New Perspectives in Leadership

Helping Your New Librarians Self-Mentor

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Introduction

All librarians begin as newbies. Whatever type of librarianship we choose to pursue, we have to find our footing in the profession. The good and bad news is that there's no roadmap: paths into our profession are diverse and circuitous. We bring quite a variety of life experience into librarianship, whether we've gone straight through a bachelor's degree into an MLIS or if librarianship is a second career we found a bit more haphazardly. That can make it harder for new librarians to find a mentor with whom they identify. It also makes us a great support network for one another when taken en masse.

Background

I have been a librarian for four years now, and I don't have a mentor - not in the traditional one mentor, one mentee sense at least. I used to think I needed a mentor, and a couple of opportunities to form such a relationship did present themselves. First a librarian volunteered to mentor me while I was in grad school. At the time I didn't know what kind of librarianship I was interested in, but I knew I wasn't interested in the technical services path that my would-be volunteer mentor had followed. It was too early in my career, and I could tell we weren't a match for some other reasons we needn't discuss here. Then after I had a couple of years of professional experience under my belt I was accepted to LLAMA's mentoring program as a mentee. Although I was very excited and honored to be chosen, my assigned mentor was mysteriously incommunicative. I never even got a response to my introductory email, and that relationship fizzled out before it even began. [Note to potential mentors: please don't sign up for a mentoring program if you're not interested in being a mentor. You say much more to your potential mentee by ignoring them than you ever could by mentoring them, and not in a good way.] Nevertheless, I have kept forging my way through this profession not alone, but with the help of friends and acquaintances. They've helped me much more than I believe either of my would-be mentors could. I want to share with you why I think this kind of informal mentoring has a future in librarianship and how we can help each other mentor ourselves.

Mentoring Millennials

Millennials tend to prefer informal mentorship. For one, we (librarians or otherwise), your peers born between 1977 and 1997,[1] have grown accustomed to communicating differently than previous generations. We're comfortable sharing more information with more people. We also crowd-source by asking a variety of people for help instead of counting on one go-to person. We

prefer informal communication to structured. This communication preference shows up in our personal *and* professional lives. Are there exceptions? Of course. But because there's something to be learned from the generalizations.

Steven Bell's piece for *Library Journal*[2] on this subject has some good advice for would-be mentors of Millennials. For example, engage us in small groups instead of individually. We like to bounce ideas off of each other and may get a lot from the peer mentoring opportunity in addition to what you can share with us. You could be a sponsor for a millennial by serving as a signal booster for our ideas and our career, whether or not you serve as our "mentor." Don't be offended if we seek out our peers' advice instead of seeking your opinion. We know you're wise and would have good advice, and I promise that we do respect you for that, but we want to engage with people who are facing similar struggles at similar stages in their careers. And honestly, we may not take your advice anyway.[3] Try not to let that get to you; it's our own shortcoming. We feel like we already know what we want to do, and we may not always realize that we need help getting there.

Lack of Opportunity?

Another reason traditional mentoring may not work for new librarians is that we can't find mentors. This is a multifaceted issue: new librarians may not know where to look for mentoring opportunities, and when identified, there aren't enough mentor spots to go around.[4] How many of you remember being paired with a mentor when you started your first librarian job? I didn't have one assigned to me when I became a librarian. If Robbeloth, Eng, and Weiss are correct, that's more often than not the case for academic librarians:[5] it's typical for libraries *not* to have mentoring programs in place. That didn't dampen my spirit because I quickly realized I was ambitious enough to forge my own path. With promotion and tenure guidelines in flux the first few years of my job, how helpful would an internal mentor have been? They couldn't have told me what I should be doing because the rules of the game kept changing year to year. I read the list of what "counted" towards tenure when I first started and again at the end of my first year, and I made my own plan based on informal conversations with colleagues and what I thought was best based on what my friends elsewhere in the library universe were doing.

Of course, I already mentioned my experience with LLAMA's mentoring program. Although I was unsuccessfully paired, I'm still part of a lucky minority of new librarians who knew of the mentoring opportunities that professional organizations made available. Of the 32 library organizations Robbeloth et al. identified, 62% lacked mentorship programs.[6] If I'd found my home in a division that didn't have a mentoring program I'd have been even worse off -- at least I had the opportunity to apply! So, a word of caution: it's great that the LLAMA mentoring program exists, but don't assume new librarians know about it and that it's meeting all of their needs.

Mentor/Mentee Mismatch

Traditional mentoring comes down to a relationship between one mentor and one mentee. As with any relationship, it's hard to find just the right match. If librarians knew how to pair people perfectly according to their interests and personality traits, we'd be supplementing our meager budgets by giving dating websites a run for their money. Whatever the program, there's a pool of potential mentors and a pool of potential mentees, and those responsible for pairing them have to decide based on limited information who will make the best matches. It's not easy and it often goes awry. Looking back on formal mentoring relationships he's participated in, Steven Bell notes that they "either fizzle out or never worked well to start".[7]

Compare that with informal mentorships where mentors and mentees happen across one another and form a bond. That's how most of us form our strongest relationships, isn't it? We meet our friends and often our spouses that way. Why wouldn't it work for professional relationships, too? Informal mentoring lets us decide who we communicate with best and whose personality matches ours well enough for us to get to know and trust one another. After all, you have to be comfortable with someone to be able to share your career challenges and aspirations.

What's a New Librarian to Do?

New librarians shouldn't despair that it's impossible to find a mentor and as a result they'll never be successful. It's just not true. What they can do is change the way they're thinking of mentorship to match what already suits their preferences and try do-it-yourself mentorship. Please keep an open mind while I describe the kind of mentorship that's worked well for me and that I hope will work well for many new librarians.

Recipe for Self-Mentorship Success

DIY or self-mentorship is really a way of leveraging your connections to help guide you through the transition into professional librarianship. Librarians love to share what we're working on with each other. Although many bemoan the state of our professional literature, we often write and present about projects we've worked on that we want to share with our peers. This happens on a day-to-day basis, too. Whether on blogs, on Twitter, or in other outlets, we can't wait to tell each other about the exciting things we're doing professionally. I'd suggest that any new librarian should cultivate an online presence that will help them stay aware of what other people are doing in their field.

It starts by knowing who to pay attention to. I think of this group as aspirational peers: much like the universities my own institution aspires to emulate, these are people presenting and publishing on the topics I'm interested in. I try to take both a broad and narrow approach, following people who are influential in academic libraries generally and assessment, especially of public services, specifically. Librarians should be good at putting a list like this together- it's like creating a bibliography on the topic of our own interests and duties.

From there, I find out where they're sharing information. If they publish articles in journals or trade magazines I read them. This is the most fully-formed version of their professional vision I'll get. Do they maintain a blog? That's a great way to get inside their minds because people are often willing to be much more candid in that format. Do they tweet? Librarians on Twitter tend to be quite active, so it's easy to keep up with what they're sharing day to day. A bonus of following librarians on Twitter is getting to know them as real people. Nobody can tweet about work exclusively all day long, and that's just not the point of Twitter in my opinion. The best librarians seem to have struck a balance between letting you into their personal and professional worlds. While I'm getting to know these people, it's important that I let them get to know me, too. Social media is a two-way street, and lurking around isn't very good manners. To be able to self-mentor, I need to build relationships and put myself out there.

There are plenty of other online forums for connecting with librarians, and you probably know of some that I don't. Even Facebook is peppered with professional groups for librarians; they may be varying in their decorum, but any contact I find that gets me in touch with more librarians is helpful. I've had some great conversations in the ALA Think Tank on Facebook,[8] believe it or not. This group is more social than many, but Millennials can probably look past things like posting drink photos on Fridays and see that at its core the ALATT is a place for librarians all over to mingle online, let their hair down occasionally, and ask each other anything.

Once I've developed a professional network, my extended librarian family per-se, I can interact with them casually and ask for professional advice when I need it. They're relationships; they need give and take. I try to chime in and help when others ask for it, and they do the same for me. I have hundreds of mentors instead of just one or two, how great is that?

How Can You Help?

By all means look out for your new librarians and help them ease into professional life. As leaders in your libraries, you can also help set up mentoring opportunities for those who want them. Just keep in mind that Millennials might not fit the mentoring paradigm you're accustomed to. Try setting up group mentorship opportunities. I still remember my former library dean taking all of us graduate assistants to lunch one day. I really appreciated having an opportunity to interact with her and my peers in a more comfortable environment. Why not bring in coffee and donuts one morning and invite your junior librarians to breakfast?

Another way you can help is by sharing your voice and experience online in places where they might be more receptive to hearing it. It's easy to find MLIS students, new librarians, and even mid-level library managers online, but we don't hear as much from leadership. Think about writing a guest blog post for an organization you belong to or a friend who maintains an active blogging presence. Think about where you might find new librarians online and reach out to them there. If you're not comfortable starting a blog or joining Twitter, consider adding resources you've found that may help Millennials self-mentor to the toolkit I've built.[9] The more ideas people can get from it, the better. Maybe you know of library leaders who do blog or tweet or

podcast or share their ideas somehow online. I'd love to diversify the voices I'm linking to, and leadership is an area I know is lacking. Help me help new librarians by building up this resource.

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References

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[5] Ibid., 10.

[6] Ibid., 10.

[7] Bell, "Next Generation".

[8] https://www.facebook.com/groups/ALAthinkTANK/

[9] http://www.gingerwilliams.me/librarians-self-mentorship-toolkit.html