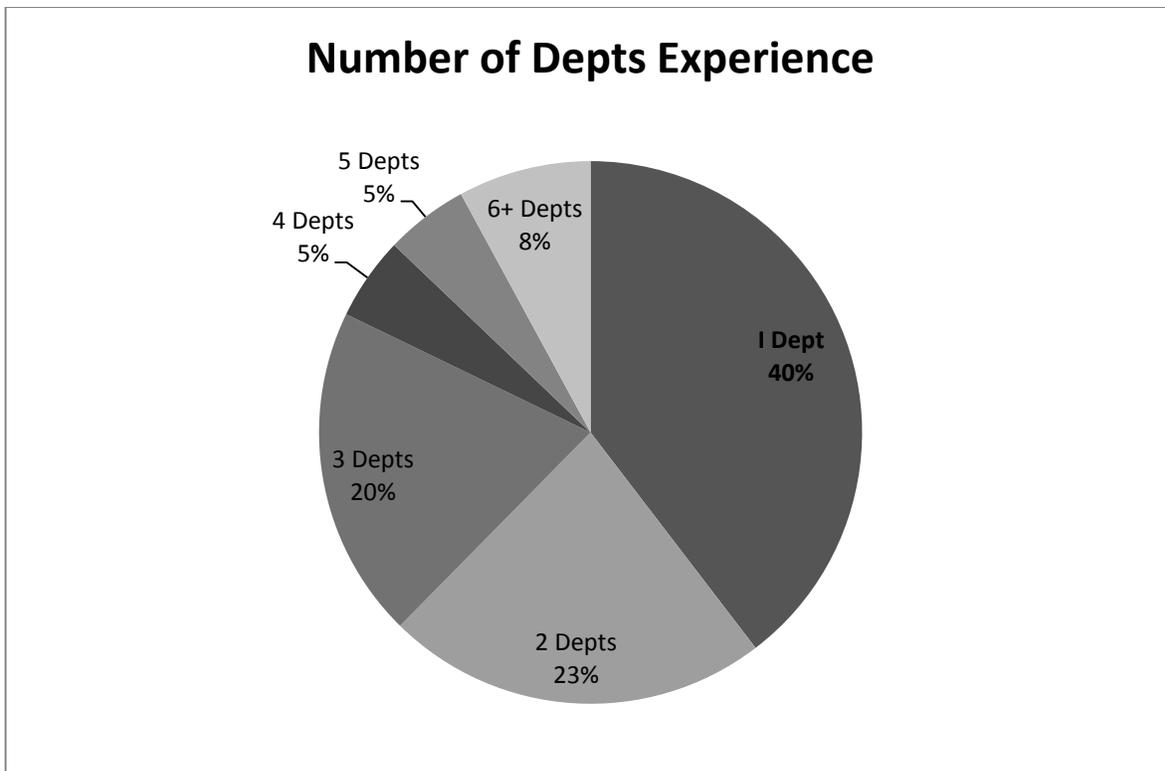


Figure 3

25. In what ways did your field experience help you get your first professional position? Please check all that apply.	Percent	Count
I defined more clearly my areas of interest. <input type="checkbox"/>	62%	63
I got advice on job searching. <input type="checkbox"/>	59%	60
My field experience led to a job with the same organization. <input type="checkbox"/>	10%	10
I got leads on open positions or professional networking opportunities. <input type="checkbox"/>	29%	30
I gained experiences that I mentioned in my application. <input type="checkbox"/>	83%	85
I listed my site supervisor as a reference. <input type="checkbox"/>	85%	87
I described my field work or project during my interview. <input type="checkbox"/>	78%	80
I included materials from my field project in a portfolio or presentation. <input type="checkbox"/>	34%	35
My field experience DID NOT help me get my first professional position. <input type="checkbox"/>	3%	3
Other <input type="checkbox"/>	6%	6
	<b>Answered</b>	<b>100</b>
	<b>Skipped</b>	<b>2</b>

Figure 4

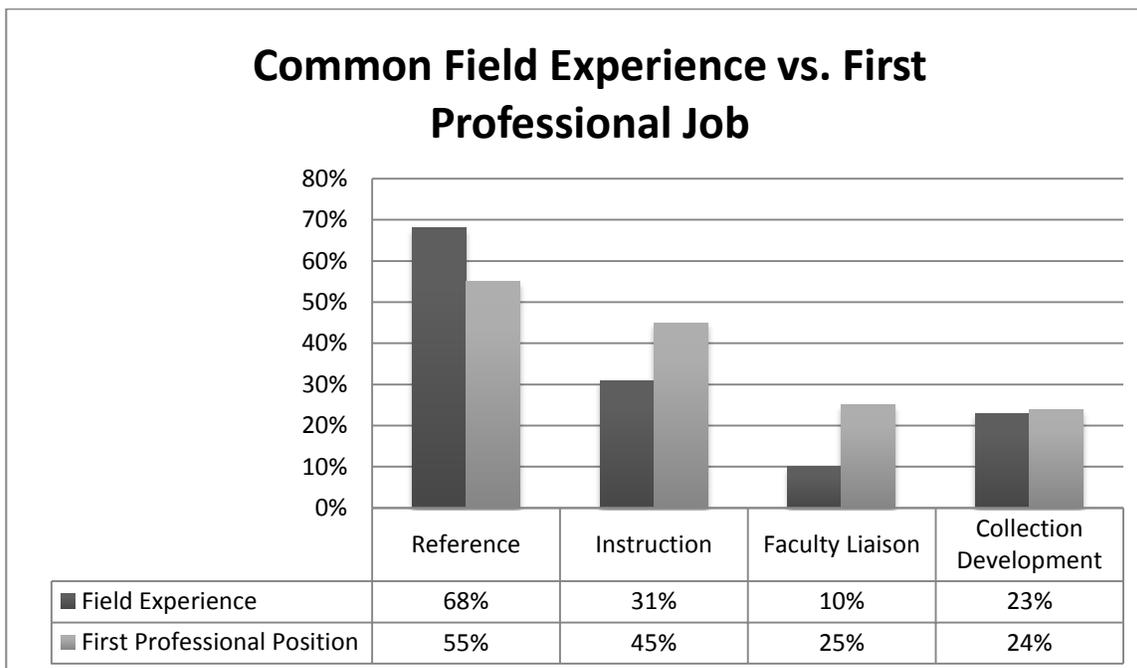


Figure 5

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<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

<sup>3</sup> S.A. Berg, K. Hoffman, & D. Dawson, "Perspectives on integrating research into LIS field experiences in academic libraries," *Journal of Academic Librarianship*, 35(2009): 591.

<sup>4</sup> J.A. Lyders, & P.J. Wilson, "Field experience in library education," *School Library Journal*, 37(1991): 31-35; N. Howden, "Practicums and field experiences," *Journal of Library Administration*, 16 (1992): 123-140; E. McClellan, "The cataloging internship in academic libraries," *Journal of Educational Media & Library Sciences*, 32 (1995): 361-377.

<sup>5</sup> The University of Maryland and the University of Washington are collaborating with Illinois in the "Field Strength" project. This paper reports data from the initial survey of Illinois alumni only. Similar surveys will be conducted with the other schools' LIS alumni.

<sup>6</sup> All quotations from alumni are taken from responses to open-ended questions in the survey.

<sup>7</sup> See, for example: G. J. Posner, *Field experience: A guide to reflective teaching* (7<sup>th</sup> ed.). Upper Saddle River, N.J: Merrill (2009).

<sup>8</sup> See, for example, M. Gorman, "Whither library education?," *New Library World*, 105 (2004): 376-380; C. J. Stoffle & K. Leeder, "Practitioners and library education: A crisis of understanding," *Journal of Education for Library & Information Science*, 46: 313-320 (2005).

<sup>7</sup> See, for example: G. J. Posner, *Field experience: A guide to reflective teaching* (7<sup>th</sup> ed.). Upper Saddle River, N.J: Merrill (2009).

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<sup>8</sup> See, for example, M. Gorman, "Whither library education?," *New Library World*, 105 (2004): 376-380; C. J. Stoffle & K. Leeder, "Practitioners and library education: A crisis of understanding," *Journal of Education for Library & Information Science*, 46: 313-320 (2005) .

<sup>9</sup> *Glossary of education*, <http://www.education.com/definition/field-experience-programs/>.

<sup>10</sup> *ODLIS: Online Dictionary for Library and Information Science*, [http://www.abc-clio.com/ODLIS/odlis\\_A.aspx](http://www.abc-clio.com/ODLIS/odlis_A.aspx).

<sup>11</sup> University of North Carolina, School of Information and Library Science, *Field Experience Program* (2010), <http://sils.unc.edu/programs/field-experience>.

<sup>12</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>13</sup> University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, Graduate School of Library and Information Science, *Practicum Overview* (n.d.), <http://www.lis.illinois.edu/academics/practicum>.

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<sup>15</sup> A copy of the survey instrument may be viewed at <https://illinois.edu/sb/sec/6047105>.

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