

# An American Future: Library Service Opportunities for Immigrant Youth

by Patricia Bangs

**F**or Soha, a young immigrant from Pakistan, a recent stint as an intern at the Lorton Library in Fairfax County was one of her first experiences in a U.S. workplace. Not only did she learn about the work of information professionals in public libraries, she also developed basic job skills. "I learned how to handle patrons, how to be friendly even when you aren't feeling happy, how to handle children," she wrote in a post-internship evaluation. For Nana, who emigrated from Ghana to the U.S. when she was ten, a summer internship in library administration and at the Access Services branch, which provides library services for individuals with disabilities, was transforming. "I haven't felt this way about working," she said. Her only other experience had been helping her sister at an assisted living facility. "I might work in a library one day."

Actually, of the fifty-seven immigrant youth who have completed ten-week internships in branches and administrative offices of the Fairfax County Public Library (FCPL) since 2008, seven have been hired in entry-level positions thanks to a unique partnership with Liberty's Promise, a local nonprofit organization that works to support young immigrants as they become participants in American society.

The project, An American Future: Library Service Opportunities for

Immigrant Youth, is funded with a three-year grant from the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS). The project both assists young immigrants in gaining job experience in the U.S. workplace and is helping the Fairfax County Public Library develop its diverse

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workforce to meet the needs of this northern Virginia community. An American Future evolved from an informal partnership between Liberty's Promise, which attempts to introduce young immigrants to the American workplace through its Opportunities Plus program, and FCPL. In 2006, Liberty's Promise approached the library about creating internships for its clients in library branches. FCPL accepted the offer, and over the next two years, Liberty's Promise placed nine youth from eight different countries in various FCPL branches and our Access Services branch. The organization's Opportunities Plus program provided the interns

with a small weekly stipend for travel and other costs. The partnership was so successful—close to half of the interns were offered continuing positions at the library, and two actually joined the library staff—that FCPL decided to apply for a grant through the IMLS Laura Bush 21<sup>st</sup> Century Librarian Program to expand the project.

The Institute of Museum and Library Services had launched the Laura Bush 21<sup>st</sup> Century Librarian Program in 2003 as a way to develop information professionals to manage the growing information needs of the nation, meet the information needs of the underserved, and build the skills necessary to further develop the information and digital literacy of their communities. In 2008, IMLS awarded a \$265,258 grant to FCPL to introduce young immigrants to the public library as a possible

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career path and as a resource in their community. When the grant ends in 2011, ninety immigrant youth from more than twenty countries will have participated in the program.

"We are so excited about these library internships," says Allison Bouley, a Liberty's Promise program officer. "We are offering these young immigrants exposure to a career that they never may have considered. Their parents see doctors and lawyers as successful American careers, but we let them learn that there are professional people in other occupations, as well."

For FCPL, the IMLS grant is allowing the library system to educate promising immigrant youth about the opportunity for careers and fulfillment in public libraries. But it is also introducing the public library and its wealth of services to immigrant communities that may be unaware of what FCPL has to offer.

The project's responsibilities are divided between two people—a staff member at Liberty's Promise, who is responsible for recruiting the interns, and the volunteer coordinator at FCPL, who recruits locations and supervisors for the ten-week internships. While some library staff may be slightly reluctant to take on high school and college-age youth with no work experience, within weeks after the interns begin they are converted, explains Erin Chernisky, FCPL's volunteer coordinator. "It has been a wonderful experience for the library," she says.

The Liberty's Promise interns must complete a rigorous selection process to be awarded an internship at FCPL. To qualify, they must meet five basic criteria: be fifteen to twenty-one years of age; meet low-income guidelines; be an immigrant or the child of two immigrant parents; have moderate to high English skills; and be legally eligible to work in the U.S.

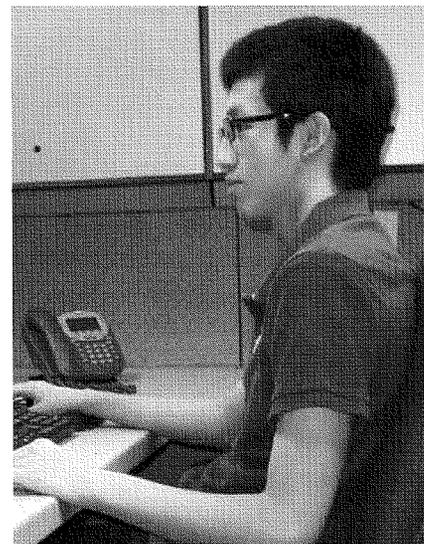


*"I might work in a library one day," says Nana, a young immigrant from Ghana, who interned in the library's Access Services branch and library administration for ten weeks during the summer of 2010.*

If they meet the basic qualifications, they are further contacted to discuss other issues, such as transportation and whether they will have enough time for the ten-week internship.

Liberty's Promise recruits the interns by sending emails about the program to ESL classes in the schools, guidance counselors, and social workers. The organization's staff attends meetings of community organizations in neighborhoods with immigrant populations. Occasionally, Liberty's Promise gets referrals from special education teachers or gang prevention staff. Many young immigrants learn about the internships through word-of-mouth from siblings, other relatives, or past interns.

Once selected, the interns attend either a full-day job skills/resume workshop or get one-on-one help from a job skills expert. "Many don't feel they have any skills," says Allison Bouley. "But then we ask them, 'How many languages do you speak?' and 'Do you



*"It was my first experience working with American people," says Taejoon. He assisted the library's Internet Services and Human Resources departments, as well as the Fairfax Library Foundation, during the summer of 2010.*

babysit a younger sibling?' That's taking responsibility for a child." Liberty's Promise staff also discuss job expectations. They emphasize the need for good communication, stressing that the interns need to feel comfortable asking questions. They may need reminders on simple workplace etiquette, such as having the work phone number available if they will be late.

Once the interns have completed the work skills, resume, and interview training, FCPL takes over arranging interviews for the potential interns with various branches and the library's administrative offices. Over the course of the project, library staff has initially rejected only one candidate for the internship due to English proficiency. A year later, he reapplied and was accepted. During the course of the internship, Liberty's Promise staff keeps in regular contact with the interns and has an on-site visit with both the intern and supervisor together.

"I want to ask the interns if

they are getting as much out of the internship as they want," says Bouley. "It also helps the interns to hear from supervisors what they are good at and what they need to improve on."

During the ten-week internships, the young immigrants perform a variety of tasks.

At the Patrick Henry Library, an intern began by learning how to shelve new adult and children's material. She assisted by signing up kids for the Summer Reading Program. In a time of staff layoffs and cutbacks in programs, the intern was able to maintain a popular Game On afternoon program for teens by setting up equipment such as projectors and computer games. Without her help, the program would have been dropped. But not only the library benefited. "I saw her become more self-sufficient and confident," says Helen Ignatenko, the assistant branch manager and her supervisor. "She became aware of what the library has. She was trying to complete her high school diploma by taking online courses, and by the end of the summer, I saw her checking out more and more books."

At the Sherwood Regional Library, which has hosted five interns, the interns perform mostly circulation tasks, such as checking in books from the book drop, pulling reserved books, and looking for missing books based on catalog reports, as well as shelving, sorting, filing, and other tasks. "One of my biggest concerns was that each intern learn to take initiative; once they were trained in several different tasks, they were able to identify what needed to be done without having to ask me what else to do," says Jacqueline Butler, page manager at the branch and an enthusiastic supervisor for the interns.

At the Reston Regional Library, where three young immigrants have completed their internships, branch manager Andrew Pendergrass

describes the interns as "a timely godsend." Branch staff oriented them to each of the library's departments. They learned back-room tasks and shadowed circulation and information staff. The branch has a large children's area and the interns straightened and merchandised the material. "They had a presence in the library," says Pendergrass. "They could answer the public's questions—such as 'Where is the librarian?' or 'Where are the board books?'"

Measuring the success of the three-year project is an important part of the IMLS grant. The project

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staff is working with the Department of Social Work at George Mason University in Fairfax to develop and fine-tune evaluation tools.

Prior to beginning an internship, each intern is asked to fill out an entrance survey about libraries. Among the questions are: (1) Have you ever visited a Fairfax County Public Library before? (2) If yes, how often do you visit the library? (3) Do you have a library card? (4) Does the library charge a fee to check out books? (5) Does the library charge a fee to check out videos and DVDs? (6) Briefly describe what you think the library does. (7) Briefly describe the kinds of work you think library staff perform. (8) Have you ever talked with your friends or family about the library? (9) If so, what did you tell them? Each intern fills out and answers the same questions in an exit survey after the internship ends.

At the end of the internship, both interns and supervisors also

fill out evaluations. Interns are asked to comment on their favorite part of the internship, new things learned, and how the internship will help them in the future. Supervisors are asked how the internship helped the intern understand the workplace environment, what situations were challenging, what was rewarding in hosting an intern, and what could be done to improve future internships.

It is clear from the comments on these evaluations that these young immigrants are learning not just about the public library, but also about their community as a whole. They are discovering that today's libraries are about more than just lending books; they also provide an access point to a wide variety of services—everything from English classes to workshops on webpage design.

One intern, Ingrid, who emigrated from Argentina to the U.S. in 2009, was impressed with the work needed to keep the library organized. "I always thought that it was so easy to shelve books," she wrote. "But now I know that each person who works there [the library] has an important role. We need one another to keep the library very organized."

For Taejoon, a young immigrant from Korea, it was working with library staff that impressed him most. "I didn't have any professional work experience," he explained. "It was my first time working with American people."

As a result of An American Future: Library Service Opportunities for Immigrant Youth, young people new to the United States not only learn about a career option they may never have considered, but also about the library itself. The project is helping FCPL to expand its reach in the immigrant communities it serves and hopefully attract a more diverse workforce.

It is definitely a win-win partnership. ■