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Intentional Design: Crafting a Mutually Beneficial Internship Program in a University Archives and Special Collections

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Abstract

At the University of Nebraska at Omaha (UNO) Criss Library, archivists in Archives and Special Collections work with students at varied levels, from student employees to interns, and engagement through instruction. These interactions and employment opportunities manifest in various types of projects, ranging from long-term processing work to more individualized assignments based on the parameters of practicums and internships. In the past, most of this work was based on in-person experiences.

In early 2020, UNO archivists rushed to modify and create digital projects that would sustain them and their students during an unknown stretch of working from home. As the pandemic stretched on and working from home expectations changed, students continued to need remote work and learning opportunities. UNO archivists gained several student workers and interns over the course of the pandemic. Some of the students were transferred from other departments in the library, such as Circulation, which needed more time to determine how they could work from home. Many of the students that were temporarily placed in Archives and Special Collections had no experience with archives' work, and archivists were "ghosted" by a few student employees. Archivists did not take this personally as the pandemic affected everyone differently; they reconnected with students with redoubled efforts in flexibility and compassion. However, archivists are not superheroes; they could not be all things to students while dealing with their own pandemic-related circumstances. As a result, archivists had to identify ways in which they could engage students in meaningful work, while avoiding their own burnout or making more work for themselves.

The Hagel Archivist, Digital Initiatives Archivist, and Outreach Archivist initially worked individually to create and manage their student employees and interns. Each area of student work, processing, digital collections, and outreach required different workflows for project creation, and varied methods for scaffolding projects and outcomes. Additionally, each archivist had different levels of experience in supervision and creation of student projects. The Hagel Archivist manages students on short and long-term processing projects and working with multiple students from various academic programs. The Digital Initiatives Archivist oversees digitization projects that partner onsite UNO students for digitization and editing with remote library information science (LIS) students from various programs for metadata creation. The Outreach Archivist and her students create social media content, virtual programming, and exhibits to support collections and campus-wide events. In 2021, these three archivists decided to create a more structured and well-rounded program for engaging student employees, practicum students, and interns in the various facets of archival and special collections work.

This paper addresses UNO archivists' planning for remote, in-person, and hybrid student projects in processing, digital initiatives, and outreach. It includes discussion of implementing different student projects and lessons learned. Also described is the ideation of a formalized internship design and workflow as UNO archivists look to increase remote collaboration with students even as they return to full-time in-person work. Through this work, archivists plan to create student projects that are mutually beneficial and leave their students with a sense of purpose, accomplishment, and support they can carry with them throughout their classes and into employment.

Intentional Design: Crafting a Mutually Beneficial Internship Program in a University Archives and Special Collections

Through the first year of the pandemic, the Hagel Archivist, Digital Initiatives Archivist, and Outreach Archivist at the University of Nebraska at Omaha (UNO) supervised digital projects for student employees, interns, and practicum students. Moving quickly through appropriate student projects compiled early in the pandemic, they knew they could not sustain the intense cycle of project management long-term. Additionally, they saw a need to create a structured, well-rounded, and cooperative program for interns and practicum students, whether fully in-person, remote, or a hybrid combination of both. This paper addresses the planning and supervision of projects in the areas of processing, digital initiatives, and outreach, and it will describe efforts to create an “intentionally designed” student program. The Hagel Archivist, Digital Initiatives Archivist, and Outreach Archivist hope that working together to create such a program will ultimately relieve the pressure of responding to internship requests disparately and provide a mutually beneficial experience for both archivist and student.

Literature Review

Literature surrounding internship and practicum design has come a long way since the 1970s when discussions of archival education began in earnest. The Society of American Archivists released its first graduate education guidelines in 1977, which essentially reflected a sequence of two classes plus a practicum (Cox, 2015). It was not until the turn of this most recent century that the profession had staffed up enough credentialed faculty to make more sophisticated course sequences the norm in archival education (Cox, 2015). With that has come more meaningful practicum and internship opportunities and an accompanying increase in professional literature on the topic. Two publications, *Best Practices for Internships as a Component of Graduate Archival Education* (Society of American Archivists, 2008) and *Archival Internships: A Guide for Faculty, Supervisors and Students* (Bastian & Webber, 2008) provide research-informed, yet loosely structured guidelines on internship frameworks. And while the value of internship and practicum work continues to be recognized as critical training needed in a field full of theory, many authors note the lack of truly established standards for library and archives internships across GLAM institutions (Kopp & Murphy, 2012; Leanard, 2012).

The lack of widely accepted standards can have dangerous effects on interns, practicum students, and volunteers of all types. Many publications highlight the problematic nature of unpaid internships if students are used simply as free labor, to perform menial basic tasks, or to do work performed in place of paid employees (Gallup Kopp, 2019; Grimm & Harmeyer, 2020; Kopp & Murphy, 2012). The risk of creating internships that fail to meet student expectations or required learning goals, as well as overworking interns and burning out supervisors is all too real (Bisio et al., 2021; Risam et al., 2017). Poorly structured internships do not engender trust building between interns and supervisors, which can prevent honest conversations about the job market, gaps in education, and systemic problems within the field such as the “hiring fit” trends based on

geography that reinforce homogeneity of the workforce (Bisio et al., 2021; Cifor & Waston, 2020; Grimm & Harmeyer, 2020).

Some institutions have responded similarly to Madway's (2011) work by reimagining the possibilities of internship programs and shifting their approach to counter some of the problematic issues noted above (Gallup Kopp, 2019; Sjoberg, 2014). Several publications illustrate efforts to reframe internships along pedagogical lines, while facilitating trust building, encouraging mentorship, and providing varied work to help create a well-rounded experience for interns (Bisio et al., 2021; Gallup Kopp, 2019; Madway, 2011). Risam et al. (2020) go so far as to advocate for student and supervisor collaboration that respects the principals in *A Student Collaborators' Bill of Rights* and enables student-directed decision making. This redirection in programmatic emphasis lends itself to successfully designed internships that consistently reflect three themes of structure across several types of institutions: building a cohort of interns (Bisio et al., 2021; Gallup Kopp, 2019), ensuring sustainability through clear learning plans from both hosting-institution supervisors and educational program coordinators (Grimm & Harmeyer, 2020; Hoy, 2011; Sinn, 2013), and utilizing a scaffolded/track design (Gallup Kopp, 2019; Madway, 2011; Sjoberg, 2014). Internships designed according to these themed structures prevent programs from turning into checklists of tasks to complete and allow for directed but varied work. Such programs are empathetic to student needs by being well-rounded and pedagogy driven; they are well-equipped to facilitate the growth and expansion of students' personal learning and professional network (Bisio et al., 2021).

Projects and Our Students: Overall

The Hagel Archivist, Digital Initiatives Archivist, and Outreach Archivist supervise undergraduate and graduate student employees, practicum students, and interns. They also teach students through instruction sessions and informational interviews. Specifically, the Hagel Archivist focuses on supervising collection processing projects and teaching students about processing. The Digital Initiatives Archivist manages digitization projects that partner onsite UNO student employee work with remote Library and Information Science graduate student work for the entire digitization process, including scanning, post-production, and metadata creation. The Outreach Archivist and her students create social media content, conduct virtual programming, and create exhibits to support collection promotion and campus-wide events. During the COVID-19 pandemic, meetings and instruction sessions with students continued and archivists continued to provide projects and experiences for their students in virtual and hybrid forms.

Projects and Our Students: Processing

The Hagel Archivist manages a team of staff and students in arranging and describing the U.S. Senator Chuck Hagel Archives and collaborates with colleagues to manage the Omaha COVID-19 Collection. The nature of the Hagel Archives—a collection currently of around 1000 linear

feet distributed across seventeen series—affords the Hagel Archivist the opportunity to plan and assign processing projects from the small to large and simple to complex, all using only the Hagel collection. This means student employees and interns of all experience and education levels, and with differing amounts of time to work on the collection, have benefitted from projects drawn from the Hagel Archives. During the pandemic, the Hagel Archivist supervised five student employees in total working on remote Hagel and other digital projects, hired and trained two student employees virtually, and supervised a practicum student in arranging and describing parts of the digital Omaha COVID-19 Collection.

In the summer and late fall 2020, two student employees left the department to pursue internship and graduate assistant opportunities. The Hagel Archivist decided to hire two students at the beginning of 2021, aware that this would necessitate changes to the usual onboarding process and entry-level assignments. Previously, onboarding was accomplished via a notebook in the workroom with a training checklist and required readings and tasks. The archivist quickly converted the notebook to a PDF and altered activities on the checklist to accommodate remote work, saving other onboarding activities for when students transitioned to onsite or hybrid work. Orientations to the actual spaces of the department and library were obvious activities to delay, while other considerations included deciding what elements of arrangement and description the archivist could teach effectively at a distance and what elements were better saved for when students could physically interact with the papers.

The Hagel Archivist met with each new student individually over multiple Zoom sessions to orient them to the department and its collections; review required readings about the library, archives, and congressional collections; provide a forest-level view of the Hagel Archives and explain the basics of arrangement and description, with an emphasis on the latter (an emphasis on arrangement would come at the start of onsite work); and train them on the department's finding aid database, ArchivesSpace, and teach them how to create archival objects in it. After this, the archivist assigned them each their first two digital projects; she assigned two so that they could switch out tasks during the long hours they were spending at home between both work and online classes. The archivist and the students communicated by email, with the students updating her every Thursday or Friday on their progress. This did not proceed smoothly every week, as the students were juggling responsibilities and stressors from many quarters, but it kept them moving forward.

The Hagel Archivist's practicum student worked on the COVID-19 Collection as they needed a virtual arrangement and description project for an upper-level graduate archival course. The department has other digital collections, but the COVID-19 Collection was at the right stage of processing to accommodate this practicum student's course requirements, and it required only a couple hours of preparation by the archivist to make it a meaningful project for the student. The archivist transferred the 16 GB of files to an accessible working space online and deconstructed some of the preliminary folder structure. She did the latter so that the practicum student could gain additional experience in creating folders, sorting files appropriately, and creating a file structure. The archivist met three times with the practicum student over Zoom to orient them to

the department and the project, to talk progress and challenges, and to teach them ArchivesSpace, through which they would do the bulk of the description required by the practicum assignments.

Projects and Our Students: Digital Initiatives

While working remotely in fall 2020, the Digital Initiatives Archivist planned and executed the migration of UNO's student newspaper from an outdated platform to the newly acquired digital asset management (DAM) system Islandora. She created detailed instructions that enabled her onsite student employee to complete the majority of metadata work necessary for the digital collection. The instructions also proved usable for the University of Missouri practicum student who worked on the same project from October through December 2020. This early work in providing remote instruction and management to both a student employee and practicum student was made possible through Zoom instruction and check-ins, instructions consisting of multiple screen shots, and email updates. While training and communication were functional, the Digital Initiatives Archivist felt that much could be improved upon.

Using what she learned from her initial supervision and instruction of remote practicum students and onsite students, the Digital Initiatives Archivist felt confident responding to a request from a professor at Louisiana State University (LSU) seeking remote metadata work for a student's directed independent study (DIS). With more freedom to direct the outcomes of internship work and a sincere desire to create a beneficial experience for a student who was limited to remote work due to her full-time job, the archivist created a work plan that integrated her remote DIS student and her onsite student employee. By assigning her onsite student employee to scan material needed to fulfil research requests, the archivist fulfilled the needs of researchers while also generating content for the Archives' online digital collections and provided content in need of description for the DIS student to work on.

With a steady supply of digital collections being generated by her onsite student employee, the Digital Initiatives Archivist planned for her remote DIS student to use trial versions of Adobe Acrobat and Oxygen XML Editor to embed metadata within digital objects and create MODS records for their eventual ingest into Islandora. Relying on the accessible nature of SharePoint files and the 7-day free trial of Adobe Acrobat Pro, the DIS student performed quality control on several hundred digital objects across two collections and embedded metadata within one. Using the 30-day free trial of Oxygen she generated MODS records for two collections from a template created by the archivist. While the archivist ingested the two digital collections into Islandora, she gave the DIS student a third collection to describe directly from the metadata forms in the Islandora backend. Using this approach, three collections were made completely available online while providing a remote student valuable experience with two types of software, a DAM, and metadata creation. Instead of trying to provide detailed written instruction for all of the DIS student's projects, the archivist took advantage of UNO's subscription to VidGrid in order to create demonstration videos that replicated what it would be like to receive hands-on/in-person training in the archives.

Nearly half-way through the LSU student's DIS work, the Digital Initiatives Archivist received another request for remote digital collections experience from a student at the University of Washington iSchool. Based on the success of the LSU student, the archivist conducted an interview and determined that the UW student would be a good fit for remote work and would benefit from what she could offer her in terms of learning experiences. The archivist used the exact approach for a work and learning plan as she did with the LSU student. The UW student was able to write and add metadata directly into Islandora for two collections, create MODS records based off the established template, and upload both the XML record and the digital objects themselves to Islandora. The last portion of her project was a stretch for the archivist, because it released the absolute control over who could add content into the DAM. Despite some initial uncertainties, the work was still able to be checked for quality and turned out perfectly. This experience was facilitated by Zoom calls, emails, brief written instructions, file sharing over SharePoint, and several VidGrid demonstration videos. The archivist expects use of such tools while interacting with onsite, remote, and hybrid interns and student employees to continually evolve.

Projects and Our Students: Outreach

The Outreach Archivist worked with students for exhibit and engagement programming. One of these projects was short-term and focused more specifically on the need for the practicum student to gain experience. The other is an on-going, grant funded project in which the student's role is more integrated into the larger body of work.

The Outreach Archivist worked with the practicum student on exhibit creation, an important element of engagement. She provided a guided instruction session for searching the catalog and databases, providing a list of items to be displayed. Then, she assigned the student to locate items, fill out call slips, and create labels following an existing template. During the exhibit installation, the archivist asked about the student's courses, interest in libraries, and future goals. This was an important step towards trust building, as the student shared things about her program, including frustrations, and elements about libraries that inspired her. While this was not a fully scaffolded project or track, the archivist established professional trust and offered continued communication.

The second student the Outreach Archivist continues to work with is a grant-funded student for a long-term collaboration between the archives and the UNO Department of Black Studies. With this second hire, the archivist was the lead and supervised the student as they conducted research for a year-long program to celebrate the 50th anniversary of the Black Studies department. In addition to research, the student works with the archivist in creating exhibits for the event, including a digital exhibit in Omeka and a small pop-up exhibit panel for a community event.

The Outreach Archivist emphasized trust building, the opportunity for development as a researcher, and comfort using primary source materials. This grant-funded student had

previously been to the archives for an instruction session but had not returned for additional classes or independent research. The student was encouraged to explore areas within the research project guidelines and follow interesting threads, as opposed to the archivist directing all their research topics. In order to build a rapport and share more of the current trends and important topics of the archival field, the archivist shared journal articles with the student for them to read and discuss. Because of department's limit on individuals in the archives, the student worked remotely until summer 2021; this had a detrimental effect since the archivist could only provide a truncated orientation.

The encouragement, academic engagement, and flexibility offered by the Outreach Archivist made for a collegial working relationship with the student, but also had drawbacks in the beginning. To be a vocal advocate for the student's comfort with the project and their use of primary sources, the archivist realized that she needed to clarify some expectations. The student was initially slightly overwhelmed and disoriented in their research because they lacked a general context of the topic. Additionally, the reading materials the archivist assigned, while foundational to the field, were irrelevant to the immediate project and therefore pointless, causing further confusion. Despite these initial setbacks, work continues at a steady pace; student and archivist have established a much better workflow. While working onsite, the student has produced more focused work, especially as they now understand their research will be used for exhibit labels and collection descriptions. The archivist found that by sharing how this research fits into the larger project, the student is less likely to become lost in the sources.

Designing Internships and Practicums

The student engagement and projects described above led to a discussion among the Hagel Archivist, Digital Initiatives Archivist, and Outreach Archivist about bringing a more holistic and cooperative view to student work in the archives. In January 2021, they started to make changes to how they hired and trained student employees. As a stopgap measure to train two new students remotely, the Hagel Archivist converted the department's older, inherited training notebook into a PDF with an updated training checklist to fit a remote environment. The Digital Initiatives Archivist suggested going further in the future by using the university's learning management system, Canvas, to offer a more robust and flexible training experience. Both archivists also updated their student position descriptions by removing jargon and targeting specific departments for candidates, producing immediate results of good candidates and two new hires.

When the Digital Initiatives Archivist brought on a practicum student in spring 2021, the three archivists' conversation and focus quickly turned to designing an internship and practicum program to bring together everyone's disparate efforts to recruit, manage projects for, and supervise students. They decided the broad elements of the program first, starting with the application process (requiring a resume and cover letter for professional practice, intended to signal the significant importance of this learning experience), a learning plan (crafted to meet

both repository and student needs and thus a meaningful experience for all), and subject tracks based on their areas of expertise in which they could facilitate the most professional growth within students. The discussion then turned to application logistics, including internships lengths and academic course requirements. This was quickly followed by more in-depth discussion of the subject tracks, which were in many ways the most complex and crucial of the program elements.

The Hagel Archivist, Digital Initiatives Archivist, and Outreach Archivist felt that core archival functions of outreach, digital initiatives, and processing made the most sense to serve as subject tracks around which internships would be based. They would serve as the primary supervisor for successful applicants who selected their respective area. One core function not included as a subject track was cataloging. Knowing from experience that students would ask for hands on experience with this, the archivists decided to make cataloging a component that students could elect to add to their learning plan. As an add-on component, a limited number of hours would be coordinated between the subject track supervisor and the Metadata Coordinator responsible for departmental cataloging.

The archivists selected additional components to enhance the overall hands-on experience. Informational interviews were deemed a vital component of a well-rounded learning experience, as they provide the opportunity to learn from other library professionals beyond the direct supervisors' sphere of experience. An end-of-internship talk on skills and lessons learned is intended to help both student and archivist evaluate the program, as well as give the student experience in preparing and giving a professional presentation. Finally, an exit interview with each student will be an additional assessment tool, allowing the student and archivist to discuss what worked and what could be improved upon.

As the archivists talked through the program elements, their discussions frequently turned to ethical considerations, as they desired to design an ethically informed internship program. Of obvious consideration was the merits and drawbacks of unpaid versus paid and credit versus not-for-credit internships. The Hagel Archivist was leery of using course credit as a crutch for not offering paid internships, while also recognizing that practicums and for-credit internships along with institutional financial realities often do not often make compensation feasible. Not-for-credit internships seemed the most problematic, as they are most often pursued by students of at least minimal privilege, contributing to the overall lack of diversity in the field. The Digital Initiatives Archivist expressed a special affinity towards providing remote experiences for students who are unable to take advantage of in-person internships and practicums, whether that was due to family or work responsibilities, location restrictions, etcetera. She recognized that this desire must be carefully balanced with the questionable practice of advertising positions for unpaid work. To deal with this, the archivists drafted an ethics rubric, which essentially results in primarily considering applicants who are enrolled in a relevant academic program. Ultimately, the archivists are interested in expanding their network to partner with LIS schools that are like-minded in terms of ethical considerations and recognize the critical value of practical experience.

A running theme throughout the archivists' discussions was the concept of sustainability. They recognize that while the time they spend preparing student projects is offset by the provision of meaningful experience for students and a tangible benefit to the repository, they also must consider other work priorities and their own emotional health. Much of their discussion surrounding internship lengths, tracks, components, and ethical considerations were shaped with sustainability in mind. Only a sustainable program will be a wise investment of time as they strive to make lasting changes within the department while maintaining an appropriate balance of life and work.

Conclusion and Lessons Learned

As a result of the varied experiences over the past 15 months, the Hagel Archivist, Digital Initiatives Archivist, and Outreach Archivist identified a need for an internship program centered around meaningful and mutually beneficial projects for students and staff. They examined relevant literature, explored trends in the field, and integrated lessons learned from introductory experiences in an effort to craft something useful and valuable. The archivists foresee students having positive experiences from their internships and practicums that build upon or fill in the gaps from their LIS programs. This method is called "intentional design" because they are creating a program that is very intentionally informed by their own expertise in the archival field, practical judgement, and feedback gathered from students.

Much of the feedback received in the early stages of design development validated the archivists' ethical considerations and their intentional focus on meaningful work. The Digital Initiatives Archivist's students confirmed that video instruction was beneficial and provided a more humanized method of instruction in comparison to screenshots embedded within a text document. All of her students reported that their experience was beneficial, even the repetitive task of digitization and metadata creation, going so far as to suggest that more work and responsibility could have been assigned. The archivist learned that she could entrust qualified students with greater responsibility than initially considered. The Outreach Archivist acknowledged that she should have given more specific research direction to her grant-funded student to provide more initial direction before allowing them to direct their own work. One change she will make in the future is to provide more specific oversight and assignments, even if a student self-identifies their working style as "independent with fewer check-ins". The Hagel Archivist echoed the importance of clear and frequent communication, specifically the necessity of clear student-directed research objectives and a structured approach for future intern and student projects.

The archivists intentionally designed their program to incorporate empathy. With a shared responsibility approach, they hope to create work that is meaningful and supportive of students' professional development, students' and archivists' emotional and mental needs, and institutional objectives. As they move towards a soft launch of this program, they expect to make adjustments as they implement a thoughtful, compassionate, and intentionally designed program.

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