TALint at the University of Toronto: Bridging the Gap Between iSchool and Academic Librarianship

Julie Hannaford
University of Toronto Libraries, University of Toronto
Toronto, Ontario, Canada
j.hannaford@utoronto.ca

Siobhan Stevenson
Faculty of Information, University of Toronto
Toronto, Ontario, Canada
siobhan.stevenson@utoronto.ca

Abstract:

In September 2014, the Faculty of Information (iSchool), in partnership with the University of Toronto Libraries (UTL) launched the Toronto Academic Libraries Internship (TALint) Program. The purpose of the program is to enhance and enrich the iSchool student's education by combining formal classroom learning with real world, hands-on experience in an academic library setting. The overarching mission of the program is to graduate professional librarians, archivists and records managers equipped to take on leadership roles in our increasingly complex information landscape. In this paper, we present the TALint program as one case study that bridges the gap between graduate education and the professional practices associated with academic librarianship. In addition to a detailed account of the program from inception through to its current iteration including assessment measures, we also describe how the initiative was articulated to the University's governing body resulting in the program's on-going financial support.

Keywords: work-integrated-learning, mentorship, internships, academic libraries, experiential learning

Introduction

In the 2014/2015 academic year, the *Toronto Academic Libraries Internship (TALint) Program* (TALint) was launched. The program is the result of a partnership between the University of Toronto's Faculty of Information or iSchool and the University of Toronto Libraries (UTL). The purpose of this paper is to present the *TALint* program as one case study that effectively bridges the gap between graduate education and the professional practices associated with academic librarianship. This case study is organized into the following sections: (1) institutional context, including an introduction to the university, the iSchool, and the university

library system (2) the history and evolution of the internship program including a note on the concept of workplace integrated learning as operationalized in the TALint program, and program details such as: how interns are selected, a sampling of the jobs held, and funding considerations, (3) an overview of the program's assessment tools and a summary of findings to-date; (4) a discussion of best practices, and (5) concluding remarks including plans for the future and open questions.

1. Context

Founded in 1827, the University of Toronto, located in Toronto, Ontario is Canada's largest and one of the world's top research-intensive universities. Spread across three campuses, it has a student body of over 88,000 (18,000 of which are graduate students) supported by 21000+ faculty, librarians, and staff members. It holds 1.1 billion dollars in research grants and contributes 15.7 billion to the Canadian economy (https://www.utoronto.ca/about-u-of-t/quick-facts). Among its 700 programs of study is the Faculty of Information or iSchool. The iSchool is the most recent incarnation of a program that began as one of the first library schools in Canada when it opened its doors in 1928 and awarded students with a one-year university Diploma in Librarianship. Over time, the diploma program was replaced with a one year Bachelors degree in library science and then in 1970, the Masters in Library Science was introduced. Today, the iSchool has an enrollment of over 560 graduate students (Masters and PhD) and offers students a choice of subject concentrations including: archives and records management, critical information policy studies, culture and technology, information systems and design, knowledge management/information management, library and information science, and user-experience and design. Students are awarded a Masters of Information upon completion. In the last three years, the iSchool has expanded its experiential learning offerings which now include a practicum course, a cooperative education option, and the TALint program.

Underpinning the research and teaching activities of the university is the UTL Library system. UTL is the largest library system in Canada and is ranked the fourth largest in North America after Harvard, Yale and Columbia. The system is comprised of 44 branches across the three campuses and employs 500 librarians and support staff. Its collection includes more than 12 million print books, 1.9 million digital books, 160,000+ journal titles, and 30000+ linear metres of archival material (https://onesearch.library.utoronto.ca/news/u-t-libraries-releases-2016-annual-report). The system's mission is: "...to foster the search for knowledge and understanding in the University and the wider community. To this end, we shall provide innovative services and comprehensive access to information founded upon our developing resources as one of the leading research libraries in the world" (https://onesearch.library.utoronto.ca/mission-statement).

2. The TALint Program and Workplace-Integrated-Learning

The TALint program was first introduced in the fall of 2014. One of the main catalysts for the program is the growing recognition of and importance attributed to workplace-integrated-learning and especially for professional programs such as the Faculty of Information's Masters of Information (MI) degree.

W-I-L

Workplace-integrated-learning (W-I-L) is the umbrella term used to describe educational experiences that combine periods of in-class study with actual workplace experiences. A formal definition from the education literature is as follows: "Work-integrated learning is a pedagogical practice whereby students come to learn from the integration of experiences in educational and workplace settings" (Billett, 2009). Internships like *TALint* are one example of this pedagogical strategy, others include coops, practicums, apprenticeships, fieldwork, and vocational learning to name just a few. While the practice of learning in-situ has been around since the apprenticeship system of the middle ages, W-I-L is very much a twenty-first century phenomenon and is representative of the labour challenges associated with preparing the next generation of workers for an increasingly competitive, perpetually innovating, and globalized knowledge economy. In the words of education scholars Kennedy, Billet, Gherardi & Grealish, "Work-integrated learning has emerged as a key pedagogical strategy to enhance student learning and development" (2015). The *TALint* program was developed with these principles in mind and provides the hands-on experiences and professional mentorships necessary to assist the student in doing the work of integrating and reflecting upon the relationship between theory and practice.

Administration of program

TALint is a two year program wherein interns are selected prior to the commencement of their first year in the MI program and hold their internships for the full two years of the program. One exception was in TALint's inaugural year (2014) when in order to seed the program, students were selected from both the incoming first year cohort as well as those entering their second year. Over the first three years of the program, the budget supported 20 interns in total (10 first year students and 10 second year students), however in 2017 due to the success of the program, the budget has been expanded to support 30 interns annually.

In order to be eligible to apply for an internship position, students must be incoming full-time MI students starting in the September following the application period and have a minimum A-grade average in their undergraduate program of study. *TALint* positions are posted each February at the iSchool. Students in any of the iSchool's seven concentrations may apply as the internships are not restricted to LIS students. Students must apply directly to UTL's Human Resources (HR) department by submitting an application and CV. The applications are reviewed by each department's selection committee and candidates are short-listed. After interviews have been conducted, the department makes a final choice. HR coordinates the necessary written letter of offer to confirm each TALint hire.

TALint students are members of the library's union and are paid a competitive wage for 15 hours of work per week. Assuming that their performance is satisfactory, UTL makes a commitment to them that their position is guaranteed for the duration of their iSchool program, thus affording them an in-depth, and sustained engagement with the profession. To date, 20 students have completed their two-year internship, 10 students will enter their second year of their internship this September, along with 15 new interns. UTL has hired two TALint students into full-time librarian positions so far. Students have variously been employed in the Map and Data Library, working on a variety of mapping and GIS projects; Information Technology Services working on digital preservation and digital humanities projects; Faculty and Student Engagement supporting our Personal Librarian and Undergraduate Student Research Award

initiatives; Cataloguing and Metadata Services focusing on supporting our electronic resources, as well as a variety of public service positions across the library system.

Program Funding

UTL is considered to be a shared university service, as such, it is funded through contributions from all faculties. UTL's funding is based in large part on the ability of the library's senior managers to persuade Deans of the value of library services to their students and faculty. Requests for monies to support new library programs and initiatives need to be compelling and justifiable if the Deans' Advisory Committee and the President are to agree to an increased outlay. The TALint program was initially funded through the library's 2014 annual budget submission to the University. Senior managers looked to the University, as well as the President's priorities to demonstrate resonance between these priorities and the program's goals. The successful "'pitch" was as follows:

> *"In the UTL strategic plan, we commit to becoming a nimble organization that adapts to the rapidly changing information and higher education environments. One way to achieve this is via a new collaboration with the University of Toronto's iSchool. In partnership with the iSchool, and with the complete endorsement of the iSchool's Dean, UTL seeks to support graduate education by providing employment and growth opportunities to graduate students".*

As part of the funding pitch, the library's top administrators pointed to the work-integrated-learning aspects of the program, which they knew to be a priority for not only the University of Toronto but also the Province of Ontario, and beyond that, the OECD as a whole.

Other aspects of the funding proposal that contributed to its success included the fact that it was presented as a partnership between the UTL system and the iSchool, something the University looks favourably upon. Finally, UTL was able to demonstrate an ability to provide contributing funds. UTL internally reallocated 50% of the overall cost and sought matching funds.

Last year, UTL requested additional funds to expand the program from 20 students to 30 arguing that the program "has allowed new and creative opportunities for the libraries to experiment with innovative services to support faculty and students across the University. There has been an overwhelmingly positive response from participating students and supervisors while enhancing library services." Based on this, the library secured full support for both budget "asks".

3. Assessment and Program Outcomes

Now that the program is entering into its third year, a rigorous process of assessment has been undertaken by the program coordinators. Surveys of incoming students, as well as recent graduates have been done. For the incoming students, the survey was designed to gather information regarding motivations and expectations regarding participation in the TALint program. Their onboarding experience was also surveyed. The graduates were asked to provide feedback regarding their experiences in the program – whether it had helped them find employment post-graduation and whether the program had helped them prepare for the profession. Additionally, a focus group was run to elicit feedback from the TALint students'

supervisors. The supervisors were asked to provide feedback regarding the program – its benefits and areas for improvement. They were also probed regarding the recruitment process, as well as their thoughts and approaches to mentoring these students. The surveys and focus group have been a rich source of evaluation for us and has given us a significant amount of both qualitative and quantitative data that has allowed us to grow the program further.

We intend to run these surveys and focus groups on a regular basis, to ensure that we have ongoing, longitudinal data on student perceptions regarding satisfaction, performance and ability to find librarian roles post-graduation. We also plan on examining alumni data to assess whether TALint students find academic librarian work faster than those who do not participate in the program.

Findings: Students-- outgoing

Based on the survey responses, we note the following important findings:

- 77.92% felt that their original goals had been met; 23.08% indicated partial fulfilment. Common goals were to gain valuable work experience that complemented the iSchool curriculum and explore roles to see if they were of professional interest, upon graduation.

  Key qualitative comments include the following:

  "To be honest, as a student at U of T I often felt that the program was lacking a practical approach - so much so that I had a hard time understanding the theory because I had no understanding of the basic practice. In this regard, the TALint program was invaluable to me. I think it is a great program to offer regardless, but I do think that one of the reasons it was so great is because the actual MI program itself is lacking"

  "I wanted to combine my academic experience with a professional skill set to become more employable".

  These comments speak to the importance of WIL as an essential means to integrate theory into practice.

- 61.54% said that the recruitment process was either very satisfactory or satisfactory. 23.08% said it was neither satisfactory nor unsatisfactory; 15.38% said it was unsatisfactory.

  This finding is likely based on the first year's recruitment practices and the mixed results are consistent with comments from supervisors in a focus group. Based on feedback, changes to recruitment approaches have been made, including lengthening the time of recruitment and ensuring that UTL handles all of the recruitment decisions. For the first year, the Dean of the iSchool short-listed candidates and this was not felt to be the best approach, as reflected in the following statement:

  "While I benefited greatly from this process, and I'm very glad that I was one of the applicants chosen, I found it maybe a little problematic that a professor at the iSchool was the person who chose which applications to forward on to the

hiring libraries. For it to be truly fair, I think that the hiring libraries should be able to assess the various applications themselves".

Improvement related to recruitment can be noted. All of last year's incoming students rated the recruitment process as either very satisfactory or satisfactory (42.86 and 57.14).

"I thought that the interview process was thorough in both knowing the intern's past experiences as well as knowing their practical skills through the testing session".

- 69.23% noted a positive mentorship experience; 30.77% said it was somewhat positive. 92.31% were satisfied with the overall supervisory experience; 7.69 were not. Some relevant comments:

"While my second year supervision was very good, my supervision in the first year was inconsistent and unprofessional."

"All of the staff were very helpful to myself and the other interns. However, that is how they are as people".

"Overall, yes. Despite a bit of negativity, both supervisors were happy to help and have been very supportive".

Because of the variability of results related to mentoring, which is a key goal for the program, we have worked hard to train the TALint supervisors to ensure that there is a consistent experience of mentoring for our students. We have built a best practices document, which is made available to all supervisors, some of whom are relatively new to the profession themselves.

In terms of expectations:

- 100% said that the program either met or partially met their expectations regarding: opportunity to network with library/archival staff and librarians/archivists (76.92 and 23.08), opportunity to learn about academic librarianship/the archivist profession (84.62 and 15.38), opportunity to be mentored (61.54 and 38.46), opportunity to gain academic library/archive experience (92.31 and 7.69) and opportunity to prepare yourself for your profession (76.92 and 23.08). 75% said that the program either met or partially met their expectations regarding a greater likelihood of finding a librarian/archivist position post-graduation.

  For the incoming students, they rate all of the above opportunities to be very important in very high numbers. The curious exception is that of opportunity to network with library/archival staff and librarians/archivists. In this case, only 42.86% rated it to be very important; 57.14% as important.

In terms of most valuable experiences, TALint students note the following:

"seeing professionals interact with each other, speaking with the archivists to gain a better sense of what employers might be looking for in the workplace, and getting a better sense of what my strengths and weaknesses are"

"the LIS-related work experience"

"I learned a lot of different technical skills that I didn't learn in class"

"UTARMs team was incredible and very accommodating. It was a wonderful experience learning from them".

In terms of least valuable experiences, one noted a desire for more in-depth project work:

"working on a tedious project that could have been done by any student".

Some noted a desire for more flexibility with the hours.

"I thought 15 hours a week was tough at times - maybe having more flexibility in terms of hours and how they pan out would be beneficial for future TALint students, especially during high stress times in the semester."

In fact such flexibility is available, so that needs to be communicated more effectively.

Care will also need to be taken regarding how the program is framed to incoming applicants to the iSchool. One observed the following: *"the TALint program should be a more direct bridge to academic librarianship positions for those who are coming into the program with more academic and/or academic library experience*" and another: *"this was a good job to have during school, but leading people to believe that they will be destined to work at UTL when it is over (is) deceitful and a lie. It also bred animosity among peers, as they say the TALint program as being exclusive, which it is*". It is important to be clear that the program is intended to provide valuable WIL experience, without any commitment to a library position at the end of the program.

Findings--Supervisors

Turning now to supervisory feedback, some of the following are important recommendations from the focus group:

- Broadening the pool of students who are eligible to apply to the program. Currently the pool is limited to those coming into the program with an A- average. Supervisors felt strongly that grades alone do not predict an effective student employee. It has been particularly challenging to recruit into niche/highly specialized areas, which has resulted in a very small number of students to interview. Over the last year, we have made it clear to supervisors that they are not bound to the initial pool and that for some particularly challenging hires, it is possible to work with the iSchool to identify other potential candidates.

- Exploring academic credit for the TALint program, which would allow us to introduce learning outcomes and otherwise strengthen the work-integrated learning components. This is an active area of focus. Effective September, 2017, there is a plan to do formal learning agendas with all of the students, both those incoming into the program and those beginning their second year.

- Changing how vacancies are allocated as students graduate from the program. We are working to build a robust system so that TALint students are placed in departments where their talents can best be leveraged and where they are contributing to key, strategic areas for the library. As vacancies open up at the end of the year, all supervisors are invited to submit proposals for the available TALint positions. The Library Executive allocates those that provide the best academic experience to the student, as well as those that will result in important progress in essential areas for the library.

- Strengthening our mentoring strategies to ensure that each student feels well supported and graduates with an informed sense of what being an academic librarian is like and whether the profession is a good fit for him/her.

- Building on our best practices documentation, so that students have a consistent experience related to supervision/mentorship, regardless of the library/department to which they are employed.

- The library employs a multitude of students. Supervisors felt it essential to distinguish TALint positions from those of other student categories, via the mentoring, etc.

4. Best Practices

Since beginning the program, best practices have steadily evolved. The year begins with an informal welcoming reception, hosted by the Chief Librarian, for all of the students to come together and get to know one another as a cohort. They meet their supervisors, as well as senior administrators for both UTL and the iSchool. The library's HR department also holds a group training session, which outlines the library structure, customer service expectations, as well as other important HR information. This sets a strong foundation for the students. We offer the students the opportunity to have their own private listserv. As membership is only open to the students, usage is unknown, however, it offers them an important communication venue on topics of interest to them, should they choose to access it. There are regular 'lunch and learn' brown bag lunch sessions. The Deputy Chief Librarian hosts these lunches. Librarians from across the library system are invited. These are opportunities for students to learn about the diversity of roles available. The librarians talk about their career paths, their responsibilities and then answer questions from the students. Again, the informality of the session allows for a comfortable environment for learning.

In terms of placement preparation, students are strongly encouraged to take the iSchool's Project Management Course. Supervisors have noted the importance of knowledge related to timelines and articulating outcomes/deliverables, as much of their work with UTL is project-based.

Students are encouraged to develop their public speaking skills and academic engagement via conference opportunities. There are several local events that are excellent opportunities for experience in this arena: TRY+ staff conference and the Ontario Library Association Super Conference. To date, students have done both poster and academic presentations.

In terms of mentorship, students are encouraged to participate as fully in the library as possible. This includes attending staff meetings, relevant UTL committee meetings and all staff Town Halls that are hosted by the Chief Librarian. HR has started to schedule exit interviews for graduating students to gain additional feedback about the students' experiences. Supervisors are

expected to hold regular one on one meetings to provide general feedback and allow for project check-ins. We encourage supervisors to: "provide a variety of projects/position responsibilities to ensure an enriching experience and exposure to a range of areas". We suggest that they look for workshops, courses and other PD opportunities that could benefit them.

5. Concluding remarks and open questions

The TALint program has steadily evolved since it began in 2014. Lessons have been learned and adjustments made along the way. There has been a concerted effort made to ensure that students have a consistent mentoring experience, despite the rich diversity of placements possible. Looking to the future, the authors plan on making learning agendas a far more robust part of the program, assuring that students approach their internships in a mindful outcome-oriented way, which will allow for greater reflection and learning. Data gathering needs to continue so that a strong dataset can be developed and more in-depth analysis permitted related to success factors, post-graduation employment predictors and the overall efficacy of WIL in the academic library.

Acknowledgments

References

Billett, S, (2009). Realising the educational worth of integrating work experiences in higher education. *Studies in Higher Education*, 34 (7), 827-843.

Kennedy, M., Billett, S., Gherardi, S., & Grealish, L. (2015). Practice-based learning in higher education: jostling cultures. In M. Kennedy, S. Billett, S. Gherardi & L. Grealish (eds.), *Practice-based learning in higher education: jostling cultures* (pp. 1-14). New York: Springer.

University of Toronto (2017). *Quick facts.* Retrieved from: https://www.utoronto.ca/about-u-of-t/quick-facts

University of Toronto Libraries (2017). *Mission statement*. Retrieved from: https://onesearch.library.utoronto.ca/mission-statement

University of Toronto Libraries (2016). *Annual report*. Retrieved from: https://onesearch.library.utoronto.ca/news/u-t-libraries-releases-2016-annual-report