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Cultural Wealth, Co-creation, and Conversations
Reimagining Academic Internships

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Article abstract

In this article, two librarians reflect on their experience as an intern and supervisor navigating traditional and antiquated norms upheld in academia. The intern, a first-generation Mexican-American student, describes the shift in her values, beliefs, and identity as she confronts the extractive practices embedded in internships, resulting in a collaborative and critical internship. The internship supervisor, a senior librarian, also reflects on her role in resisting these exploitative dynamics by using the community cultural wealth model, which recognizes the knowledge students of colour bring from their homes and communities. The intern and supervisor introduce ideas for improving the internship experience by embracing community cultural wealth, critiquing the role of neoliberal multiculturalism, and addressing the systemic extraction that hinders the professional development of marginalized students.

Cultural Wealth, Co-creation, and Conversations: Reimagining Academic Internships

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ABSTRACT

In this article, two librarians reflect on their experience as an intern and supervisor navigating traditional and antiquated norms upheld in academia. The intern, a first-generation Mexican-American student, describes the shift in her values, beliefs, and identity as she confronts the extractive practices embedded in internships, resulting in a collaborative and critical internship. The internship supervisor, a senior librarian, also reflects on her role in resisting these exploitative dynamics by using the community cultural wealth model, which recognizes the knowledge students of colour bring from their homes and communities. The intern and supervisor introduce ideas for improving the internship experience by embracing community cultural wealth, critiquing the role of neoliberal multiculturalism, and addressing the systemic extraction that hinders the professional development of marginalized students.

Keywords: *academic library internships · community cultural wealth · LIS education · multicultural neoliberalism*

RÉSUMÉ

Dans cet article, deux bibliothécaires réfléchissent à leur expérience en tant que stagiaire et superviseure naviguant dans les normes traditionnelles et désuètes maintenues dans le milieu universitaire. La stagiaire, une étudiante mexicano-américaine de première génération, décrit le changement de ses valeurs, de ses croyances et de son identité alors qu'elle confronte les pratiques extractives intégrées dans les stages, ce qui se traduit par un stage collaboratif et critique. La superviseure de stage, bibliothécaire principale, réfléchit également à son rôle dans la résistance à ces dynamiques d'exploitation en utilisant le modèle de richesse culturelle communautaire, qui reconnaît les connaissances que les étudiant.e.s racisé.e.s rapportent de leurs foyers et de leurs communautés. La stagiaire et la superviseure présentent des idées pour améliorer l'expérience de

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stage en valorisant la richesse culturelle communautaire, en critiquant le rôle du multiculturalisme néolibéral et en s'attaquant à l'extraction systémique qui entrave le développement professionnel des étudiant.e.s marginalisé.e.s.

Mots-clés : *éducation en sciences de l'information · néolibéralisme multiculturel · richesse culturelle communautaire · stages en bibliothèque universitaire*

Libraries have a complicated history concerning the exclusion of minoritized people. Criticisms and pleas for diversifying the field are long-standing, and early literature points out how "minority internships" were presented as a viable solution to the "diversity problem" (Díaz and Starkus 1994). LIS students feel compelled to offer labour in exchange for experience; however, there are questions about the quality of the experience and inconsistencies in how the internships are implemented and evaluated across libraries (Huggins 2017). More problematic is the lack of discourse examining inequity and diversity in LIS internships. LIS research documents the positive relationship between internships and successful job search outcomes (Iglesias et al. 2023), yet those without access and privilege are disadvantaged compared to their peers. The exchange of labour for experience creates inequities and perpetuates the extractive relationship between libraries and BIPOC employees. Questionable and inconsistent data collection also shows little to no improvement in diversity (Hulbert and Kendrick 2023) and disregards the importance of what gets counted; as Katherine D'Ignazio and Lauren Klein (2020) have vocalized, that which gets counted impacts policymaking, resource allocation, and other decisions that impact the day-to-day experience of minoritized groups. The demographic trends over the years, despite an effort to diversify the field, imply that the exchange of labour for experience has been extractive rather than mutually beneficial. Darder (2012) defines this exchange as multicultural neoliberalism, a practice that undermines collective social action and fundamental change while accepting multicultural subjects at an institution.

We see multicultural neoliberalism at work when institutions neglect the existing knowledge and skills an intern brings. Internships are accepted as the correct and "professional" way for students to gain essential skills, network, and acquire cultural and social capital (Fisher 2022), which is needed "to participate in a whole range of cultural activities" (Goulding 2008, 235). Depositing social and cultural capital through internships is similar to how we often view students as "blank slates" needing to be filled with knowledge. Academic libraries advocate for equity, diversity, and inclusion (EDI) in LIS internships but still subscribe to the deficit model in which

whiteness is capitalized, and diversity is commodified through tokenism, racialized tasks, and pay inequity (Vong 2022).

Below, you will read about the experience of an intern and her internship site supervisor as we try to disrupt an exploitative and extractive system while encouraging the intern to learn and evolve into the librarian she wants to be. Rather than focusing only on the cultural and social capital to be gained, we honored the community cultural wealth model, which recognizes the array of knowledge communities of colour bring with them (Yosso 2005). This model rejects whiteness as a form of capital and welcomes the rich knowledge interns gather from their communities.

A note about language

For the sake of understanding, we use commonly referred-to phrases to describe the various roles and parts of an internship. Much of the vocabulary/nomenclature is steeped in hierarchy, which needs to be disrupted in favour of more collegial language that denotes a relationship that puts the librarian and the LIS student on even footing.

Positionality

We share our positionality statements so the reader can understand our perspectives and how our identities impact our experiences.

Karen

I am a Mexican-American daughter of immigrants born and raised in the Inland Empire of California, in the far southwestern United States along the Mexico border. I am also a first-generation student, with neither parent having graduated high school. I participated in the fellowship discussed in this paper during my LIS program and was hired as a full-time Instruction and Reference Librarian shortly after. I recognize that my experience is unique, and many students face additional barriers.

Allie

I am a white female librarian who is fully tenured at the rank of Librarian. I have been in the profession and at my current institution for 18 years. I did not participate as an intern while in library school; instead, I worked as a library staff member, allowing me to directly apply what I was learning. As a member of the dominant group in librarianship, I recognize that I am often not the best or the only person to mentor BIPOC library school students through their educational and professional journey.

Instead, I see myself as a guide, connecting novice librarians to others who can provide additional mentoring and support to help them achieve their goals.

Two paths converging

Allie

The California State University, San Marcos (CSUSM) Teaching Fellowship is an internship that allows LIS students to teach in a library before receiving their degree. When it was created, few graduate courses offered information literacy, pedagogy, and teaching and learning theory, which is still true today (Valenti and Lund 2021). This fellowship was meant to fill that gap. During the fellowship, students start to build their identity as teachers, which is at the core of their relationships and collaborations, ability to enact equitable and inclusive teaching practices, and effectiveness in the classroom (Day and Kington 2008; Meulemans and Carr 2013). We offer a small stipend for the fellowship, and we recommend that students enroll in an internship course through their university to receive course credit.

While the program has evolved over the years, its singular purpose is for library school students to teach a group of students in a library classroom. As this is an unlikely activity within an LIS graduate course, it allows students to practice teaching and find their authentic teaching self (Valenti and Lund 2021). It also allows students to discover if they do, in fact, want to teach.

The fellowship begins with the intern developing their own learning outcomes and assessments using the guidelines given by the internship instructor. Typically, interns work through the semester reading articles about the scholarship of teaching and learning and information literacy; interviewing and observing the teaching librarians, with an eye towards identifying the student's authentic teaching voice and picking up teaching techniques; designing sample lesson plans for a variety of different courses; teaching a portion of a lesson from a shared lesson plan; and developing and teaching their own lesson plan to a first-year course. Hays and Studebaker (2019) found that participation in the scholarship of teaching and learning directly influences a librarian's teaching identity, which provides a core foundation of the fellowship. The implications for this work "[include] fostering a vision wherein academic librarians recognize each other as members of the teaching and learning community" (2). As the intern participates fully in departmental activities, we take this responsibility seriously.

While we thought this was an effective way to develop and run a teaching internship, the era of COVID-19 and racial reckonings shifted what I saw as necessary in developing future teaching librarians. During the COVID-19 pandemic, the

teaching librarians continued our work on building a relational culture, along with enacting anti-racist principles (Nataraj et al. 2023; Quiñonez, Nataraj and Olivas 2021). We reexamined our departmental practices, as well as our lesson plans and teaching strategies. This naturally led me to reexamine the fellowship structure and program.

Karen

I did not expect to graduate with a full-time job after getting my MLIS. During my graduate studies, I became familiar with the overwhelming whiteness of librarianship by reading scholarship such as April Hathcock's *White Librarianship in Blackface: Diversity Initiatives in LIS* (2015). Additionally, I worked closely enough with many librarians to get second-hand burnout. My goal of becoming an academic librarian did not feel attainable.

At the time, I worked in a public library and had little to no knowledge surrounding pedagogy, classroom instruction, information literacy in higher education, or building a teaching identity. Many librarians I spoke to referred to academic libraries as if they were a secret society: difficult to join and very exclusive. My LIS graduate program offered an optional internship course, allowing students to gain experience while earning class credits. While searching for internships in the San Diego area, I was surprised at the lack of student opportunities. The fellowship at CSUSM was not advertised, but I found it after digging through every university website. The application surprised me the most because, unlike many other internships, this one did not ask for transcripts, letters of recommendation, or lengthy personal statements. Allie reached out to me, and instead of a formal interview, we had a casual conversation and soon afterward started working together to build an experience tailored to my internship course and personal goals.

The power of validation and co-creation

Karen

What I enjoyed most from the fellowship was co-creating my experience based on my personal goals. Allie and I felt the internship guidelines supplied by the course were insufficient, overly corporatized, and sometimes monotonous, so we added collaborative reflections where I could unpack and process my experience working in an academic setting. Reflecting with Allie and the BIPOC librarians at CSUSM helped me digest the new knowledge I was acquiring while validating my existing knowledge.

Until this point in my education, I never considered myself a creator and holder of knowledge. During the fellowship, I was introduced to Laura I. Rendon (1994), who coined validation theory and its application for nontraditional students, such as first-generation or historically underrepresented minorities. I considered many ways I could incorporate this into my teaching while working with CSUSM students, many of whom are first-generation. What I did not realize, however, was that I was still experiencing self-doubt, and when a full-time librarian position opened up, I disqualified myself because I felt inadequate. Allie encouraged me to apply and shortly after, I was hired. The outcome would have differed if I had not received external validation.

Allie

After Karen and I had our initial conversation about the fellowship, I realized we had an opportunity to co-create an experience that gave her what she needed to become a teaching librarian. With previous interns, I relied too heavily on the guidance the intern received from their graduate programs and, honestly, my own expertise without deeply reflecting on why that was. When Karen applied, I had just finished four years as the director of our faculty development centre, where my primary role was developing professional learning opportunities for faculty. A primary tenet in training adults is recognizing their training expertise. We also offered programs to graduate students, where I realized they also bring expertise to the table. I spent much time reflecting on this and wanted to apply it to the teaching fellowship.

Karen and I worked to develop the tangible pieces of the program, but there was work to be done to welcome her into the culture and support her through her educational and professional journey. Rather than treating her as less than a "real librarian," the department welcomed her as a novice librarian and invited her to participate fully in our department. This included attending and participating in departmental meetings, professional development opportunities, and library and campus events. Honouring her cultural background (and with her permission), I immediately connected her to other Latina librarians to hear their experiences and build relationships with them.

What counts as "professional"?

Allie

An additional element I was not expecting was advocating for Karen during her internship. Given the disconnect between internship courses and internship sites, there were several places where Karen's professor and I disagreed. My evaluation of

Karen was very collegial and developmental; I offered guidance for her to develop her skills and knowledge around teaching and learning, and she took that guidance and implemented it in a way that aligned with her goals. However, the evaluation process and documents from the internship instructor demonstrated an antiquated idea of what goes on in the daily work of a library, which is not surprising given the disconnect between the library school curriculum and the day-to-day operations of a library (Mullins 2012). In a mid-semester evaluation, I found myself explaining how evaluating "professionalism" was laden with gender and racial stereotypes and did not provide any evidence of Karen's actual knowledge, skills, or abilities (Gray 2019). As someone who grew up white and middle class, I developed some traditional ideas around what *professional* was, to the point where I changed a lot of myself to fit that idea (i.e., participating in diet culture and changing my hair to fit a stereotypical ideal of what a professional woman was). As I started learning more about implicit bias and white supremacy, I learned how laden the idea of professionalism is and how oppressive it is, especially to historically marginalized groups. Given the history of librarianship, the experiences of our BIPOC colleagues in the current environment, and the troubling retention numbers of said colleagues, I found it difficult not to push back.

Karen

I was taken aback by the workload demanded by the internship course; I had another job, a full-time school load, and personal obligations in addition to the fellowship. Most problematic was my internship's evaluation component, which asked Allie to rate my "professionalism" and "physical appearance." Allie advocated on my behalf and insisted it was an inappropriate and inaccurate method of assessing my experience. This was a pivotal moment in my fellowship because I observed Allie reject the assessment and provide critical feedback to my instructor, explaining why it was loaded with neoliberal meritocracy.

The situation led to meaningful conversations surrounding whiteness in higher education and the systems upholding them. Assessments rooted in white normativity neglect other ways of knowing and often assume that the student or librarian lacks certain skills and that the institution can deposit the "correct" way of knowing and doing, what Freire (1970) refers to as the "banking model" of education. In our experience, we witnessed how internships are used to "deposit" knowledge and norms centered around neutrality and meritocracy, which the organization could later extract. Whiteness is also sneaky and often invisible, sometimes taking the form of a word or phrase used in hiring or evaluations (Okun 2021). Early career BIPOC librarians like myself are placed in precarious situations because, on the one hand, our values and cultures tell us to resist and reject the status quo. On the other hand,

we risk our reputations and careers by critiquing the very institutions that claim to embrace diversity. Tara J. Yosso (2005) calls it the contradictory nature of education, in which "schools most often oppress and marginalize while they maintain the potential to emancipate and empower" (74). My experience is a prime example of the way in which academia has empowered me while also imposing dominant ideologies.

Reflecting and unpacking

Karen

Although my fellowship led to a full-time librarian position, that is not often true for graduating MLIS students. Not only are internships often unpaid, but they are also an afterthought in LIS programs. Poorly designed internships contradict the values we claim to embrace in librarianship when we expect underrepresented students to offer free or underpaid labour that strips them of their cultural wealth. If institutions and libraries want to boast about their diversity efforts and inclusivity, we must reject whiteness and identity as assets and begin questioning if we are even equipped to welcome people who do not necessarily "fit in."

The unique opportunity to co-create an internship, identify and challenge whiteness, and receive validation has changed how I view myself and the values I hope to bring into the classroom. The experience empowered me to bridge the theories gained through my MLIS program and my cultural background with the practical side of academic librarianship. Today, I continue reflecting on my cultural knowledge and how to use it in my work. For example, my current research interests include Chicana feminist epistemology (Delgado Bernal 1998), which acknowledges and addresses issues surrounding immigration, bilingualism, generational status, Catholicism, and borderland experiences, all of which have shaped my life. I certainly never considered how the *consejos* (advice) and *corridos* (Mexican ballads) I grew up with were educational strengths that I might employ in the classroom (Delgado Bernal 1998).

Allie

The unique aspect of Karen's internship compared to previous ones was that her experience, expertise, and cultural background were much more at the forefront of our work. Before Karen, the fellowship was focused on complementing and supplementing what interns were learning in their instruction, reference, and information literacy courses. Given the timing of Karen's internship, I was in a much different place as a supervisor/collaborator. In addition to my work in faculty development, I had spent the previous several years focusing on increasing my

cultural competency, understanding various pedagogies, and actively learning about and practicing anti-racism. These activities had a deeper impact on my work with Karen than I had originally realized.

As previously described, we built Karen's internship around foundational principles and practices of library instruction, information literacy, and the scholarship of teaching and learning. We also investigated educational myths and systemic barriers to education, specifically in the library classroom, and included readings about applying culturally inclusive pedagogies. We included more of the hidden aspects of academic libraries, such as organizational culture, faculty relations, work/life balance, and setting boundaries. The librarians were clear and transparent about our work and when it was appropriate to push back against faculty colleagues and administrators. We demonstrated how our positionality and privilege could be used to advocate for groups without that privilege. This is vital for interns to see in a workplace so they feel empowered to do the same when they enter the academy.

Personally, I learned a lot from Karen during our work together. She consistently questioned why we made certain decisions, how we developed our curriculum, and why it was important to develop our confidence and agency as librarians. This made me explain or reconsider my work. I am grateful to now have her as a colleague, as she continues to push me to grow and avoid falling into complacency and stasis.

Conclusion

While we recognize that our experience is unique, we suspect that we are not alone in thinking that the internship experience is extractive and demands structural change. The traditional discourse surrounding internships centres on practicality and prescribed competencies, focusing on the intern's deficits rather than looking inward at the extractive and inequitable exchange of labour. Internships cannot be divorced from discussions surrounding equity in academic librarianship, and if academic libraries want to be intentional about their EDI efforts, they must challenge systems and structures that privilege whiteness. What if we didn't see interns as empty vessels to fill or workers with widgets of DEI to extract? What if, instead, we saw them as novices who need a "more knowledgeable other" to advance through the zone of proximal development: a move from what they can do alone and what they can learn? (Vygotsky 1978). If done thoughtfully, internships at the graduate level have the potential to retain and integrate more students from historically marginalized groups into academic libraries.

The community cultural wealth model can help institutions navigate away from extracting diversity narratives and feel-good stories that do more for public image than they do for LIS students and librarians of colour. While we support EDI

efforts in LIS, we encourage academic libraries to guide and support individual and collaborative reflections examining if and how multicultural neoliberalism exists in their institution. Internships are but one piece of a giant puzzle that aims to improve the working conditions of students and academic librarians. This article does not provide a definitive answer or solution to the "diversity problem," but it does give us a platform to share our experiences and kindle meaningful conversations.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Karen Tinajero-Vazquez (she/her/ella) is a Reference and Instruction Librarian at CSU San Marcos, where she teaches first-year general education courses surrounding information literacy and research methods. She is currently an early career librarian with research interests in unpaid internships, LIS education, and collective care in academic libraries.

Allison Carr (she/her) is the Academic Transitions Librarian at CSU San Marcos, where she focuses on supporting students as they transition from their high school or community college to CSUSM. Ms. Carr's current area of research is centered around the sense of belonging of transfer students, and culturally affirming internships for LIS graduate students.

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