Sharing Our Success: Using a Teacher Training Program to Improve Information Literacy Instruction and Support MLIS Students

Rachel Gammons, Alexander Carroll, and Lindsay Inge*

Preparing MLIS students to become effective, knowledgeable, and compassionate teacher librarians has been a recurring theme in Library and Information Science (LIS) literature since the 1970’s. Despite the demonstrated need for incoming librarians to have teaching skills, Master’s in LIS (MLIS) programs continue to struggle to prepare students for the realities of teaching in a library setting. In recent review of LIS curricula, researchers found that of the 58 American Library Association accredited MLIS programs, the majority offered a single instruction related course.¹ And of these, all were electives that were offered at most once a year. The lack of curricular training for instruction for MLIS students not only impacts the career prospects of graduates, who are increasingly being called to enter into the field with relevant and practical experience in instruction, but has also created a need for thoughtful, effective, and evidenced-based teacher training initiatives. Training programs, such as Association of College and Research Libraries’ (ACRL) Immersion Program, exist for established librarians; however, these programs are not only often financially burdensome for participants, but are also targeted at practitioners rather than students.

In an effort to address the gap between the capabilities of MLIS programs, the expectations of Libraries for emerging professionals, and the limitations of teacher training programs in the field, librarians at the University of Maryland created the Research and Teaching Fellowship (RTF): a three-semester experiential teacher training program for MLIS students at UMD. Crafted in collaboration with MLIS program administrators, the RTF is intended to be completed in tandem with the MLIS degree and fills a void in the field by providing opportunities for MLIS students to obtain guided, scaffolded, and meaningful instruction experience.

Literature Review

Previous research in the area of information literacy instruction has demonstrated a positive correlation between librarian interventions and increased student performance in information literacy competencies.² While the results of some of these studies revealed correlations that were not statistically significant, several conducted in the last decade suggest that this effect becomes more pronounced when a librarian’s role within a class extends beyond the traditional one-shot lecture.³ Historically, many programs of information literacy instruction have relied upon the use of quantitative assessments, and while these measures can be evaluated with relative ease, when relied upon exclusively they do not constitute sufficient evidence for student learning.⁴ Dunn describes the limitations of quantitative assessment pointedly, noting that it does not measure “the effectiveness of student

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In response, information literacy programs have increasingly adopted mixed-methods and rubric-based assessments for evaluation. These methods of evaluation, while more time consuming than quantitative methods of assessment, provide deeper and richer insights into student learning. However, as student enrollment in higher education has increased in the last decade, many institutions have experienced difficulties retaining the necessary library staff required to offer in-person information literacy instruction at any level, much less instruction that extends beyond one-shot lectures. Thus, even though more teacher-librarians are creating classroom experiences ripe with active learning and assessing student performance using authentic measures of assessment than ever before, the high demand for information literacy instruction is forcing many programs to rely entirely upon online modules for delivering instructional content. While these increasingly robust modules are able to reach every student, to do so they sacrifice synchronous interaction between a student and an instructor, and often rely entirely upon shallow, quantitative assessments of student learning.

Considering this increasing need over the last decade to increase the quantity and quality of information literacy training for undergraduate students, it should come as no surprise that academic libraries are seeking to hire librarians that are skilled in delivering and assessing information literacy instruction. In their analysis of library job advertisements published online from April 2006 to May 2009, Reeves and Hahn found the majority of professional librarian vacancies were public services positions and that academic libraries advertised more entry level positions than public or special libraries. Their study also revealed that instruction, regardless of specialty, was one of the most commonly requested areas of experience for entry level positions. Taken together, these conclusions suggest that the role of teacher-librarian in a college or university library is a viable means of entering the profession. However, this pathway requires that prospective teacher-librarians gain experience providing library instruction to students; Reeves and Hahn recommend that "practical experience throughout the graduate program... should be a part of every student's portfolio." In the decade since Reeves and Hahn began their study, more recent studies have corroborated their results, especially the importance of gaining relevant experience while completing an degree. Triumph and Beile distill this point succinctly, arguing that while an ALA accredited MLIS remains the foundational requirement for the vast majority of professional librarian positions, "most positions require prior work experience or facility with a particular skill."

As has been argued elsewhere, a review of MLIS program curriculums in light of these trends in higher education and job market presents an obvious and troubling contradiction. Despite the growing need for entry-level librarians with educational training in empirically tested pedagogical principles, MLIS programs do not provide sophisticated and evidence-based teacher training. Scholarship in the last decade has presented a number of proposals and models for bridging this gap. This includes a few suggestions targeted at MLIS students directly, such as Brecher and Klipfel advocating that library school students use elective credits to take education classes outside of their MLIS program. However, most proposals in this area are inspired by Wegner's idea of professional communities of practice, and aim at addressing skill deficiencies for professional librarians already floundering in the workplace. Walter suggests that libraries adopt instructional improvement strategies used by other higher education professionals, such as "critical self-reflection, peer coaching and evaluation, and the use of teaching portfolios." However, the extent to which instructional improvement programs are available to practicing librarians can vary greatly. The Library Instruction Leadership Academy (LILAC), as described by Davies-Hoffman et al., represents perhaps the most ambitious example of an instructional improvement program for librarians. For librarians lacking the community resources available through LILAC, Lorenzetti and Powelson suggest that formal mentoring programs can aid in the development of junior librarians' skill sets. On the other end of the spectrum, Brecher and Klipfel suggest that academic blogs on information literacy offer a no cost professional development for teacher training.
and present a medium for connecting teacher-librarians at different institutions in online communities of practice.\textsuperscript{18} Notably absent from most of these proposals and program descriptions is direct engagement by practitioners with MLIS programs themselves.

**Overview**

The UMD Libraries Research and Teaching Fellowship (RTF) program was inspired by these ideas and models that emerged from the literature, and seeks to create a local community of information literacy instruction practice built around a strong partnership between the University Libraries and the College of Information Studies. RTF is a competitive program open for up to five MLIS students per year. The application and interview processes take place at the end of the fall semester of their first year in the MLIS program; admitted Fellows begin the program the following spring semester. Once admitted, Fellows commit to the program for three semesters: the spring semester of their first year in the MLIS program, the fall semester of their second year, and their final spring semester. The Fellowship is constructed around a cohort structure, where Fellows move through the program in groups of four or five, providing a supportive community of practice through which Fellows engage in team-based and experiential learning in information literacy instruction, reference, research, professional development, and participate in the reading and analysis of library literature.

One of the cornerstones of the RTF is its structure as a paid program. Fellows are compensated at a rate of $15 per hour and work an average of five hours per week during the academic year. The only exception is the third and final semester, in which senior Fellows complete a 120-hour field study for course credit (a requirement for the MLIS program) that averages 10 hours per week. During the field study, Fellows are compensated for all library operational work, including first year instruction, reference, and a weekly office hour. The only component without compensation is the Teaching as Research project; a self-directed assessment project in which Fellows partner with a subject librarian to design, implement, and assess an information literacy intervention for an upper-level undergraduate or graduate course.

As of spring 2017, UMD Libraries has hired three cohorts of Fellows. The first, hired in 2015, operated on a compressed schedule, with the program beginning in the summer, rather than the spring. The following cohorts

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have operated on the standard progression, with hiring taking place at the end of the fall semester and Fellows
beginning the program at the start of the spring semester of their first year in the MLIS program. The organization
of the program allows UMD Libraries to overlap cohorts each spring semester, creating a virtuous system
in which senior Fellows provide peer mentorship and training for junior Fellows.

The first cohort, hired in summer 2015, was composed of six full-time students (five of whom were about
to begin their third semester in the MLIS program and one who was just beginning the program). The second
cohort, hired in fall 2015, included three full-time and one part-time student, all of whom were in their first
semester of the MLIS program. The third and most recent cohort was hired in fall 2016, and is composed of five
full-time students.

Components of the Fellowship
To prepare students to enter into careers in public services librarianship, the Fellowship is centered around the
development of teaching, reference, and research skills. These experiences span all three semesters, with the
level of responsibility increasing each semester. For instance, while Fellows lead information literacy instruction
sessions for first year composition each semester of the program, they begin their first semester by conducting
three observations of information literacy instruction sessions, followed by co-teaching two sessions. By the end
of the first semester, they independently teach at least one session. In their second and third semesters, Fellows
lead an assigned quota of classes, based on the number of sessions requested. The second and third semesters
also include formal teaching observations by RTF directors, followed by a one-on-one conference. In their third
semester, Fellows also conduct peer observations, giving them an opportunity to put into practice the type of
constructive feedback modeled by the RTF directors. In all three semesters, Fellows record teaching reflections
and participate in a department-wide assessment.

In addition to their classroom teaching responsibilities, Fellows participate in reference, research, and pro-
fessional development. Each semester, Fellows complete one to two hours of reference. This begins with weekly
desk hours at UMD’s STEM library, where Fellows become familiar with circulation, equipment loan, and other
information and directional questions. They also provide support to library patrons by monitoring chat refer-
cence. In their third semester, Fellows apply the skills learned in their first year in the program by assuming one
or two hours of on-call reference assistance at the main campus library, which includes in-person and online
reference interactions.

Fellows also participate in a monthly journal club, led and organized by second and third semester (senior)
Fellows. In their first semester, junior Fellows read the assigned article and come prepared to critically evaluate
the work alongside their colleagues. Senior Fellows assume a greater level of responsibility by working in pairs
to organize and lead journal club meetings including selecting a recently published article of their choosing and
facilitating discussions of the article using a critical evaluation worksheet.19 Journal club meetings are open to all
library staff and are attended by librarians, public services staff, as well as library administrators. Each of these
activities are complemented by a weekly office hour, which offer junior and senior Fellows time to complete
readings, respond to student and faculty emails, and to meet with RTF directors. It is a requirement that each
Fellow’s office hour overlap with at least one other Fellow. The office hour is a staple of the program and contrib-
utes to a strong sense of community among the cohorts.

In addition to on-going responsibilities, each semester also includes a discrete area of focus to allow Fellows
to build skills in each of the core areas: teaching, research and reference, and professional development. The se-
 mesters are organized into non-credit bearing “courses” including RTF101 (spring), RTF102 (fall) and RTF103
(spring).
Semester One (RTF101)
The focus of the first semester is an online learning curriculum, built and distributed through Canvas. This non-credit-bearing course introduces Fellows to trends in academic librarianship and information literacy instruction through weekly readings and discussions. Readings address themes of information literacy, the transition from the ACRL Information Literacy Competency Standards to the Framework for Information Literacy, academic librarianship, assessment, student-centered teaching, and critical pedagogy. Each week Fellows read two to three peer reviewed articles, book chapters, and/or blog posts and post reflections on the week’s readings to an online discussion board. The course requires Fellows to invest three to four hours per week; approximately the time that would be spent on a credit bearing graduate course. Junior Fellows also continue to participate in the core program components, including desk hours at the STEM library, office hours, teaching observations, and co and independent instruction.

Semester Two (RTF102)
The second semester of the Fellowship occurs during the fall semester, during which UMD Libraries provides the highest volume of one-shot information literacy sessions. The high demand for classroom instruction creates a natural opportunity for second semester senior Fellows to focus on the development of teaching efficacy. Fellows build on the reading and reflection, teaching observation, co-teaching, and independent instruction from RTF101 and apply the skills to independent instruction. During RTF102, Fellows carry the bulk of the Libraries’ instruction for first-year students, working primarily with English 101.

To accommodate various course and work schedules, Fellows are assigned a quota of sessions, averaging 14–18 sessions, and sign up for sessions that match their availability. Sessions are either 50 or 75 minutes and English 101 instructors have the option to bring their students to the library once or twice over the course of the semester. Each Fellow is responsible for contacting the English 101 instructor to confirm, coordinate, and customize the lesson plan for the library instruction session. Although Fellows are encouraged to base their session on a “standardized” teaching outline, each Fellow is free to customize the flow and focus of the session to fit the needs of their students and individual teaching style. RTF102 also includes an increased emphasis on reflective practice. In addition to posting weekly written teaching reflections to the RTF102 Canvas course, senior Fellows also receive two formal teaching observations, conducted by RTF directors. Each observation includes a post-session conferences in which the observer and Fellow review the strengths and opportunities from the session. Fellows are also welcome to request informal observations from their peers, or to co-teach additional sessions.

In addition to instruction, Fellows continue to build upon their reference skills by continuing desk hours at the STEM library. Beginning in RTF102, senior Fellows also assume a greater level of responsibility for Journal club. Finally, RTF102 includes an increased focus on professional development. Throughout the fall semester, RTF Directors host three to four workshops focused on preparing students for an academic job search, including (1) locating and reading job ads (2) writing a CV (3) writing a cover letter, and (4) preparing for phone interviews.

Semester Three (RTF103)
The final semester of the Fellowship (RTF103) functions as a capstone for the RTF program. The level of responsibility is increased, as Fellows transition from five hours per week, to completing the requirements of a 120-hour field study. The field study fulfills two functions: first, it meets a requirement of the MLIS program by providing a field study placement for Fellows; second, it allows senior Fellows to gain a greater level of practical
experience by providing peer mentorship and training to the incoming junior Fellows, participate in the on-call reference program on the main campus library, and complete a Teaching as Research Project (TRP). The field study is divided with an almost equal split between library operations (teaching English 101, providing reference, participating in professional development activities) and leading an independent teaching and assessment project through the TRP. Senior Fellows continue to be compensated at $15 per hour for library operations work.

The goal of the TRP is to give Fellows an opportunity to collaborate with librarians and faculty members to design, implement, and assess an information literacy session, or create an online module or learning object for a subject-specific course, targeted towards upper-level undergraduates or graduate students. RTF Directors pair Fellows with librarian mentors based on the Fellow's research interests and desired career path. In addition to providing hands-on experience with upper-level information literacy instruction, the TRP also fosters a mentor relationship between Fellows and librarians, and provides a “bridge” for Fellows between their roles as students and as soon-to-be graduates and professionals.\(^{25}\) In order to fulfill the requirements of the field study, Fellows complete a non-credit bearing RTF103 Canvas course created by RTF directors. Here they provide bi-weekly updates on their TRPs, upload copies of their teaching outlines, learning outcomes, and assessment plans, and reflect on assigned readings. To encourage Fellows to view themselves as responsible practitioner researchers, they also complete a mock Institutional Review Board (IRB) application and prepare a poster to present at UMD’s iSchool Field Study Expo and UMD’s Library Research & Innovative Practice Forum.\(^{26}\)

In addition to the TRP, senior Fellows continue to provide information literacy support for first year students. The volume of instruction decreases slightly in the spring, with Fellows leading 10–14 sessions. The decrease in instruction is mitigated by an increase in peer mentorship and training for junior Fellows. Over the course of their final spring semester, senior Fellows participate in peer observations, in which they observe one another teaching a library instruction session for English 101 and conduct post-session conferences with observers, modeling after the conferences held between RTF Directors and Fellows during RTF102.\(^{27}\) They are also responsible for monitoring and moderating the online Canvas space for RTF101, including reading and responding weekly reflections posted by junior Fellows, who are now in their first semester in the program.

**Benefits**

The Research and Teaching Fellowship is a mutually beneficial program for MLIS students, the UMD iSchool, and UMD Libraries. The three-semester experiential learning program allows Fellows to scaffold the development of teaching efficacy and research competency over the course of their MLIS program and provides an opportunity for Fellows to apply the knowledge gained in coursework to the practical experience provided in the Fellowship. This results in a holistic integration of theory and practice. Graduating Fellows leave the program with the knowledge and experience necessary to obtain entry-level academic librarian positions, which has been successfully demonstrated through job placement rates. In exchange, the RTF provides the Libraries with capable and competent library instructors who carry more than 35% of the Libraries’ overall instruction load and 75% of the general education instruction. For less than it would cost the Libraries to support one graduate assistant position, we are able to provide placement to up to eight Fellows per year. The Fellowship also supports the field, by training up conscientious and knowledgeable future colleagues, who will bolster the field and bring new ideas and energy to academic librarianship. Finally, the RTF benefits the iSchool by providing additional funding for MLIS students, placements for field studies, and contributing to job placement rates post-graduation.

In addition to these broad benefits, RTF directors have conducted a longitudinal evaluation of benefits, challenges, and opportunities. This mixed-methods research study has included focus groups with Fellows and
Librarians, exit interviews with graduating Fellows, written reflections, and follow-up surveys distributed to Fellows several months' post-graduation. Preliminary results from the first cohort (hired in 2015 and graduated May 2016) are presented here, with detailed findings to be included in an article, expected in late 2017.

**Benefits to Students**
All six of the inaugural cohort received and accepted full time job offers after matriculating through this program, with four of the six receiving multiple job offers. In interviews and post-matriculation surveys, Fellows explicitly credited this program for their success in this area, with one Fellow stating, “I am certain I got my current position because of my experience in the Fellowship.” Several Fellows identified the opportunity to gain meaningful teaching experience as an especially valuable component of this program. One Fellow commented that “teaching experience has been either a required or preferred component of every job I applied for this year,” adding that “being able to list my experience on my resume made me a more competitive applicant.” In addition to gaining experience teaching, Fellows felt that engaging in peer-observations and completing teaching reflections made them better instructors, with one explaining, “every time you watch somebody you see something else that you’re like ‘I liked the way that worked, I want to try it.’” Fellows from the initial cohort also celebrated this program’s sense of community, which made them feel as valued and respected members of a university library. One Fellow described how these community building aspects of the program “connected [her] to the library,” while another shared that the journal club provided meaningful opportunities to interact with librarians and library administrators as colleagues. Another added that an unexpected benefit of the Fellowship was the creation of “a cohort of people to talk with...that have common interests,” in comparison to a graduate curriculum that can feel confusing, isolating, or lonely. Along those same lines, another added that the Fellowship instilled confidence that “you always had support, whether it was applying to a job [or] improving a class that didn’t go well.”

**Benefits to Library**
A major goal of this program was to form a community of practice that engaged practicing and aspiring academic librarians alike. In order to achieve this, RTF directors consciously and explicitly made activities such as mentoring relationships and participation in a journal club required components of this Fellowship, ensuring that practicing librarians from across the libraries would have the opportunity to engage Fellows. Library administrators saw the creation of this new community of practice as a valuable addition to the UMD Libraries. In a follow-up survey sent to UMD Library administrators, one administrator shared, “In my opinion the Research and Teaching Fellowship program provides as much value to the Libraries as it does to the students in the program. Having an engaged and energized group of library science students actively working in the Libraries has created a bridge between theory and practice that is sometimes lacking in academic libraries.” In addition to serving the Libraries at large, RTF also provides service opportunities for Librarians. Working with a Fellow provides early career librarians, in particular, with the opportunity to serve as a mentor to an aspiring professional, which another administrator noted is a valuable opportunity for pre-tenured librarians. Through these mentoring relationships, Fellows not only introduce seasoned librarians to “new technologies and new ideas,” but also provide a morale boost to the community due to the Fellows’ “eagerness to work, learn, and participate,” particularly through Journal Club and the Teaching as Research Project.

Finally, RTF has facilitated an important connection between first year information literacy instruction and upper-level instruction, which is often stifled in a large academic library. By applying the knowledge, skills, and experiences learned in their interactions with first year students to their Teaching as Research Projects,
Fellows close the loop of instruction and assessment; demonstrating, evaluating, and eventually publishing on the successful integration of information literacy concepts throughout an undergraduate, or even graduate, curriculum.

**Conclusion**

The directors hope that the presence of enthusiastic Fellows within this community of practice will encourage practitioners to continue to adopt evidence-based, student-centered teaching practices and promote an environment of co-teaching, observation, and reflection that allow for continual improvement in information literacy instruction. We believe this model, which has been successful built around the needs and experiences of MLIS students, could be adapted to many different academic environments.

**Notes**

11. Triumph and Beile, "The Trending Academic Library Job Market."