

Transformative Mentoring: Sustaining the Future of Academic Libraries through Engagement- Centered Development of LIS Students

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Mentorship is an experience valued in life and in the professions. The privilege to have someone who can offer guidance provides comfort and can lead to personal and professional growth. Mentoring in libraries reflects the same sentiments and is valued not only by the mentees but also by the mentors.^{1,2} Mentoring library and information science (LIS) students in many ways is central to sustaining the profession and to nurturing a new generation of capable professionals.³ Offering LIS students proper guidance is especially significant now when library leaders call for a change in libraries' time honored traditions, redefining librarianship as a field centered in interaction with users.⁴ This paper introduces a team-based model of mentoring at the Margery Somers Foster Center, a unit of Rutgers University Libraries, as an effective model that better prepares LIS students for their career development. We believe providing opportunities for interaction through team engagement-based projects nurture a new generation of capable professionals with interpersonal skills and social capital, ready for action in the twenty-first century, building a bright future.

Call for Change

Calls for change in academic libraries represented in literature focus on central importance of connections, communication and relationships with our users. Nancy Kranich, Megan Lotts and Gene Springs challenge librarians to “turn outward” and present approaches and tools based on the Harwood Institute approach to engage librarians with campus community.⁵ In his *Atlas of New Librarianship* David Lankes poses the question “what is librarianship when it is unmoored from cataloging, books, buildings, and committees?”⁶ Lankes calls for a change in these library's traditional activities and vital elements redefining librarianship as a field centered in interaction with users, facilitating conversations and providing access to information. These voices advocate for adapting to new conditions and realities of higher education and transforming the libraries from a “facility” to a hub for intellectual exchange towards a place for the cultivation of scholarship sensitivities without necessarily abandoning core values.

Reality of Student Workers/Interns

Despite these calls for change, what is the reality of LIS

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student workers and interns in academic libraries? At Rutgers University Libraries in New Brunswick, we have the good fortune to have the Library and Information Science Department of the School of Communication and Information on the same campus, replenishing our part-time workforce every semester. Eager and talented LIS students are willing to work part-time, or enroll in a credit-bearing field experience internship to gain practical experience under the supervision of a librarian based at one of our libraries.

The LIS students have some placement options, but typically the students work on a part-time basis at reference desks located in one of the four library buildings. They report to the unit library's reference team leader and are expected to provide the first line of service paired with a librarian, either together at the desk or as a backup in their offices for consultation as necessary. Despite this arrangement, the decline of research questions at the reference desk results in fewer opportunities for LIS students to interact with the librarian to gain experience, or to simply observe a refined art of user interaction. The more complex queries, such as the ones that involve specialized databases, are rare and the few questions posed at the reference desk are directional in nature, thus meaningful interaction with the mentor and learning from them during their shifts is very limited.

The LIS students have the opportunity to observe library instruction sessions taught by their supervisor in their areas subject responsibility and also teach sessions for transfer students. In this case, LIS students are expected to follow a script created by the instruction coordinator who also provides a training session. These transfer student instruction sessions constitute a rich experience, especially for those students with little or no experience in teaching or public speaking. Other LIS students, especially those enrolled in credit-bearing field experience internships, assist their librarian supervisors on special projects, including digitization, scanning, exhibition, metadata creation, gift book processing among others. Although valuable learning is associated with these tasks, the interaction is generally limited to a single librarian.

From the Rutgers University Libraries perspective, the LIS students' contributions to operations are significant in all areas, especially as budget cuts have resulted in position reduction in all departments. From the LIS students' perspective, the internship presents valuable experience, and participation in certain projects provides the basis, or inspiration, for further explorations. However, most of the time students perform specific tasks assigned with little or no context of the overall project, limiting the experience to a series of isolated and mechanical processes. Additionally, often the librarian supervisor has multiple responsibilities and is not sufficiently available, leaving the student on his/her own with inadequate guidance. In the case of digital or multimedia projects, the supervisor might lack technical skills to offer direct guidance or to troubleshoot for problems, leaving the intern without resources to advance the project.

This traditional, supervisory approach to LIS internships is based on a hierarchical relationship where the supervisor shares his or her experience and wisdom while the novice intern absorbs the knowledge. This model provides little or no opportunity for LIS students to participate in a complex project as a team member. Also, working alongside other librarians beyond a supervisor, library staff, and fellow interns could offer useful learning experiences, yet there are rarely opportunities for these kinds of interactions. This hierarchical model also impacts the supervisor, as the opportunity for rich learning from the intern's valuable skills and experiences might be left unexplored.

Instead of approaching LIS internship experiences in this inward-facing, task-oriented manner, we call for librarians to approach their supervisor roles from the rich tradition of mentoring in the profession, expanding their role beyond supervisor. When experienced librarians are able to leverage their knowledge of the library and campus communities, they can help the student to develop the kind of outward facing, community-building skills necessary to being a twenty-first century librarian.

Literature Review

From formal to informal programs and across every type of librarianship, mentoring is a critical component to passing down the profession as evidenced by the large body of literature surrounding the issue. Newly hired academic librarians are often the focus of mentorship programs, particularly those that are in-house whereby the new librarian is paired one-on-one with a more experienced librarian.⁷ While some focus on the benefits of mentoring to the library as an organization,⁸ others focus on the benefits to the new librarian as mentee and experienced librarian as mentor.⁹⁻¹¹ Mentoring is a way to sustain the profession by passing down information about the organization and the mindset of the profession.¹² Mentors often deeply invest in the professional life of their mentees, particularly when they form informal, organic, one-on-one relationships.¹³

While formal one-on-one mentoring programs are popular, collaborative mentoring situations are also finding a place in academic libraries. Fyn argues that, for newly hired librarians, a peer group-mentoring situation that also involves experienced librarians can go beyond communicating workplace policy to provide points of commonality and connection in the larger experiences of the librarians, offering a different kind of support.¹⁴ Keener, Johnson and Collins also describe a collaborative mentoring effort that sprang out of the change to faculty status for librarians at Wake Forest University. This program offered both formal, one-on-one mentoring and also peer collaborative mentoring, which took the form of panel presentations and journal reading groups to ready librarians for immersion in academic publishing. They also touch on the idea of reverse mentoring in which the newer librarians assist more experienced librarians with emerging technologies.¹⁵

LIS students interning at academic libraries hope to one day become these newly hired librarians, yet there is little written about mentoring these students into the profession, perhaps because of the realities of why LIS interns are hired—often to work when more experienced librarians are busy with other tasks, or

off duty. Another reason for the lack of literature on LIS students and mentoring may be because of the organizational approach to mentoring. If mentoring is meant only to acclimate new librarians to an organizational culture or get them through the tenure process at a particular institution, then there would be little reason to mentor an LIS intern who is a part-time, temporary employee.

Several articles about gaps in LIS student education provide solid rationale for mentoring students, though they do not specifically use the term mentoring as a solution. Instead, they focus on collaborative approaches in which the library and LIS community are responsible for helping the student to acquire a broader set of skills. For example, Bird and Crumpton focus on the divide between what is taught in LIS programs and what is expected of new librarians in the field. As a remedy, they propose a collaborative internship experience where LIS educators, librarians and interns can fill the gap.¹⁶ Ball discusses the use of practicums and service learning as a way to bridge the criticism that education teaches too much theory and not enough practice, which results in a failure to communicate the core values of the profession.¹⁷ Stephens argues that mentoring should begin while students are still in library school, and that professors as well as library practitioners should be involved in a collaborative learning experience.¹⁸ Cooper talks about the key components of LIS fieldwork in the form of service learning, arguing that the best internships are ones in which there is “student-community collaboration.”¹⁹

The major divergence in the majority of the literature about mentoring in librarianship in general and mentoring LIS students in particular is that the approach to mentoring students is collaborative and focuses on gaps in LIS education, perhaps signaling a trend to the characteristics of twenty-first century librarianship. For example, Sargent, Becker, and Klingberg go beyond the traditional one-on-one mentoring relationship and discuss a teams-based approach to LIS internships whereby students are incorporated onto subject teams and therefore have an opportunity

to learn more of the kinds of tasks that they will be asked to perform as academic librarians, answering the gap in LIS student education noted above. They describe a learning process in which the librarian and intern are partners, and also mention the value of networking opportunities during internships.²⁰ Lacy and Copeland describe a formalized mentoring program between LIS students, who were not interns, and working academic librarians at their institution. They agree with other cited authors that field experience offers the opportunity to fill gaps in knowledge such as teaching and fulfilling liaison duties. They note that little has been written about the benefits of such mentoring relationships from the point of view of the mentee, or about the benefits of such relationships to the mentor.²¹

Transformative Mentoring Framework

Our transformative mentoring framework is based on feminist pedagogy and Paulo Freire's critical works on education where the importance of broad experience as a source of knowledge is influenced by the vision of social justice.^{22,23} We believe this understanding of the transformative potential for team-centered mentoring creates conditions for rich learning not only for the LIS student but also for all participants. The focus on collaboration resonates with mentoring approaches of LIS students articulated by some authors included in the literature review. It is also a strategy to create a new generation of librarians capable of working effectively in a team environment in academic libraries, redefining the role of librarians on campus.

The feminist pedagogy and Freire's vision demonstrate shifts in education challenging dominant approaches to learning and definitions of knowledge. Both reject a hierarchical role between the teacher and students and share the notion that both groups (mentors and mentees in our case) have distinct and valuable experiences to share as sources of valuable knowledge. The feminist pedagogy takes this one step further and validates differences and heterogeneous backgrounds of individuals and values them as assets.²⁴ We approach our project grounded in these

frameworks and consider a team of participants with different backgrounds, age group, and interests. We consider seriously the notion that everyone has specific knowledge, ranging from expertise, ethnic and national backgrounds, professions and interests, life experiences, and aspirations and the notion of learning from everyone. We also included in the process the need for communication, constant reevaluation and assessment, as well as flexibility for readjustments as necessary.

The Douglass Alumnae Oral History Project

Our vision is based on our experience working with the Douglass Alumnae Oral History Project (DAOHP), a collection of approximately 250 intergenerational interviews of Douglass College graduates, an initiative of the Associate Alumnae of Douglass College. Douglass College's status within Rutgers University has changed over the years since its founding in 1918 as the New Jersey College for Women. The Douglass Residential College (DRC), as it is known today, retains its identity with a number of women's college traditions, including a very strong and supportive alumnae association, the AADC: Associate Alumnae of Douglass College. The DAOHP was launched in 2003 as an initiative within AADC "to capture the many fascinating stories that [Douglass] alumnae have to share."²⁵ The collection includes interviews with women who graduated between 1929 and 2005 and is filled with anecdotes and memories of their years on campus. Collectively they cover the Douglass Alumnae history in New Brunswick, New Jersey and constitute valuable primary source material for investigations focused on the history of women's colleges and women's education.

From the onset of our involvement, we chose to create a project-based team that together would prepare the material to be ingested into RUcore, the Rutgers institutional repository, in the future and explore related projects that would enrich participants' experience and disseminate this rich Douglass history to a broader audience. Rather than just a succession

of digitization and transcription processes conducted exclusively by library staff, we created a space in the project workflow where LIS students, Douglass and Rutgers undergraduate students could work together with this material, along with a team of library staff and librarians. We also created intentional connections with Douglass alumnae, who were eager to share the college history as they experienced them. For current Douglass students and young alumnae this process ultimately offered an opportunity to create their own narratives and histories.

In addition to interacting with the alumnae's fascinating accounts and learning about college traditions through their testimonials, this project brings awareness to issues of digital and technical literacy to the "born digital generation." The LIS and undergraduate students have the opportunity to gain familiarity and experience with multimedia production and related skills, in addition to knowledge of digital preservation issues and processes that are becoming more and more central to our personal and professional lives in a pervasive digital environment.

Since 2013, in addition to assisting Douglass alumnae in capturing new interviews and continuing the digitization of interviews in analog format, the LIS students were involved in a number of associated projects based on DAOHP while they created their own documentary projects using DAOHP sources.^{26,27} The LIS students produced multimedia presentations and curated exhibitions for special events co-sponsored by the Libraries, AADC and DRC, including the "Douglass College 95th Anniversary" multimedia presentation for the anniversary event, which incorporated quotes and archival images. Our relationship with the alumnae group made possible a book-reading event with a well-published alumnae author from the class of 1942. The event prompted a fascinating conversation between current and past students, sharing their Douglass experience and other significant issues that resonate, including friendship and family.

The LIS students also oversaw projects developed by Rutgers undergraduate students in the Aresty Research Program, a selective program available to

Rutgers students. One project, developed during the 2013-14 academic year, used NVivo software to mine interview transcripts for expectations placed upon women before, during and after the World War II. Currently one Aresty student is developing a mapping project using ThingLink software, populating a Douglass campus map with archival images and quotes from the DAOHP interviews. Another Aresty student is identifying diversity among Douglass students from the 1920s through 1950s by examining their college experiences as expressed in DAOHP narratives.

These projects are developed very collaboratively, where LIS students work with undergraduate students, discussing approaches and suggestions and learning from one another. The librarian provides directions and overall guidance and staff members offer technical and multimedia assistance at the point of need, providing an overall support. Participating alumnae serve as consultants and they are an outstanding source for clarification on interview content, always supplementing them with information grounded in their experiences and history. Team members learn valuable college history and pride, share experiences and perspectives, building a deeper understanding of the project and also of the worlds beyond themselves.

LIS Student Perspective

Working in a project-based, team-centered environment provides opportunities to dive deep into the technological aspects that will increasingly be required of twenty-first century librarians. Yet beyond learning these hard skills, a team-based mentorship approach focuses on ways to be instead of tasks to accomplish. It takes a more holistic, community-building mindset to how a librarian should be rather than focusing on what a librarian should do. By facing outward, LIS students can begin to fully integrate into the community around them and realize the fullest expression of our profession—a profession that can be at the heart of the community, and also dependent on the community for support.

It is not to say that the concrete skills one learns through field experience are not important, but that

the soft skills of communication and community building are vital to creating sustainability in the profession. Relationship building is essential to our jobs, particularly when one has liaison relationships. Even those without direct subject-area relationships still have constituencies that they need to work with. If all students are doing is sitting at a desk instead of watching experience in action, then there is no opportunity for them to see what it means to reach out and create community.

Moreover, librarianship is a profession of life-long learning, and librarians, through their own social capital, have the opportunity to help LIS students establish personal learning networks that will allow students to grow and develop long after an internship experience has ended. It is only through these ties to the larger campus community that students can begin to understand that the academic library is the interdisciplinary hub of campus and that they have incredible power to be campus connectors.

All-member perspective: Douglass Alumnae Oral History Project

The engagement-based team project is an example of shared responsibility and collaborative teamwork based on the DAOHP. The framework demonstrates that LIS students have the opportunity to interact with different participants and practice being members of a team project. The interaction with diverse and inter-generational team members raises awareness on how different participants can contribute to a project with their unique skills, competencies, specialized knowledge, and backgrounds. The strength of this model includes LIS student empowerment and the notion of flexibility to integrate evaluative revision back into the initial workflow. The LIS students have room to develop specific ways that suits them the best in the interest of the overall project.

Although this paper is an examination of a particular mentoring model and only a more comprehensive study could ultimately gage the impact, the engagement-based mentorship framework provides an opportunity to LIS students to work in a team envi-

ronment, one of the skills much valued by employers, including the libraries. Working with the DAOHP, LIS students have an opportunity to learn about Douglass College history and expand multimedia and digital humanities skills, while expanding social capital and network capabilities. Training LIS students is one of the critical areas to sustain the libraries as effective information providers and face the future with confidence. Efforts toward creating a transformative LIS student mentoring experience seriously impact the ability to build the future of our profession.

Notes

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