

How do I get a library job? Evidence-based advice

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Abstract

It is widely assumed that practical job experience is the main factor that will get you a job once you graduate from a library program, so it follows that obtaining an internship while in school must be key to your future career success. But is there evidence behind this common advice? The accompanying [video](#) investigates these questions using interview and survey methodology.

Introduction to the Video



Figure 1. Video presentation of “How do I get a library job? Evidence-based advice”

You would be hard pressed to find a Library and Information Science (LIS) student who has not been told that working as a pre-professional in the LIS environment is critical for finding fulfilling work after graduation. This advice is ubiquitous. Our profession's leaders dispense it often. Joseph Thompson, the past-president of the Reference & User

Services Association of the American Library Association (RUSA), recently reported on a state conference panel he organized for job seekers where

The panelists universally stressed the importance of internships, field studies, practicums, and volunteer positions. [...] In addition to developing your experience and skills, you're also making connections with colleagues who may want to hire you at that library in the future, or at the very least will be happy to serve as references for you as you apply for positions elsewhere (p. 4).

While this seems logical, there is limited evidence in the library literature to support or prove it.

This mixed-methods study explores how pre-professional library work experiences like co-ops and practicums influenced early-career librarians' career success. We hope the results of our research will be useful to the LIS programs who design pre-professional work programs and to LIS students trying to decide if and what kind of pre-professional work to pursue. We define pre-professional work experiences broadly as any work LIS students undertake in library or information centre settings that are usually (but not exclusively) administered by the LIS programs' institutions.

We wanted to pursue this project because of our experiences as LIS students and job seekers. We had very different educational and professional backgrounds, but the same professional librarian aspirations. We both knew going into our LIS program at Western's Faculty of Information and Media Studies (FIMS) that we wanted to be academic librarians, but because of our differing backgrounds we approached our time there very differently.

Sandra has an MA in History, a BEd, and an MBA. Before starting at FIMS, she had had one career as a high school teacher and another career in marketing. In other words, Sandra had a wealth of professional and academic experiences before she arrived at librarianship. Because of this, Sandra chose not to participate in many pre-professional library work experiences. She did some job shadowing, worked as an intern on a chat reference service, and grew her professional network through library associations, but decided to focus her time at FIMS on graduating quickly.

Comparatively, Judith was much more inexperienced. She got an MA in English immediately after she graduated from her BA. She had worked part time consistently throughout her BA and MA, but mainly as a Teaching Assistant and in other student leadership/support positions like Residence Assistant. Knowing that she didn't have the practical professional skills she would need to make herself an attractive candidate to academic libraries, Judith took the opposite approach to Sandra. She applied to as many co-op positions as possible and was lucky enough to secure a full-time eight-month position at a university library. After she returned to FIMS, she continued to work in libraries as an intern on the Ontario Council of University Library's chat reference service.

So, here you have two aspiring academic librarians with opposite professional backgrounds both seeking full-time, stable work. What happened when we went on the job market?

After graduation, it took us both a while to find stable, full-time employment in the LIS sector of our choice—a very common experience, as our research discovered. Sandra was on the job market for eight months before securing her first position. Judith was lucky and got a job within a month of graduation. Both of our first positions were part-time contracts, but at least they were in academic libraries.

Fast forward to today. We are both now working as academic librarians in full time, permanent stream positions. Sandra is at Humber College Libraries and Judith is at the University of Toronto Libraries.

Having watched our careers develop as a result of our choices and skills, we couldn't help but wonder if the dominant narrative about pre-professional work experiences is oversimplifying things. How can these work experiences be *imperative* to getting the job of your dreams if people like Sandra who don't do them (or at least not very much) land perfectly well in the long run? Or maybe it's a matter of gradation? This study is an attempt to answer some of those questions.

Our overarching research question asks 'how do pre-professional LIS work experiences affect LIS students' subsequent career success'? There are far too many variables involved for us to be able to study all aspects of how pre-professional LIS work experiences interact with an individual's credentials, aspirations, geography, skill set, interview skills, professional network, etc. ad infinitum. So for this first study we limited ourselves to the following secondary research questions:

- What pre-professional LIS work experiences do students have access to?
- What outcomes do students get from these experiences?
- What external factors affect the influence of these experiences?

That first question were able to answer through the websites of LIS institutions and through preliminary interviews. Students had access to formal work experiences organized by their LIS programs like co-op placements and practicum courses. They also developed their own opportunities by securing work (either paid or unpaid) in the library system of their university or in the job market.

For the second research question, we also relied on our preliminary interviews. We analyzed the interview transcripts and observed seven common themes. We included these themes in the survey portion of our study to see if they resonated with a larger sample (they did). Our survey participants told us that they experienced the following outcomes in their pre-professional library work experiences (in order of most to least agreement):

- Added to my professional resume

- Taught me practical professional skills
- Clarified my professional aspirations
- Built my professional network
- Helped me get a job after graduation
- Informed my academic choices in my LIS program
- Introduced me to new areas of the LIS field that I have previously not considered or known about

For the final research question, we asked our survey participants about their level of education and the length and responsibility-level of their previous careers. Most of our participants (84%) only had Bachelor's degrees. About half (47%) had previous careers, and these tended to be non-management roles (56%) in what we're calling a mid-length career (44% had worked between one and three years) or a long-term career (40% had worked seven years or more).

In the attached video, we explain in more depth our study's findings with a focus on the online survey results. It's an adaptation of the presentation we gave at Ontario Library Association Super Conference 2015 in the Mentoring track, so it's pitched mainly to LIS students and job seekers. We hope it will help LIS mentors and professionals give advice to the new professionals in their circles too.

References

Thompson, J. (2014). Getting the library job you want: Tips for RUSA members on making the next career move. *Reference & User Services Quarterly*, 54(2), 4–7.