

Virtual LIS practicums

Student and supervisor experiences during COVID-19, part 2

Existing literature on practicum experiences often focus on one perspective, either the student's or the supervisor's, but rarely in the same piece or related to the same practicum offering. Pre-professional fieldwork helps graduates pursue specialized library careers, addressing the well-documented experience barrier that many graduates lack. Because COVID-19 required remote learning, virtual practicums may continue, offering LIS graduates the chance to learn from experts and develop skills beyond traditional LIS curriculum.¹ For the practicum shared here, the student's institution and practicum host site agreed to modify the existing in-person experience into a virtual format because of COVID-19.

Part 1 of our article, published in the May 2023 issue of *C&RL News*, outlined the logistics and preparation in offering an online practicum and described the student objectives and learning outcomes. In Part 2, we present the student's and supervisor's reflections on communication, work-life balance, managing information overload, and project workload, providing recommendations for others coordinating a virtual practicum.

About the institution

The University of Illinois Chicago (UIC) is a Carnegie Classified Research 1 institution with a health science library supporting research and education at three regional locations (Chicago, Peoria, and Rockford) and three satellite locations (Quad Cities, Urbana, and Springfield). The practicum took place within the Health Sciences Library (LHS) in the Information Services and Research (ISR) Department. LHS supports six health science-specific colleges (medicine, nursing, pharmacy, dentistry, public health, and applied health sciences) of the sixteen at the institution. Health science student enrollment in 2020 was approximately 7,500 and full-time health science faculty was about 1,200.² The institution is a federally designated Minority Serving Institution, an Asian American Native American Pacific Islander-Serving Institution, and is a Hispanic-Serving Institution.³ Faculty in ISR are tenure-track and are library liaisons to the health sciences colleges.

Student perspective—Holly Beverley

This practicum was my introduction to health sciences librarianship. Working with established librarians and engaging in professional work was the best way to understand what this career path would entail in my near future. Early communication with the practicum

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site was beneficial as I got to know the communication styles of professional librarians and which projects would be accessible.

Since I was eager to get to work, I spent time getting to know the library website before the semester began to prepare for reference interactions in frequently used resources at the practicum site. I explored various LibGuides related to health science disciplines and resources, watched tutorials from medical libraries on health science search strings or controlled vocabulary like the Medical Subject Headings (MeSH), and made personal accounts in commonly used databases. My supervisor shared a “database discovery worksheet,” which acted as a roadmap to locating common features of many databases like saving searches, sharing results, identifying controlled vocabulary, and the disciplinary strengths of each.

As we spent more time online throughout the semester, I felt a stronger sense of rapport and comfort with my supervisor to ask her different questions about the field of librarianship and how to approach research consultations or build relationships with researchers and faculty in designated colleges. It took time to develop a sense of conversational ease, especially in an online environment devoid of in-person social cues. Initially, I felt intimidated by the knowledge gap between my own knowledge relative to experienced librarians at the practicum site. Project-based questions were helpful transitions into deeper knowledge and further discussion of other related DEI or career-development topics. As we got to know each other better, the supervisor shared insights about librarianship and alternative career options like corporate librarianship, which were not previously known. Albeit through Zoom, I sought to make positive first impressions through diligent work ethic. Throughout the semester I learned to navigate new subject matter and articulate questions to the best of my ability. Still, the ability to take constructive criticism was necessary for growth.

The consistency and granularity of feedback on various projects felt intense because of the one-on-one nature of the experience. It took time for me to accept the imperfect elements of progress within the educational experience and perceive the weekly check-in meetings as a time to discuss project updates, challenges, and highlights without fear or anxiety. To adhere to the 120-hour time restriction, I had to make the most out of 1–2 hours of project work at a time, frequently leaving things incomplete to honor the guidelines of the practicum. This segmented workflow contrasted with my typical approach to LIS-coursework where I would see a project through to completion in fewer sittings, without regulating the amount of time it took me.

The ability to multitask and manage information overload was another challenge. Depending on the day, I would have multiple computer applications and internet browser tabs open to complete reference work while maintaining conversation with my supervisor on a virtual communication platform like Zoom. Visually and mentally, it was a challenge to keep up with a verbal conversation while tracking information from different platforms, but in time it became routine.

Such individualized time, attention, and work-life balance is uncommon in traditional LIS education settings.⁴ It is not fair to assume all practicum student and supervisor pairings would have such positive rapport.⁵ This mentor relationship reinforced my desire to succeed in this career, yet other fieldwork arrangements where supervisors are less committed to student success may not have the same outcomes.

Supervisor perspective—Tina Griffin

As a liaison on the tenure track, my daily work is a combination of reference, instruction, collection development, research, and service. Reference and instruction make up the largest percentage my time overall, but spring semesters skew toward more reference activities. Because we are a high-level research university, health science students and faculty prefer in-depth research consultations, but email, chat, and office hours are also used. Previously each year, I held about sixty in-person consultations. During and after COVID-19, consultations have increased to more than 100 and are almost exclusively online. Prior to COVID-19, I used chat service and office hours downtime to complete administrative tasks or other work. However, chat service hours tripled and email reference volume increased dramatically while office hours were discontinued; collectively that meant availability for administrative tasks disappeared.

In spring 2021, our institution still had masking and space restrictions in place to provide a safe working and learning environment. As experienced by many, working from home may be convenient but contains tradeoffs. I was fortunate in that I had a dedicated workspace, adequate technology, and stable internet. I also did not have personal demands such as childcare or parent-care. Having few obligations and a suitable environment made weekly scheduling possible with minimal interruptions.

I was also fortunate that the practicum student had a high level of initiative, was self-directed, and was an excellent communicator. It is possible that some students will not thrive without more supervision than a virtual space affords, especially if the student has competing priorities. It is essential that communication standards, work documentation, and project organization are consistent throughout the experience. There should also be contingency plans for when the expected schedule, tasks, or communication gets derailed. These should be discussed to see what is reasonable and feasible for both the student and supervisor, and then documented for both to reference. For this practicum we had weekly meetings, and the student kept a work log. These tools allowed us to adjust the work pace before the student was overwhelmed or off track from her goals.

The weekly meetings provided time to discuss her learning progress and plan the coming week's supervised and unsupervised work. The student was enthusiastic and conscientious in her tasks; however, her work-life balance was blurred, and it became clear that I needed to moderate her pace. I reinforced that unsupervised work needed to be limited to the allotted amount, otherwise the total hours would be exhausted before the semester would be over. Like most students, she needed to hear that there was always more work and that it wasn't necessary (or possible) to get "everything" done. So, we used part of the weekly meetings for her to select which opportunities she would like to pursue, allowing her to remain in control of her goals without getting overloaded or feeling like she wasn't accomplishing "enough."

As with any supervisory position, there may be an emotional component to supervising students. This was amplified during the pandemic. I needed to be aware of her wellbeing and capacity while assigning tasks, as well as my own. The virtual space can feel impersonal or distant and may become a barrier to having open conversations. The technology limits reading somatic or other non-verbal cues, leading to one or both of us potentially misinterpreting vulnerability in the moment. In addition, both of us were working in private spaces connected to our personal lives, and this environment can hinder discussing difficulties. Despite this, virtual meetings did increase individual attention compared to an office

environment for us. The online space required literal “face time,” which assured her of my attention with minimal distractions, such as other librarians, staff, or patrons (although there could be home distractions—frequently pets). This direct attention allowed engagement in deep conversations that may not have happened otherwise.

Lessons learned

This experience benefitted the student, who was hired for a summer position afterward at UIC and gained direct exposure to liaison responsibilities. Such exposure is not common but advantageous.⁶ For LIS students interested in academic librarianship, liaison training has shown to have a “considerable positive impact on students’ knowledge and confidence level.”⁷ The practicum site also received instructional materials from the developed workshop, recommended updates for two research guides, additional reference services, and research support on an informatics research project.

Institutions willing to host virtual practicum students should consider developing a consistent curriculum or structured program. Organizations need to contact LIS programs and communicate their willingness to host students to increase student awareness of specialized library career paths. Career centers may also promote specialized experiences available. Additional opportunities like pre-screening interviews for practicum students or matching supervisors with students who aspire to similar positions should be considered.

The virtual format presents challenges of internet connectivity, professionalism, attention, and individual accountability, but it opens the door to pursue studies in specialized settings. The student participated in professional librarianship activities, meetings, and networking, and received personalized mentorship, which offered valuable insights for career development. The practicum’s virtual format allowed her to maintain her normal employment, since the 3-credit hour practicum is unpaid and alone didn’t qualify for student loans.

For others replicating a virtual practicum experience, structuring supervised and unsupervised time, and establishing consistent student expectations is recommended. Supervisors must know their capacity limits and what their institution can facilitate. Students must recognize that practicum work relies on communicating effectively, using time wisely, and seeking out a site and supervisor who can facilitate their experiential learning with flexibility.

While the learning objectives were achieved for this experience, those designing virtual student practicum experiences should recognize that some in-person experiences may not be replicable. Tasks and goals should include both modes when possible, and it is the supervisor’s responsibility to identify these gaps. For example, as the pandemic waned, in-person services resumed. For this practicum, the supervisor insisted that the instruction session designed by the student be applicable for both in-person and virtual, including the active learning component, assessment, handouts, and presentation materials.

Conclusion

Students benefit from applied experiences, cultivation of tangible skills, familiarization with library resources, exposure to collaborative librarianship, and opportunities for networking and research practices. Because of this experience, the student was prepared to continue working at the practicum site remotely for the summer and transitioned to full-time work in a hybrid environment at a military medical research institute in 2021, four months after the end of this practicum. Because of her positive practicum experience, she

began mentoring three students from the LIS program through Mentor Collective, a program that matches alumni with students who have similar interests and backgrounds to help graduates navigate career paths.

Although this practicum arrangement took place in a medical library, these experiences may be generalizable to other library types. Practicum fieldwork experiences are dependent on supervisor willingness to mentor and take on the time commitment of training future library professionals, often in un-paid capacities that are short-term and demand a lot of attention. The education cycle relies on members in the profession to give back and foster professional training and collaboration to advance the LIS field.

The following two appendices are available as supplementary files from the link in the right sidebar:

- Appendix One: Practicum Guidelines
- Appendix Two: Database Discovery—Health Science *zz*

Notes

1. Mary Ellen Starmer, “Benefits of Practicum Students in Preservation: The Value of the Experience to the Department, Students, and Field,” *Collection Management* 29, no. 2 (2005): 33–40; Cecilia Woon Chien Teng, Raymond Boon Tar Lim, Dana Wai Shin Chow, Suganthi Narayanasamy, Chee Hsiang Liow, and Jeannette Jen-Mai Lee, “Internships before and during COVID-19: Experiences and Perceptions of Undergraduate Interns and Supervisors,” *Higher Education, Skills and Work-Based Learning* 12, no. 3 (May 9, 2022): 459–74, <https://doi.org/10.1108/HESWBL-05-2021-0104>.

2. University of Illinois Chicago Office of Institutional Research, “Institutional Data and Statistics,” 2020, <https://oir.uic.edu/data/>.

3. University of Illinois Chicago Office of the Chancellor, “Minority-Serving Institution Status,” 2020, <https://chancellor.uic.edu/minority-serving-designations/>.

4. Alisa Howlett, “Differences in Work/Life Balance and Stress at Work Between Male and Female Academic Librarians,” *Evidence Based Library and Information Practice* 14, no. 4 (December 12, 2019): 188–90, <https://doi.org/10.18438/eblip29649>.

5. Sean P. Kennedy and Kevin R. Garewal, “Quantitative Analysis of Workplace Morale in Academic Librarians and the Impact of Direct Supervisors on Workplace Morale,” *The Journal of Academic Librarianship* 46, no. 5 (2020): 102191, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.acalib.2020.102191>.

6. Ramirose Ilene Attebury and Joshua Finnell, “What Do LIS Students in the United States Know about Liaison Duties?” *New Library World* 110, no. 7/8 (2009): 325–40; Teng et al., “Internships before and during COVID-19.”

7. Nazi Torabi, “Library School Curricula in the US Should Address Liaison Responsibilities for Students Interested in Academic Librarianship,” *Evidence Based Library and Information Practice* 5, no. 2 (June 17, 2010): 100–102, <https://doi.org/10.18438/B8H326>.