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## Tales From the Field: The right mix of theory, practice, and soft skills for educating digital library leaders

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# Tales From the Field:

## The right mix of theory, practice, and soft skills for educating digital library leaders

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### New Librarian Perspective

Filling the expectation gap - from coursework to workplace reality

- ◆ New digital librarians indicate a large gap between coursework offered in graduate programs and expectations of employers
- ◆ Job ads for digital librarian positions vary widely in responsibilities and qualifications
- ◆ Some skills in job ads are nearly impossible to acquire without practical experience
- ◆ Skills such as project management and strategic planning for digitization and the ability to evaluate and implement best practices are best learned on-the-job or through mentorship
- ◆ Employers have very high expectations but often cannot articulate their needs



*"I think it's about time that library schools began preparing their students for the rapidly changing culture and purpose of libraries."*  
Respondent, new librarian survey, 2010

*"Until you've worked on a digital project from start to finish, it is difficult to fully understand how important it is to have a solid plan. Something that seems like a good idea at first can cause real headaches later so it's important to think ahead."*  
Dale Bryant, UWM Libraries Digitization Intern, 2010



#### Skills taught in library education:

- ◆ Largely theoretical foundations
- ◆ Broad-based subjects and overviews
- ◆ Technical information is often introductory and quickly becomes outdated
- ◆ Internships vary with supervisory style and task assignments/responsibility
- ◆ Few chances for sophisticated decision-making and independent work

#### Strategy: Apprenticeships

- ◆ Apply knowledge gained from coursework in the practical library setting
- ◆ Participate in the development of digital library (DL) projects
- ◆ Develop a set of practical and technical skills in the context of actual DL projects
- ◆ Learn project management skills
- ◆ Develop strong interpersonal and communication skills



### Practicing Librarian Perspective

Internships and more - Not just practical skills

- ◆ Internships introduce students into a community of practice; integrate coursework with practical experience
- ◆ Combination of an apprenticeship and mentoring, providing an opportunity to build real-job expertise and a partnership, offering a chance to contribute unique talents and expand professional skills
- ◆ Encourage international collaboration by inviting students from other countries to participate in developing digital library projects with an international focus
- ◆ Practicing librarians serve not only as mentors but also as partners providing students with an opportunity for both learning and teaching

#### Skills required on the job:

- ◆ Evaluate new technologies and select appropriate local solutions
- ◆ Monitor and analyze patterns and statistics for decision-making
- ◆ Metadata design/data life cycles including migration and preservation
- ◆ Planning and workflow to support new information discovery systems and interfaces
- ◆ Leadership and confidence and experimentation

#### Strategy: Partnerships

- ◆ Contribute unique skills and subject knowledge to the development of DL projects
- ◆ Share knowledge about standards and recent DL developments learned from coursework
- ◆ Develop professional skills by building upon individual expertise and talent
- ◆ Provide a 'fresh' user-centered perspective
- ◆ Build strong team-work and consensus-building skills
- ◆ Cross-training and re-training within organizations

## Conclusions

Employers are increasingly seeking candidates with **hybrid skill sets** of both traditional and technical skills.

Successful candidates can demonstrate a portfolio of coursework, practical experience, technical expertise, and networking contacts creating a strong foundation and basic **professional support system** that they bring with them to the organization.

Development of future digital library leaders requires a strategic mix of theory and introduction to **communities of practice**; best fostered by developing partnerships between new librarians and library digitization centers.

Through experiential learning, students benefit from expanding their technological acumen with specific systems, while modeling and developing essential **soft skills** like teamwork, communication, and decision-making.

Key to these programs is the element of **mentorship** that elevates the experience beyond work training.