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Libraries Without Walls: An Internship at Oshkosh Correctional Institution Library

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ABSTRACT. An internship in a prison library provides excellent training both in basic library services and in dealing with under-served populations. This type of internship, one that imparts an alternate view of librarianship, provides an understanding of how organizations work and develops professional integrity and supervisory skills. A prison internship experience has wide application in the library field, grounding students firmly in customer service and library instruction skills. *[Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-HAWORTH. E-mail address: <docdelivery@haworthpress.com> Website: <http://www.HaworthPress.com>*

KEYWORDS. Library, internship, prison, jail, library instruction

INTRODUCTION

In a time when many resources are available on the Web, the phrase "libraries without walls" has become prevalent in the library profession. When applied to a prison library, such as the one at Oshkosh Correctional Institution (OCI), this phrase takes on a different meaning. Prison

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libraries are very much bound by walls, both literal and figurative. Literally there are walls, gates, and fences at prisons, but there is also a societal wall: us versus them, the law-abiding versus the guilty. To the patrons, a prison library is a place for both intellectual and spiritual freedom. To the graduate student preparing for a Masters in Library and Information Science degree, an internship in a prison library provides an alternate view of librarianship from the one presented in most course offerings. Although a prison library is not a public, academic, or school institution, the experience of working in a prison library prepares an intern for virtually any track of the library profession. The job of a prison librarian can be boundless. The simplest components of librarianship, such as shelving books, have power and meaning to the patrons of a prison library. This article describes my experience as an intern at the Oshkosh Correctional Facility and my thoughts on its relevance to the library instruction services that I provide in my current position.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Library literature on internships in prisons is scarce. One article on the topic, containing no references, is a brief recap of how the author became involved in prison librarianship and an explanation of how few understand what would draw someone to prison librarianship as a career (Mongelli 1989). The goal of the internship described in the Mongelli article was to study the information needs of inmates in a medium-security prison. Mongelli structured his internship by participating in all aspects of running a prison library. He stressed librarianship as a therapeutic service that differs from other library settings. The only other article about internships in prison libraries in the literature describes the Oshkosh Correctional Institution library (Purifoy 2000).

As compared to the topic of internships in prisons, there is more literature on the broader area of prison librarianship. Most of the approximately 200 articles that have been written on prison libraries are short and do not include citations. Included in this literature are studies that address the primary tasks of services to inmates and operating a prison library (Chesley 1991; Helo 1990; Walker 1989), safety and procedural advice (Reece 2000; Vogel 1994), typical reference questions (Kirby and Letterly 1991), and the rewards of prison librarianship (Schweyer 1989; Reece 2000; Walker 1989). These articles recognize that the jobs of prison librarians encompass all aspects of library work. Other short

articles are persuasive pieces demonstrating the merits of inmate library use (Bratt 1996; Lemon 1997; Schneider 1996).

Also included in these 200-plus articles surveyed are longer articles that include citations. These studies primarily focus on affordable service to under-served populations and include a discussion of the professional demands of providing service to disadvantaged users and comparing inmates to poor and homeless patrons in other libraries (Lithgow 1996; Sullivan 2000). In 1989 the *Wilson Library Bulletin* published several articles on library service to prisoners. Vogel (1989b) notes that between 1977 and 1989 there were only 4.5 articles per year on prison librarianship. Sullivan (1989) addresses penal ideology on reading materials from moral utility to bibliotherapy. Suvak (1989) calls for new prison library standards and generates suggestions for writing standards. Vogel (1989a) describes a successful prison librarian and provides a bibliography of suggested reading materials for those interested in the profession. Souza (1989) notes the similarities between providing service to traditional library patrons and inmates, and the challenges of service to prisons. Sullivan is the earliest author to address the issue of providing Internet service to inmates (Sullivan 1989).

Bowden (2003) also explores inmate use of technology for education and leisure through a survey of adult state prisons. She notes that most prison libraries have access to word processing and CD ROMs but that almost none of the prisons surveyed allowed inmates to surf the Internet unmonitored. Using the library as a means for reformation and reintegration into the community through education is a theme in several articles (Dixen and Thorson 2001; Vogel 1997). Another article discusses the issue of using the library as an information hub (Vogel 1994). Finally, three sources directly address training for prison librarianship, most notably Brenda Vogel's prison library handbook which addresses the necessary skills for anyone entering the field (Vogel 1995; Lucas 1990; Leffers 1990).

THE PRISON

Oshkosh Correctional Institution (OCI) is a medium security prison located in Oshkosh, Wisconsin. Surrounded by farm fields, OCI is new and clean and has beautiful grounds. When it was designed in 1986, Oshkosh was a model prison. Inside the buildings the atmosphere is like that at a high school with lockers, bells ringing to mark time periods, and prisoners lining up in the hallways like students. The campus

grounds appeared surreal to me: a cross between a concentration camp and a country club. During tours people are chauffeured around in a golf cart. My overall impression was of a campus that is both verdant and utilitarian with flowers and crops alongside barrack-like buildings.

Inmates must either be at school, at work, or in assigned yard areas. Inmates can choose what they do as long as they are where they have signed up to be. Looking at people gardening, talking, and sunning themselves, one sees OCI as a vision of pastoral peace surrounded by guard towers and barbed wire.

At first glance it is difficult to distinguish the inmates from the staff. Unlike county jails where inmates wear state-issued plastic sandals and blue hospital scrubs, the inmates at Oshkosh choose their own clothes. Many of the inmates wear designer tee shirts and ironed work pants. The inmates often have a more professional appearance than the support staff who wear denim jeans. It is clear who the deputies are because they wear uniforms and usually have military haircuts.

LIBRARY ORGANIZATION AND SERVICES

The library at Oshkosh Correctional Institution is divided into two separate libraries: legal materials and recreational reading materials. According to the OCI 1998 *Annual Report*, a total of 35,243 inmates visited the library that year, with another 12,735 visiting the law library. In that year, 67,571 books were circulated and 4,270 items were requested on interlibrary loan. The services offered are described in the 1998 *Annual Report*:

> Library services are administered through the general inmate library, the law library (maintained in accordance with Wis. Adm. Code 309.27), a segregation law library, a professional staff library, and individual living center libraries. The main/law library is open six days a week, including three evenings. The library, in conjunction with the school, offers a literacy/tutoring program which is affiliated with the Literacy Volunteers of America. (Oshkosh Correctional Institution 1998)

During my internship the library provided fiction and nonfiction books, CDs, videos, and typewriters. Books in Braille, Braille programs on typing for the Library Congress, and Braille typewriters were also provided. A course on sign language was tutored by inmates. These pro-

grams were popular with the inmates who were enthusiastic learners of sign language and Braille. A children's literature discussion group was led by a librarian.

LIBRARY STAFF

The 1992 *Library Standards for Adult Correctional Institutions* recommends one library director, one assistant librarian, and three library clerks for 1,501-2,400 inmates (Association of Specialized and Cooperative Library Agencies 1992). Oshkosh has over 1,800 inmates (Wisconsin Department of Corrections 2003). During my internship, there was a library director, an assistant librarian–who was a recent library school graduate–two library clerks, and inmate workers.

During my internship I observed the librarians consistently adhering to professional principles. I observed that this characteristic discouraged inappropriate behavior from most inmates and allowed dignity to those inmates who were reprimanded for inappropriate behavior. I also observed that the librarians required that all library staff maintain a professional distance from the inmates to assure safety. In the prison environment personal information can be used for power. Inmate assistants were referred to by their surnames (e.g., Mr. Smith). Inmate patrons were made aware of the rules, but never in a disrespectful or humiliating manner.

The library director encouraged all library staff to be open to all kinds of questions. The library staff were taught not to take offense regardless of how touchy the questions that were asked. The inmates at Oshkosh were free to ask any library-related questions, and library staff members were taught to give the most truthful answers. This was important to the patrons, whose locus of control is often external and who therefore may feel like the library staff is trying to take advantage of them.[1] The plethora of rules that govern the professional prison librarian provide a certain freedom. Sharing personal information such as problems at home or new purchases is considered taboo in the library. Gossiping and bragging among the library staff is discouraged because inmates could be listening. I found this to be a wonderful work place situation and not a constraint.

As an intern at OCI, I spent much of each day working and talking with inmate library workers. Most of my contact on the job was with inmates. My preconceptions were that inmates spent their time either absorbed with philosophical thoughts or plotting escapes. I learned that

inmates just live their lives in prison while observing the same formalities and structures as everyone else. The inmate workers I came to know would ask me about how I slept or about my commute. They talked with each other about what was going on the next Friday night. To the inmates, even though movies are no longer shown in Wisconsin state prisons, Friday nights are still a special time.

Time does not stop for inmates. Studies say that inmates who participate in educational programming are less likely to return to prison (Brewster and Sharp 2002; Dowden and Andrews 2002; Gehring and Eggleston 2003). I observed that most of the inmate workers and library patrons were the active participatory type of inmate. Studies show that prison-as-a-deterrent does not work if an inmate hibernates through time served. Prison is a much more painful deterrent if the inmate is wide-awake and participating (Brewster and Sharp 2002; Dowden and Andrews 2002; Gehring and Eggleston 2003).

HIRING

The library director must attract both qualified librarians willing to work in a prison and hire library staff from the inmate population. Some important criteria for hiring inmates at Oshkosh were the following: recommendations of the educational staff, social workers, and other job supervisors; the inmate's duration of sentence; and the inmate's record in prison including the number and the nature of conduct reports. Although most library skills can be learned on the job, the Oshkosh staff felt it was preferable to hire inmates who scored 6.0 on the *Tests of Adult Basic Education* (TABE: an English, math, and reading assessment exam), the equivalent of a sixth grade reading level. The nature of the crime the inmate had committed was not considered in the hiring decision. Only the inmate's record once they were inside the prison system was regarded as relevant hiring information. When I asked the library director if, out of curiosity, she ever looked at the crimes her inmate workers had committed, she confessed that she sometimes did.

I was not always sure how to respond to inmates. One inmate library worker was upset to find out that he was possibly being moved to Tennessee with twenty-four hours notice. He told me that his wife had just moved from Tennessee to a new house in Wisconsin to be closer to him. He said that before they bought this house that he had asked the prison administration if he was going to be moved from Wisconsin. He told me that the prison administration assured him that he would not be moved.

I believed that he was trying to solicit sympathy from me and was concerned that it might be a touchy issue with the library staff so I was brief with him. At the end of the internship, I learned that only model prisoners are moved to other states and that the librarians were sorry to see this inmate worker moved to another prison. While I believe that a librarian cannot be too trusting, with additional experience I would have been more sympathetic towards the inmate.

CENSORSHIP

One of the most important ethical issues in prison librarianship is censorship. Many Americans hold the belief that prison should be punitive rather than rehabilitative and that prisoners should be limited in their reading material (Roper Center 2003; Mackey 2003.) In the Oshkosh library there were multiple copies of both Iceberg Slim and Donald Goines novels. Iceberg Slim spent much of his young life in correctional institutions in Illinois and Wisconsin. His novels were published in the 1960s and 1970s. Slim's largely autobiographical novel *Trickbaby,* about a prostitute's child, is still a jailhouse bestseller. Inspired by Iceberg Slim, Donald Goines wrote a novel patterned after *Trickbaby*, titled *Whoreson*. Until his mysterious death in the 1970s, Goines wrote sixteen novels, including a series of books featuring Kenyatta, a black revolutionary. Neither Goines nor Slim has ever gone out of print. Goines' work is still the mainstay of a small, Los Angeles publisher, Holloway House, with over two million copies sold. Though Goines invented what is termed the "Black Experience" novel, there is little literary criticism on his work.

Goines and Slim are by far the two most popular writers in correctional institutions, and yet their works are prohibited by many correctional facilities because of their content. At Oshkosh, the Holloway House novels are kept behind the counter to prevent theft but any inmate can check them out. The library regularly orders titles that Oshkosh does not own on interlibrary loan. The library director stated that while there is no formal censorship policy, the librarian reserves the right to make decisions on a case-by-case basis. Most of the censorship of controversial books is enforced for safety reasons. For instance, tattoo art books are allowed but, because of health risks, books on tattooing technique are prohibited. Black and white supremacy books are allowed unless they advocate violence. Neither violent Klu Klux Klan books nor any violent Nation of Islam titles are included in the library collection.

Sex offenders had special conditions imposed on their library use by their caseworkers; *not* reading certain titles can be considered treatment for a sex offender. The librarian did not directly censor reading for sex offenders. Instead, if a book with a picture of children or a book on gay teenagers was requested by a sex offender, the librarian called the caseworker to see if there were any restrictions on that inmate's reading.

While the library director at Oshkosh did not have many problems with the prison administration concerning the censorship of books, she noted that they rarely question her judgment because she is firm with the inmates. One example of administrative censorship was an unwritten message that the 1996 title *Ain't Nobody's Business If You Do: The Absurdity of Consensual Crimes in Our Free Country* was not the type of material that the administration found helpful in running a prison.

I resisted recommending the book *Twice the Work of Free Labor: The Political Economy of Convict Labor in the New South* to an inmate worker who was interested in prison industries. Any prisoner could have easily asked for this book on interlibrary loan; inmates are allowed to read any nonviolent political books. But the prevailing attitude of the general prison staff was that librarians should not encourage inmates to read controversial material. Recommending books that create extra work for other prison employees, even if it is just listening to inmates complain about injustice, could affect the librarian's salaries and promotions.

LIBRARY SKILLS

The School of Library and Information Studies (SLIS) at University of Wisconsin-Madison has a student group that provides recreational reading to inmates in two local jails. Through my participation in the group, I became interested in service to inmates. The internship at Oshkosh was undertaken to fulfill a SLIS graduation requirement. The director of the SLIS program referred me to the Library Services Coordinator for the Wisconsin Department of Corrections, who referred me to the library director at Oshkosh. Though it would be a long commute from Madison, Oshkosh was deemed to be the best place for an internship because of the excellent library director.

As part of this internship I learned a surprising amount of basic library technical services and reference library skills. Because this prison library was isolated, it was similar to other types of special libraries where tasks are not assigned to specific departments. A prison librarian

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has to be a cataloger, a reference librarian, a circulation librarian, a law librarian, and a program coordinator all rolled into one. During this brief period I learned basic Dewey cataloging and interlibrary loan procedures. Using an automated circulation system I learned how to look up records and check out books. I also became familiar with a cataloging system cooperatively shared with the local public library. I helped the inmate workers check out books, magazines, CDs, newspapers, and movies using the cataloging system's circulation module. I learned how the library organizes and uses its patron records in the administrative interface.

The ready reference experience that I gained was invaluable. I learned to search for addresses and phone numbers in both paper and electronic versions of the phone book. I provided a limited amount of reader's advisory services for the patrons basing my suggestions on my experience as a bookseller and as a volunteer in a local county jail. One of the times I advised someone, the inmate had requested a "librarian." The person working at the reference desk was a library clerk and referred the inmate to me, saying that I was training to be a librarian. I helped him find a book on how to write a novel. The inmate flattered me when he told me that I would be a "good librarian."

At OCI I never saw inmates mistreated as often depicted in the movies. I learned to keep my opinions to myself and to not make assumptions about inmates. I observed that one of the inmate library workers was functionally literate, but he appeared to be unable to follow written instructions. One library staff member mentioned that this inmate library worker might not be able to read. The staff member concluded that the inmate library worker had "grown up on the streets" and that he had little formal schooling. Another staff member insisted that this inmate library worker had attended college. I learned from this exchange that there were varying perceptions of the inmate staff and to not judge the inmate workers or the library staff for their beliefs.

I learned about legal materials and how to answer basic legal reference questions by observing inmate library workers and librarians. I became familiar with the rules and rights of prisoners' access to legal materials and photocopied large amounts of materials for inmates unable to come to the library due to segregation or physical complaints.

The prison often becomes an isolated environment, its own little world. This presents an opportunity for the library staff to take on nontraditional roles. The library provided notary services and even answered questions about ordering clothes through mail order catalogs such as Penney's or Sears.

SUPERVISORY SKILLS

I tried to keep a professional distance from the inmates. An important skill that I learned was to avoid being overly involved with the patron during a reference interview. I believe that this is an important skill not only in a prison library but also in any library. This was by far the most difficult objective to achieve. I found that most inmates were generally starved for diversion and that they were curious about a young woman coming to work in a prison for no pay. My primary model in trying to maintain a professional demeanor was the library director at Oshkosh. Taking to heart Bud Allen's classic book *Games Criminals Play* (1981) ended up making me paranoid rather than enhancing my professional behavior.

Because I hope to hold a supervisory position in my career, I tried to gain experience through supervising the inmate library workers. They were enthusiastic about my eagerness to plow through the cataloging backlog. They gravitated toward an assembly-line method without my lead. Initially the inmate workers had to teach me most of the steps. After establishing a computer record, the books had to be processed with typed call number labels, genre stickers, and bar codes. As soon as I mastered the process they immediately let me direct. The inmate who had originally shown me how to create call number labels asked, "Do you want me to type out the stickers for these books now?" That surprised me because I thought the inmates would want to show, as a way of creating control, how much more they knew then me. Instead these men were willing to take direction from a newcomer who was often half their age. I found it to be a positive experience in letting others lead when establishing a supervisory role.

TEACHING SKILLS

One morning I was walking through the security booth at the same time as a deputy. He asked me how it was going and if it was different than I had expected. When I mentioned that I had been volunteering at a county jail and had been expecting to be surprised by some things, the deputy stated how difficult it was to work with inmates. My remark to him was that I never knew what to expect. "Expect that you can't trust them. That's the one thing you can count on," he said. From this I learned that serving as an intern at a prison library has many parallels to the career of teaching librarian. My experience at the prison library has

shaped my career as an academic librarian. Teaching English Composition 101 classes on how to use the library is frequently viewed by academic librarians as equally unpleasant as working with inmates. It appears to me that the English Composition professors feel that students have no research skills while the librarians doubt that students have an interest in learning research skills. The situation is often viewed as grim. Why would I want to teach disinterested eighteen-year olds? The promise of disappointment and embarrassment hardly warrants the effort.

This disparaging view of both academic library instruction and library service to inmates reminds me of a lesson from my Introduction to Librarianship course about the nature of library work. In that lesson the professor pointed out that a librarian's status depends on the clientele served. In the case of my prison internship part of that experience was influenced by the fact that I was working with people deemed lost by society. Similarly, as Head of Library Instruction, I have been informed by faculty that the students who have been brought to the library for instruction are woefully ignorant of library research skills. Faculty members have told me that students do not even realize how ignorant they are of library research methods. The academic librarian often feels that they are teaching library research skills to students who are deemed lost by the faculty. The academic librarians are faced with the challenge of teaching students who may be bored, and because of this, they may act out.

Despite their shortcomings, it is frustrating to have one's clientele so mistrusted. It is true that one must be careful around inmates, but a librarian must also be careful around students and tailor one's teaching approaches to engage their attention. Students will be bored if there is no attempt to relate instruction to their needs and interests.

Even in the short time I was at Oshkosh, I began to feel the stigma attached to being labeled a criminal and to feel trapped by the same walls holding the prisoners. Some of the buildings were designed for comfort and efficiency while others, depending on when they were built and the prevailing political platform, were bare bones. Public opinion swings from prisons as a place for reformation to prisons as a place for punishment with funding following the pendulum (Chepesiuk 1995). Currently funding in general for libraries is tight and even tighter for prison libraries which have both an increasing clientele to serve and increasing financial difficulties. The Bureau of Justice Statistics (BJS) reports that in the "year ending June 30, 2002, the number of inmates in custody in local jails rose by 34,235; in State prison by 12,440; and in Federal prison by 8,042" (BJS 2003). Vogel summarizes the problem by

commenting that as the costs go up for local, state, and federal jails and prisons, "Congressional and judicial hostility toward prisoners has imperiled the library, the tiniest of prison programs" (Vogel 1997, 35). Librarians working in the field report problems in such areas as declining rights to legal materials for inmates, the inability for inmates to become Internet literate to increase their job marketability, inadequate staffing, small and/or outdated recreational reading collections, and the frequent need to rely on donations because of the lack of a budget at all (Sullivan 2000; Glennor 2003; Bowden 2003; Adams 2001). Due to inadequate funding at Oshkosh the library's computers were old and without Internet connections.

But just as inmates are deemed undeserving of receiving proper funding, many in the academic environment view undergraduate library instruction as a low funding priority. The skills that I learned while working with an under-served population prepared me to fight for funds and for new equipment. I learned to work with the university administration to get financing. I also worked with the university administration to convince the faculty to bring their classes to the library for instruction in library research skills.

CONCLUSION

Interning in a correctional facility library was a great professional experience. I learned basic library skills in technical services, reference, and supervisory skills which are applicable to any library situation. Another competency common to internship experiences was the chance to observe how organizations work; in this instance I was also exposed to how a state-run organization operates which would be similar to a public or academic library. A prison library is an excellent place to observe and develop professional integrity. While professionalism is common to any library (given that the library has examples of librarians who exhibit professional behavior), a prison environment frames the importance of professional behavior in a more extreme context. In a prison there are consequences not common to other library situations: unprofessional behavior could cause a librarian harm or death.

The unique lessons learned in a prison library internship should also be stressed. Because librarianship is a service profession, the chance to provide services to an underserved population is vital in the education of all future librarians. The alternate perspectives provided by this type of internship come not only from working with an underserved popula-

tion but also from the unusual situation of the clientele. For example, I take safety in every workplace situation seriously and think about what is appropriate to wear to work as a result of this internship. More philosophically, an internship in a prison also taught me to value all library patrons.

What I enjoyed most about this internship was the inmates themselves. I enjoyed the sardonic jokes and appreciated their earnest interest in learning despite their situation. The inmates also have an interesting view of life. I received a nice complement on the last day of my internship. An inmate noticed that I was jumpy. I told him that I did not want anything bad to happen to me on my last day. I explained that, because my experience with the inmates had been so positive, I wanted to leave without an incident. I told him that I wanted to be able to tell people on the outside that inmates are good people. I did not want something bad to happen so that people could say, "see I told you so." The inmate was a little surprised. He said not to care what other people thought. He told me that I was just a little different, that's all.

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NOTE

1. Inmates frequently have an external locus of control. Locus of control is a personality construct relating to an individual's perception of events: either determined internally, i.e., caused by his/her own behavior, or determined externally, i.e., caused by fate, luck, or external circumstances. Studies report that locus of control is an important factor for prisoners' adaptation (Pugh 1998).

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