

ASSESSING THE IMPACT OF THE SWARTHMORE COLLEGE LIBRARIES INTERNSHIP: WHITE PAPER

Pamela Harris, Sara Powell

11.30.2017

INTRODUCTION & METHODOLOGY

The Swarthmore College Libraries Internship began in 2003 as a multi-institutional Andrew W. Mellon Foundation \$1.5 million grant to address diversity in the library profession and recruitment at the undergraduate level. Due to the original success of the program, Swarthmore College Libraries have continued to sponsor the internship with student employment funds since 2010. As the Internship approaches its fifteenth anniversary we examine our original goals: to address the shortage of professional librarians due to retirement; to recruit talented undergraduates early in the hiring pipeline and to broaden the racial and ethnic composition of the library profession so that it can better serve increasingly diverse populations.

Modeled on [“Undergraduate Library Internships and Professional Success” \(ACRL 2016\)](#) by Clinton Baugess, Gettysburg College, this assessment aims to evaluate the effect of the Swarthmore College Libraries Internship on participants’ undergraduate experience, career trajectories, and/or graduate study, especially in light of the considerable staff resources dedicated to the program. Indeed, through an online survey (n= 49) and five semi-structured telephone interviews, respondents reported an overall positive impact. We plan to share our findings with the Swarthmore College community. Should the results be compelling and draw interest, we will share findings with academic library professionals to inform development of library internship programs.

We emailed 81 internship alumni a Qualtrics survey. The survey featured internal skip logic that revealed more questions to interns who have worked in the field, with a maximum of 29 questions. The questions primarily focused on the overall internship experience, its impact on graduate school and early career, and skills acquired. Two questions, copied from the COFHE Alumni Survey (circulated by the Office of Alumni and Institutional Research), address continued connection to Swarthmore College and its staff & faculty. In the survey, we asked respondents whether they would be interested in participating in semi-structured, follow-up phone interviews. (See appendix for survey and interview questions.)

All responses were kept private, with the option to share identifying (contact) information for a follow-up phone interview. All data is stored in a password-protected electronic format. This research has been reviewed according to Swarthmore College IRB procedures for research involving human subjects.

DATA & IMPACT

Of 81 survey invitations emailed to former interns, we received 49 responses, or a response rate of 60.5%. This high response rate could be attributed to interns' meaningful experiences in the internship, as evidenced by their responses. Among the respondents, 19 expressed a willingness to participate in follow-up phone interviews; ultimately, five half-hour phone interviews were conducted, in which participants could elaborate on their graduate school and career path after graduation as well as further thoughts on the internship program.

The 49 survey respondents represented at least one intern from every year (excluding 2010, in which there was no internship program), ranging from seven respondents each from the 2006 and 2007 cohorts and one respondent from the first (2003) cohort. Demographic questions related to ethnicity and citizenship were optional in the survey. Of those who responded, 46% identified as white, 24% as Asian, 18% as black or African-American, and 4% as American Indian or Alaska Native; 11% were not U.S. citizen or permanent residents at the time of the internship.

History was by far the most popular major represented (10 majors), followed by English Literature and Linguistics (5 each). Perhaps unsurprisingly, the vast majority (38 people, or 84%) had held student jobs in other areas of the Libraries and archives, with Research & Instruction, Access & Lending, and Friends Historical Library being the most widely represented departments. Some former interns had worked in more than one area while students.

Just over half (24 people, or 53%) completed an independent project while an intern at the Swarthmore College Libraries. Ten students received funding for library-based summer research or project, and a further three worked as a post-bac in the Libraries. Over half (26 people, or 57%) went on to postgraduate study, including 14 people who went on to an MLIS program. These 14 MLIS students represent 42% of the survey respondents who went on to postgraduate study (or 29% of all survey respondents).

DISCUSSION

Internship satisfaction

The survey indicates high levels of satisfaction with the internship. 80% were extremely satisfied, and 95% moderately *or* extremely satisfied; nobody stated that they were neutral or dissatisfied.

In terms of significance in shaping career, academic, or personal interests, an impressive 82% of all survey respondents believed that the the internship was moderately, very, or extremely significant. All respondents believed that the internships was significant to any degree.

A recurring theme among phone interviewees was, to quote a phone interviewee, the “semi-academic and semi-vocational” nature of the internship. When compared to the Swarthmore curriculum that tended towards the academic and theoretical, the internship offered hands-on, practical exposure to a viable career. One phone interviewee reiterated that the internship was “really the only practical professional development I had all throughout college where a clear path and direction . . . was given.” Similarly, another stated that “the main value the internship adds is immediate and obvious practical application, which is not really something I got out of anything else I studied at Swarthmore.” A third interviewee emphasized the importance that the internship is a *paid* opportunity, which mitigated some of the risk of exploring an unknown area: “I just took a chance on it. I wasn’t sure what to do expect.”

More generally, the internship provided an opportunity for past participants to bond and explore. As one former intern put it, their senior spring was a tough semester, and the internship was an “oasis for me: maybe because, while there was homework and stuff outside of class -- it’s not like we weren’t *doing* anything -- it wasn’t soul-sucking.”

Finally, our survey asked directly about how much former interns’ valued particular components of curriculum. The top three most “valuable” areas were learning without the normal rigor of class, career exploration, exposure to different aspects of the field, relationship(s) formed with library staff, and field trips. These results reflect the internship’s goals to expose students to the breadth of the possibilities in library & information science in a low-pressure, supportive environment. The word cloud below visualizes responses from Q35:



Postgraduate study

Swarthmore academics are good preparation for graduate school, with 80% of students planning to pursue graduate studies within five years of graduation. As mentioned above, over half (26 people, or 57%) of former interns went on to postgraduate study, including 14 people who enrolled in an MLIS program. In their phone interviews, interns elaborated internship's value in their decisions to attend grad school and their experiences in the programs. One interviewee was clear that "the internship is what made me go to library school" while another MLIS graduate stated that "the internship experience had a great deal to do with where I am today." "I feel that I went into the career way more prepared than any of my friends going into their own professions," said another former intern.

One senior was actively applying to PhD programs, but the internship changed their career trajectory. Prior to the internship, they said that "librarianship was never something considered as a possible job outside of student job or school environment." Another interviewee elaborated, "I finally figured out what my interests were, but I didn't know how to turn that into a job or a career, and I had never thought about librarianship as something I could do." Anecdotally, we have heard before from students that faculty, and students themselves, see attaining a PhD as the only natural career progression for graduates with a liberal arts background.

We were curious whether project work might have any impact on postgraduate trajectories. As mentioned above, cumulatively, 27 (or 55%) of former interns who took our survey had completed an independent project as intern, received funding for a summer project, and/or worked as a library post-bac during their time at Swarthmore College. Of these students, 40% went on to study in an MLIS program (compared to 42% of all respondents). Therefore, interns who completed a project or post-bac were equally likely to go on the MLIS. We did, however, find that this select group of students was significantly more likely to go on to grad school as a whole: 70% have been enrolled in a postgraduate degree or certificate-granting program, compared to 37% of other interns who did not participate in these additional opportunities. Given that the internship was designed to increase interest in pursuing professional work in LIS in particular, these results bring into question the value of these added programmatic opportunities, which require considerable additional staff time and funding.

Post-graduate employment

As a defining Swarthmore experience, two respondents acknowledge the value of the internship, one of whom had not previously considered working in the field: "Thank you for the Swarthmore Library Internship opportunity which springboarded my current career!" This enthusiasm is echoed elsewhere as in this comment: "I was an IMLS intern about a decade ago and it was the most important thing I did at Swarthmore relative to my subsequent career and life path.

Twenty people (or 43% of all respondents) are currently employed in libraries, archives, museums, publishing, or a related field. A further eight respondents have previously been employed in the field but are not now. Together, those currently or previously employed in Library, Archives, Museums (LAMs) account for an impressive 57% of former interns who responded to the survey. What's more, of those currently employed in the field, 62% have an MLIS.

It is clear from the survey and from follow-up interviews that the internship had a positive effect on students' decision to enter the field. Indeed, 70% of those respondents currently or previously employed in the field say that the internship had *a lot* or *great deal* to do with their decision to pursue a career or positions in libraries, archives, museums, or a related field. In addition, 72% of these people said the internship helped them identify possible areas of specialization in the field. A phone interviewee who had experience working at the circulation desk and had previously considered librarianship stated that "it was the [internship] program that made me see it as a viable career path."

Perhaps more significantly for recent graduates in a difficult economy, 67% believe that the internship helped *a lot* or *great deal* in landing them their first position in the field. According to one phone interviewee, their current supervisor "told me quite explicitly that for the job I would have, they had never hired somebody with my background, and the library internship--and other roles I had had in libraries as a result of the internship--was a huge part of why I was hired." Another, who does not work in the field, said that the internship "has informed my approach to data and information."

FURTHER QUESTIONS

Outreach & publicity

As mentioned, History, English, and Linguistics are the most popular majors among former interns who took our survey. On the one hand, this might indicate helpful venues for targeted outreach through administrative assistants. On the other hand, the dearth of STEM majors (7 total, some of whom double-majored) suggests that we could do a better job to make librarianship as a field more appealing to students with a wider range of academic backgrounds and interests.

We know that the overwhelming majority of former interns (84% of those surveyed) worked in other areas of the Libraries (or in the Peace Collection or Friends Historical Library) while students. It is unclear whether these students became interested in the internship because of previous work in libraries & archives or whether the internship led them to pursue subsequent work experience in the field. In addition to considering discipline-specific outreach, going

forward, internship coordinators might wish to consider the efficacy of targeted outreach to current library student workers in light of the program's overall goals of diversifying the profession.

Similarly, both from assessment results and our own discussions with interns, we know that the fact that the internship is paid has been an important factor many applicants. In future advertising, we should consider how to effectively market the internship as a truly unique opportunity: it is paid without being a job; it offers academic reading and theoretical discussion without the "soul-sucking" rigor of a Swarthmore class; and it provides much-needed practical experience and advice on choosing a graduate program, applying for jobs, and entering the profession.

Areas of curricular improvement

While former interns had overwhelmingly positive experience with the internship, a few suggested areas of improvement, which might be considered as the curriculum is updated in coming years. One phone interviewee suggested that there be more exposure to public & school librarianship in the internship, as "these are the people who make the first impressions to kids about what libraries are and can do." Another suggested that there could be more practical job-hunting and -finding advice (currently limited to a single seminar session), with coverage of topics such as interview advice and "how to make the most of library school to ensure you get a job."

CONCLUSIONS

Our assessment has indicated that the internship was both a universally satisfying experience *and* that it helped shape students' career, academic, or personal interests as a valuable component of the Swarthmore experience. As discussed above, many former interns valued the internship for its mix of traditional academic and more practical work. In addition, the internship offered more qualitative benefits as well, including long-lasting relationships formed with staff & fellow students.

According to the most recent COFHE survey (published November 2017), 20% of students from the classes of 2004, 2006, and 2008 are "regularly in touch" with Swarthmore professors and staff, excluding their advisors. Our assessment survey specifically asked whether former interns were still in touch with library staff. Among former interns, we found that 14% are regularly in touch with library staff in particular (and 28% in touch with library staff and other professors & staff, excluding their advisors), a much higher level of continued communication than the student body at large. One phone interviewee noted that "it's nice to be in contact with adults [at Swarthmore] who aren't professors. That was a good experience."

Across their Qualtrics survey comments and in phone interviews, former interns repeatedly emphasized the significance of the internship beyond its direct benefits to career and graduate study:

- “The librarianship intern was one of my top experiences at Swat, and I feel lucky that I got to have such a great time trying out a field I otherwise wouldn't have.”
- “This program gave me a sense of community, identity, and confidence that I didn't experience anywhere else at Swat.”
- “I miss everyone on the library staff at Swat!”
- “It changed my life and was my favorite part of the week.”

Internship's value to profession

The Swarthmore College Libraries Internship began, in part, to address the lack of diversity within the profession. According to the ALA's most recent Member Demographics Survey, undertaken in January 2017, the profession self-identifies as 86.7% white, 4.4% Black or African-American, 3.6% Asian, 1.2% American Indian or Alaskan Native, 0.2% Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander, and 4% other. The “unbearable whiteness of librarianship” need hardly be reiterated here. The demographics of our predominately white, female profession do not reflect the diversity of the populations we serve, whether in public or academic libraries.

As mentioned above, 57% of former interns are currently or have formerly been employed in LAMs or related fields, with 43% currently in the field. Clearly Swarthmore College Libraries Internship has made a modest contribution to the diversification of the profession, of the 43% currently in the field the demographics differ broadly from national statistics: 43% Black or African American; 14% Latino; 7% American Indian / Alaska Native; 7% Asian.

Even if the Swarthmore cohorts overall are predominantly white they graduate from the internship understanding the need to diversity and promote inclusiveness in our profession. One working librarian states, “There is really a lack of racial diversity in librarianship from what I have seen, so if this program can help promote and encourage people to go into the field, I think it's really invaluable.” Another graduate cites research about the different programs that have been (un)successful in increasing diversity in the field, arguing that it is these college, targeted recruitment programs that have been most successful. Now in its 15th year, we have a completely diverse group of students, some of whom may go on to careers in the field. Regardless, as one graduate stated, the value of the program is broad and in a disconnected, face-pace society one of the greatest strengths may be the opportunity for “building bridges, [and] interacting others with whom I would never have had a relationship.” We build upon past success with internship, attracting people who may have never before considered cultural heritage, in the guise of librarianship, as a career option.