

“Spending a Year in the Library Will Prepare You for Anything”: Experiences of Social Work Interns at Public Library Field Placements

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Abstract: *Many public libraries across the country have looked to the field of social work to assist in meeting the needs of patrons. Oftentimes, libraries have limited resources to provide a social worker, so they are partnering with local universities to provide social work interns. The purpose of this study was to hear from the library social work interns themselves about their experiences of completing their social work field placement in a library setting. This study was conducted in two parts: an online survey with 35 respondents and semi-structured qualitative interviews with 14 participants. The online survey included demographics and questions regarding students’ experiences completing an internship in a public library. The follow-up interviews consisted of in-depth questions exploring the unique challenges and transferable skills learned while in their placements. The findings speak to the importance of role clarity, physical space, confidentiality, and supervision arrangements. This study also found that, regardless of the challenges of these placements, interns overall had positive experiences and spoke highly of their library-based field experiences. Recommendations include identifying field-specific challenges in a library-social work partnership for those who are in the field as well as future research involving other stakeholders, such as librarians, university staff, and supervisors.*

Keywords: *Supervision, social work students, public libraries, social work field placements, internships*

Partnerships between public libraries and schools of social work have grown exponentially since the first known collaboration in 2009 with the San Jose Public Library (Luo et al., 2012). In response, corresponding academic literature addressing the existence of social work library interns has also increased in recent years. While this coverage speaks to aspects of what social work library placements entail, there is a paucity of literature about these placements as told from the perspective of student interns themselves. The current research fills this gap by gleaning insights from BSW and MSW social work students who conducted their field placements in public libraries throughout the United States between 2017 and 2020.

Literature Review

Approximately 160 public library branches in the United States host social work students as interns (Zettervall, 2023). While there are active partnerships in Australia and Canada (Garner et al., 2021; Schweizer, 2018), the bulk of known collaborations exist in the United States. Scholars who consider this topic deem these collaborations as essential

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to help meet the needs of underserved patrons while offering quality generalist placement opportunities (Wahler et al., 2021). Social work student interns can help enhance public libraries' capacity to address high-needs patrons through a holistic response of targeted programming that can benefit all library stakeholders (Aykanian et al., 2020; Kelley, et al., 2017). Social work practice placements at public libraries can also engender a better understanding of similarities and differences between the two professions and thereby paint a fuller picture of library patrons' needs (Zettervall & Nienow, 2019).

Previous studies on social work student library placements primarily focus on working with a specific population, such as patrons experiencing homelessness (Aykanian et al., 2020; Provence, 2018), a singular library branch (Cuseglio, 2020), or one library system (Provence et al., 2020; Wahler et al., 2019), examine specific training for library staff (Sharkey et al., 2021), or offer a broad review of such partnerships (Johnson, 2019). Soska and Navarro (2020) report the development of social work education partnerships with libraries as an emerging and important phenomenon, but do not address the experiences of interns and their work.

The present study delves deeper into topics examined by existing literature on the type of micro, mezzo, and macro tasks (Johnson, 2021) social work students at libraries take on, including their responsibilities such as needs assessments (Provence et al., 2020) and training librarians (Sharkey et al., 2021). Our research is unique as we spoke directly with an array of interns from all over the United States – beyond just one branch or library system – about their lived experiences. The current study answers the call to conduct further research on these interprofessional collaborations (Soska & Navarro, 2020) as it used both quantitative and qualitative research methods to better understand the perspectives of students about their experiences in library-based social work field placements. The current study used the following exploratory research question to address the aforementioned gap in the literature: "How do social work student interns placed in public libraries perceive their work?"

Methods

The design for this study was a sequential mixed methods approach (Creswell & Creswell, 2018) that included a survey to collect demographic data followed by interviews. Both of these quantitative and qualitative approaches were approved by the IRB by Saginaw Valley State University. All participants were provided a consent form to complete and send back to the researchers prior to completing the survey. The consent form explained the researchers' procedures for anonymizing and safeguarding the collection and storage of data.

Participant Eligibility

The sampling frame for the study was BSW and MSW social work student interns who completed their field placements in a public library setting between the years 2017 and 2020. The researchers made no stipulations related to type of program (generalist or specialist) that participants attended. All eligible participants resided in the United States.

Quantitative Procedures

Eligible participants were gathered from a list of already-established professional contacts gathered by one of the researchers. Additionally, three professional listservs targeting both librarians and social workers were used to identify participants. The researchers determined, based on updated information from the *Whole Person Librarianship Community of Practice* (2023) listserv, that this listserv had an accurate count of current and former interns and were thus contacted for this study. Invitations to participate in the study were sent through email and postings via the professional listservs in October 2020.

The survey was sent directly to 47 interns. In addition, 78 field supervisors were sent the survey link with instructions on how to forward it to eligible participants. To increase enrollment in the study, an additional email reminder was sent to both interns and field instructors after a period of two weeks. A total of 35 participants completed the survey. Participants could opt to provide their email address if they wanted to participate in a follow-up qualitative interview. All but one participant had completed their field placement at a public library by the time they participated in this survey. One participant was conducting their field placement at the time of this survey.

The quantitative portion of this study was a 28-item non-standardized Qualtrics survey containing multiple-choice questions and two open-ended questions created by the researchers based on an extensive review of the literature. Questions assessed demographics of participants and the libraries in which they were placed, as well as the tasks assumed in their roles. Additionally, participants shared their perceptions of how challenging their tasks were in their library field placements. They also reflected on how their internship experiences affected the next steps in their social work career. Finally, they rated their satisfaction levels on a Likert scale. Nearly all of the multiple-choice questions offered an open text option for participants to provide an explanation if warranted.

Qualitative Procedures

A semi-structured qualitative interview protocol allowed participants to elaborate on their quantitative survey responses. Questions clarified participants' perceptions about their tasks and duties, including challenges they encountered, resources they accessed, ways they connected with their universities, and the arrangement they made with their supervisors. Participants were also asked to reflect on the collaborations they had with library staff and patrons. Fourteen of the 35 participants who responded to the survey agreed to participate in the qualitative portion of the study. Twelve of the 14 were Masters-level and two were Bachelor-level placements. Interviews were conducted and audio-recorded via Zoom and then professionally transcribed. Interviews lasted 60 minutes on average.

Data Analysis

Quantitative Survey

Survey data were analyzed using Qualtrics software. Qualtrics computed the results while protecting the privacy, anonymity, and confidentiality of all participants. Demographic tables and basic descriptive measures, including mean, median, mode, and standard deviation, provided a summary of participants' responses.

Qualitative Interviews

Our process of analyzing and jointly reviewing the data served as a means of triangulation (Padgett, 2017). We used Corbin and Strauss' (2008) constant comparison process: "As the researcher moves along with analysis, each incident in the data is compared with other incidents for similarities and differences. Incidents found to be conceptually similar are grouped together under a higher-level descriptive concept" (p. 73). Transcripts of the interviews were divided among the researchers for review. An initial reading of these transcripts elicited the following codes based upon phenomena that directly correlated to themes identified in the literature review: tasks/duties of placement, challenges presented, supervision arrangement, and supports accessed. For the second iterative reading, the researchers reviewed different transcripts to validate the codes. A third and final reading of the transcripts allowed the researchers to place the interview data within the codes. From this reading, themes were determined.

Internal Validity of Qualitative Component of Study

Validity specific to qualitative research is "the correctness or credibility of a description, conclusion, explanation, interpretation, or some other sort of account" (Maxwell, 2013, p. 122). Contrasting this definition with the quantitative focus on objective truth, Maxwell (2013) explains that a valid study contains results that accurately represent the phenomenon being studied. Among the several techniques for ensuring validity that Maxwell (2013) and other researchers (Guba & Lincoln, 1989) reference, the current study used three forms of validity: rich data, numbers, and peer debriefing.

Creswell (2013) refers to extracting "rich, thick descriptions" (p. 252) from study participants as a form of validity as others can transfer such information to other settings because of its shared characteristics. In Stake's (2010) words, "a description is rich if it provides abundant, interconnected details" (p. 49). In the current study, we provide details when describing a case or a theme, often using participants' words to do so.

Second, Maxwell (2013) notes many conclusions from qualitative studies have implicit quantitative components. Counting incidences of comments related to a theme provides a clue to the evidence bearing on a particular conclusion. We used this approach in our reporting on the narrative data to support a theme's viability.

Lastly, Creswell (2013) notes intercoder agreement is a form of peer debriefing that contributes to the validity of qualitative research. In this study, we met after the interviews

were completed to discuss our impressions and thoughts connected to the data. Through an iterative process of independent and conjoint coding, we came to an agreement on the codes and categories elicited in the study.

Findings

Survey Results

The survey included sociodemographic items to describe participants' ($N=35$) level of education, length of internship, and size and setting of their library site. Twenty-nine participants (82.9%) were MSW (Master of Social Work) students. Of these individuals, 41.7% were in their first year of a two-year program when they completed their library internship. The rest were either in their second year or in an advanced standing program. Six participants (17.1%) were BSW (Bachelor of Social Work) students. Most participants (62.9%) were in an academic year (August-May) placement. Four participants (11.4%) completed one semester placements.

Educational Tracks of Participants

Participants were asked what educational tracks they were following during their internships. Over one-third of the MSW participants (37.5%) had a macro focus, defined as "community organizing/macro" and "policy," compared to three (12.5%) who were on a micro ("clinical or interpersonal practice") track. A total of 16.7% of MSW participants were on an "advanced generalist practice" track while other tracks included "children and families," "leadership," and "forensic social work." BSW students do not have a defined track as they are considered generalists at the undergraduate level.

Participants were also asked to describe the size and setting of their library site. Half (50%) designated their branches as "mid-sized," twelve participants (31.6%) were at "large" libraries, and five (13.2%) described their branches as "small." Participants opted to self-describe from a pre-selected list of descriptions. There were no criteria for defining "small", "mid-sized" or "large" libraries. When asked to describe the type of community where the branch was located, 18 participants (48.7%) answered "urban," 16 (43.2%) responded "suburban," and three (8.1%) identified their communities as "rural."

Duties Assumed During Placement

Survey participants also identified the duties assumed during their placements. They noted that they conducted needs assessments, facilitated staff training, and provided outreach to library patrons.

Needs Assessments. Nearly three-quarters (73.6%) of participants conducted some form of needs assessment as one of their internship duties while eleven (20.8%) did not engage in this task. Table 1 lists the targets of the needs assessments for those who completed them. The 5.7% "other" responses indicate needs assessments were initiated but not completed due to COVID-19 interruptions.

Library Training Topics. Nearly half of participants (48.7%) provided, coordinated, or facilitated workshops for library staff. Table 1 shows the topics addressed at these training sessions. Workshops provided by participants that fell into the “other” category included “Domestic Violence Prevention,” “Child Abuse Awareness,” and “Social Services Available for Patrons.”

Table 1. *Focus of Participants' Duties*

Focus	n (%)
Needs Assessments (n=42)*	
Library patrons	17 (40.5%)
Community members	10 (23.8%)
Library staff	7 (16.7%)
Community-based organizations	5 (11.9%)
Other	3 (7.1%)
Total	42* (100%)
Library Training Topics (n=30)**	
Mental Health 101	9 (30%)
Staff/Patron self-care	7 (23.3%)
Other	6 (20%)
Trauma-informed principles	4 (13.3%)
De-escalation tactics	2 (6.7%)
Impact of existing library policies	2 (6.7%)
Total	30** (100%)

Notes: * duplicate responses from participants.

** number of participants who responded to this question.

Outreach. The survey asked participants about the types of outreach they provided to library patrons. Participants were able to select more than one option; therefore, there were 91 total responses to this question. Thirty-four (37.4%) participants made referrals to local resources such as those that provide financial assistance and a similar proportion (35.2%) offered technical assistance with completing online applications or forms. Twenty participants (23.1%) developed or modified programs for library patrons, such as programs to assist patrons experiencing homelessness. Only one participant did not provide outreach as part of their job.

Amount of Time Spent with Constituencies Encountered by Participants

Table 2 depicts the amount of time participants spent with various constituencies, scaling the length of time from 1 (*small amount of time*) to 5 (*large amount of time*). Mean scores indicate participants spent most of their time with library patrons ($M=4.09$). Library staff and supervisors ranked second ($M=3.17$) and third ($M=3.03$), respectively. Participants spent the least amount of time with community agency representatives ($M=2.97$) and library administrators ($M=2.63$).

Table 2. *Amount of Time Spent with Constituencies Encountered by Participants*

Constituent	Mean	Std. V	Variance	n
Library patrons	4.09	1.16	1.34	35
Library staff	3.17	1.18	1.40	35
Supervisors	3.03	1.11	1.23	35
Community agency reps	2.97	1.04	1.09	34
Library administration	2.63	1.24	1.55	35

Note: Scale: 1 = least amount of time; 5 = most amount of time.

Perception of How Challenging Tasks Were

Table 3 shows participants’ perceptions of how challenging their duties were. Participants rated their perceptions on a scale from 1 (*not challenging at all*) to 5 (*very challenging*). The three tasks that ranked as most challenging, all scoring above a mean score of “2,” were “developing programming,” ($M=2.29$) “developing library training,” ($M=2.13$) and “knowledge about (understanding the roles, tasks, and responsibilities of) the position” ($M=2.09$). The three items that ranked least challenging were “time management for tasks” ($M=1.38$), achieving buy-in from library staff about their role ($M=1.34$), and communicating with university staff/field directors about the field experience ($M=1.14$).

Table 3. *Perception of How Challenging Tasks Were as Reported by Participants*

Task	Mean	Std. V	Variance	n
Developing programming	2.29	1.52	2.32	35
Developing library training	2.13	1.52	2.32	30
Knowledge about position (duties/ tasks/responsibilities)	2.09	1.73	2.99	35
Helping library staff understand role	1.76	1.55	2.42	34
Referrals to/relationships with community-based organizations	1.74	1.40	1.96	35
Knowledge about surrounding community and its needs	1.69	1.35	1.82	35
Support in your role as intern	1.66	1.66	2.74	35
Interaction with library patrons	1.56	1.46	2.13	34
Supervision of your work	1.40	1.5	2.24	35
Time management for tasks	1.38	1.53	2.35	34
Achieving buy-in from library staff about role or place at the library	1.34	1.39	1.94	35
Communication with university staff field director about experience	1.14	1.62	2.64	35

Note: Scale: 1 = not challenging at all; 5 = very challenging.

Reports of Satisfaction Levels of Interactions With Constituencies

Survey participants were asked to report the title or status of the person designated as their social work supervisor. Nearly half (48.7%) identified a university staff member as

fulfilling this role. A similar proportion (43.2%) reported their supervisor was a social worker either employed at the library itself (21.6%) or contracted from a local agency (21.6%) while four (10.8%) answered “other” to this prompt. Those individuals who answered “other” indicated a library staff member who is not a social worker, served in this supervisory capacity. Participants were also asked to indicate how often they met with their supervisor. Of the participants who responded to this prompt, 27 (67.5%) stated they met with their supervisor “weekly.” Five participants (12.5%) indicated bimonthly meetings and seven (17.5%) responded they met on an “as needed” basis.

Participants rated their satisfaction with interactions they had with various stakeholders connected to their internships: university staff, supervisors, library staff, and library patrons. These findings are compiled in Table 4. Most participants answered they were either “very satisfied” or “satisfied” for all prompts. These perceptions matched responses to the prompt, “Indicate the satisfaction level of your internship as a whole.” A sizable majority (83.3%) of those who responded to this survey item indicated they were satisfied or very satisfied with their internship experience.

Table 4. Reports of Satisfaction Levels of Interactions with Constituencies

Constituent	Very Satisfied	Satisfied	Neither S or D	Dissatisfied	Very Dissatisfied
University staff	13 (37.1%)	15 (42.9%)	3 (8.6%)		1 (2.9%)
Supervisor	20 (54.1%)	7 (18.9%)	2 (5.4%)	4 (10.8%)	1 (2.7%)
Library staff	17 (47.2%)	12 (33.3%)	2 (5.6%)	2 (5.6%)	2 (5.6%)
Library patrons	14 (37.8%)	17 (46%)	5 (13.5%)		
Experience as a whole	18 (50%)	12 (33.3%)	5 (13.9%)	1 (2.8%)	

Qualitative Interview Results

Analysis of the qualitative interviews cultivated four major themes: (1) a broad range of practice that spanned from micro-level interactions with patrons to macro-level program development; (2) challenges with tasks and responsibilities at the library; (3) primarily positive experiences with supervisory supports; and (4) obstacles related to the physical setting of the library. To maintain participants’ anonymity, a naming convention was adopted (e.g., “P1” for Participant 1).

Full Generalist Practice Experience

Though most participants were on a macro/advanced generalist track, they described their library placement experience as incorporating a combination of micro, mezzo, and macro tasks with an emphasis on micro-level. The following section offers examples of each level of practice that library social work interns experienced in their field placement.

Participants conducted micro-level tasks that included individual case management, resource navigation, assistance with completing forms, vocational assistance, conflict resolution, and crisis intervention. Participants assisted a variety of library patrons, including people experiencing homelessness, adolescents, immigrants, older adults, middle- and working-class individuals, persons who were deaf and hard of hearing, persons

who were low-vision/visually impaired, and patrons experiencing mental illness. Participants indicated that this micro-level work involved a significant amount of relationship-building that included supportive listening and initiating contact with individuals.

Several participants noted that partnerships were crucial for providing proper referrals to community agencies. Learning about community programming and local services was identified as a useful mezzo practice while in placement. Participants reported collaborating with a myriad of community partners, such as police officers, domestic violence centers, homeless shelters, churches, adult education programs, and re-entry programs. Other mezzo tasks included facilitating events, the most common of which was “Coffee & Conversation,” wherein social workers invite community members to the library to discuss what is on their minds.

Additional mezzo tasks included organizing resource fairs, creating community resource flyers, and training library staff on trauma-informed approaches to working with patrons. Lastly, participants engaged in macro-level tasks, such as attending library board meetings, helping create or modify library policies and procedures, writing grants to obtain or secure funding, and developing and/or implementing needs assessments.

Challenges Related to Participants’ Tasks and Responsibilities: “An Ideal Mix”

The challenges participants encountered related to their placement duties primarily involved unmet expectations, lack of role clarity, and differing philosophies between social work and librarianship.

Expectations. Though all 14 participants engaged in a blend of micro, mezzo, and macro tasks, several anticipated doing more macro work than they experienced. Two participants expected more direct guidance from library staff: “I was expecting a little more hand-holding and someone watching over me all the time...whereas this offered no direct supervision and no social worker on site. It was just like ‘Here you go’” (P13). Others noted they did not have any expectations as they were the first interns at their branch or from their university: “I didn’t put up any expectations because I was a guinea pig...I was the one creating this. We didn’t know what we were doing so I didn’t put up a lot of expectations” (P11).

Role Clarity. One of the biggest challenges reported by participants was the absence of role clarity and understanding of their duties. Over half of the participants said their daily tasks were unclear, as P8 noted: “Nobody knew what I was supposed to do so my basic duties were what I made up as I went along.” Others relied on their prior work experiences to carve out their duties and even participants who were not the first interns at their site described their roles as “ambiguous” (P7). This lack of clarity, per participants, also confused library staff which led to inappropriate referrals and expectations. To alleviate this concern, one participant spent significant time educating librarians about what social work entails.

Participants also spoke of restrictions about the type of tasks they were allowed to conduct. Some felt confined by services they could offer due to being at a library placement

versus a traditional social service organization. P5 stated there was “a lot of hesitancy to let us be social work interns because there was no clinical social worker onsite to supervise.” This student also noted their library administrators expressed concern about liability and would not allow them to generate referrals to social service organizations. Throughout the interviews, participants reported struggles with navigating bureaucracy and confidentiality that inhibited social work services, such as maintaining basic documentation and anonymous data collection from library patrons.

Differing Philosophies. Some participants further determined that because public libraries are nontraditional host sites--where the primary purpose is not for social services or standard social work practice--the dynamic between library staff and social work students was complicated. Some experienced minor conflicts over values, such as confidentiality, which highlighted for them philosophical differences between the two professions. One participant described the arrangement as a “tug-of-war,” where social workers saw themselves as meeting the needs of the community while librarians were concerned that having a social worker present “scared people away” (P1). P5 sensed their role was “rubbing up against the system” and experienced a lack of resources and cross-collaboration resulting in “missed opportunities.”

Responses to Challenges: Skills Developed. Though participants faced challenges pertaining to expectations, role clarity, and differing philosophies, they spoke of pivoting and overcoming obstacles through transferable skills they took with them after their placement. Participants described library placements as ideal for those who are self-starters and adept at taking initiative: “What you get out of this internship is what you put into it” (P12). For those who did not embark on their internship with this mentality, many found they were pushed to hone such skills. One participant, who had little role clarity, decided to create a job description to help future interns navigate what their responsibilities would look like.

Another participant who anticipated more macro work still found the challenge of unmet expectations worthwhile:

I was gaining all the competencies I needed for macro practice and I was also doing micro casework which was the perfect balance for me. I love people but I also love being able to provide something for them. That was an ideal mix. (P11)

Library placements offered participants valuable experiences working directly with patrons, including skills with advocacy and navigating systems, de-escalation, approaching and networking with community partners, and flexibility with adapting to the needs at hand. P8, for example, determined that “spending a year in the library will prepare you for anything.”

Experiences Related to Support and Supervision

Per the Council on Social Work Education (2022) requirements, all participants obtained supervision from an individual trained as a social worker. Each participant also had a librarian assigned to them as their “task supervisor” to oversee daily work in the library. Furthermore, all participants met with a professor and fellow classmates during a

weekly field seminar class and others found support through online connections. All four formats provided a mode of supervision for the interns. While mostly positive, some participants noted aspects of supervision were challenging, whether due to the absence of a professional social worker at the library, a contracted supervisor that was unavailable, or an unresponsive library task supervisor.

Social Work Supervision. Though only three participants had a library-based social worker to provide them social work supervision, the remaining eleven participants were supervised by an external social worker either from their university or contracted by the library or a community agency. P10 found the latter “very helpful in developing my basic clinical skills of building rapport and establishing trust with patrons,” while P6 noted the highly collaborative work with their supervisor who helped them lead staff trainings. Five participants noted the absence of a library-based social worker as a key challenge during their internship. This lack of immediate social work direction and structure was difficult to navigate, particularly for three participants who encountered patrons struggling with mental health crises. Five participants voiced appreciation for their supervisors’ hands-off approach in guiding them, which allowed for a degree of freedom that was positive, particularly when those supervisors were responsive and available for support.

Task Supervisors. Nearly all participants were assigned a librarian who was designated as their “task supervisor.” Such individuals operated as the point-person for participants while at the library, which was especially important for those who had no professional social worker on site. Though some participants mentioned receiving minimal support from these librarians, most acknowledged the exceptional support of library staff, regardless of whether they had a formal orientation or any prior knowledge about libraries in general. Participants’ descriptions of their successful collaborative work with librarians included: providing them with “all the support in the world” (P11); being “super open to me working things in the way I thought would be best” (P5); being “completely supportive of anything we wanted to do” (P13); and being “very, very supportive” (P2).

Examples of collaborative work with task supervisors included creating opportunities to reach immigrant patrons (P5) and providing psychoeducation to staff about trauma-informed approaches to working with patrons (P3). Sometimes these trainings focused on a particular patron population, such as individuals experiencing homelessness (P5) or patrons who were deaf or hard of hearing (P7). De-escalation tactics and modeling person-first language were taught (P3), as well as being a support for librarians’ job-related stressors. One participant reflected that librarians were “very receptive” to training about when to refer patrons to the social work intern (P13).

University-Based Support. Nearly all participants obtained regular supervision from university-based field advisors and professors. Several participants found this type of supervision to be adequately supportive even when navigating crises at their placement. P7 mentioned their field instructor was the most helpful support in their role as an intern. Over half of participants mentioned support garnered from fellow library interns or students in their field seminar class. These classmates generated connection, as one intern who described her class as:

A place to process my colorful and impactful experiences...it was definitely a good support and it helped illuminate the need of having social workers in libraries to the rest of my class...I still bonded with my classmates even though they weren't in libraries...this class was essential. (P9)

Student cohorts also provided valuable group supervision for minimizing the isolation some participants experienced as the sole interns conducting their placements in a library setting.

Online Support. Despite these challenges, all participants acknowledged the help received from one or a combination of the aforementioned sources, including online networks. One participant noted, "I don't feel that I got the support from my university, but I didn't feel like I needed it because of how much I was getting from the library and my social work supervisor" (P 11). Two participants initiated research about and contacts with social work librarians and student interns across the country through networking websites such as *Whole Person Librarianship*. This resource was particularly useful for participants who transitioned their placements online due to the COVID-19 pandemic. P11 said, "I had built this network outside of the library for support within the social work realm of things, outside of my supervisor. That was so critical in fostering the success that we had."

Obstacles Related to Library Spaces: "Space Was Definitely Tight"

One challenge particular to these placements related to the physical setting of the library. Participants reported a lack of material resources hindering their ability to adequately serve patrons, some of which were caused by COVID-19 restrictions. Additionally, they noted obstacles connected to the physical set-up of the library itself, including lack of confidentiality and isolation, some of which potentially jeopardized their safety. Participants responded to these barriers by focusing on patron engagement and challenging themselves to develop micro-level skills.

Lack of Material Resources. Four participants cited a lack of resources in conducting their work. They noted the absence of a private phone line or a library computer as hindrances to executing their duties. These participants found it problematic that they had no choice but to use their personal cell phones and computers. P9 viewed the inability to print documents as a drawback to working with patrons.

Other participants discussed the difficulty of remote work in fulfilling their tasks due to COVID-19 restrictions. P11, for example, was uncomfortable engaging with the elderly population through a virtual platform. Two participants asserted COVID-19 precluded their work in changing policy. P14 noted the inability to change a banned person policy at her facility, while P3 found collaboration with city management officials to review homelessness policies was curtailed.

Physical Space Challenges. Nearly all participants identified the spatial arrangements of their work as a challenge. Several noted the absence of a designated, private, and reliable space to meet with patrons. Participants reported having to check out office spaces that were not always available when needed: "Space was definitely tight. When I had an

appointment with a patron, I would have to make sure the case management office was free” (P9). Another participant noted the structural barriers to patron engagement: “I would have to reschedule if the room wasn’t available and if the patron didn’t feel comfortable meeting in an open space” (P2).

Confidentiality. One consequence of spatial challenges was a concern about confidentiality and privacy of patron information. Participants observed the discomfort of sitting in an open space while speaking to patrons as others were in hearing range. One participant found they could not follow up with patrons because they were unable to retrieve basic information and another participant noted the lack of private spaces precluded effective supervision. P8 explained, “I couldn’t even use a sign-up sheet for appointments” adding:

I couldn’t have conversations with people because there was no privacy and the security guards would come and tell me to be quiet. It was this crazy situation where I couldn’t do my job because it was against all the rules they had.

Isolation. Another consequence of navigating limited physical spaces was a sense of isolation. Because one participant had “no office space” and “wasn’t allowed to approach patrons,” they “would sit in the library with a little sign saying, ‘social worker’” (P8). This participant also identified minimal access to the library administration as “I was very siloed in my own little world...there wasn’t a sense of someone having your back or that you could collaborate with anyone and that was tough as a first-year student.”

Safety. Two participants identified more serious concerns connected to the spatial arrangements of their work. They cited safety issues precipitated by the physical set-up and isolation from other staff. One expressed concern about being a “young female intern working with older homeless men” (P3) and described her experience with such patrons as “sexual harassment.” Another noted the difficulty of de-escalating people who were physically violent until the police arrived, a situation worsened by the fact that the participant’s clinical supervisor was not situated in the library (P8).

Responses to Physical Space Challenges. In response to the difficulties presented by the physical layout of the library, participants directed their efforts toward patron engagement. In doing so, they experienced an increase in confidence and comfort interacting with vulnerable, marginalized populations. Most participants viewed the absence of designated workspaces as opportunities to engage patrons in both informal and formal ways. P6 viewed “developing relationships” as key to the work completed on the library floor. P11 walked outside the perimeter of the library property, interacting with patrons – providing them with water and snacks – with the intention of inviting them inside. P14 also offered free food to individuals and informed patrons about social work services offered by the library.

Three participants discussed the formal programming they instituted to engage with patrons. P3 established a “Coffee and Conversation” program that fed persons experiencing homelessness, provided hygiene supplies, and offered information about local social service agencies. P13 coordinated a program for teens to provide them “a chance for them

to talk with each other and the social worker and to play games...” Another set up a table for patrons “to come up, eat sweets, and ask questions about the program” (P14).

Participants reflected on how the lack of adequate space enhanced their engagement skills. P1 learned to take initiative and become more self-directed. P12 concurred: “You really have to have your head screwed on well and have to talk to people and collaborate and take action. You can’t just wait for them to come to you.” Six participants noted their experiences increased their comfort level with unpredictability. One recognized their ability to “walk up and talk to anyone...I walked away having experienced more, and learning more, than probably anyone else in my class” (P8). P9 reported becoming more comfortable working with persons experiencing homelessness and those living with mental illness. Another found the library placement opened their eyes to the needs of under-resourced and marginalized community members (P5). P7 developed a greater awareness of their surroundings and “noticing when people may need help.”

Discussion

The present study adds to the growing literature about library-social work collaboration by presenting firsthand accounts of experiences of social work interns placed in public libraries. A mixed methods approach revealed specific duties these participants assumed, as well as challenges related to their tasks. Despite concerns related to supervision, differing philosophies between disciplines, lack of role clarity, and the library’s physical space, participants did share examples of the support and resources they used to make for an overall satisfactory field placement experience.

During the qualitative interviews, we asked our participants what advice they would give to social work supervisors, public librarians, and potential student interns about library-based field placements. Our aim was to provide a space for participants to offer a blueprint for social work supervisors, public librarians, and social work students who may consider social work/public library collaborations. The following discussion comes in the form of recommendations stemming from participants’ feedback and existing literature on social work library placements.

Social Work Supervision and Supports

Supplementary Support

Participants who noted and appreciated their supervisors’ hands-off approach aligns with Aykanian et al.’s (2020) recommendations that library field placements are best suited for “mature, resourceful students who were open to a nontraditional placement setting and [can] work somewhat autonomously with minimal day-to-day supervision” (p. 75). For participants without onsite social work supervision, it is important to connect them with quality supplementary support from their university professors. Many participants also found their field seminar class especially helpful and contributed to them feeling more connected to the university. As mentioned earlier, others accessed online networking

groups such as *Whole Person Librarianship*. We recommend that supervisors and universities explore how to facilitate extraneous support for library social work interns.

Focus and Flexibility

Intentional focus must be paid to library-based interns by regularly connecting with and actively listening to their needs as “consistent supervision and support can be challenging for social work interns in a library setting” (Zettervall & Nienow, 2019, p. 53). Participants requested social work supervisors be open to modifying initial learning contracts, as library social work “is so new for so many people that you have to adjust the learning agreement and your expectations to the unknown” (P13). We concur with Sharkey et al. (2021) that social work supervisors must heed the “iterative process of developing and adjusting protocol” (p. 4). As one student noted, “there are so many things that I did that never fit in those boxes because we couldn’t make them fit” (P11).

Librarians

Participation

We consider participants’ feedback that task supervisors and library staff should interface more intentionally and directly with social work interns and be more open to the collaborative opportunities the placement can offer. Two participants encouraged librarians to inquire about the perspectives of social workers, noting that hosting students is a worthwhile endeavor because “we bring lots of ideas and skill sets that can be an asset to the community and library branch” (P3). We concur with Wahler et al. (2022) that librarians can support student placements by asking students questions about their role and ways they anticipate meeting the needs of patrons.

Communication

It is critical for librarians and administrators to maintain clear and open communication with both the student and their social work supervisor, particularly about any restrictions on the type of tasks interns can conduct. This is especially pertinent in library settings due to variations among the two professions regarding confidentiality and privacy (Aykanian et al., 2020; Zettervall & Nienow, 2019). Such transparency can be achieved by delineating expectations of the intern prior to commencing placement. We agree that the lack of guidance some participants experienced speaks to the need for paying “attention to the clarity of roles from the various university and library partners to provide the appropriate support to MSW students” (Sharkey et al., 2021, p. 3).

Funding for Library Social Workers

For existing programs and collaborations to continue, participants suggest that library administrators maintain support of existing partnerships and secure funding for social workers in libraries. We concur with our participants’ unanimous affirmation of having social workers in libraries, which aligns with Cuseglio’s (2020) suggestion that “placing

MSW interns in public libraries can be beneficial in addressing patrons' various needs...these valuable field placement opportunities...have the potential for positive long-term outcomes in their community, and its members" (p. 681).

Library Social Work Interns

Interdisciplinary Opportunities

Participants found their confidence increased through engagement with community organizations and challenging populations. Unique to this setting, however, is that participants recognized a challenge with the different philosophies among librarians and social workers. Field placements in public libraries can provide good training for effectively engaging in interdisciplinary work (Johnson, 2019) and social work programs should provide a solid orientation to librarianship and its culture (Zettervall & Nienow, 2019).

Student Characteristics

Study participants reported that "taking risks by putting their ideas out there" (P1), "being open and flexible and creative" (P3), as well as exhibiting "maturity" (P4) and "humility" (P12), are ideal traits for work in a library setting. Given these recommended skills, we assert that library social work is best suited to students who either already have these tools or have the capacity to build them. Field placement personnel should consider these characteristics when recruiting students for library placements. Our recommendation mirrors Sharkey et al.'s (2021) experience that their program "carefully selected and interviewed generalist and specialization students with prior social service experiences to alleviate potential challenges" (p. 3).

Safety

Related to the need for more consistent and present supervision is attention paid to support systems for the safety of social work interns. Given the prevalence of offsite supervision and student interns often being the only social work presence on site, our study confirms Aykanian et al.'s (2020) assertion that library administrators and staff should implement protocols that protect the physical and emotional well-being of social work interns. At the very least, policies and standards for emergency protocols need to be clearly outlined.

Needs Assessments

One participant advised future interns to "research resources ahead of time so you don't have to look it all up when you are actually meeting a patron" (P9). Another recommended that students "explore as much as you can because the library is a great reflection of the community as a whole" (P2). These comments suggest the importance of making community needs assessments a primary and initial task for interns. Other researchers

concur that needs assessments are necessary for orienting the intern to the library and the community in which it exists (Cuseglio, 2020). Zettervall and Nienow (2019) also suggest that assessments can help interns and librarians understand specific community needs, which are important to know before collaborating with community partners.

Limitations and Areas of Future Research

The main limitation of this study is the generalizability of both our quantitative and qualitative data. Because public libraries in one locality have needs specific to the community in which they reside, it can be difficult to generalize recommendations to all public libraries based on the experiences of the social work students we interviewed who completed their fieldwork at public libraries. The small number of research sites in the present study preclude generalizing to all library systems.

There are also limitations related to the recruitment protocol. Non-probability-based methods of recruiting participants inevitably leads to biased sampling (Shaw & Holland, 2014). Participants who had positive experiences may have self-selected to participate in the study. Similarly, it is possible that individuals who had unsatisfactory experiences chose not to participate. As library social work internships become more prominent, larger sample sets will mitigate this bias. Further, our sample size consisted of participants within the author's professional network of contacts, adding a potential bias based on convenience sampling.

It is also important to acknowledge potential bias in the data analysis. Cultivating narratives from a single and narrow population does not consider the complexities of library/social work partnerships. A future study could assess the perspectives of library staff, administrators, social work faculty, and social work supervisors separately, thereby triangulating the data and offering perspective to participants' perceptions. We also recommend that future studies incorporate information learned from research on other non-traditional social work host sites or multidisciplinary practice, such as school social work, and compare them to traditional social work field placement sites.

Conclusion

The current research is unique in its quest to garner insights directly from social work students about their experiences completing field placements at public libraries. In addition to existing literature on this topic in general, we aimed to enrich the discussion of best practices of libraries as social work field sites. It is worth noting that, despite the challenges interns faced, not only were they satisfied with their experience but most support the need for continuing library social work internships, in addition to hiring professional social workers at public libraries. Participant 8 – who noted his library placement was considered one of “the worst” by fellow students in his cohort – said he “walked away thinking it was one of the best internships...It was very, very difficult but I think I learned so much more than many of my other classmates.”

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