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First-Year Library Mentorship Opportunities

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Abstract

The first-year experience at any university library sets the foundation for the future relationship between the new faculty member and the library as a whole. Not only is the librarian being acculturated to the organization, but he or she must decide if the library and university will provide a supportive environment for his or her career goals. In this probationary process, the tenured librarians evaluate their tenure-track colleagues' professional progression and merit.

Many libraries institute a formal first-year mentoring program in order to facilitate the immersion of new faculty members into the organizational culture of the library and university. There are excellent examples of flourishing mentorship programs in libraries, but one can also find examples of informal mentoring that aids in the success of tenure-track faculty.

This article discusses the benefits and drawbacks of various forms of library mentorship and how one can make the most of being mentored in diverse university settings.

Keywords: mentoring programs, academic libraries, tenure-track faculty, first-year librarians

Introduction

University libraries invest a great deal of time, money, and energy into the recruitment process for tenure-track librarians. Thus, both the newly hired librarian as well as the library have a vested interest in maturing the librarian's career. To facilitate the growth of a librarian in the profession and their immersion within the organization as a whole, many libraries institute a mentoring program within the first year after hiring. The mentoring process is traditionally regarded as one by which an experienced professional, the mentor, provides support and guidance to a developing professional, the mentee or protégé (Bolton, 1980).

According to Kram (1985), the experienced professional in this dyad is meant to perform multiple functions in his or her role as mentor. These functions are interrelated, but are grouped under two major categories—those that support career growth and those that support the mentee’s psychosocial development. The career functions include providing sponsorship, exposure and visibility, coaching, protection, and challenging assignments; whereas, the psychosocial functions include providing a role model, acceptance and confirmation, counseling, and friendship (Kram, 1985). Mentors should be people who project “an enthusiasm for, and dedication to the profession while having a broad perspective of librarianship” (Pollack, Dellaria, Healey, & Kepner, 1992, p. 13).

Exemplary mentors would be efficient at fulfilling all of these roles, which would in turn support the goals of mentoring programs. These programmatic goals are twofold: first, tenure-track faculty members experience a great deal of uncertainty when inserted into a new position with unfamiliar expectations and presented with sometimes conflicting advice when they question the procedures for gaining tenure at a university (Knight & Trowler, 1999). A mentor is thus a guide through the stressful preliminary induction into this new environment. Second, libraries face a challenge in retaining new faculty members, and with the “graying” of the library profession as baby boomers retire and younger faculty replace them, this has become a serious concern in academia (Munde, 2000; Steffen, 2009). By using a mentoring program to ease the tenure-track librarian’s transition into the organization and the tenure process, university libraries attempt to instill a sense of institutional loyalty, acculturate the librarian to the institution’s values, and thus retain the librarian while enhancing professional knowledge and skill level for the benefit of both parties.

The probationary period before tenure is granted serves as a vehicle for tenured faculty to evaluate the scholarly merit and progress of their tenure-track colleagues. It also allows tenure-track librarians to decide if the university provides an environment supportive to their career goals. Mentoring programs help both tenured and tenure-track faculty begin to make those important decisions in a meaningful way. However, it is important to note that mentoring should never be considered a “one size fits all” proposition (Level & Mach, 2005). What works for one library or librarian will not work for all of them. This paper explores several strategies that tenure-track librarians can use to make the most of mentorship opportunities.

Formal vs. Informal Mentoring

Aspects of mentoring and mentoring programs are well-documented not only in library science literature, but also in other disciplines, such as education, business, and nursing. Early discussions of mentorship in the literature focus on various

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forms of formal mentoring programs, where the mentee takes the role of the passive receiver of information during an acculturation process to the organization. Recent studies advocate a more active experience for mentees, but still place a great deal of emphasis on formalized mentoring processes. While these are useful programs, they are hardly the only mentoring one engages in during the tenure and promotion process.

Informal mentoring is an alternative means of mentoring that is less structured and focuses on the building of a relationship between the mentor and mentee. Informal mentoring “allows a mentees [sic] the opportunity to choose his or her own mentor through a personal relationship or social network, and can be a method for success for librarians” (Moore, Miller, Pitchford, & Jeng, 2008, p.75). This scenario is useful for mentees because they choose a mentor with whom they have a personal connection and with whom they feel comfortable having candid conversations about professional issues (Johnson, 2002; Ragins, Cotton, & Miller, 2000). It could be argued that the process of informal mentorship provides an intrinsic sense of empowerment and ownership for the mentee.

If informal mentoring can assist tenure-track librarians with their bid for tenure, then why would libraries invest time into formal mentoring? The most succinct answer can be found with Farmer, Stockham, and Trussell (2009), who said that a “formalized mentoring program is a way to meet the needs of new employees and effectively impart the information and advice in a coordinated, ongoing process” (p. 8). Informal mentoring may leave some people or groups disenfranchised from the process, whereas formal mentoring offers an equal opportunity to all new faculty members.

Traditional mentoring often involves a one-on-one situation with a mentor-protégé dyad. However, there is some controversy regarding this method, including the “acculturation” process for the mentee, which replaces the values of the individual with the values of the institution, and creates homogeneity in the university. The possibility of exploitation in the uneven power dynamic between mentors and mentees does little to remove the barriers to advancement for racial, gender, sexuality, age, and ethnic groups that are already marginalized in academia (Hansman, 2002; Angelique, Kyle & Taylor, 2002).

While the aim of both informal and formal mentoring is to facilitate a supportive learning environment for the protégé that benefits the mentee, mentor, institution, and profession, there are examples in the literature of possible issues that can arise from the mentor-protégé relationship (Bolton, 1980; Brooks & Haring-Hidore, 1987; Goldstein, 2003; Johnson, 2002; Kram, 1983; Rawlins & Rawlins, 1983; Shapiro, Haseltine, & Rowe, 1978). Goldstein (2003) provides a comprehensive summary of these difficulties, which include excessive time commitments by both parties, unrealistic expectations placed on one party by the other, unfair manipulation of

one party by the other, or overdependence of one party on the other. Either mentor or mentee can be at the root of these issues. However, there are other potential problems that stem from one side of the relationship, such as expectations by the mentor that the mentee will fail the tenure process, as well as feelings of inferiority and intimidation on the mentee's part when paired with a highly productive, reputable, and experienced mentor (Goldstein, 2003).

Some of these worst-case scenarios can be avoided with proper training for both mentees and mentors on what to expect and what to provide in the process of mentoring. Cox (2005) recommends how to get the best mentors possible, stating that it is necessary not only to "select volunteers with a broad educational and employment background and plenty of life experience, but also to couple this with appropriate training on what to do when the unexpected occurs and how to build an empathic yet empowering relationship" (p. 413). What this assumes is that the best mentoring takes place in an environment when all parties are involved on a voluntary basis. There are studies which bring to light the percentage of mentoring programs which are voluntary for both mentor and mentee (Wittkopf, 1999), and those that discuss programs which are voluntary for mentors, but compulsory for tenure-track mentees (Kuyper-Rushing, 2001). Farmer, Stockham, and Trussell (2009) suggest that mentoring that involves compulsory involvement from faculty will foster resentment and a lack of commitment to the process.

In the ideal mentor-protégé dyad, whether it be a formal or informal pairing, both sides agree to engage in the process, although it would seem that informal mentoring is the only situation which guarantees that both mentor and mentee have consented to participate. It then becomes important to note that there are certain demonstrable characteristics found in a healthy mentoring relationship, such as reasonable expectations of the time commitment involved in mentoring, respect by both parties for the skills and experience each brings to the relationship, and a willingness by both to listen and learn. Mentors may find that they gain as much or more than they give their mentees. They might learn from mentees by discussing past experiences, by finding the answers to mentees' questions, and by pushing themselves to view situations from a different perspective in order to assist their mentees in the acculturation process (Barkham, 2005). At first, the positions of mentor and mentee may be clearly defined as role model and protégé, but a good relationship will be fluid enough to adapt to changing needs.

In an informal scenario, the selection of a mentor is made at the discretion of the mentee, and is likely to be more flexible than a situation that is prescribed by a formal program. Though research shows that, given the choice, people will select a mentor who is much like they are, when the greatest potential for development and learning comes from dissimilarities in experience and personality (Clutterbuck, 1998). Therefore, the best idea is finding a match with enough similarities to work well together, but enough differences to foster growth. Pairing mentors and mentees

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formally can be as much an art as a science, and there are various methods that can be employed to support a better outcome, such as personality tests, assessments of learning styles, matching questionnaires, and interviews that uncover interests, career goals, and experience (Cox, 2005).

Experience can be an important indicator in this matching process. One of the issues not often addressed in mentoring programs is mid-career induction for those who are not new to the profession, but who are new to their position (Fabian & Simpson, 2002). These librarians need support too, but a different kind of support than recent library school graduates. This might be addressed with questionnaires that define experience level, but as Kram and Isabella (1985) stated, “age and career stages shape different peer relationships,” and this needs to be factored into mentoring programs (p. 116). A key to success when implementing a mentoring program is not just having a well-defined plan, but also a plan that is flexible enough to work with the diverse needs of the professionals participating in the program (Kuyper-Rushing, 2001).

While professional development needs will be quite disparate from one librarian to the next, there are those fundamental logistical needs that are uniform to all first-year librarians. Indeed, the most valuable aspects of a robust mentoring program may have little to do with the one-on-one interactions between mentor and mentee. These additional services could be one of the strongest arguments for a formal system. For example, the chair of a mentoring program might draw up a checklist to ensure logistical needs for first-year librarians are met—such as how to get keys made and how to use the copy machine—which may seem basic, but those are vital pieces of information if one wishes to make handouts for a class or get into a classroom in order to teach said class (Wu, Molteni, & Goldman, 2010). Before a librarian can move to the higher level of considering professional development and navigating organizational politics, she must have her practical needs met first.

Aside from logistics, there may be other, more scholarly, benefits to a formal mentoring program. One such program facilitated several presentations for all tenure-track librarians, which included sessions on publishing in academia, research design, grant writing, organizational communication, and preparation of the dossier for the tenure process (Wu, Molteni, & Goldman, 2010). Not only can this enhance professional development, but can also widen the social and professional network that librarians form in their first year.

Alternatives to Traditional Mentoring

Though the one-on-one mentor-protégé model of mentorship has been discussed in multiple fields outside of library science, there is an acknowledgement in the literature that this traditional model is not the only way to form a mentoring

program. With the scarcity of tenured faculty to serve as mentors, it might not even be the ideal model any longer (Level & Mach, 2005); indeed, some new librarians might even turn to mentors external to their institution to help with growth in the profession. Furthermore, Darwin and Palmer (2009) claim that pairing one mentor with one mentee does little to foster a collaborative environment. Libraries have adopted various forms of peer, group, circle, team, and co-mentoring models, both formally and informally. Some describe a model where one mentor serves multiple mentees (Wu, Molteni, & Goldman, 2010), and other studies articulate a process by which one mentee is grouped with multiple mentors (Bosch, Ramachandran, Luévano, & Wakiji, 2010; Schoenfeld & Magnam, 1994).

External mentoring often follows that one-on-one mentor/protégé dynamic, but takes place outside the auspices of the institution that a junior librarian has just joined. It is important to note that while librarians need an induction into their new organization, they also require immersion in the profession. Mentoring can raise the skill level of protégés, which benefits the profession as a whole by creating better qualified librarians. External mentoring can offer a broader perspective to a tenure-track librarian than he could find by limiting himself to only those viewpoints found in his own library. The geographical distance that might exist between mentor and mentee in instances of external mentoring can often be overcome through e-mentoring (Bierema & Merriam, 2002), and there are multiple ways that one might seek out these kinds of mentoring opportunities. Informally, they can be found by such activities as participating in library associations or networking at local, regional, and national conferences, which would facilitate contact with potential mentor candidates.

More formally, there are many different kinds of library associations that offer mentoring programs. The New Members Round Table of the American Library Association (ALA) has a program that targets new librarians in the United States, but there are those that have a more geographic focus, such as mentoring through regional associations like the Southeastern Library Association and the New England Library Association as well as state library associations, such as Florida, Texas, California, New Jersey, and North Carolina. Others focus on special interest groups, like the mentoring program through the Medical Library Association. Most of these associations require membership in the organization in order to take part in the mentoring program, though the New England Library Association is a notable exception. Their mentoring program is open to all librarians, regardless of geographical location or membership in the organization (New England Library Association [NELA], 2008). External mentoring, whether formal or informal, is not compulsory, and therefore addresses the issues of possible resentment brought up by Farmer, Stockham, and Trussell (2009). This is specifically addressed by the NELA mentoring website, which states that participation in the program is “completely voluntary and any party for any reason may terminate relationships” (NELA, 2008, para. 2). This empowers both mentors and protégés to step back from

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an unhealthy relationship, which they might not be able to do in formal programs that prescribe a specific time period, such as the entire first year of a new librarian's employment.

Something to consider with mentoring arrangements is that they need not be for long-term, overarching goals. One can seek these out for finite projects or events. For example, the Library and Information Technology Association (LITA) provides a mentoring program for librarians who are first-time attendees at ALA annual conferences. An informal example of such a mentoring situation would be when librarians are preparing their dossiers for a Retention, Tenure, and Promotion Committee to review. Even if a group of tenure-track librarians were at various stages of the tenure process, they could meet to counsel and encourage each other as they complete their dossiers. Such a group would provide vital guidance for a short-term goal, and would be a prime example of co-mentoring.

Like external mentoring, most of the alternatives to one-on-one mentoring can be either formal or informal. In instances of co-mentoring, placing "the prefix 'co' before 'mentoring' reconstructs the relationship as nonhierarchical; 'co' makes mentoring reciprocal and mutual" (Bona, Rinehart, & Volbrecht, 1995, p. 119). As with the group example above, reciprocal mentoring need not involve direct peers to make it a fruitful mentoring relationship. It can involve tenured and tenure-track librarians, or several tenure-track librarians with varying experience levels, as long as all parties respect what the others have to offer the relationship. Through shared interest in research or a similarity in personality, co-mentors can form a mutually beneficial relationship that often leads to an increase in scholarly output and a supportive, encouraging environment.

With larger universities that have more librarians who might leave or retire in the same time frame, there is the possibility of several librarians being hired into a cohort. This allows for group/cohort mentoring between those new librarians, which can be prescribed formally by the institution or can form naturally. This group of peer librarians can work together to answer questions they have about the tenure process, organizational politics, and professional development. Much of this cohort mentoring would also fall under the auspices of peer mentoring. At "first glance, the term *peer mentoring* might seem somewhat of a paradox given that mentoring is normally associated with expert-novice relationships" (Le Cornu, 2005, p. 356), but having a tight-knit peer group can engender a sense of community, trust, and career success for everyone involved, which can build the confidence to overcome some of the obstacles inherent to librarians in the "publish or perish" environment of academia (Mitchell & Reichel, 1999). However, group and peer mentoring can still suffer some of the failures mentioned by Goldstein (2003) if insecurities or intimidation arise if one member advances more quickly in his or her career than the others. Another possible issue with peer mentoring is that "peer mentors may

have a more limited range of experience and cannot offer any guidance based on a long career as a more traditional mentor might” (Level & Mach, 2005, p. 305).

Fiegen (2002) discusses how librarians are responsible for their own successes and lays out steps for mentees to design a personal mentoring program for themselves, including how to identify possible mentoring relationships by assessing their own needs and finding qualified experts who can serve as either short or long term mentors to fulfill those needs. The expert need not be a tenured librarian, simply someone who has the experience that the librarian lacks. This approach empowers new librarians to take control of their own career development and goals. It does, however, require that librarians feel comfortable approaching possible mentors to discuss their needs and ask for help.

Conclusion

Ideally, both formal and informal mentoring will provide a sense of empowerment to first-year librarians, both within the organization and within the profession. However, as this paper has shown, there is no perfect form of mentoring. Each has its benefits and drawbacks, so the best set of circumstances might be a combination of various types of mentoring—formal and informal, one-on-one and group, peer and expert-novice. One could argue that no mentoring situation can provide everything a developing librarian needs, and having that expectation can only create frustration and impede progress.

A great deal of attention has been paid to the desired qualities of a mentor. The superlative mentor is intelligent, caring, supportive, encouraging, flexible, patient, professional, scholarly, and ethical, among other things (Carruthers, 1993; Cox, 2005; Johnson, 2002), which is a tall order for one person to fulfill. Perhaps too tall an order, which is a good reason for first-year librarians to expand the number and kinds of mentoring relationships they enter in to. Barkham (2005) describes the characteristics of a good mentee; for example, a mentee should be open and honest about fears and confusions, respect advice, network and form professional friendships, and be prepared to listen, reflect, ask questions, and ask for help. To this, one must add: be fully engaged in the process.

There are many advantages that can come from a good mentoring relationship grounded in realistic expectations—increased scholarly productivity, wider social and professional networks, career opportunities and advancement, and guidance for achieving tenure. Librarians must be open to every opportunity to learn and remain accountable for their own success, and in the end, they are their own best advocate for getting all the tools and skills they need. No one has more to gain from a flourishing career than they do, so taking control of their own professional development is key to making that a reality.

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