

# **Co-op placements in academic libraries: Their role in the formation of librarians' professional identity**

Progress report for CARL prepared by:

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October 3, 2011

## **Overview of Research**

Professional identity is the set of attributes, beliefs, values, motives, and experiences that contribute to peoples' definition of themselves in professional roles (Schein, 1978). There has been considerable research into the professional image of librarians, but only limited research exploring the professional identity of librarians. Professional identity has been a focus in other professional disciplines, where research studies have demonstrated that educational field experiences, such as co-op placements, can provide key insights into the development of professional identity (Grealish & Trevitt, 2005; Lurie, 1981; Niemi, 1997; Pratt, Rockmann & Kaufmann, 2006). The purpose of this study was to gain a greater understanding of the factors that influence the formation of academic librarians' professional identity, and to understand the roles of co-op placements in the formation of professional identity among LIS students.

## **Methods**

We gathered data for this qualitative study via two methods: semi-structured interviews with LIS students who had recently completed a co-op placement in an academic library, and content analysis of these students' co-op reports. In the interviews, participants were asked questions related to three broad themes: their experiences and daily activities during their co-op placement, their perceptions of their professional identity, and their professional goals and aspirations. The co-op reports provided additional description of the students' work environment and responsibilities during the placement.

Participants were recruited from The University of Western Ontario and the University of British Columbia, currently the only two Canadian universities that offer a co-op option as part of their MLIS programmes. Staff at Western's Faculty of Information and Media Studies and UBC's School of Library, Archival and Information Studies assisted with recruitment.

Because this study used qualitative research methodologies, our goal was to recruit twelve to twenty students. It was expected that we would reach the point of saturation (the point where no further themes are found in the data) with this number of participants. Due to our proximity to Western and the necessity that we conduct the UBC interviews by telephone, we expected that the majority of participants would be from Western. We recruited and interviewed sixteen MLIS

students; fifteen from Western and one from UBC. Only two students from UBC responded to the call for participants, and only one of them was eligible to participate in the study.

### **Project Timeline**

The project has taken longer than expected, largely because of the time required for participant recruitment. In the past two years, there have been relatively few co-op placements in academic libraries, and therefore there were few students who met the criteria for inclusion into the study. In order to obtain a sufficiently large sample size, it was necessary to recruit participants on five occasions: three times in 2010 and twice in 2011. Participant recruitment was coordinated with the academic terms; we sent calls for participants when students had returned to classes or were completing co-op placements. There were relatively few students in each term who were eligible to participate in our study, and as a result participant recruitment has been the longest phase of the research study.

We began to analyze interview transcripts in fall 2010, and more in-depth analysis is ongoing. Our goal for disseminating the final results is early 2012.

A detailed timeline is provided in Appendix A.

### **Analysis**

A grounded theory approach is being used to analyse the data from interviews and co-op reports. Both researchers are coding interview transcripts and co-op reports to identify themes that emerge from the data. The themes will be further refined and clarified through repeated analysis of the data. Our method of analysis for this study follows the iterative analysis model described by Pratt, Rockmann and Kaufmann (2006) in their work on professional identity construction in medical residents.

### **Initial Findings**

Although we have not yet completed our analysis and interpretation of the data, several themes have emerged from the data. We will continue to explore and refine these themes as we continue through the research process. The themes that have emerged so far include: authenticity of the professional experience in co-op placements; importance of being treated as an equal; prominence of “librarians as helpers”; and the (dis)connections between the co-op experience and classroom education.

***Authenticity of the professional experience in co-op placements:*** Students described opportunities to participate in a wide range of activities during their co-op placements in academic libraries. Many of the activities, however, appeared to better align with the experiences and responsibilities of library assistants, rather than with the work of professional librarians. In many professional settings (e.g., business, publishing, journalism, government/politics) it is not an uncommon practice for interns and co-op students to be assigned more menial tasks; however, if the purpose of the co-op placement is to provide students with an accurate picture of the professional role of librarians, then the use of co-op students to fulfill basic tasks is potentially problematic and requires deeper examination. Further examination of this observation is critical in order to understand the use and application of co-ops in professional librarian education.

***Importance of being treated as an equal:*** Students' positive experiences of the co-op placement were often attributed to a sense of belonging and a sense of being treated as an equal. Many students described an overall acceptance into the academic library community in which they were placed. This acceptance into the library community led them to feel like they were – as students labeled themselves – ‘a real librarian.’ Students not only shared their experience of being treated as equals, but also spoke of doing equivalent work. This perception of equivalency is positive, but is also complicated when considering the many instances where the experiences and role of co-op students were better aligned with library assistants rather than professional librarians. When considering the role of co-ops in the formation of professional identity, the lack of recognition by students that the work they completed on co-op placements may not be reflective of the work of professional librarians may be problematic. However, on a more positive note, the high value that individuals placed on acceptance, community, and belonging is a value that is likely to translate into the professional identity of these future academic librarians.

***Prominence of “librarians as helpers”:*** Students often referred to the assisting or helping role of librarians, both in descriptions of the work they carried out and in the descriptions of the professional work they observed being done by librarians. The majority of students interviewed referred to “helping” as the core of the profession, which was, therefore, central to the professional identity of the future librarians interviewed for this study. As such, the professional identity of librarians should be examined in the context of research done in other professions that have been considered “helping professions,” such as education, social work, and nursing. Because professional identity is contingent on the beliefs, values, and motives of the profession, the prominence of helping in the experience of co-op students is significant to the professional identity of future librarians.

***(Dis)connections between the co-op experience and classroom education:*** Students explained that the co-op experience did not just *contribute* to their understanding of librarianship, but rather, *entirely formed* their views of librarianship. In contrast, classroom education was described as giving a theoretical foundation for that understanding. The students provided examples where classroom education was both congruent and incongruent with what they observed as the reality of librarianship. The development of professional identity is a result of the socialization processes that occur in both education and in work environments, and field experiences are uniquely positioned at the intersection of education and the work environment. Further examination of the descriptions of the connections and disconnections between the co-op and classroom experience is necessary in order to more clearly articulate the benefits and contributions of co-op placements and classroom teaching for LIS education.

### **Plan for Dissemination**

We expect to disseminate the findings of our study through multiple avenues. To date, we have presented preliminary findings at Western's Research Day 2011 with a poster titled, “It's About Helping People: Co-op Experiences of LIS Students in Academic Libraries” (Hoffmann & Berg, 2011). This poster presented our initial findings related to the prominence of the helping role of librarians when describing the professional work of librarians.

We anticipate being able to publish two peer-reviewed papers from the data that we have collected. Because of the nature of this research we would like to share our results not only with

the academic library community, but also with LIS educators. As such, we will be exploring the possibility of presenting our findings at the Association for Library and Information Science Education conference. In all forms of dissemination, we will acknowledge the generous support of the Canadian Association of Research Libraries.

### **Use of CARL Research in Librarianship Grant**

The CARL Research in Librarianship Grant was used to pay for interview transcription, equipment (USB drive to store research data), and participant compensation. Interview transcription was the most costly part of the research so we allocated more grant funds to this than initially proposed, and sought alternate means of obtaining or paying for other items in our proposed budget (digital recorder, long-distance charges and travel costs). The Research in Librarianship Grant's assistance in covering costs for interview transcription was vital for the completion of this research.

### **Significance of Research**

This study is intended to help to bridge the divide between education and practice, particularly with respect to education for future academic librarians. Although we have not yet drawn our final conclusions, nor have we definitively determined the avenues for dissemination, we have been able to identify ways in which this study can influence education for academic librarianship. For example, one of the co-investigators, Kristin Hoffmann, is currently teaching the Academic Libraries course, LIS 9630, in the Faculty of Information and Media Studies at the University of Western Ontario. She has been able to apply what she has learned from this research study in her teaching, and it has informed both her development of the course syllabus and her understanding of the ways in which students are likely to conceptualize themselves as future academic librarians.

This study will also be helpful in identifying ways in which field experiences such as co-op placements complement LIS education. For classroom instructors in library schools who direct the LIS curriculum, and for those academic librarians who host and supervise co-op students, this understanding of the connections between education and practice will help to ensure that meaningful and relevant experiences are provided for LIS students.

More broadly, by identifying significant factors in the development of academic librarians' professional identity, this study will strengthen the understanding of how academic librarians perceive themselves as professionals. Recent years have seen numerous discussions about the future of academic librarianship and the value that librarians bring to the academy. A strong understanding of academic librarians' professional identity will facilitate a clearer articulation of librarians' value and the important role they have to play in support of higher education.

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**Appendix A: Project Timetable**

<b>Project Phase</b>	<b>Expected Timeline</b>
Literature Review: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Professional identity of academic librarians</li> <li>● Professional identity formation, organizational socialization</li> </ul>	July 2009 – ongoing
Methodology construction: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Develop interview questions</li> <li>● Develop information &amp; consent materials</li> <li>● Identify contact people and obtain support from target institutions</li> </ul>	August 2009
Research Ethics Board protocol submission <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● The University of Western Ontario</li> <li>● The University of British Columbia</li> </ul> Including any necessary revisions	December 2009 – March 2010
Participant recruitment	Western: January 2010, May 2010, September 2010, January 2011, May 2011 UBC: May 2010, September 2010, January 2011, May 2011
Data collection – interviews at Western and telephone interviews with UBC participants	Following participant recruitment
Transcription of interviews	Throughout 2010 and 2011, following each set of interviews
Data analysis	2011
Preparation of manuscript for submission	2011-12