Case Study: Dominican University School of Information Studies and Skokie Public Library Internship Partnership

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RICHARD KONG AND KATE MAREK

ABSTRACT

Richard Kong, the director of the Skokie Public Library (SPL), and Kate Marek, the dean of Dominican's School of Information Studies (SOIS), found that a shared commitment to practice- based learning (PBL) in an MLIS degree program could provide the basis of an innovative practical experience beyond a traditional three-credit-hour practicum course. In academic year 2014–2015, the two organizations launched a partnership in which students in Dominican's SOIS have an opportunity to participate in a year-long immersive internship program at Skokie Public Library, gaining invaluable professional experience in a PBL model for library and information science. In this article, Kong and Marek discuss the inception of the Skokie Public Library (SPL)–Dominican SOIS partnership, its planning, design, and implementation, the results of preliminary evaluations, and some comments from current and past participants.

INTRODUCTION

Practice-based learning (PBL) is a term most closely associated with clinical practice in professional education, and, to a great extent, even more narrowly in the health and human sciences fields. However, as articles in this special topic issue of *Library Trends* demonstrate, PBL is an effective tool that should also be discussed beyond clinical professional licensure programs, and specifically within our own library and information science (LIS) disciplinary degree programs. At Dominican's School of Information Studies, as in many other LIS programs, our Master of Library and Information Science (MLIS) curriculum includes a three-credit-hour elective Practicum course that students are encouraged to take, particularly if

they have no library experience or if they are venturing into a new area of specialty in LIS. To further ensure that every student graduates with professional experience, the School of Information Studies (SOIS) faculty will require a sample from practice to be included in each student's e-Portfolio, either from the Practicum course or from existing employment in an information services job they currently hold.

Both Richard Kong, director of the Skokie Public Library (SPL) and SPL deputy director at the inception of the partnership described in this article, and Kate Marek, dean of Dominican University's School of Information Studies (SOIS), see significant benefits of PBL in professional studies, and found through discussion that this shared commitment to PBL could provide the basis of an innovative partnership that would go beyond a traditional SOIS Practicum. This article will discuss the inception of our SPL–SOIS partnership, its planning, design, and implementation, the results of preliminary evaluations, and some reflections from current and past participants.

Preliminary Conversations

Kong's initial interest in PBL grew from his own positive experience while in library school at the University of Michigan's School of Information. While a student in the LIS program, Kong participated in Ann Arbor District Library's Public Library Associate program. This program offered paid, practical library experience for students enrolled in the School of Information's Library Science master's program. While many internship experiences allow students to gain professional experience for just one single semester, this unique program allowed students to work side by side with professional librarians for up to two years while completing their degrees. This extended period of learning and mentorship was crucial to Kong's growth as a librarian and contributed to his desire to pursue a career in public libraries upon graduation. The students in this program were treated as professionals by their full-time colleagues, and were considered regular employees of the library. While Kong's experience centered on adult services (i.e., reference services, collection development, programming), other students in the program focused on areas such as youth services or technical services. During this time at the Ann Arbor District Library, Kong also benefited from observing the innovative work of other colleagues on projects such as a groundbreaking new website and online discovery interface built on Drupal, the open-source content-management system, and the grand opening of an exciting new branch library in the Pittsfield neighborhood of Ann Arbor.

Two key aspects of this experience stood out in terms of value to the student. First, the experience lasted up to two years rather than the one-semester experience from the typical library school practicum (including that at Dominican's SOIS). Second, it was a paid position, and thus

provided essential financial support needed for most graduate students. One significant restricting factor for library students as they look at practical library experience is that they must work during graduate school and thus have limited time available for on-the-job experience if it takes them away from a heavy load of classes and their current employment. Thus, the benefits of the immersive practice-based experience seemed even less available to students who needed to be earning money while attending graduate school and whose existing jobs were outside of LIS organizations. We found ourselves asking, how could we provide financial support in an unpaid internship setting?

A third consideration where both authors saw value through a PBL experience was the benefit of students' peer-to-peer sharing during their learning experiences. We decided that a cohort model would be ideal, where more than one intern traveled through a structured practical experience at a library, learning together, and that regular reflection sessions with all parties participating would be beneficial. Ongoing regular reflection sessions could build a time to pause and talk to one another, share ideas and experiences, and provide moments of celebration when interns talk about their successful frontline service experiences.

Thus, the framework for our SPL–SOIS design included

- an immersive experience for students over a full academic year;
- financial support;
- several students would be chosen each year, providing a cohort of learners; and
- regular reflection sessions would be included during the year.

Planning, Design, and Implementation

With mutual agreement to move forward with the partnership, Kong and Marek agreed to the general framework, and each identified goals from their own institution.

Dominican SOIS Goals

- Interns will come out of the MLIS program with documented real-world experience at an award-winning public library.
- When they finish the internship and graduate, interns will serve as mentors for future waves of students and as ambassadors for the library field.
- Interns will become enthusiastic about the work and their career path.
- Successful interns will help get the message across to all Dominican SOIS students that real-world library experience is essential.
- A flagship internship program together with SPL will become a recruiting tool for prospective students.
- The SPL–SOIS program will achieve recognition as a successful university/public library partnership.

Skokie Public Library Goals

- Interns leave with a good basic sense of how a library operates from top to bottom through direct experience and will understand how organizational culture impacts what we do.
- Interns will feel confident with general experience as well as having a specialty.
- Interns will support our programming initiatives (e.g., YA pop-up programs).
- Interns will develop and execute their own innovative big programs or services (bar set high)—will try new things beyond just picking up on what we are already doing.
- Interns will build relationships with patrons and will develop skills working with the public.
- Interns will develop specific skills (e.g., special needs, kindergarten readiness, community engagement using Harwood approach, story times).
- Interns will represent SPL well in the community.
- Interns will partner and work alongside SPL staff in meaningful ways, adding their valued perspective.
- Interns will learn how to lead themselves and others.
- Interns will be successful at the initial job search when graduating.

The resulting design includes

- competitive internships awarded to three to four students for an academic year, fall through spring;
- applications are accepted in spring for the following academic year;
- applicants are vetted by SOIS; SPL administrators hold interviews at the library, and they make the final selections;
- SPL assigns mentors for each of the students based on their departmental assignment;
- interns enroll in the practicum course (LIS 799) in the fall semester, which is grounded primarily in programs and services, while the following spring semester is an independent study (LIS 801) that adds a focus on research in practice;
- SOIS provides scholarships for each of the two three-credit courses for each of the students;
- each student works with an SOIS faculty member who supervises the academic aspects of LIS 799 and LIS 801; the faculty member becomes an integral part of the learning community;
- the fall semester experience provides an introduction to all aspects of the library's programs and services, with each student also having a special departmental or programmatic focus; the LIS 799 Practicum procedures are followed, including identifying learning goals and outcomes with on-site projects towards measurable outputs; and

- the spring semester, as an Independent Study (LIS 801), includes a research focus; the LIS 801 procedures are followed, including identifying a research and/or assessment project identified and codesigned in partnership with the student, faculty member, and the SPL mentor.

Regular 90-minute reflection sessions are held monthly or every two months among students, SPL mentors, SOIS faculty advisors, and both administrators. (In the first year of our partnership, Carolyn Anthony was the Skokie Public Library director, and she and Richard Kong both attended the reflection sessions when possible.) The standard format for the reflection sessions, led by Kong, focus on three key questions:

- What are we learning? (This is meant for everyone—interns, mentors, faculty supervisors, and administrators.)
- What is the relationship between the insights and experiences that interns gain in both the classroom and the library?
- How has the internship experience and coursework shaped intern aspirations for your career?

With goals identified for the SPL–SOIS partnership and the design in place, the program was ready to launch for the 2014–2015 academic year. The initial application process began in Spring 2015. A short video overview is available online (https://spldominternship.wordpress.com/about-the-program).

Application and Selection Process

SOIS opens applications for the SPL internship in the spring semester for the following academic year. Descriptions of potential areas of focus and the departments in which the interns will find their home base are provided in the online posting. Applicants are vetted and forwarded to the Skokie Public Library, where they are reviewed by the administration and various mentors. SPL's hiring practices include interviewing in teams of at least two staff, including the primary hiring manager. All staff who are involved with hiring the interns review the entire pool of applicants, noting their stated preferences for focus areas (e.g., adult services, young adult services, youth services, community engagement, access services). Each hiring team chooses which applicants they are interested in interviewing; this often leads to some applicants being interviewed for multiple openings. Interviews are conducted in the same manner in which full-time professional librarians are hired, with applicants visiting the library in-person and answering a set of interview questions related to each particular focus area. After interviews are completed, the hiring managers meet as a group to discuss openly how they rank each applicant and why they think each applicant may or may not be a good fit. For each of the three years of the program thus far, SPL staff have come away from the process selecting excellent, promising students who each bring a unique set of skills, talents, and passions.

SPL Orientation; SOIS Student–Faculty Preparation

Once the initial interns were selected, the mentors at SPL spent months preparing for the start of the program. The orientation process became a focus point for the mentors, as they sought to create an engaging, diverse set of activities to introduce the interns to the library. The orientation process has evolved over the years, but some aspects that remain constant include meetings with new colleagues in various departments, a thorough tour of the library, and a driving tour of the community.

One intern said of the community tour: "I loved the Skokie town tour. I'd never have been able to glean that level of information and understanding about the town, its layout, structure, people, and history without the tour."

Another intern summed up the entire experience: "The orientation was both very thorough and welcoming. It gave a great overview of what we were all in for by showing us both the community and all of the parts that have to come together in order to make the library successful. I definitely found it helpful and appreciated all of the time everyone was taking out of their schedules to see it through."

Working at Skokie Public Library

Students are required to work at least 120 hours on-site at SPL in the fall to meet the LIS 799 requirements, and the 120 hours per semester are also required for the spring as well. Part of the challenge has been to schedule the students so that there is some overlap for the full cohort to help facilitate the learning community. Each of the students works within a different department of the library and has a different SPL mentor. Eventually, the students themselves get involved in making sure they connect during the week for conversation outside of the formal meetings with mentors and administrators.

Fall Semester Work: LIS 799 Practicum

The first semester of the internship begins with further training on and orientation to the library's policies, procedures, operations, collections, and services. One primary way this occurs is by having interns shadow experienced staff at various public service points (e.g., reference desk, reader advisory desk, youth services desk). They get a sense of the library's customer service standards and culture by serving patrons alongside new colleagues. Interns also begin meeting with various staff throughout the organization to obtain a strong grasp of the many ways in which the library serves its community. Mentors meet regularly with their interns to check on their progress and make sure they are enjoying their experience. During these first few months, interns usually take responsibility for activities such as facilitating programs, teaching classes, and offering story times.

Mentors will also encourage interns to begin thinking about their second semester project.

Spring Semester Work: LIS 801 Independent Study

As mentioned above, the second semester of the internship emphasizes research in practice. By using the LIS 801 course as a frame for the second semester, students work with the SPL mentor and the SOIS faculty member to identify a research project that will allow them to conduct relevant, practice-based research that benefits the library and provides students with experience in applied research practices that can be used for data driven assessment.

In 2016–2017, for example, student research projects within their work at the library included

- gathering data about reference questions leading to referrals to different services in the community, with a goal of analysis of community resources and improved service; and
- researching the public library use and potential of Snapchat for programs and services to teens in terms of successes and failures and an initial SPL plan of approach; and analyzing the SPL Braille and other special needs collections in terms of their use at the library and potential further use through community partnerships.

Students continue to work with mentors on projects in the library, reflecting Kong's early experience at the Ann Arbor Public Library of working side-by-side with professional librarians, serving the Skokie community and developing relationships with SPL patrons.

Internship Evaluation

Some benefits of PBL to the student are universal to a good practicum experience. For example, spending time in an authentic professional environment can affirm one's professional direction and add confidence to the job search. Students can test his or her skills in a safe environment, with mentorship and guidance. A practicum within a vibrant organization provides the beginnings of a strong professional network. A good practicum will add dimension and understanding to the theory-based content of the classroom. Ultimately, a good practicum will help the student get that first professional job that leads to a successful and rewarding career.

It was with these benchmarks in mind that we constructed our first two evaluations, the first being a May 2016 survey to gauge interns' responses to the structure and implementation of the experience, and a January 2017 survey as a first-pass effort to assess longer-term impact.

In May 2016, Kong sent a questionnaire to the seven alumni of the DU-SPL internship asking for anonymous feedback about their intern-

ship experience (Appendix A). The survey included twenty-five questions: twenty-three asking students to rate their experiences on a five-level Likert-style scale, and two open-ended questions asking for additional narrative feedback. Then, in January 2017, the intern–alumni responded to an additional email request for feedback via the four open-ended questions listed below. The combination of the formal survey and the more informal call for comments gave us a strong sense of what the interns valued most about the experience, as well as potential points of improvement in the internship structure. We will be using the feedback to help us refine the program and enhance its best components.

The Survey
At the end of academic 2015–2016, with two full academic year cycles complete, there were seven SOIS graduates who had completed the Skokie Public Library internship. We sent the survey to those seven previous interns, six of whom responded. Overall, the respondents indicated satisfaction with the application process, orientation process, and opportunities to work with the public at various services points, programs, and special projects. Satisfaction with working alongside mentors at SPL and faculty advisors at Dominican was also high, and all respondents indicated that the practical learning experience gained at the library enhanced their academic studies. The survey also revealed that all of the interns who responded were extremely satisfied with the ways in which the internship helped prepare them for their job search. SPL staff placed a special emphasis on asking interns about their career interests, and worked to prepare the interns for all phases of the job search including finding opportunities, applying, interviewing, and even navigating one's career after finding that first full-time position. There was an indication that more experience with collection development would have enhanced the internship experience, so in the third year of the program we decided to make it a required component for all interns.

   The program has a strong record of students graduating and finding full-time employment before or soon after graduating. Overall, the May 2016 survey showed us that the program was in many ways a success because students reported high levels of satisfaction with the culture of the library and the internship program.

The Feedback on Impact Responses
Five of the graduates responded to the more informal request for feedback in January 2017. Since this set of four open-ended questions was delivered to the graduates via email, their responses were also received via email and so were not anonymous and, while we can therefore expect that any negative feelings might be less likely to be expressed, the questions focused specifically on the impacts that graduates felt one or two years after

the internship experience and thus would most naturally invite positive rather than negative responses. The four questions were as follows:

- As an overall part of your MLIS degree program, how has your experience as an SPL intern influenced your professional practice?
- What were two or three key aspects of the internship design that you found most useful?
- How would you change the internship to improve the student experience?
- Please tell us a story of a learning experience, patron interaction, conversation with a mentor, etc. of your time as an SPL intern that was especially useful and memorable for you.

Responses to the first question were most often general in terms of the experience of working at Skokie Public Library. For example, one respondent highlighted the excellence of the SPL organization as

> setting a high bar . . . for timely, thoughtful response to events in the surrounding community, as well as the world-at-large. The reflection that I put into community involvement and outreach is largely due to what I experienced (and continue to keep tabs on) at Skokie.

Another respondent spoke to the culture of innovation and creativity:

> Having the opportunity to work and learn in a library is essential to any graduate student. Having the opportunity to do so in an environment that encouraged learning, thinking outside the box, creativity, new ideas and embracing the possibility of failure as a learning experience was amazing. I often find myself referring to experiences I had as an SPL intern as well as using skills I picked up during my time as an SPL intern.

A former intern who is now working at a professional organization said of Skokie Public Library:

> Even though I am not interacting with patrons on a daily basis in my [current professional] role, I am able to advocate for public libraries in my research as a result of the Skokie internship.

When asked to comment on the internship design, one respondent's reply was reflective of several graduates' responses:

> One [aspect] that stands out . . . was the meetings as a cohort, and the group meetings with the mentors at Dominican University and Skokie. These meetings throughout the year-long internship allowed us to connect and grow, and inspired us as library professionals. [And] . . . seeing the behind the scenes aspects of running a library (human resources, maintenance, etc.) that many library professionals don't often get to see . . . Being able to learn about this prior to taking a library job has helped prepare us for any and all situations that may come up in a library.

The third question invited feedback for improvements to the internship design. The responses to this question echoed some of what we have

been hearing informally regarding consistency for the interns in regards to academic expectations, since each student has his or her own faculty supervisor who becomes an overall part of the internship team. Having multiple faculty advisors in the learning group adds a great deal of dimension to the reflection sessions and to the group experience, but the flip side for the students is that each intern negotiates the terms of the LIS 799 Practicum and the LIS 801 Independent Study with a different faculty member. In addition, the Dominican University SOIS registration processes for LIS 799 and LIS 801 are somewhat unwieldy, involving lengthy, multistep paper approvals. This fairly consistent feedback indicates a need for reexamination of this aspect of our partnership design and also points out to SOIS the need to improve the efficiency of LIS 799 and LIS 801 registration processes for all of our students.

The fourth question in our email call for feedback asked graduates to relate a specific memory from the intern experience. In general, responses to this question highlighted an individual mentor or patron interaction, but several responses also emphasized once again the broad opportunities that came through working closely with an excellent library staff and administration, and the learning community that created. This response exemplifies the typical reply:

> Everyone in the library was a mentor to me. Colleagues were kind, generous and welcoming so some of the greatest learning moments for me happened while collaborating with others on projects.

Additional comments from students included the general realization of the importance of practical experience as part of professional preparation, the appreciation of being able to practice and experiment in a safe learning environment with feedback, the value of working across departmental lines in the internship, the appreciation for the SPL mentors and their guidance, the value of the cohort within the experience, and the appreciation for the quality of Skokie Public Library. In summary, the quantitative and qualitative evaluation feedback we have received from graduates has been overwhelmingly positive.

CONCLUSION
We perceive the internship program as being a win-win-win scenario, providing benefit to the students, SPL, and SOIS. Students get financial support from SOIS for six credit hours and a multilayered, immersive practical learning experience at an award-winning public library. The library has quality interns close to receiving their professional degrees, which enhances their connection to contemporary LIS theory and provides more people power to create and deliver programs and services. The LIS program gets a greater, more direct connection to information services in practice, with real-time analysis of our curriculum and our conceptual directions. And, the internship structure provides an opportunity for an immediacy

to the feedback loop beyond the typical alumni survey regarding how library school is preparing students for practice.

Now in our third year, the basic design of our partnership has remained the same. As we review our original goals, we are extremely happy with the success of the program. Dominican's SOIS has practicum students in placements across the rich community of LIS organizations in the Chicagoland area, including an immersive internship year placement in Dominican's own Rebecca Crown Library that also connects the practical library experience to scholarship support. Although our SOIS scholarship budget is limited, these two successful partnerships suggest that there is tremendous benefit to targeting scholarship dollars to students' practical experience.

Likewise, the rare opportunity to work in a high-functioning, innovative, and supportive organization such as Skokie Public Library is a tremendous benefit we can offer our students. One comment from our first group of interns has become a touchstone for us when we think about this partnership. About half way through the year, an intern who was just beginning independent frontline work with teen patrons commented in the reflection session:

> I never knew that I could have a day job that I loved as much as I enjoyed my life outside of work—I am learning that I *truly love* working with teens in a library!

This graduate student had found her calling, ready to move into her job search with a confidence and enthusiasm that would boost her professionally and ground her in meaningful work for her lifetime.

Appendix A

Internship Program Evaluation
Please complete this form to provide feedback about your internship experience at Skokie Public Library. Thank you!

1. In which internship class did you participate?
   - ❏ 2014–2015
   - ❏ 2015–2016

2. How satisfied were you with the application process?
   Not at all   1   2   3   4   5   Extremely

3. How satisfied were you with the orientation process?
   Not at all   1   2   3   4   5   Extremely

4. How satisfied were you with your learning experience at public service desks?
   Not at all   1   2   3   4   5   Extremely

5. How satisfied were you with your learning experience with other public service opportunities? Ex. BOOMbox, Jr. High Zone, 1-on-1 appointments
   Not at all   1   2   3   4   5   Extremely

6. How satisfied were you with your learning experience with planning and/or facilitating events (programs and classes)?
   Not at all   1   2   3   4   5   Extremely

7. How satisfied were you with your learning experience with collection development and/or management?
   Not at all   1   2   3   4   5   Extremely

8. How satisfied were you with being able to pursue your interests through special projects?
   Not at all   1   2   3   4   5   Extremely

9. How satisfied were you with your experience working with your library mentor?
   Not at all   1   2   3   4   5   Extremely

10. How satisfied were you with your experience working with your faculty adviser?
    Not at all   1   2   3   4   5   Extremely

11. How satisfied were you with the group reflection sessions with mentors and faculty advisers?
    Not at all   1   2   3   4   5   Extremely

12. How satisfied were you with meetings and discussions with the other interns in your cohort?
    Not at all   1   2   3   4   5   Extremely

13. How well did the practical learning experience at the library enhance your academic studies?
    Not at all   1   2   3   4   5   Extremely

14. How satisfied were you with the design of the internship experience in regards to the academic and practice balance?
    Not at all   1   2   3   4   5   Extremely

15. Did you have enough supervision time with your mentor?
    ❑   More than enough (i.e., too much)
    ❑   Just enough
    ❑   Not enough

16. Did you have enough time with your other colleagues besides your mentor?
    ❑   More than enough (i.e., too much)
    ❑   Just enough
    ❑   Not enough

17. How satisfied are you with the ways in which the internship prepared you for your job search?
    Not at all   1   2   3   4   5   Extremely

18. How satisfied were you with the opportunities to learn about the operational aspects of the library (e.g., facilities, administration)?
    Not at all   1   2   3   4   5   Extremely

19. How satisfied were you with the opportunities to learn about the work of other departments?
    Not at all   1   2   3   4   5   Extremely

20. How satisfied were you with your experience of being integrated into your department or team?
    Not at all   1   2   3   4   5   Extremely

21. How satisfied were you with the overall library culture?
    Not at all   1   2   3   4   5   Extremely

22. How satisfied were you with the overall experience with the internship program?
    Not at all   1   2   3   4   5   Extremely

23. Would you recommend this program to others?
    ❑   Yes
    ❑   No
    ❑   Other: _____

24. Tell us about anything you wish you had more exposure to or more time to learn during your internship.

25. What else do you want to tell us?

Richard Kong is the director of Skokie Public Library, an award-winning institution that serves a diverse population of 65,000 just north of Chicago, Illinois. He contributes actively to the library profession at both state and national levels, currently serving on the boards of both Illinois Library Association and Public Library Association. He participated in the Synergy Illinois Library Leadership Initiative and the Public Library Association Leadership Academy, and was named a *Library Journal* Mover & Shaker in 2012. Kong holds a bachelor of arts from Oberlin College, a master of divinity from Princeton Theological Seminary, and a master of science in information from the University of Michigan School of Information.

Kate Marek is the dean of Dominican University's School of Information Studies, where she has been on the faculty since 2000 and has served as dean since July 2013. Her academic areas of interest include information policy, technology developments in information services, and the evolving needs of the LIS curriculum. Marek's publications include "Information Policy," in *Information Services Today* (Hirsh, 2015); *Using Web Analytics in the Library* (2011); and *Organizational Storytelling for Librarians: Using Stories for Effective Leadership* (2010). Marek holds a bachelor of arts from the University of Texas at Austin, a master of arts in library science from Dominican University, and a PhD in library and information management from Emporia State University.