This paper describes exploratory research related to the perceptions of public librarians in North Carolina regarding the perceived value of experiential learning programs in library school as compared with classroom-based courses and other types of work experience. The research involved 16 librarians working in public libraries across North Carolina participating in focus groups designed to uncover their perceptions of their library school education and the usefulness of experiential learning programs as a part of that education. The author concludes that experiential learning is perceived not only as highly valuable to former students but as more valuable to them than classroom-based course work in preparing them for a career in librarianship and in guiding them to the appropriate area of librarianship.
PUBLIC LIBRARIANS’ PERCEIVED VALUE OF EXPERIENTIAL LEARNING

by
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**Introduction**

Experiential learning programs are courses offered by an institution of higher education that allow students to gain experience in a real world business environment related to their career interest while earning credit towards their degree. As Samuel Lamb points out, these programs are based on the premises that they “[enhance] academic experience by providing practical work experience… [, create] opportunities for career exploration… [, and greatly] enhance job placement opportunities after graduation.” (Lamb, 1983, p.63) If these premises are true it is hard to see a reason not to support such a program. But the popularity of such programs has waxed and waned over the years, with the current situation being that they are held in high esteem. Most schools offering a Master of Science in Library Science (MSLS) degree offer some form of experiential learning program to at least some portion of their student body – some limit participation to future school librarians and others only allow a very limited number of students to enroll. (Coleman, 1989) Yet all of these schools spend a lot of time and effort implementing experiential learning programs and their students are asked to make choices between participating in such programs and enrolling in additional classroom-based coursework. But what are the benefits of participating in experiential learning programs? Are Lamb’s premises true? Are participants paid more? Are they more satisfied with their job? There is little relevant empirical evidence to answer any of these questions.
Without such empirical evidence these expenditures and decisions are being based on assumptions that there are significant benefits. But these decisions are too important to be based on assumptions. They must be made based on fact. Research may inform students and administrators whether experiential learning programs are typically poorly run and not worthwhile or typically well run and of significant value as teaching tools. These results may also reveal which aspects of experiential learning programs are most important/least important to participants, thus providing data that could be used by library school administration to strengthen their experiential learning program. Moreover, the findings might indicate that more schools should offer a larger array of programs and/or perhaps even make participation mandatory (if this is feasible based on the library community around the school) or that these programs are so problematic that schools should not continue to offer them. In addition, research may be able to identify important links between participation and aspects of career development, such as increased job satisfaction, increased job competence, and quicker career advancement. If such connections are found to exist, it would indicate to employers that they should highly value participation in experiential learning programs when hiring recent graduates. Unfortunately, significant research in this area has not yet been undertaken.

Why has not such research been done? One answer may be that such detailed research has been done at the undergraduate level (Kysor & Pierce, 2000; Foster, Franz, & Waller, 1986) and these results are being used to justify graduate-level programs. However, there are too many differences between undergraduates and graduates for the results of those studies to be generalized to graduate programs. For instance, graduate students are often more mature and bring more work experience to the table when they
come to graduate school and thus may not reap all of the benefits of experiential learning that undergraduates do. Consequently, graduate students would not necessarily garner the same benefits from experiential learning programs. In order to find out what benefits they do reap, studies need to be done. This study is intended to stimulate research in this area by focusing on public librarians working in North Carolina to see what aspects of learning they consider most valuable. The results should help identify the different impacts of experiential learning program participation at the graduate level. And while the results of this study are not generalizable beyond public librarians in North Carolina, it is a good first step and will, hopefully, prompt more research in this area in the coming years.

**Background**

In the beginning, library schools relied on experiential learning programs. As Louis Coburn (1980) points out, “[t]he idea of ‘practical training in libraries’ was a central theme in Dewey’s planning for the School of Library Economy.” (p.15) Dewey referred to his library program as a ‘systematic apprenticeship.’ The intent of such a program was to provide uniformity to the apprenticeship model by utilizing common methods to teach skills which would be useful in a variety of settings “thus removing from apprenticeship the whimsies and eccentricities peculiar to individual workmen.” (White, 1961, p. 45) The goal of the experiential learning portion of the program was to give students “a practical appreciation of the real nature of the work not to be obtained by any amount of reading, lectures, or mere observation.” (Columbia University, 1937, p. 105) According to Dewey, “practical training rather than mere information is the end sought.” (Columbia University, 1937, p. 93)
This emphasis on experiential learning was due in large part to the fact that librarians trained in library school were still competing for jobs with librarians trained through the apprenticeship model. Apprenticeship librarians had several years of practical experience to draw on and thus library schools needed to provide a similar amount of practical experience for their graduates. For years debate centered on whether the librarians produced through library schools were or were not superior to librarians produced through apprenticeship. John Cotton Dana, Chairman of the American Library Association (ALA) Committee on Library Schools in 1900 and Librarian of the Public Library in Springfield, Massachusetts, argued his preference for apprenticed librarians by noting that

most librarians, were they asked this question – ‘Other things being equal (health, appearance, formal education, etc.), would you choose for an assistant a person who had worked two years in a library like your own, or one who had spent two years in a library school and no time as a library assistant?’ – would answer – ‘the former.’ (Coburn, 1980, p. 18)

Many other prominent librarians also opposed the idea of library schools, such as Dr. William G. Poole, and Mellen Chamberlain. With such split of opinions between the great librarians of the day it is not any wonder that, as Frank Walter notes, “[t]he theory ‘learn to do by doing’ died hard as it did in other fields.” (1937, p. 15)

In the early years of the development of the library school, “the preponderance of students’ time was spent in practical work as compared with classwork.” (Coburn, 1980, p. 18) However, the scales began to tilt as the turn of the century grew near, with formal classroom-based course work prevailing in popularity. In 1902, Arthur Bostwick, then Chairman of the ALA Committee on Library Training, drew fire when he stated:

The point that needs to be emphasized here is that the school instruction, though we speak of it as having largely supplanted apprenticeship, still needs to be
supplemented by practical work before the person who takes up the occupation can be regarded as thoroughly trained in it. This is fully recognized in the learned professions. In law, the graduate of a law school is glad to spend several years in an office at a nominal salary, or at no salary at all, in acquiring that experience without which his professional services would lack value. The graduate of a medical school is eager to obtain a hospital appointment where he spends his time in accumulating valuable experience at a small salary or without salary. The normal school graduate often begins his work as a substitute or waits a year or more before securing a position. The newly ordained clergyman often goes into mission work or accepts the position of assistant at a nominal salary for the same reason; in almost every case he begins at least with a small pastorate. The graduate of West Point or Annapolis enters the service in the lowest grade for small compensation. (pp. 137-138)

This brought up the question of comparing librarian’s salaries to those of lawyers and doctors, and even to teachers (who, at the time, made significantly more money). There was great controversy over Bostwick’s attempt to draw such comparisons. In an attempt to get at the real rationale behind the provision of experiential learning in library school and, perhaps, quell the controversy stirred by Bostwick, Josephine K. Rathbone, Librarian of the East Orange, New Jersey, Public Library spoke of the general benefits of practical training:

To put in practice what has been studied in theory and in strictly technical lines is, apparently, more necessary to a student who has had no practical experience before. It certainly is invaluable in fixing his knowledge and giving him command of himself. But it is equally invaluable in a larger way to the student with previous experience, for it lets him compare. Experience without training is one-sided and often narrow and self-satisfied. Training without experience leaves one uncertain, with a feeling that one is supposed to know, does know, but with a vague helplessness and dread of cutting loose. And this is dispelled by practical work as part of the course – command of self is gained. (1903, p. 154)

Even with such eloquent arguments in favor of experiential learning programs, Walter observes, that “[f]or many years the antagonism between the ‘practical’ librarian and the graduate of a library school was distressingly acute.” (1937, p. 15)
It was in 1905 when the first standards for library school programs were promulgated by the ALA Committee on Library Training. These standards tended to reduce the amount of practice work being done as a part of library school training. By 1915, the focus had shifted away from the simple question of whether to offer experiential learning programs to more complex issues in experiential learning program administration. These complex issues grew out of the lack of uniformity in experiential learning program administration and included such questions as:

Should preliminary practice work be required of all candidates or only those without previous experience? Should this work be done before entering school or should it be supervised practice in the library connected with the school before classwork begins? Could preliminary practice work take the place of regular school instruction to any extent? (Coburn, 1980, p. 21)

For a few years, at least, the issue of whether or not experiential learning programs should exist in library school seemed to be settled and the questions focused more on how they should be managed, but in 1923 Charles Williamson presented a report that would stir up another round of controversy. Williamson’s report concluded that experiential learning programs were not useful in library schools. In his report Williamson noted that no real research supported the use of experiential learning programs. Instead, he alleged that “convenience of the practice library or of the school rather than from any consideration of educational theory.” (Williamson, 1923, p. 57)

Williamson went on to conclude that

[t]he primary and fundamental responsibility which the school cannot escape, and by which it must be judged, is its work of instruction. It probably should assume less responsibility for placement and disclaim any pretense of being able in the one-year general course to add to instruction the experience necessary to produce skilled library workers. (1923, p. 61)
However, Williamson’s report, while mostly negative towards experiential learning programs, did offer some advice for incorporating such a program into the library school curriculum. His suggestions included

the desirability of compressing field experience into a shorter time period, thereby insuring more productive results for the student (‘It is exceedingly important…that the student should not put more time than necessary into his field work’); the provision of trained field supervisors who would, if necessary, be paid for their services (‘It is not reasonable to expect librarians to devote themselves to students without compensation’); the importance to the library schools of insuring that cooperating libraries assign their best librarians to the tasks of field work (‘…a supervisor of field work should be the most experienced and practical library worker on the staff of the school, and at the same time a trained teacher’); and the necessity for thoughtful consideration of student placement in an appropriate library (‘the school must see to it that the supervising librarian is qualified for the task, has the time to give to it, and is possessed of the essential facts about the student’). (Coburn, 1980, p. 23)

During these early years the amount of the library school program that was devoted to experiential learning varied greatly from school to school and from year to year. This brought it under scrutiny. Even during the time when it seemed that everyone agreed that experiential learning was necessary for library training, there was no consensus on how much training was needed or how to administer such learning programs. These inconsistencies were at the heart of Williamson’s report and as a result of this report library schools began to deemphasize experiential learning programs within their curriculum. This was the beginning of a hard road for experiential learning programs. While the 1925 ‘Minimum Standards for Library Schools’ issued by the ALA Board of Education for Librarianship instructed library schools to provide at least 108 hours of required experiential learning as part of their curriculum, more criticism of experiential learning was on the way. Ernest Reece, Professor of Library Service at Columbia University, was a vocal opponent of experiential learning in library school. Reece
complained in 1932 that library schools were merely ‘apprenticing’ students. He argued “[f]ield work, important as it was, required a dimension of its own – outside the curriculum of the library school. The major function of the library school was to impart curricular content.” (Coburn, 1980, p. 24) Between Williamson’s report and Reece’s arguments, experiential learning programs did not stand much of a chance.

At the time of Williamson’s report all library training took place at an undergraduate level, as there was a big push to get enough qualified librarians in the field to support the numerous libraries cropping up in the United States. But soon it was determined that graduate education in library science was needed. In 1933, there were five graduate-level library programs (Chicago, Columbia, Illinois, Michigan, and California), none of which included any experiential learning in the curriculum. (Coburn, 1980, p. 24) Thus, from early on in the development of graduate level library programs experiential learning was considered unnecessary. It was, however, between 1940 and 1960 that these library schools developed into "graduate study centers comparable to schools training workers for other professions.” (Carroll, 1970, p.10) During the forties, librarians seemed to indicate a moderate acceptance of experiential learning programs in library school. Several noted “that some schools might have gone too far in stressing theory and were willing to consider the proposition that students needed ‘some practical experience under field conditions to be fully prepared for the responsibilities of actual service.’” (Coburn, 1980, p. 25) This willingness to reevaluate experiential learning programs led to research on the value of such programs. Neil Van Deusen was one such researcher. He polled directors of library schools and found that they “still considered field work invaluable for developing an understanding of what went on in a library, for
instilling confidence and enthusiasm, and for pointing up the application and integration of theories.” (Coburn, 1980, p. 25) He also found that some directors were hesitant to support experiential learning programs due to administrative difficulties. Then, in the fifties, Esther Stallmann decided to make a thorough investigation into the history of internships. This investigation led her to believe that internships offered “young librarians…the opportunity to witness for themselves good examples of administration and service on all levels of library activity.” (Coburn, 1980, p. 25) Her ultimate opinion was that internships are “a method by which librarianship too may make for the student the desired connection between theory and practice.” (Stallman, 1954, p.80)

In 1963, Louise Darling issued a comprehensive report in which she concluded that internships were valuable to students. However, according to Palmer, the focus on her report tended to be placed not on this conclusion, but on the statement that “[e]vidence to date is good, but there is not enough of it, and what there is needs refinement so that factors such as the academic background of the intern can be correlated with career success.” (1975, p. 242) In 1967, Samuel Rothstein echoed Darling in calling for further research. He was “convinced that the issue of field work in American library school curriculum had to be resolved not on whether it could be done easily or well enough but on whether it was worth doing at all.” (Coburn, 1980, p. 26) He concluded that library schools were not acknowledging the need for or providing their students with a program balanced between academics and practice. Rothstein further noted that students valued experiential learning programs “1) as a refreshing change of pace, 2) as a means of gaining confidence, 3) for enlargement of views, and 4) as a means of relating theory to actuality.” (Hempstead, 1971, p. 118) However, even after noting
such benefits, he continued to call for research and discussion regarding the place of experiential learning in library education.

In the next few years there was some research conducted regarding the value of experiential learning programs. Laurel Grotzinger, Professor in the Western Michigan University School of Librarianship, conducted a survey in 1969 and a follow-up survey in 1970. Her results revealed “that although the library schools generally endorse the theory of field experience, they are inhibited from giving it their full support because of administrative difficulties.” (Coburn, 1980, p. 27) Beyond administrative difficulties, she also found that library school administrators felt that

> [g]iven the short time in school and the very important fact that large numbers of our students were already working in libraries at sub-professional jobs, it came to be felt that instead of parallel experience – class and workroom – we might very profitably use our limited time in class today knowing that beginning tomorrow they would, for the most part, get very little but the workroom. (Grotzinger, 1971, p. 338)

Another interesting finding was that many administrators felt that experiential learning is not appropriate for graduate level studies. This is an argument that is still made today. John Hempstead did not agree that experiential learning was not appropriate for graduate studies, but he did feel that standards needed to be implemented. As a result, he suggested that because producing competent librarians required a combination of the efforts of library schools and the community libraries, that experiential learning program standards should be set by the ALA, thus allowing the library profession to govern these programs at the highest level. (Coburn, 1980, p. 27) Hempstead’s support of experiential learning programs stemmed from his analysis of research regarding teaching internships. Studies of teaching internships had revealed that
Inexperienced students have an idealistic attitude toward pupils which diminishes rapidly when they enter the field of practice in the traditional way, perhaps because their ideals are unrealistic which causes their ambitions to be frustrated. Interns experience the same decrease in attitude towards pupils, but the intern program allows for seminars and post-internship courses which permit the student to recharge his zeal and re-form his ambitions around a more realistic framework of experience. (Hempstead, 1971, p. 127)

In her 1971 report, Grotzinger had challenged her fellow researchers to discover if “the graduate of the accredited library school [would] be more effective or qualified on the job if he completed a field experience as part of his study.” (p. 339) In the opinion of Barbara Ward, Associate Professor and Coordinator of Library Education, Department of Instructional Media, California State University at Long Beach, experiential learning was “a vital and integral component of the total program of library education without which neither the student nor the faculty of the library school is able to ascertain whether or not the student is effective or qualified to any degree.” (Ward, 1973, p. 233) Ward felt so strongly about the value of experiential learning that she wrote: “How any school engaged in creating a quality program of library education can eliminate, limit to one student segment, or fail to include a field experience component in the program of study, for whatever reason, is incomprehensible.” (Ward, 1978, p. 233) She concluded with a response to Grotzinger’s query, stating that “no reliable comparison can be made as to whether students are more effective or qualified with it than without it. The answer is, they are not qualified at all without it.” (Ward, 1973, p. 236)

In 1975, Roger Palmer attempted to evaluate what had been determined to date with respect to experiential learning programs. In doing so, he studied the existing library literature to determine what message it sent. He found that the literature was incomplete
and called for “a comprehensive analysis of field experience as a means of preparing librarians.” (Palmer, 1975, p. 244) In addition, he also had the foresight to predict that

[w]ith the solid field experience planning that is being conducted by some of the schools, the continuing interest in practical work among students, and the shift in interest from theoretical-only to theoretical-plus-practical experience in much of graduate education, it seems almost safe to conclude that field experience is about to enter its Renaissance.” (Palmer, 1975, p. 252)

Mildred Tietjen also conducted a study in 1975. She studied accredited library schools to evaluate their experiential learning programs. Her findings indicate that experiential learning programs varied in both quantity and quality of offerings. However, she was able to ascertain that both students and faculty valued the programs. Then, in 1976, Alice Witucke continued to build on the body of research regarding experiential learning programs. Like those before her, however, she found “the need for philosophical and empirical study of the place of library experience in library education was strongly reaffirmed, especially for the work experience taking place outside the auspices of the library school.” (Witucke, 1978, p. 172) In her opening paragraph she aptly notes that:

[s]uch direct experience (practicum) was a major part of the core of early library education. Over the years this central position has given way to an increasingly academic professional preparation…. Among reasons cited for this change have been the need to make the most of the limited time spent in library school, the difficulties in administering effective practicum programs, and a lack of conviction that practicum is a useful learning methodology.” (Witucke, 1976, p. 162)

Her research identified the following reasons for library schools omitting or limiting experiential learning programs:

administrative difficulties (size of student body, relative inadequacy in number and quality of available libraries with librarians willing to cooperate, the lack of library school control over the experience, inadequate supervision on the part of the cooperating library’s staff); unnecessary, since students get library experience on their own; low priority compared to course work; ineffective in relation to
other activities; narrowing; burdensome on libraries and their patrons; undue emphasis on clerical activities; trend away from field work in library education.

These reasons were cited for encouraging field work: students and employers favor it; theory and practice can be related; students are oriented to reality; learning is applied; certification procedures require it; field work compensates for professional positions which provide no supervision or orientation to the field; student confidence is built; competence, judgment are developed; course work is enhanced (student gets more, given more); student’s program of study is individualized; acquaintance is made with patrons; faculty are updated; special courses are extended.” (Witucke, 1978, p. 166)

In the end she concluded that the “wide variety of policies and practices, the lack of really strong statements for or against experience, the contradictory statements about it all suggest that there are few hard data on the effect of preprofessional library experience and that little is known about evaluating that experience.” (Witucke, 1976, p. 171)

As Walter so eloquently notes, “Library schools did not, like Minerva, spring full-grown and full armed from the brow of a benevolent parent. Professional training for librarianship is the product of many causes and influences acting over a long period.” (1937, p. 13) One major influence has been “[t]he shifts in attitude toward field work that have occurred over the long period from 1876 to the present reflect[ing] varying degrees of emphasis at different times on the coupling of theoretical study and practice.” (Coburn, 1980, p. 29) In the over 100 years since library training began we still do not have answers to such questions as:

Do students using experiential curricula absorb as much knowledge as students in traditional classroom settings? Do experiential curricula do as good a job of instilling understanding of essential concepts and theories? Do experiential curricula engage the learner in high-quality conceptualization and communication of learned knowledge? (Jacobs, 1982, p.19)

With the lack of answers to these questions, Jacobs notes that “[a]dvocates of experiential learning simply assume that capable students can and do acquire academically valid knowledge through career-specific work and reading as well as ‘during the undergraduate
years.’’ (1982, p. 21) The lack of answers also leaves the door open for those who oppose experiential learning to argue that the administrative hardships outweigh the educational benefits or that practical skills are not appropriate material for graduate level credit.

As has been noted, there has been little definitive research done on the value of experiential learning on graduate level library training, yet there is a fairly robust body of literature regarding the impact of experiential learning with respect to undergraduates in general. These studies have shown that, for undergraduates, participation in an experiential learning program is a significant factor in increasing students’ ability to relate theory and practice (Cook, Parker, and Pettijohn, 2004), adaptability in social environments (Cook, et al., 2004), ability to find a job after graduation (Gault, Redington, and Schlager, 2000), initial salary (Pianko, 1996), and job satisfaction after graduation. (Kysor & Pierce, 2000) These undergraduate studies have, however, been relied upon by graduate schools implementing experiential learning programs. There are many differences between undergraduates and graduate students that could raise questions about whether the benefits derived from experiential learning programs are applicable to graduates. Age is the most obvious difference between the two groups with graduate students being, in general, older than undergraduates. And since age has also been shown to be related to job satisfaction (Thornton, 2000, p. 229), applying undergraduate job satisfaction data to graduate students may be dangerous. Likewise, most undergraduates have no meaningful work experience prior to entering their degree programs, but many graduate students have had meaningful work experiences and some have even worked in the field they intend to enter upon graduation. This means that, unlike undergraduates,
in many cases this will not be a graduate student’s first exposure to working in the chosen field, therefore benefits such as increased ability to adapt to social environments or increased ability to adapt theory to practice may not be applicable. Consequently, using undergraduate data to justify programs for graduate students may be inappropriate. Moreover, graduate students typically have a better grasp on their ultimate career goals prior to entering a degree program as opposed to undergraduates who typically spend a large portion of the time in their degree program undecided as to their ultimate career aspirations (Kinnier, Brigman & Noble, 1990). Again, because of the considerable differences between the two groups of students, the data gathered from undergraduates may be invalid when generalized to graduate students. Thus, it is inappropriate for graduate school administrators to make decisions about implementing or continuing to support such programs based on benefits accruing to a completely different population.

Although there is little empirical data as to the exact benefits of experiential learning programs at the graduate level, there is a general feeling amongst library science students and administrators that such programs are valuable in some way. In an informal discussion with a few MLS candidates and graduates, May (2003) discovered that the students felt that “[p]racticums and internships are essential if a student is not already working in a library. (And even then, there is so much more to be learned by applying a specific experience or project to the course work at hand!)” (p. 13) Similarly, as is evidenced by the large number of schools that have such programs, library schools feel experiential learning programs are valuable, but they differ in how they believe they should be implemented (Coleman, 2004, p. 25-26). It is likely that such inconsistencies in implementation are attributable to the fact that there is no published data on the
benefits associated with the programs, forcing schools to merely make assumptions about what aspects are important to a program. Some researchers have begun to study the effectiveness of the experiential learning program at a particular school, (Garrett, 1997) but such studies are too limited in scope to be useful to the overall profession. Thus, it would be helpful to administration and students alike to see the results of broad-based studies that identify the valuable aspects of experiential learning programs in library schools and how they impact a participant’s future career.

**Methodology**

The goal of this study was to gather basic data on how library science students perceived the value of experiential learning programs. To do this required candid discussions with librarians who chose to participate or not participate in such programs to determine how they valued their library school experiences. Initially, the idea was to randomly choose four public libraries in North Carolina and conduct focus groups with the librarians there who held MSLS degrees. This was accomplished by using the 2005 Directory of North Carolina Public Libraries which is available on the State Library of North Carolina website. In this directory the public libraries are listed alphabetically by region with the branches listed alphabetically by county under the regional headquarters to which it aligns. The next step was to number the libraries in the order they are listed and use a random number table to select four public libraries. Unfortunately, three of the four libraries randomly chosen had three or fewer MSLS graduates on staff. This meant that if anyone chose not to participate there would not be enough participants to form a focus group. This left a couple of options. The library staffs could be combined into one focus group (but logistically this would be difficult) or specific libraries could be chosen
that were known to have larger MSLS staffs. Choosing the larger MSLS staffed libraries was a more logical approach. Consequently, the sample for this study included librarians who hold an MSLS degree and were working in one of three of North Carolina’s larger public libraries in September or October of 2005. Once the libraries were chosen, the director or branch head for each library was contacted and her support was requested in organizing a focus group of MSLS graduates working in that library. The three focus group meetings were held in September and October of 2005. Among the three meetings there were 16 participants.

Developing the focus group questions required a lot of research and a couple of test focus groups. The first test group included fellow students from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill School of Information and Library Science. This focus group did not go well. As it turned out, proper explanations had not been built into the questions, so the participants kept asking for such explanations. This led to some confusion amongst focus group participants and, in the end, impacted the quality of the results. The second test group consisted of several academic librarians. The revised questions tested on this group now seemed to include sufficient explanations so the discussion was much smoother, the participants were more at ease, and the results were more detailed and complete. In the end, the questions that worked best were open-ended, with clear explanations of the type of information being requested, and touched on both classroom and experiential learning experiences (see Appendix A for the focus group script). The questions ultimately chosen allowed the focus group results to be useful in determining the perceived value of experiential learning experiences and in crafting further research as responses tended to provide detailed information about the
participants’ feelings regarding what benefits they felt were linked to their experiential learning experiences as opposed to classroom learning situations.

Once the focus groups had been held the process of analyzing the data began. Since this is not quantitative data it was analyzed manually to identify underlying meanings and patterns. Each response was categorized and in some cases subcategorized. These categories were studied to try to find patterns in participant’s responses. Responses described why participants enrolled in an MSLS program, the value they placed on pre-MSLS enrollment library work experience, the usefulness of classroom-based and experiential learning coursework, and the aspects of the MSLS program that guided career paths. Patterns discovered in this data helped to identify factors that participants consistently felt were benefits of experiential learning program participation and to formulate suggested changes to experiential learning programs to make them more beneficial. The goal of this analysis was to identify patterns in the data that pointed to the perceived value of experiential learning programs as compared with classroom learning experiences.

**Results**

There were five specific questions asked of each focus group along with an open invitation to add any other thoughts or opinions on the subject. From the responses, it is clear that four of the participants were children’s/young adult librarians and the rest were adult reference librarians (either general reference or specialized reference like reader’s advisory, etc. All of the participants responded to at least one question and none seemed to temper their responses based on the reactions of other participants. In many cases participants signaled their agreement/disagreement with another participant’s response by
shaking their head. Sometimes these non-verbal signals were reinforced by verbal explanations and sometimes they were not. Only verbal responses were captured in the data because it was not always clear what aspect of a response the non-verbal signals were directed toward. Responses to each specific question were categorized. These summary categories and the percentage of responses falling into each are identified below. In addition, any areas where there was significant agreement are highlighted.

The first question asked of each focus group was “What prompted library school attendance?” This was meant to be a general question that would ease participants into the conversation. Surprisingly, the responses to this question turned out to be quite telling about what is drawing people to the profession. Twenty-three responses were given for this question and they were grouped into nine categories. As you can see in Figure 1, out of the nine answer categories, prior work in library was the most common driver of library school enrollment. This data is in line with John Berry’s findings in his 2003 study. Moreover, if you combine the number of participants who enrolled in library school because of prior work in a library with those that enrolled in library school because they love the library as a learning environment that covers almost half of the participants’ responses.
The second focus group question shed light on the importance of library experience prior to entering library school. Interestingly, half of the eight participants responding to this question felt it was important and half felt it was not. This meant that some who had indicated that prior work in a library had led them to library school either felt that experience was not important to library school success or refrained from responding to this question. Because of the structure of the question, reasons why participants felt prior work experience in a library was or was not important were able to be gleaned. The reasons why they felt it was or was not important are depicted in Figures 2 and 3, respectively. Eighty percent of the responses indicated that those who considered prior experience important felt this way, at least in part, because they thought it helped to be familiar with an actual library setting (two responses) and/or because they thought library school bore no relation to real library work and that such experience helped convince them to endure the library school program (two responses).
Only one respondent indicated that they felt this way because they thought it helped set career expectations. Interestingly, 50% of those participants who did not consider prior library experience important felt this way because they thought it was not useful in setting expectations.

To get at the perceived value public librarians attribute to classroom learning situations, the participants were asked about the usefulness of classroom work in career preparation. Eighty percent or eight of the participants felt classroom work was useful or somewhat useful, though they all had input on what classes were good and bad and why.

Table 1 lists the courses identified by participants as useful or not useful with the number
of responses mentioning each course in parenthesis. Only one class was mentioned as being both useful and useless and that was Cataloging. Also, all of the courses identified as useful, except Cataloging, were mentioned by more than one participant. None of the courses identified as not useful was mentioned by more than one participant.

Table 1. Classroom courses identified as useful or not useful.

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<th>Useful Classes</th>
<th>Not Useful Classes</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Reference (2)</td>
<td>Human Computer Interactions (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cataloging (1)</td>
<td>Cataloging (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Library Management (2)</td>
<td>Media for Children and Young Adults (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Seminar in Public Libraries (2)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Participants also identified why they felt classroom learning was useful or not. Table 2 lists the reasons participants gave for feeling that classroom learning was useful or not. Again, the number of responses referencing each individual aspect is included in parentheses. While agreement as to the reasons given for usefulness was evenly spread among the four categories listed, 80% of the responses indicating classroom learning was not useful noted that it was not useful because of the lack of classes in practical skills areas that were important parts of their current jobs.

Table 2. Why classroom courses are considered useful or not useful.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Why Useful</th>
<th>Why Not Useful</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Good instructor (2)</td>
<td>Bad instructor (1)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Well rounded career preparation (1)</td>
<td>Lack of classes in practical skill areas (4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Developed professional attitude (1)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Allowed discussion of practical issues (1)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

That actual library experience was considered important to participants was clear when the discussion turned to questions about the usefulness of experiential learning in
career preparation. All nine of the participants responding to this question felt that experiential learning was useful or somewhat useful in career preparation. However, the question prompted thirteen responses identifying reasons for feeling this way. These reasons were categorized as shown in Figure 4. It is clear from the responses that many of the participants felt that job experience acquired during experiential learning greatly helped graduates get their first job out of library school.

**Figure 4. Why experiential learning is an important part of career preparation**

The final area of discussion was the usefulness of library school in guiding career choices. Sixty-four percent or seven out of the 11 participants responding to this question felt that library school helped guide their career choice. Of the six reasons given as to how library school guided their career choices, one-half of the reasons attributed the choice of career directly to their experiential learning experience. All of the reasons given by participants for feeling that library school helped guide their career choices are represented in Figure 5. Some of the choices made involved drastic changes in career paths. For instance, one participant switched from wanting to be a cataloger to being a reference librarian, while another one switched from wanting to work in an academic library to working in a public library.
While the small size of the sample may have caused the response percentages to appear higher or lower than they might in the general population of public librarians, the patterns were consistent across focus groups. Some patterns could be identified by examining the responses to individual questions, while others required analysis of response patterns over several questions. Below is a discussion of some of the conclusions that can be drawn from this study.

**Discussion**

The goal of this study was to gather some basic data on how library science students perceived the value of experiential learning programs. The results of this study show that these public librarians perceive experiential learning as a highly valuable tool for both career preparation and career guidance. However, some other conclusions can also be drawn from this data.

First, over a quarter of the responses regarding what sparked an interest in enrolling in library school indicated prior library work experience. These data suggest that since prior library experience is one of the main reasons for coming to library school, the library profession, especially the American Library Association, could focus its recruitment activities on current student workers, volunteers and paraprofessionals. In
addition, further studies could potentially be done to determine if there are other attributes common to many library students that may also be useful to be aware of for recruiting purposes – for instance, advanced degrees in English and/or the social sciences. This information could also be used by the library profession to try to diversify the profession by focusing recruiting efforts on populations not currently enrolling in library school in significant numbers.

Second, respondents were split on whether or not pre-professional library work experience is valuable in setting career expectations. This is important because setting career expectations is often given as a benefit of experiential learning programs. (Witucke, 1976, p. 166; Hempstead, 1971, p. 127) Because of the conflicting results of this study, this is an area that needs to be the focus of a future study. Such a study should investigate whether pre-professional library work experience is valuable in setting career expectations at all, and if it is, if its value varies based on the library setting (public, academic, etc.) and/or library role (reference, cataloging, etc.).

Third, while most respondents felt that classroom-based coursework was useful, those that didn’t were disappointed because they were looking for more practical coursework. Examples given of coursework that would have been helpful included classes in popular materials and handling difficult patrons. These statements indicate that maybe these respondents did not participate in an experiential learning program.³ If this is the case, it could indicate that at least some students need experiential learning to round out their education. It would be interesting to study this further to determine if there is a relationship between these responses and experiential learning participation.
Fourth, with respect to the perceived usefulness of classroom-based learning versus perceived usefulness of experiential learning in career guidance the results were fairly decisive. As mentioned above, half of the responses regarding influences in career direction during library school identified experiential learning as the guiding force, as opposed to 17% who identified coursework. Beyond this, however, the comments made revealed that both good and bad experiential learning experiences were useful in guiding career paths. Several individuals participated in experiential learning in library settings or performing library roles that they discovered they did not like. They found these experiences to be as valuable as experiential learning experiences in an ideal job setting and role. Whereas only a few participants found classroom-based work informative enough to impact career directions since it provided little, if any, practical experience in the specific setting or role.

Fifth, with respect to the perceived usefulness of classroom-based learning versus perceived usefulness of experiential learning in career preparation neither technique was lauded as ideal. The results related to prior work experience show that there is no consensus on the usefulness of work experience in setting appropriate work expectations. The comments made during these discussions make it clear that both with respect to prior work experience and experiential learning the choice of work setting is critical. Many felt that unless the student planned to work in the same library or one substantially similar to it, that expectations may be way off. This is because libraries and library administration approaches are unique. However, classroom-based learning did not get high marks on setting expectations either. Most felt that classroom-based learning focused more on theory that, while helpful in general, was not useful in setting career
expectations. So which is considered more useful? According to the comments of participants, working in a library was much more useful than classroom learning in preparing for a career in public librarianship.

**Conclusion**

Overall this study found that experiential learning is perceived by former students to be a highly valuable part of the MSLS program. At a time when the library profession is bracing for the impending mass retirement of older professional librarians and looking for solutions on how to insure the survival of the profession – experiential learning programs may be a way for these older librarians to train their replacements. Unfortunately, as beneficial as experiential learning programs may be to students and to the profession as a whole, these programs exact a high cost on library school administration. These costs include faculty learning new teaching methods to develop successful programs, investments in relationships with nearby libraries which may be willing to serve as host sites, and added instruction at host sites to make sure experiences meet curricular requirements. In addition, library school administrators disagree about the types of experiential learning programs to offer, whether participation should be mandatory, and how to assess experiential learning programs. These issues leave experiential learning programs open to criticism and debate about their place in library schools at all. Don Fallis and Martin Fricke are two such critics who believe that experiential learning programs, while useful, should not be a part of the MSLS curriculum. They feel that practical skills obtained from experiential learning are not in line with graduate level educational goals. Instead, they point out that an alternative approach such as having the ALA “accredit credential programs or undergraduate
programs that are not taught at the graduate level. Such programs would be designed to provide students with the practical skills of librarianship that employers legitimately want and need them to have.” (1999, p.45) In this scenario, Fallis and Fricke envision the library school “act[ing] as a clearinghouse for connecting library students to the [independent organizations, such as state library associations, providing]…such training.” (1999, p. 45)

Unfortunately, an exploratory study such as this one cannot resolve the argument between those that support experiential learning as part of the MSLS program and those who oppose it. But others can build on this study to help resolve these issues. This study has provided evidence that experiential learning is valued by professional public librarians in North Carolina and has established a basis for Lamb’s first two premises – experiential learning “enhances academic experience by providing practical work experience [and]…creates opportunities for career exploration.” (Lamb, 1983, p. 63) Other studies could follow the same script used in this study and focus on a different library setting, such as school, academic, or special. The results of those studies could then be used to either corroborate these findings or identify differences in the perceptions held by librarians in different settings. In addition, others can use this data to structure further research focused on determining if such learning should take place as part of the MSLS program or if sponsorship by another organization, such as the ALA as Fallis and Fricke suggest, would be preferred. In order to resolve some of the administrative issues mentioned above, studies could be done on who should participate versus who does participate in experiential learning, what types of experiential learning are useful, and how best to structure and assess participation in experiential learning programs. For
instance, research could attempt to discover if there are differences in responses between those who worked in a library before going to school and those who did not or between those who held a library job while in school and those who participated in experiential learning programs. Once these studies have identified the most appropriate organization to administer experiential learning programs and how best to administer such programs, studies should focus on the impact of experiential learning programs on participants’ futures, such as whether or not participation improves job placement opportunities after graduation and/or increases job satisfaction, career advancement, initial salary, etc. Such research will build a solid framework of support for the most appropriate form of experiential learning. Because these questions are not yet answered, this paper will conclude the same way so many research papers before have – by noting that thorough studies are now needed to build on the existing foundation and determine the best structure and total impact of library-based, experiential learning programs at the graduate level.

Notes

1 Dr. William G. Poole is best known for his publication of Poole’s Index and Mellen Chamberlain was the librarian at the Boston Public Library.
2 Berry sent an e-query to several hundred library science graduate students asking how they decided on a career in librarianship. His results showed more than 70 percent of respondents worked in a library.
3 None of these respondents indicated that they participated in an experiential learning program, but the question was not directly posed to each individual participant so the data is unclear.
References


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Walter, F. K. (1937). The growth of the library school idea. In *Papers presented at a dinner commemorating the fiftieth anniversary of the establishment of the first library school at Columbia College* (pp. 13-21).


APPENDIX A

Focus Group Questions
Experiential Learning Program Focus Group Study

Place:
Date:
# of Participants:

Thanks for coming. I think I met all of you already, but just in case, my name is Jennifer Ricker and I am a library science student at UNC-CH. This is Sylvia Marsico and she will be taking notes on our discussion. She has also just hit the record button on the tape recorder so that if she misses anything that is said we will have a backup. I am here today to find out about your experiences in library school and more specifically what aspects of library school best prepared you to work as a librarian. Since you probably went to a variety of schools and attended them at various times, you will probably all have different experiences to share. Some of you may have had opportunities to participate in programs that others didn’t or may have had prior experiences that impacted you. These are the types of things I am trying to find out about. So feel free to share anything you feel is germane. I am going to ask some questions of the group, please feel free to respond to any question I ask and to add comments to the responses given by others. If we start getting too far off topic I will try to bring us back around. Also, remember that the information shared here today should be treated as confidential, so please do not share anything that is said here with anyone outside of the group. Does anyone have any questions or concerns? Then let’s get started.

1. Tell me about what prompted you to attend library school. Were there influential people, influential places, experiences with books or libraries, etc. that impacted your decision?

2. Sounds like some of you may have had some prior library experience. How was that important as preparation for a career in librarianship? (alternatively, if not brought up as part of question 1 –how important do you think having library experience prior to attending library school would be to preparation for a career in librarianship?)

3. What about library school classes? How were those at preparing you for what you actually do as librarians? Were there any that were particularly useful? What was it about those classes that made them so useful?

4. Did any of you participate in an experiential type learning program (where you worked in a library under the supervision of library staff and maybe a faculty advisor and were awarded credit hours for this work)? How useful did you find this to be as preparation for your career? What about the experiential
type learning program did you find useful and what did you find not useful? How do you feel this compared to working while in library school? Was one experience more beneficial? Why?

5. Did any of you change your mind about what type of librarianship (i.e., from reference to collection development or from academic librarianship to public librarianship) while you were in library school? What prompted this change of heart?

6. Is there anything else that anyone would like to add?

Thank you so much for your time. I really appreciate your participation in this study.