

New and Noteworthy

Paying It Forward, Giving It Back: The Dynamics of Mentoring

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When you think about your career thus far, who helped you get to where you are now? Many of us can remember friendly and supportive childhood librarians, teachers, professors, supervisors, and colleagues who offered good advice, introductions to key people, and articles to read. Some became friends, some not. But each person, in their own way, contributed to your professional development through some form of mentoring.

What is mentoring? Although the term “mentor” is sometimes used as a synonym for “teacher,” “coach,” “advisor,” or “guide,” the term implies a deeper, more long-term professional advising relationship. Mentoring can take the form of informal arrangements, such as occasionally meeting for coffee at a conference, or formal programs administered by employers and professional organizations. The Internet is packed with information about mentoring both inside and outside the library profession:¹ how to set up a program, guidelines, examples and case studies, forms, outcomes, etc. With many recent library school graduates and current professionals uncertain about the economy and how it may affect their careers, mentoring has become an increasingly hot topic of conversation.

One recent addition to the library literature on mentoring is the fourth installment in the ACRL “Active Guides” series. *Pay It Forward: Mentoring New Information Professionals* is an interesting and helpful guide written by two librarians in a mentor-mentee relationship.² Mary Ann Mavrincac (the mentor) and Kim Stym look at the mentoring relationship from both points of view. The guide includes a brief history of mentoring, the planning process, the difference between mentoring and coaching, and reassurance in the form of “myths and fears about mentoring.” Especially helpful are numerous self-assessment activities and reflection questions, and a detailed chart in Chapter 11 listing the benefits of mentoring for both mentor and mentee. The “Leadership Focuser” in Appendix 1 reinforces the concepts discussed in the book through formulation of a mentoring goal, program outcomes, and exercises.

Another basic, readable guide with a somewhat broader definition of mentoring is Marta K. Lee’s *Mentoring in the Library: Building for the Future*.³ Speaking from the academic

perspective, Lee discusses library school assignments, internships, new librarians, mentoring for promotion and other topics from her own professional experience, including many real-life examples. Her own vision of mentoring, however, includes many librarian-patron interactions not traditionally defined as mentoring: “Mentoring does not mean helping only those looking at becoming a library professional but helping anyone needing assistance,” (ix) including students who are researching assignments and patrons needing books or articles. While some might disagree with the author’s assertion that, using this definition, “the most important part of being a librarian is mentoring” (ix), it does raise interesting questions about the nature of relationships that librarians form on a daily basis.

A particularly good article focused on mentoring on the academic side (although it would be useful for public, school, and special libraries as well), is a 2009 piece from *The Southeastern Librarian*. “Creating a Culture of Mentoring @ Your Library”⁴ advocates for a more holistic approach towards professional mentoring; a successful mentoring program is part of a larger librarian support structure that may also include a library faculty organization, research committee and welcome/orientation committee. Not only does this administrative structure benefit the mentee and mentor, it also reflects the level of commitment the organization has for new employees and the next generation of leadership. “A successful formal mentoring program,” state the authors, “contributes to a healthy organizational climate and positively impacts the organizational culture...it is a valuable tool for recruitment and retention, an effective succession planning strategy and can be an effective tool for building diversity” (30).

These three titles, and indeed, much of the literature, focus on college and university libraries, although mentoring relationships can of course exist in any type of organization. Carol Smallwood’s and Rebecca Tolley-Stokes’s *Mentoring in Librarianship: Essays on Working with Adults and Students to Further the Profession* offers a larger perspective.⁵ The essays in this title cover a variety of topics such as the importance of structuring time, mentoring high school students, mentoring at a distance, and mentoring library assistants in an independent school library. Perhaps the most interesting take-away from the collection and its 32 authors, however, is the difference of opinion regarding the “perfect” mentoring relationship: “some are adamant that the relationship be highly structured, while others insist that its life be organic with natural ebbs and waning that should not be highly dictated.” However, “most agree to a few basic principles: Set a time limit, decide to meet periodically, and agree on a few goals” (1).

A key reason for library administrators seeking to formalize a mentoring program in their own institutions is the overall goal of succession planning. For years, the library world

has heard predictions that the Baby Boomer generation is on the verge of retirement and key leadership positions will go unfilled. Although this has not yet proven to be the case, a major responsibility of library leaders is identifying and mentoring those who will come after them. Maureen Sullivan and Robert D. Stueart address this responsibility in their 2010 book, *Developing Library Leaders: A How-To-Do-It Manual for Coaching, Team Building, and Mentoring Library Staff*.⁶ The stated goal of the manual is to prepare the next generation of library leaders, and it fulfills its aim with the “How-to-Do-It” series’ standard combination of background, tips, guidelines and tools. The six fundamental leadership strategies discussed include influence and persuasion, team-building and group dynamics, project management, coaching, mentoring, and succession planning. An important goal of successful library organizations, the authors argue, is to create a “culture of enhancement” for its staff, an idea that echoes the “culture of mentoring” focus of *The Southeastern Librarian* article previously mentioned.

Another useful resource familiar to many academic librarians is the Association of College and Research Libraries’ (ARL) series of SPEC (Systems and Procedures Exchange Center) Kits, which survey large research university libraries for examples and best practices on a range of topics. *SPEC Kit 239: Mentoring Programs in ARL Libraries* (March 1999)⁷ offers representative handbooks, guidelines, memos and other materials. A more recent title is *SPEC Kit 323: Socializing New Hires*, published in August 2011.⁸ This SPEC Kit concentrates on orientation, training and mentoring programs internal to the organization, and also offers a useful bibliography with references to readings on organizational culture and socialization.

Ideally, new hires will already be somewhat familiar with the work environment and conditions they will enter as library professionals. To that end, Michael Stephens⁹ puts forth the suggestion that library school students would do well to actively seek out mentors. “Having a strong mentor during your first few years as a librarian,” writes Stephens, “can provide a safety net of advice, encouragement, and caution for a newly minted professional. Such a relationship would be even better if it began during LIS education” (38). Not only can these relationships be useful for the students and their mentors in the field, but also library school professors, many of whom are years removed from “true practice.” Stephens suggests that LIS programs begin with informal mentoring relationships and move towards formal programs.¹⁰

However, humbling though it might be for established librarians, “the next generation may not want your mentoring,” says Steven Bell in his April 23, 2013 “Leading from the Library” column in *Library Journal*.¹¹ Bell emphasizes that for many aspiring library leaders, official and unofficial mentoring relationships can be quite useful: ‘No matter what level of leadership responsibility we’ve acquired in our careers, it is likely a

relationship with an experienced colleague—not always a senior one—can help in the pursuit of better leadership. That’s why the popularity of mentoring programs continues. At least for most generations. For millennials, the chain may break.” Librarians born between about 1979 and 1984, in general, prefer to move among fluid, short mentoring relationships with many different people rather than establish a more permanent relationship with just one more experienced colleague. Bell references an interesting 2013 *Bloomberg BusinessWeek* article¹² which suggests some alternatives to traditional mentoring: peer mentoring, reverse mentoring (having the newer staff mentor the older), and speed mentoring (quick meetings similar to speed dating).

Despite the evolving nature of mentoring relationships, a key theme continues to be their transformative nature for both parties involved. EDUCAUSE, the information technology in higher education organization emphasizes the possibilities of new forms of communication and structure in a special topic website on mentoring,¹³ and states:

“Mentoring is just-in-time help, insight into issues, and the sharing of expertise, values, skills, and perspectives. Mentors function as a catalyst—an agent that provokes a reaction that might not otherwise have taken place or speeds up a reaction that might have taken place in the future.”

Do you serve as that catalyst? Is someone a catalyst for you?

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References

¹ A list of older materials on mentoring in libraries may be found in Rita Gibson’s “Mentoring & Libraries: A Bibliography” at <http://colt.ucr.edu/bibmentoring.html>, last revision May 2003 at the time of this column’s publication. The more recent (2012) “Mentoring Resources on the Internet,” hosted at WebJunction, focuses on best practices:

http://www.webjunction.org/documents/webjunction/Mentoring_Resources_on_the_Internet.html. Also see the Medical Library Association's "Mentoring Resources" list at http://www.mlanet.org/mentor/mentor_resources.html.

² Mavrinac, Mary Ann and Kim Stym. *Pay It Forward: Mentoring New Information Professionals* (ACRL Active Guide #4). Chicago: Association of College and Research Libraries, 2012.

³ Lee, Marta K. *Mentoring in the Library: Building for the Future*. Chicago: American Library Association, 2011.

⁴ Doolittle, Elizabeth M.; Graham, John-Bauer; Martin, Alyssa; Mendelsohn, Hal; Snowden, Kent; and Stone, Amanda. "Creating a Culture of Mentoring @ Your Library," *The Southeastern Librarian* 57:1 (2009). Available at: <http://digitalcommons.kennesaw.edu/seln/vol57/iss1/7>

⁵ Smallwood, Carol and Rebecca Tolley-Stokes, eds. *Mentoring in Librarianship: Essays on Working with Adults and Students to Further the Profession*. Jefferson, N.C.: McFarland & Company, 2011.

⁶ Sullivan, Maureen and Robert D. Stueart. *Developing Library Leaders: A How-To-Do-It Manual for Coaching, Team Building, and Mentoring Library Staff*. Chicago: American Library Association, 2010.

⁷ Wittkopf, Barbara J. *Mentoring Programs in ARL Libraries* (SPEC Kit 239). Washington: Association of Research Libraries, 1999.

⁸ Ladenson, Sharon, Mayers, Diane, and Hyslop, Colleen. *Socializing New Hires* (SPEC Kit 323). Washington: Association of Research Libraries, 2011. Available at <http://publications.arl.org/Socializing-New-Hires-SPEC-Kit-323/>.

⁹ Stephens, Michael. The Role of Mentoring. *Library Journal* (Sept. 15, 2011): 38. Some library programs are currently offering programs such as Stephens describes. For example, the Graduate School of Library and Information Science (GSLIS) at the iSchool at the University of Illinois offers mentoring resources, including an application to participate in a matching program called Alumni-Student Connect. (<https://illinois.edu/fb/sec/7704289>). The Simmons Graduate School of Library and Information Science maintains a similar GSLIS Mentoring program (<http://simmons.edu/gslis/for/current/careers/mentoring.php>).

¹⁰ Stephens' suggestion is underscored by the conclusion of a March 2013 University of North Florida study which found that only a small percentage of the academic libraries, library associations, residencies and fellowships, and library schools surveyed offered formal mentoring programs (Robbeloth, Hilary; Eng, Alice; and Weiss, Stephanie, "Disconnect Between Literature and Libraries: The Availability of Mentoring Programs for Academic Librarians" (2013). *Library Faculty Presentations & Publications*. Paper 10. http://digitalcommons.unf.edu/library_facpub10).

¹¹ Bell, Steven. Leading from the Library: The Next Generation May Not Want Your Mentoring. *Library Journal* (April 23, 2013). Available at: <http://lj.libraryjournal.com/2013/04/opinion/leading-from-the-library/the-next-generation-may-not-want-your-mentoring-leading-from-the-library>

¹² Khidekel, Marina. The Misery of Mentoring Millennials. *Bloomberg BusinessWeek* (March 14, 2013). Available at: <http://www.businessweek.com/articles/2013-03-14/the-misery-of-mentoring-millennials>

¹³ "Mentoring" is a special topic in the career development section of the EDUCAUSE website, and is available at: <http://www.educause.edu/careers/special-topic-programs/mentoring>. The site also links to an introductory podcast and other resources.