

2019 ICfL Summer Intern Summary Report

Randy Kemp, November 2019

Background and Methodology

In an effort to build the capacity of a diverse, skilled workforce for the library community, the Idaho Commission for Libraries (ICfL) piloted a summer internship grant opportunity for Idaho public libraries in 2019. With a \$1,000 grant, the library, the late high school or early college intern, the intern's mentor, and a community partner were intended to collaborate and expose the intern to working in a library for several weeks in the summer. The intern was to represent the diversity of the population served by the library.

The main desired outcome of the grant investment was that a diverse set of interns considered work in the library field as a viable career option, at the same time as they deepened their workplace skills through the internship. A second desired outcome was that partnerships and collaborations among libraries and local organizations were started or strengthened. Additionally, a potential next level activity, with feedback from and evaluation of the internship experience, was for Idaho libraries to pursue a registered apprenticeship program or some other recognized library skill enhancement opportunity.

Public libraries in Idaho (one award per library legal entity) were eligible to apply for the grant. Successful applicants were expected to meet the following requirements and expectations:

- Intern either in final two years of high school or first year of college.
- Intern represents the diversity of the community the library serves.
- A \$1,000 stipend for each intern. Number of weeks and number of hours per week to be determined by library mentor, intern, and human resources. Monies cannot be spent on food or capital projects.
- Project-based experience for the intern with input from the intern on the exact tailoring of the desired outcomes, activities, and outputs.
- Library and the intern will partner with another organization that has a related mission to the intern-focused project.
- Intern mentored and trained by experienced library staff.
- Intern and supervisor intentionally review and evaluate the experience during the internship and at the conclusion of the internship. These evaluative episodes, and written summaries, are shared across the library, with the partner, the ICfL, and with Idaho libraries (the latter with support from the ICfL).
- Report back to the ICfL regarding how the money was spent.
- Participate in a final review and future brainstorm session with grantees, hosted by the ICfL (via webinar).

The grant announcement included a seed list of potential activities (a representative, non-exhaustive list of potential projects):

- Summer reading outreach
- Computer coding activities

- Digital literacy coach for youth
- Youth program design and development
- Summer STEM activities
- Outreach to home-bound community members
- Community arts program
- Reading tutor/coach
- Sustainable local gardening education

Applications were scored using the points indicated alongside selected questions in the grant application itself. The ranking committee were permitted to also take into consideration the geographical distribution across the state of grant awardees.

Successful applications would demonstrate specifics on how diverse interns will be recruited; how the project would be collaboratively formulated among the mentor, intern, and anticipated partner; and the capacity of the mentor to invest in the intern.

Supporting documentation was also taken into consideration. Examples included a letter of support from a potential partner, a draft intern application form, or a draft interview script.

Grant awardees completed an interim questionnaire in conjunction with a progress review with the intern in mid-July 2019. The questionnaire:

1. Name of Public Library
2. Preparer's Name (first and last)
3. At this interim stage of the internship, how has the intern's perception of library work changed?
4. To what extent, so far, has the intern's openness to a career in libraries evolved?
5. To what extent, so far, have workplace skills in the intern grown and deepened?
6. How has the connection with the project partner organization and the library grown?
7. What unexpected outcomes, activities, challenges, or opportunities are you identifying at this interim stage?
8. What additional support from the ICfL, other grantees, or the library community in general will contribute to the success of this grant activity for the intern, the library, or the partner organization?
9. Are you on track to obligate all funds by mid-September?

Grant awardees completed a final evaluation report in conjunction with a final review and learning opportunity with the intern and partner. The final questionnaire:

1. Name of Public Library
2. Preparer's Name (first and last)
3. Compared to the intern's perception of library work at the start of the internship, how has the intern's perception changed?
4. Now, at the conclusion of the internship, how likely is the intern to pursue additional work in a library setting?
5. How does the intern explain and describe any changes in workplace skills as a result of the internship?

6. How likely is the library to engage with partners through future projects and partnerships? What was valuable about the partnership? What are the opportunities for enhancing partnerships in general so that they are successful?
7. What resources and support would be valuable in a future, similar opportunity that were missing from this internship experience?
8. Itemize how grant monies were invested.

Nine libraries applied for and were given the \$1,000 grant. Each of the mentors, interns, and project partners were invited to join a summative conversation about the experience. Seven of the nine libraries participated in the online conversation.

Evaluation of Outcomes

Intended Outcome: Considers work in the library field as a viable career option

The primary intended outcome of the summer internship was for the intern to consider work in the library field as a viable career option. One underlying premise was that people in the targeted age range (or stage in life) knew little about the actual workings of a library and therefore were unaware of job options available to them in a library. An internship, then, would provide practical experience in a library such that an intern could make an informed decision about a career in libraries.

Of the nine interns, five indicated an openness to again work in a library; one would consider future volunteer opportunities in a library; and two were undecided as further evaluation was needed, but a future library job was possible. These are quite positive numbers.

Interns did indeed learn about the real work undertaken by library staff. At least two interns started the experience with the attitude that libraries check out books and ended with the accurate understanding that libraries do and are much more than that stereotypical aspect (e.g., external partnerships). One of these interns learned about program creation and delivery, conducting research, and new ways to integrate curriculum as examples of the breadth of what library workers do.

In one way or another, all the interns experience the various roles fulfilled by library staffs, such as the entire library materials life cycle (selection, purchasing, receiving, cataloging, physical processing, circulation data analysis, and weeding), shelving, programs, administration, and outreach. Further, at least one intern identified a preference for back-of-house roles (cataloging) compared to front-facing roles (circulation, reference). The breadth of experiences, then, illuminated where an intern's skills matched with the expectations of a given role.

It was this variety of roles in the library setting that caused another intern to recognize that there are various professional and educational pathways to finding employment in a library and that a career in libraries (at least in Idaho) is not dependent on a library science degree. Another intern, in similar fashion, expressed amazement that a small library with a small staff without formal library training could accomplish all that they did, with meaningful impact on the community. This intern intends to pursue an education in a non-library field yet sees the library as a viable career outlet in the future with this degree in hand. Another intern, in similar fashion, expects to pursue a career in science and can envision partnering with libraries in the future for STEM activities.

The mentor of this intern noted that “...the experience has allowed her to see all of the ways in which the library serves the community, beyond what she was merely using it for.... In general, she has started to see the library as a place where anyone can learn anything and where everyone deserves to be.” This shift in attitude about the purpose and affordances of libraries was a major desired outcome of the internship experience.

One intern started the internship with lawyer as a career objective; now this intern is considering a library science degree. This same intern is now on the regular payroll at the library. Another intern is volunteering at the library at the conclusion of the internship.

Intended Outcome: Diverse set of interns

The internship announcement included the desired expectation that the intern would represent the diversity of the library’s community. In explaining “diversity” to potential grant applicants, factors such as ethnicity or socio-economic status or a minority of one kind or another were mentioned, and largely left up to the library to determine.

Anecdotally, about four of the interns could be considered diverse and representing the non-majority culture of the community. The missed opportunity was at least two-fold: (1) each application could have included a summary of the community demographics, highlighting the majority and minority cultures; and (2) identify in the grant report which minority culture(s) was represented by the intern. These are lessons for future grant cycles.

Intended Outcome: Deepen workplace skills

Overall, the interns gained significant workplace experience and skill development through the internship, both the library-specific skills (some noted above) and soft skills applicable in any workplace environment.

Examples of typical office skills that were enhanced for some of the interns: taking notes, sending emails, MS Office, Google Drive, fill out a timesheet, manage project files, working within a budget, researching products and pricing, keeping track of inventory, and multitasking.

Communication was a significant area of growth for several of the interns. This includes communicating and working with employees in a collaborative environment. A shy intern emerged from their shell throughout the course of the internship out of necessity while working with multiple staff people. Talking with and getting to know library customers, along with practicing patience when teaching program participants was another point of learning. Those interns who assisted library patrons and facilitated programs with library patrons were exposed to people from all walks of life (e.g., children or seniors in an assisted living facility) and the associated need to communicate in ways that resonated (whether one-on-one or in a presentation setting). Another intern noted that skills such as proper grammar, spelling, and punctuation had greatly improved; another wrote blog posts for the first time. In one case of poor communication, an intern had an emergency come up yet did not alert library; just did not show up to work.

One mentor noted that the intern “stated she learned a lot about working with children. She originally had hesitations regarding working with children, but after the summer she not only realized it was better than anticipated, but in fact she was really good at it.”

The onus of improving communication skills also fell to library staff. One library recognized the importance of communicating precise instructions from the library staff to the intern after vague guidance led to confusion and misunderstanding.

Interns were stretched regarding their people skills in general. Self-confidence, for example, is an area where one intern grew over the course of the summer where at the outset of the experience, the intern was likely to be intimidated in the professional setting of helping a patron. One intern highlighted how constructive criticism from a colleague is advantageous for improvement, even if difficult to hear. Another intern recognized the increased capacity over the course of the internship related to quality customer service.

Time management was also an area where interns (and mentors) grew. One intern self-identified the importance of pacing regarding tasks: the balance of quality outputs, time invested in the task, in concert with rushing to then have no tasks for long periods of time. One mentor wrote: "One area where we as the staff could have helped [the intern] more was in helping her learn how to balance the quality of her work with the productivity of her time. [She] was very focused on creating high-quality products and sometimes took more time than was necessary to complete certain tasks. This is not a criticism, but more of an observation of where the library staff could have been better engaged as mentors." Still another intern saw improvements in time management skills, while, at the same time, admitting there is room for additional improvement.

Intended Outcome: partnerships and collaborations among libraries and local organizations were started or strengthened

Across the board, libraries started or deepened partnerships with local community groups; and these connections are likely to continue. The following was a common mentor sentiment: "The library will definitely continue to engage with partners through future projects and partnerships." In one case, in fact, the intern has committed to making herself available to volunteer with local partners. Another mentor wrote that "the value was being able to tap into resources which would have cost money or time without the partnership." This same library worked with more partners than originally anticipated.

The challenges of working with partners exist as well. One mentor enumerated key constraints on the library engaging partners: time and money. The mentor noted the investment of time with partners necessarily means that time is not invested in other activities. As noted below, however, the return on that investment can be significant, suggesting prioritizing partnerships is a wise expense.

In at least two cases, to highlight the intern's influence on partnerships, the intern's social capital enhanced connections to the community at large through the intern's informal social network. In one case, the intern's friends and family participated in programs because the intern invited them, thereby increasing the attendance at the community-wide reading program. In a second instance, the intern's part-time job in the food service industry, meant that some of those customers chose to visit and engage in the library.

In yet another library, the intern's active engagement with the local partner created deeper connections in the community; connections the relatively new permanent staff had yet to nurture due to time constraints. The staff are now building on the relationship foundation laid by the intern, such that curriculum and programs are coordinated between the library and the partner (and other community members as well).

One mentor noted: “Working with partners is so valuable, they help reach other community partners that we weren't reaching. Communication is probably the key point on keeping partnerships successful.” Another mentor observed this multiplier effect since the primary partnership with a single school led to another school raising its awareness of the resources on offer at the library. The same mentor recognized the value of brainstorming with the partner to explore additional, new collaborations, such that the library is now a much more active thought partner with the school.

In another library, the intern strengthened an existing partnership since the intern's age was much lower than that of the program participants, resulting in a positive impact (even after working through initial refinements to program delivery to be appropriate for the audience).

Stretch Outcome: registered apprenticeship

Listed as a possible stretch goal during the startup of the pilot project, the notion of moving toward a formal registered apprenticeship (with the associated federal and/or state approval) remains a possibility yet was not formally addressed by mentors. The mentors found the internship process a valuable one and they encourage the ICfL to continue the grant program.

Next steps along the formal apprenticeship or certification front:

1. Seek clarity on the required process of designing and implementing an approved apprenticeship program through conversations with the Idaho Department of Labor as well as managers of existing Idaho apprenticeship programs
2. Explore an informal certification experience for library interns coordinated through the ICfL, the Idaho Library Association, and Idaho institutions of higher education

Unexpected Outcomes

A few highlights to share of unexpected outcomes from the intern's interaction with the staff and patrons in the libraries.

- Noted the gaps in material services; that is, training the intern on preparing items for the shelves. As a result, the library updated its processing procedure because of the issues identified during the training of the intern. Using the experience of onboarding the intern to improve the employee onboarding process.
- The importance of treating interns as job shadowing more than simply shelf reading (or some other transactional task focus). The focus truly is on helping them explore librarianship.
- Who feels welcome in the library space and who does not. Expand outreach for future programs, make space welcoming, reach community members who are not engaged with library. Intern's reflections were full of insight and newness. Asking "why?" These questions arose because the intern and the intern's social network were not previously heavy library users.
- Intern's social connections started coming to library: friends and family; then at a community engagement event the personal connection resulted in learning about the library.

Learnings and Opportunities for Improvement

Mentors and Library Room for Improvement

- Orient library staff on the difference between an intern and an employee, role of the mentor, how to balance the intern's learning and working, and how staff can adjust expectations accordingly.
- Clear expectations with interns on how to invest time when specific projects are completed while covering or assisting at the circulation desk: what to do during the down time.
- Stronger communication with library staff on how to interact with the intern. Meet with staff. Share a skill; expose to new library activity.
- Can be too much with multiple interns for check-ins and deep mentoring. So only have the number of interns that can be supported by the available resources (if a library has multiple interns).
- Embed the intern within the minority community.

The ICfL Room for Improvement

- Increased detail of the project characteristics and scope.
- Difference between intern and employee. Expand the role of mentorship and education for the intern. ICfL can help staff understand role as mentor compared to employer. [Note: possibility here to suggest ways to track data, converse with intern/partner, and even set up a "theory of change" supported by the ICfL.]
- Guidelines on what to teach the intern. Such guidelines could cover the various aspects of specific library services and administration and even guidelines on soft skills training.
- Provide a toolkit of various models and examples of successful internship programs.
- Examples of forms or templates.
- Digital resources or materials to pass on to the intern detailing some of the career possibilities in libraries and related fields as well as general information about how the role of libraries is changing.
- Gather the mentors and interns part way through the experience to see what other mentors and interns are doing at other libraries.
- As noted above, identifying the demographic makeup of the majority and minority cultures in each application and then noting which minority culture(s) the intern represented was a missed opportunity.
- Announce internship opportunity earlier for recruiting. Potential interns already in summer jobs.
- Financial support to libraries: maybe pay staff for the extra layer of acting as mentor, if additional funds.

General Points of Observation

- Risks associated with hiring an unproven individual. In one case, the intern did not complete the full number of weeks due to inconsistent attendance, lack of communication, and negative professional choices in the job setting.
- This could be a yearlong process where candidates volunteer and then are placed in internships when specific criteria are met.