

## **Abstract**

To what extent are unpaid internships used in academic libraries in Ontario and what are the experiences of the individuals fulfilling them? An environmental scan was undertaken across the province and interviews solicited from the community at large to explore the experience of unpaid labour in depth. Based on a 38% response rate, it was determined that Ontario academic libraries are not engaging in the use of unpaid labour, unless it is for course credit. Six individuals who had participated in an unpaid labour opportunity were interviewed. The majority did so for course credit and had worthwhile experiences. General themes that emerged from the interviewee's experiences were the need for an improved selection process for practicum placements, the importance of communication and contact with a designated supervisor and co-workers, the need for guidance and feedback in completing assigned work, and the offer/availability of a professional reference for future use. There was general agreement that the net benefit of gaining work experience compensated for the lack of actual remuneration, but that without course credit, engaging in unpaid internships/labour is not an option for those who do not have support at home to do so.

## **Keywords**

LIS education, unpaid internships, labour, practicums

## **Introduction**

Brought together by a mutual interest in the labour market for new graduates in the library and archives sector, we aimed to determine the extent to which unpaid internships are used in Ontario academic libraries, and about the individuals fulfilling these roles. It was a two-phase study, the first phase consisting of an environmental scan to determine the state of unpaid internships in all Ontario university libraries, and the second comprised of face-to-face interviews with volunteers who have participated in such opportunities.

This project has been in development since approximately April 2014, when the literature review/research problem exploration stage began informally. At this stage we realized we were dealing with a timely topic, as the Ministry of Labour in Ontario had started enforcing the Labour Act as it pertained to unpaid internships in the province more forcefully. Subsequent to this change in government enforcement practice, several internship programs in the media industry were shut down and there was much discussion and debate in the news centred around the general issue of unpaid internships. A gap in Canadian data has already been identified by researchers from the

University of Victoria partnered with the Canadian Intern Association, who have estimated there could be as many as 300,000 unpaid interns in Ontario alone (McKnight, 2013). While considering the potential implications of the trend toward operational dependence on unpaid labour as has been observed in certain segments of the media sector, we were struck by the question of how the academic library sector fit in this tumultuous landscape.

## ***Literature Review***

Interest in this project was incited by recent media focus on and criticism of the practice of lengthy unpaid internships in the publishing sector in Canada and, to a lesser extent, in the entertainment industry in the United States and the resulting litigation (Yost, L. 2013; Ugwu, 2013; McKnight, 2014). Most accredited, post-graduate LIS programs include work placements, either required or optional, many of which are unpaid. In light of the publicized, negative experiences of interns in other sectors, the researchers wanted to examine the experience Ontario LIS students have with unpaid placements.

There is scant literature regarding unpaid internships in the library and information science field that specifically study the Canadian model. A literature review, conducted in March of 2015, found a few short papers on the topic of library internships, some of which were quite dated. This includes reviews of existing internship programs (Howes, 1978), reviews of placement programs within special libraries such as map collections (Strickland, 1988) and hospital libraries (Holst, 2001). To help fill the gap in Canadian data, a nationwide non-sector specific study of internships is currently being conducted by the Canadian Intern Association in partnership with researchers from the University of Victoria. This as yet unpublished study estimates there could be as many as 300,000 unpaid interns in Ontario alone (Goodman, 2014) There are also a number of reviews of the European library internship model from the UK (Siebert and Wilson, 2013) and the Netherlands (Stein, 1984), that examine restructuring of existing field work conventions to better benefit students.

This small study is unique in its focus on the academic library in Ontario and exploring both the rate of participation from the library perspective, and the exploration of the participants' experience. A review of educational training programs in libraries was published in 1992 by the Association of Research Libraries that included internships as part of formal Library education. Their survey found the majority of libraries (15 of 18) in fact "pay interns for their field experience" (Brewer, 1992, p5). This did not address the individual experience of the interns, however, and focused on the internal workflow and policies related to these programs.

A more in depth review of some key studies related to unpaid academic internships in general helped to create a clearer picture of the history of the practice, and created some starting points for the assessment in this study.

Burke and Carton's 2013 study on internships in the United States concluded that an internship "must produce a rich learning experience for the unpaid student if it's to be successful" (pp. 121). The paper includes a proposed policy framework looking at the pedagogical and ethical aspects of internships they suggest would help ensure a positive experience for the students. This framework serves as an excellent starting point for creating a questionnaire for assessing the success of the internship experiences. The study looks at unpaid academic internships in general, without focus on a specific field. Taking a historical view of the tradition of internships, the authors question their viability in today's economic climate, in light of their prevalence in the US. Reviewing pedagogical, legal and ethical aspects – both positive and negative – the authors outline a policy recommendation to ensure a successful internship program.

The 2013 UK review of unpaid internships in creative industries undertaken by Siebert and Wilson reviewed studies that stressed the institutional benefit to essentially "try before you buy", with placements acting as long term interviews for possible positions with the company (pp. 712). In order to determine if library and information science students are benefitting in the same way, questions around interns getting jobs at the institutions where they interned were added. Siebert and Wilson take a socioeconomic view of internships, noting only those who don't need an income can afford to take on unpaid work. Finally, the study noted a majority of interns polled thought that their situation was unfair but "this is how things are done" (pp. 714). This attitude is troubling, and assessing the quality of library internships was an important part of this research.

This qualitative UK study approached both students and educational and professional stakeholders, including career advisors and union representatives, as well as a policy analysis. The article stresses that new graduates with no experience are much less likely to find employment and looks at the pros and cons of unpaid internships as possible entries into creative industries. Unique in the broad stakeholder perspectives it gathered, this study concluded that internship programs do pose a risk to some workers, who may be displaced in favour of unpaid interns. Taking a socio-economic view of the topic, the researchers argue lower income students are at a disadvantage as they are not able to afford long periods of unpaid labour.

Durack's 2013 study on undergraduate interns in writing programs offers a working definition of internship: "a substantive experiential learning opportunity that links theory to practice and education to employment" (pp. 2). This will serve as a useful basis to determine if the experiences students had reflect this standard. Durack highlights the positive attributes: "Internships give students a boost in a competitive job market and a chance to try out careers" (pp. 2). Focusing on undergraduate interns in writing programs in the United States, the author suggests economic issues faced by students have changed so drastically that the usefulness of academic internships must be questioned. Co-ops, were excluded from the study as they are more closely linked to

the educational institution and the teaching process. The author argues the pros and cons of internships, and reviews relevant US laws governing internship programs and how these may interfere with the creation of quality internships. The author examines the realities of economic pressures on students and suggests academic institutions should be proactive in transforming their internship programs in light of these changes.

A 2014 resumé review conducted by Nunley et al. measured the impact of organized internships on the employability of the student. The researchers described their results as "strong evidence that internship experience improves employment opportunities" with the finding that former interns were contacted significantly more for interviews than those who did not complete an internship (Nunley et al., 2014. pp 11). The study, it should be noted, relied on a statistical analysis of a resumé survey and did not take into consideration the actual experience of the interns, but does seem to indicate a hiring preference for this type of organized work experience.

## ***Methodology***

The researchers used basic interview methods to gather information about individual internship experiences, along with a survey questionnaire to determine the nature and extent of the use Ontario university libraries are making of unpaid labour.

### **Phase 1 - How many Ontario institutions are offering unpaid internships?**

A questionnaire was designed to be distributed among the 21 Ontario university libraries we had identified. The existing Ontario Council of University Libraries (OCUL) organization was leveraged. Because we only wanted one respondent per institution, and a consistent voice in response, we opted to seek the audience of the associate university librarian community. We approached our institution's Associate Chief Librarian to facilitate access to this group. She agreed to share the survey with them via their closed listserv.

Nine (9) questions in total were developed in order to gather the data. Our primary interest was to determine how many institutions offered unpaid internships; what their motivations were in offering them; were they an effective form of labour; and was the operation of the institution dependent upon their existence. We also asked basic questions about the size of the institution in order to determine if there were any trends to be correlated.

Respondents were not required to identify their institution. We were not concerned about duplicate responses due to the method by which the survey was distributed. A consequence of this anonymity, however, was that we were unable to

identify those who did not respond, and therefore, were not able to follow up in order to increase the response rate.

## **Phase 2 - What is the experience of those who participate in unpaid internships?**

Individual interviews were selected in order to gather the most authentic data for this phase of the study. Due to the subjective and personal nature of each individual's experience, and in order to elicit the most honest responses, we felt this method would increase our chances of success. We went through the Research Ethics approval process; approval was confirmed in October, 2014.

We sought representation from all Ontario universities offering the master's degree in library and information science - University of Toronto, University of Western Ontario and University of Ottawa. The student/alumni services officers at each of these schools were identified as we determined these offices were most likely to be able to reach current students and recent graduates. In cases where it was not immediately obvious from the website who that individual was, a phone call to clarify was made. An introductory email was sent in order to arrange a phone call for a more in-depth conversation to explain the intention behind the research and our intended audience so they could determine the optimal communication method to reach out to students and alumni. Each school was provided with a scripted email to distribute. Each individual researcher also posted the call for participation on Twitter. A small token (\$10 Indigo gift card) was offered as an incentive to participate.

Initially, we hoped to recruit five participants from each school. The inclusion criteria were:

- volunteers who have participated in an unpaid labour/volunteer/course-credit opportunity in the last two years in an Ontario academic library
- volunteers can either be currently enrolled or a recent graduate of a masters of information program
- the unpaid labour/volunteer/course-credit opportunity could have taken place during school or after graduation

Exclusion criteria were:

- volunteers whose experience was restricted to a single event
- volunteers whose experience consisted of fewer than 8 hours (total)
- participants in informal or formal job shadowing or peer mentoring

- volunteers engaged under the auspice of the university as a whole (as opposed to the library specifically)

In total, we received six volunteers, all of whom met the inclusion criteria. Unfortunately, all but one were from University of Toronto. This was a concern as it was a much smaller sample size than we had hoped for, and was not representative of all Ontario schools. The University of Ottawa's School of Information Studies is relatively new (started in 2007); we anticipated this would be a difficult group to meet the goal of five participants. The University of Western Ontario does not offer a practicum, rather, they incorporate paid co-op positions into their degree offerings. We thought this contributed to the low turnout.

We met to discuss whether or not we should carry on with the project given we did not meet our participation goal. We also sought a meeting with the Research Ethics Board consultants to help us determine if we should continue. It was their opinion that we could choose to carry on, even with the small sample, as long as we noted this in our findings. We decided to persevere, intrigued by the anomalous response from University of Toronto.

Each volunteer was matched to a pair of researchers. We arranged to meet at mutually agreeable locations and times. It was determined that one interview would have to take place over Skype due to distance. We provided the questions and the consent form via email prior to the interview in order to allow sufficient time for the participants to review the documents. The consent form was signed and collected prior to the start of the interview. The interviews were recorded and have been securely saved.

## ***Results***

### **Environmental Scan**

We sent a questionnaire to the Associate University Librarians of each Ontario university. We received 8 (out of a possible 21) completed surveys in response. This represents a 38% response rate. We received responses from small, medium, and large institutions, all of which had an equal distribution (respectively) among the size of staff complement. 50% had offered an unpaid work/volunteer/internship opportunity in the last two years, and 50% had not. Of those who had, two (2) indicated it had been for course credit in an ALA accredited school, one (1) did not, and the last indicated they had offered both (i.e. yes and no). The majority of unpaid opportunities fall under the umbrella of ALA credit. Some opportunities do not - due to the way this question was

framed, it is possible all unpaid opportunities involved course credit (just not necessarily ALA certified course credit). Evidence appears to support that respondents were only offering practica if they were affiliated with a University or College library science program.

In terms of motivation for participation in these programs, only five (5) responses were received. There are a variety of factors leading institutions to engage with practica; but the desire to mentor students was an important and broadly shared factor. None reported their service levels were dependent upon these programs.

## Interviews

The acquisition of professional references as a result of work completed on unpaid internships and the opportunity to learn new professional skills are two of the main benefits cited by our subjects. All respondents felt their skills were enhanced, and were comfortable using, and did use, their supervisor(s) as a reference in a formal job search.

*"I didn't know anything about that field or those kinds of search strategies until I did this practicum ... So the only like real experience I had in medical librarianship was this practicum... I'm almost completely sure that without that I would not have this job." - interview participant.*

The majority of unpaid internship opportunities experienced by our subjects were facilitated through their graduate schools for course credit as opposed to being arranged by individuals on their own time. This may be a corollary of the unionized environment of many academic libraries, which tend to prohibit the use of unpaid labour. The one respondent whose placement was self-arranged and not for credit, did experience some concerning behaviour around the supervisors' need to 'hide' the placement from the local bargaining unit. This experience was unique in our results, and actually appears to have been illegal according to Ontario legislation. (See appendix I).

*"You know I was sort of...It was hinted at the time that this was really kind of under the radar, because the union wasn't too happy about that kind of situation, so they had to keep it very much as an educational opportunity...and I understand it's quite unusual for university libraries to use volunteers." - interview participant*

It was encouraging to note the majority of unpaid work opportunities we studied involved project-based work suitable to the professional aspirations of the interns as opposed to day-to-day operational tasks. This was an area probed in the environmental

scan phase of the project, and this finding was corroborated when institutions unanimously reported they were not reliant upon unpaid labour to maintain service levels. This is further reiterated by the finding that several institutions reported a secondary motivation to participation was project driven.

There is an overall impression the segment of the unpaid internship landscape that is specifically facilitated by professional information schools appears to be offering a fair exchange, as evidenced by the positive assessments of their experiences by our interview subjects.

*“I know a lot of people when they go to library school they already maybe worked in a library, or they [inaudible] had student jobs working in libraries, I couldn’t do these things because of commuting, so this was actually a really good opportunity for me to actually see what it’s like to work in a library, some of the interesting bits, some of the boring bits.”* - interview participant

## **Discussion**

The data generated by our environmental scan, though not as robust as we had hoped, clearly indicated Ontario academic libraries are not operationally dependent upon unpaid labour. In fact, there was a clear indication the desire to mentor students was the primary motivator. One respondent stated that “field placements cost more in staff time than anything the library gets out of them” (survey respondent), in line with the Ontario Ministry of Labour guidelines that “the employer derives little, if any, benefit from the activity of the intern while he or she is being trained” (Ontario Ministry of Labour, 2015).

We did not uncover a single instance of an Ontario post secondary library facilitating any unpaid labour/volunteer opportunities not explicitly tied to a university or community college-level course of study related to library or archival science. Unpaid internships facilitated through information schools (i.e. internships in exchange for course credit) continue to be a critical component in many emerging professionals strategy for acquiring job experience. As noted by Siebert and Wilson (2013) there was general consensus that participation was contingent upon having support at home and course credit was crucial to making it worthwhile.

*“So I don’t know, worthwhile for me definitely but also it wasn’t paid so part of my summer was spent not getting paid ... but if I had to pay the*

*rent I wouldn't have even been able to take that course. So anyways, worthwhile if you have the money!"* - interview participant

Other interns reported they have calculated the cost of the experience as part of the inevitable debt load of contemporary graduate/professional education.

Individuals responsible for the organization of unpaid internships for course credit would be wise to listen to feedback from past participants. It was noted in our data that the process of applying to and receiving internships could be developed in a more transparent direction. Job descriptions are usually quite brief and there is rarely a pre-vetting interview between intern and employer, for example. More information about the work expected of the student and the skills to be developed throughout would be helpful for students in terms of selecting desired opportunities and managing their expectations throughout the practicum.

Most of the interns noted they found the process for selection of the opportunities problematic. While some were able to organize their own placements reflective of specific research interests and goals, a common complaint was the "first come first served" process of practicum selection caused some tension. None of the opportunities organized through the graduate schools included a formal vetting process or resume review.

*"Only one or two people can get each opportunity so I guess the competition is being fastest to click on it when it opened"* - interview participant

*"Whoever got to it first...we all logged in onto this archaic site and tried to sign up for the ones that we wanted."* - interview participant

While the experiences were generally positive, there were suggestions that some of their peers had difficult, negative or unhelpful experiences. The researchers acknowledge that, though anecdotal in nature, the majority of participants interviewed noted they were lucky to have had a positive experience and some of their peers had negative experiences. Improvements made to the posting and selection process as noted above could help address this issue.

One concerning issue to come up during the research process was the discovery that at the University of Toronto, the "leftover" practicum placements (i.e. those not selected by anyone) were being offered to students within the school but outside the class as "volunteer" positions (University of Toronto Faculty of Information, personal communication, February 3, 2015). While the chance to gain experience may still be

beneficial to the student who has yet to acquire any other library experience, the opportunity for credit, and the concomitant prestige and sense of security that comes with some degree of institutional oversight have been removed. As such, care needs to be taken to ensure legislation and union regulations are not being circumvented through this uncredited volunteer route.

### ***Implications for further research***

According to recent government data there is a worrying trend of an oversupply of job seekers to job openings in our industry (Employment and Social Development Canada, 2012).

*National Occupational Projection Survey Data, 2013 - Librarians, Archivists, Conservators and Curators.*



This margin is projected to shrink mildly, but persist well into the next decade. Therefore, it is a matter of great concern to have noted practicums that went unselected by students were subsequently offered as volunteer positions. In combination with other developments in the industry such as the increasingly popular trend toward crowdsourced metadata (Mayer, 2015; Library and Archives Canada, 2015), one can deduce while there may not be a trend toward the use of unpaid labour in Ontario academic libraries, it is evident this is happening in other public memory institutions.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> See [LAC's Digital Strategy](#) (p.10).

The value memory institutions add to society depends in large part on a viable community of long term, invested professionals. A quote from one of our interview subjects states,

*“There is no replacement for the librarian/archivist who knows her holdings well from working closely with them over the long haul; no database can replicate the lateral thinking involved in connecting researchers with useful materials. We're supposed to safeguard the past in the interests of the future - how can we do this if our staff are increasingly temps?”*

Our study has only scratched the surface of this subject, but the implications we have touched upon are a matter of concern warranting further interrogation.

A few of the interviewees noted the financial stress that the unpaid internship route can put on the students. While the opportunities afforded to the participants were successful learning experiences, the time commitment necessarily limits the student's available time and ability to undertake paid work. Financial pressure is an issue common throughout many students' education experience in general, and the researchers believe this requires further investigation. In particular, examining a model that runs internships independently of classes to better balance time commitments.

## **Conclusion**

We have concluded that Ontario university libraries' service levels are not dependent upon unpaid labour. Our small sample size of participants in unpaid labour opportunities confirms the University of Toronto's iSchool practicum program provides a net benefit to participants, namely in the form of course credit and experience enrichment. We were unable to draw conclusions about any other school-sponsored programs due to lack of response, though we feel the response rate is indicative of the nature of individual school's program offerings (i.e. paid co-ops). It should be incumbent on librarians and archivists to ensure practicum opportunities are always mutually beneficial enterprises that furnish participants with valuable job experience and robust mentoring relationships.

# Appendices

## *Appendix I*

Following are the conditions under which the Ontario Ministry of Labour (2015) considers unpaid internships to be legal and acceptable, with all criteria being met:

1. The training is similar to that which is given in a vocational school.
2. The training is for the benefit of the intern. You receive some benefit from the training, such as new knowledge or skills.
3. The employer derives little, if any, benefit from the activity of the intern while he or she is being trained.
4. Your training doesn't take someone else's job.
5. Your employer isn't promising you a job at the end of your training.
6. You have been told that you will not be paid for your time.

Another exception concerns college and university programs. The ESA does not apply to an individual who performs work under a program approved by a college of applied arts and technology or a university. This exception exists to encourage employers to provide students enrolled in a college or university program with practical training to complement their classroom learning.

## ***Appendix II – Interview questions***

1. How did you learn about the opportunity in which you participated?
2. Was there a competition for the opportunity? If so, what was the application process like?
3. Was the opportunity related to a specific project, regularly scheduled duties or a combination of both?
4. Were you assigned a specific contact person/supervisor? Did you have regular contact with that individual? Did you report to someone upon arrival each time? Was a regular schedule established?
5. Were there clear expectations outlined for you? What form did these expectations take and how were they relayed to you?
6. What training was provided for you (including any human resources or health & safety training not directly related to your daily workflow)?
7. Did you feel confident in completing the tasks that were given to you? If you did not, what avenues did you take to seek clarification? Was feedback offered on the work that you completed?
8. Did you feel as though your skills were enhanced? If not, what could have been improved to increase skill development?
9. Did you feel as though your professional network was expanded? Would you feel comfortable following up with any of the individuals you met or worked with in the future?
10. Were you offered any professional development opportunities (e.g. webinars, lectures, Library Council meetings, etc.)? Describe.
11. Did your supervisor or contact person offer to act as a reference for you? If yes, have you taken advantage of this opportunity?
12. Did the opportunity lead to a job with the institution?
13. Was the experience worthwhile? Why or why not?
14. Is there anything else that you'd like to add about your experience that we may not have already asked?

## ***Appendix III – Environmental scan survey instrument***

Audience: OCUL Directors/AULs

How many librarians are employed at your institution?

- 1-5
- 6-15
- 16-30
- 31+

How many library staff are employed at your institution?

- 1-10
- 11-20
- 21-50
- 51+

Has your institution offered any unpaid work/volunteer opportunities in the last two years? This is defined as work that is project based and/or involves work suited to the expertise of a professional.

- yes
- no

If yes, were these opportunities for course credit with an ALA accredited library school?

- yes
- no
- partially (explain)

Which course credit/unpaid work experiences has your institute used (open ended question)?

What are your motivations in participating in these opportunities (rank in order of importance)?

- budget driven
- desire to mentor students
- project driven
- other (explain)

Are your institution's service levels dependent upon this labour (i.e. would service be reduced if a volunteer was not able to provide it)?

- yes
- no

## Scope notes

## Exclusions

- event volunteers
- volunteer posts consisting of fewer than 8 hours (total)
- informal or formal job shadowing or peer mentoring
- volunteers engaged under the auspice of the university as a whole

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