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The Merits of Mentoring

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The Merits of Mentoring

Robert A. Seal

> *Tell me and I forget, teach me and I may remember, involve me and I learn.*
> —*Benjamin Franklin*

When I was a young librarian in the early 1970s, I never thought much about mentoring. I was too new to the profession to mentor anyone, and I am fairly certain I had no one formally mentoring me. I am not even sure that most academic libraries had formal mentoring programs in those days. As I moved through my now four-decade-long career, I never had anyone say to me, "I will be your mentor." That is not to say, however, that I was not mentored. In fact, I had great mentors, whether or not they thought of our relationship in terms of mentor and mentee. In addition to the specific advice and constructive criticism I received, I learned much from watching my colleagues go about their daily work. This was especially true early in my career, when I received my first administrative position at the University of Virginia in Charlottesville in 1976. Both my direct supervisor, the associate university librarian, and the university librarian not only helped me develop my administrative skills but also modeled behavior which I try to follow to this day after many years as a library director and dean. The insights I gained from them as well as from the library dean at my next position at the University of Oklahoma in Norman have served me well. I have tried to emulate how they worked: leading, planning, prioritizing projects and needs, interacting with staff and stakeholders, writing and speaking, and much more.

I would like to use this editorial space to explore why mentorship is critically important as we train those who will follow us in positions of responsibility and authority. I do not claim to have all the answers or even the best answers, but at the very least perhaps this column will give current and future library deans and directors something to consider.

Merriam-Webster defines a mentor as "a trusted counselor or guide," a tutor or coach. We in leadership positions have a duty to be that counselor, guide, and coach, to develop the future leaders of our profession. Based on my own experience being mentored by others over some forty years, I believe there are several reasons why library managers should give priority to mentoring those they supervise. First, we have a responsibility

to share our work experience, both successful and otherwise, with new and mid-career librarians, especially those we believe have managerial potential. We must advise, teach, and provide feedback on their work. They learn from us, but we also learn from them. I find that the newer generation of librarians brings fresh ideas and new ways of thinking. They inspire and energize me. In short, mentorship should be a two-way street.

Second, we must model responsible administrative behaviors, including having and articulating a clear vision and direction for our unit; exhibiting honesty and integrity at all times; showing care for others; acting as a strong advocate to the university administration; being transparent about decisions in nonconfidential situations; seeking input and listening well; having the courage to make hard, even unpopular, decisions when the best interests of the library are at stake; and finally, being willing to compromise when circumstances call for it. A conscientious mentor gives his or her mentees increasing responsibility to challenge and test them in order to evaluate their work and ability to operate under stress. In this manner, we teach them the benefits and risks of administration.

Third, we must encourage our mentees to become involved and stay active professionally. This is particularly true of our newly minted librarians, who will benefit throughout their careers from the many benefits of "being a professional." Ongoing, regular participation in professional organizations, whether library, archival, technological, or otherwise, is critical to advancement in one's position and in the profession by developing job skills, being exposed to new ideas, honing speaking and writing abilities, and making personal contacts with other librarians—that is, developing a professional network. Of course, active involvement in professional associations by our librarians and staff has another important benefit: raising the visibility of our institutions and libraries. Another worthy reason to be involved outside one's institution is because many academic libraries have systems of rank and promotion, or promotion and tenure, and a strong, diverse resume is essential to prepare for that process. As mentors, we need to emphasize why being active professionally is critical to improving one's chances of moving to a higher rank.

Fourth, a significant part of mentorship is stressing the importance of scholarship to our younger colleagues, explaining why it is critical to the development of librarianship and to their own career advancement. By encouraging our newer librarians to undertake research projects, to publish, and to present papers at conferences, we help them develop their communication skills, build their resumes, and contribute to the advancement of our profession. The future depends in large measure on the creative minds of younger librarians, and therefore we should encourage those we mentor to find one or more areas of interest about which to study and write. Publishing is not for everyone, of course, but those we identify as excellent writers should be encouraged to go in that direction, for example, to submit articles and book chapters for publication. A first step might be to write a paper for presentation at a professional meeting, to serve on a panel, or to develop a poster session. The important thing is to find one's own niche or area of research interest, and to write and speak about it.

Fifth, we mentors need to emphasize the importance of service within the library and larger institution. This primarily involves committee work, because much of the work of today's academic library takes place in our many task forces and standing commit-

tees. Membership in these groups improves thinking skills, offers project management experience, and helps build relationships with colleagues in other departments. Chairing a committee cultivates leadership, communication, and organizational skills. We need to place potential leaders in those roles as part of their development as future department heads, assistant and associate deans, and library directors. Institutional service is important, too, and whenever possible we should nominate our best and brightest to serve on, or even chair, university committees and task forces. It is not just the dean or director who should represent the library. Indeed, librarians often take leadership roles on campus in areas such as copyright, scholarly communication, technology planning, curriculum development, and more. This activity not only develops a person's abilities but also provides valuable experience for future administrative responsibilities, and contributes to institutional success.

Finally, because we need bright, thoughtful, innovative individuals to lead our profession into the future, we should identify those in our organization who have the potential to become administrators, in particular at the dean or director level. Through mentorship, we encourage these colleagues to consider administration as a viable career path, one that requires hard work but also has tremendous benefits. The ability to have a vision and set the direction for an academic library is a satisfying and important aspect of top leadership. I knew early on that I wanted to be a library director and was fortunate enough to achieve that goal, but it did not happen overnight and it required much preparation on the job, publishing, and activity in professional organizations. Of course, not everyone is cut out to be a library director or wishes to follow that path. At the same time, we also need strong department heads and assistant directors, and we must identify and encourage colleagues who would succeed in and enjoy these important middle and upper management roles. These individuals play key roles in our organizations and deserve thoughtful mentoring as well.

The act of mentoring can occur one-on-one, formally or informally, or in groups. The most common form, one-on-one, usually involves a supervisor and employee initially having regular meetings to review job duties and progress, introduce colleagues, and so on. Later, the mentoring often becomes less structured and, as appropriate, addresses issues noted here: professional development, projects, and regular performance reviews. It is important for the mentor to be honest, to clearly communicate expectations and concerns, to provide feedback and encouragement, to offer helpful suggestions and praise, to be a good listener, to stress the importance of professional development, to tolerate mistakes, and to encourage risk taking. A mentee must be open to constructive criticism, ask for advice and direction, and provide feedback to his or her mentor. Open dialogue is critical to the success of the mentoring process.

Mentoring can take another form, one that more and more libraries are adopting: mentoring programs for new librarians and staff. At the request of a former assistant dean, my library created a mentoring program for new librarians. After three years of success, the program was expanded to include new staff as well. The program at Loyola University Chicago is aimed at providing sufficient structure and support for new hires. It has three objectives: (1) assist new employees to become familiar with and involved in the library community; (2) facilitate communication between individuals at different levels and within departments of the libraries; and (3) provide a support system to make

new employees feel welcomed and become acclimated to the unique social and cultural environment of the libraries. This activity is apart from other types of orientation and job training provided by Loyola and the University Libraries: the library's mentoring program is focused primarily on organizational socialization within the library system. A mentoring committee whose responsibility is first to match mentees with mentors manages the effort. The committee also trains mentors, monitors progress for each mentor-mentee pair, resolves any problems that might arise between the two, assists mentors in planning activities, and seeks feedback from each person at the end of the relationship, typically, but not always, after six months. The Loyola Chicago program has been so successful that it might serve as a model for other academic libraries.

Because mentorship in large measure is aimed at developing a person's career, advancement often means leaving the organization to get a promotion, to move up the ladder to a level of more responsibility. This should not be disconcerting; in fact, the opposite. Successful people will almost always move to another institution as they gain experience and seek more responsibility. Becoming a library dean or director can involve multiple moves along the way. Some individuals remain at the department head or associate university librarian level indefinitely because they are happy doing their job and are good at it, or because of family, health, or other reasons.

My own management philosophy is to hire the best people I can and get out of their way—that is, let them do their jobs without micromanaging them. That is not to say, of course, that we should not mentor, communicate, lead, and be available when needed. Mentorship is a commitment by both parties, but especially by the mentor, and the relationship assumes a great deal of trust in both directions. We trust our staff to do their jobs, correctly, professionally, and with integrity. Our mentees should trust us to guide them and be a support system and role model. In the end, that is the essence of mentorship: trust, communication, and feedback. The rest will fall into place.

When I started this missive, I noted that I was not formally mentored but learned by watching and working alongside my superiors. My guess is that much of today's mentorship, more than forty years later, is still informal. That is not to say, however, that those of us in leadership positions should not consider being a mentor, even if that word is not used in the relationship. I hope that the suggestions presented here will be useful to my colleagues as they define their working relationship with both new and mid-career librarians on their staff. Bob Goshen, a leadership coach and motivational speaker, says, "Leaders . . . should influence others . . . in such a way that it builds people up, encourages and edifies them so they can duplicate this attitude in others." We have a responsibility to coach, teach, guide, and inspire those who report to us. Their success and the success of our library depend upon us doing so and doing it thoughtfully and well.

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Editor's note: We were especially happy to have Bob Seal write this editorial because mentoring is an important part of *portal*'s philosophy. Unlike some professional journals, *portal* does not pride itself on a high rejection rate. Instead, we understand that

authors—particularly first-time authors—may benefit from mentoring. When a submission undergoes the double-blind review process, *portal* referees often take the role of experienced colleagues coaching their early-career counterparts to ready the submission for publication. Referees provide detailed assessments, suggesting ways to strengthen a manuscript, and review the article again after the author has revised it. Such mentoring has produced successful, even prize-winning, results.

Marianne Ryan
Editor, *portal: Libraries and the Academy*