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"The Visible College"

LING HWEY JENG, EDITOR

Alma Mater Mentoring: Library Science Alumni Promote School and Profession

Pamela Dragovich and Stephen Margeton

Traditionally, library school alumni activities at the Catholic University of America are planned and implemented by its Alumni Board which is elected by national ballot. Elected members meet monthly throughout the academic year to plan activities and participate in university events. These activities and events include attending homecoming and various honors convocations as well as sponsoring lectures and receptions. Mentoring, a quasi-academic activity, also appears to fit appropriately among the Alumni Board's activities, but before discussing program details, it is necessary to define some terms.

The Who's, Why's, and What's of Mentoring

Who is a mentor? Jennifer Cargill, associate university librarian at Rice University, Houston, Texas, writes that a mentor is usually a knowledgeable professional who displays many talents:

Developer of skills, developer of careers, promoter of professional activities, counselor . . . [builder of] bridges between the present leaders and those new to the profession or seeking guidance.¹

Others have reaffirmed this position,

suggesting that mentors are really like teachers, and that they work best when imitating such academic role models as tutor or coach.² Still others believe that mentors serve a dual purpose of promoting the individual and offering a professional safety net:

Mentors promote proteges' career advancement by providing orientation, coaching, protection, and visibility. They also perform a psychological function, offering counseling, friendship, role modeling, and reassurance.³

While mentors sometime inform, and at other times counsel, they are at all times a source of reliable information. Whatever mentorship philosophy is adopted, there is little doubt that mentors are useful guides through the ever-expanding and complex world of library and information science.

Why mentoring in library school? The Alumni Board identified four excellent reasons. A mentor can provide career guidance, encouragement during the academic program, advice on important course and field work, and opportunities to make professional contacts.⁴

Career Guidance and Encouragement

Is there a real distinction between the

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role of "faculty advisor" and the role of "alumni mentor"? While academics usually view career direction from the outside, mentors know employment from the inside. Faculty advisors usually assist students in planning their course of studies. Their advice frequently centers on curriculum requirements and learning opportunities, with a modest measure of career planning.

Mentors, on the other hand, inform students about career and employment opportunities from experience. They are reliable conduits of information about private and public employment, trends in job markets, what to expect in the way of job satisfaction, writing for publication, and what can be gained from joining a professional organization.

Although mentors are not expected to place students in positions, they do frequently counsel students about realistic job expectations and suggest techniques for making professional contacts. For example, experienced mentors know that skills marketable in one library may not be salable in another. They can help students recognize these differences and tailor individual approaches to gain access to employers. Mentors may help students size up job opportunities by reflecting on the philosophy of the parent organization, the nature of the position, the staff work ethic, the

likely patron constituency and, of course, the levels of remuneration.

Mentors can also offer encouragement throughout the academic program.⁵ Encouragement takes many forms, from sharing opinions about the value of a particular course in light of one's career plans, to helping to develop a library research project, to discussing prospects for a "practicum." In any of these scenarios, a library science student can benefit from the insight of an experienced librarian mentor.

Mentors are also great promoters of affiliation with professional associations while still in school. A mentor who is active in one or more professional associations can provide students with insight into the activities and explain how involvement can expose the student to a wide variety of learning opportunities and an entire network of library professionals. After all, why wait until after graduation to become aware of associations which can be vital links in helping to identify interests, skills, and career goals?

Some employers believe that the most important advice a mentor can give to a student is on the mechanics of writing a good resume and preparing for a successful job interview. Frequently employers must read poorly prepared vitae that provide too little or too much information. Indeed, many employers

have come to prefer a standard pattern of information on resumes, and those resumes that detour from the accepted path may face a more critical review.

Although a good resume may land a job interview, positions have been lost by students through careless preparation and lackluster interviewing. Making the right impression on a first interview does not necessarily mean projecting a perfect image. Employers allow for interview jitters, but they do expect basic interview decorum. There are many useful hints which can be discussed with a mentor, from dressing properly and emphasizing relevant job history to projecting a positive, energetic image—all of which can make the interviewing process more successful.

The Mentoring Program Start-Up

At what point can a student benefit most from mentoring? In other words, how many credits of the library science program should have been completed? Is completion of core courses sufficient? Is it preferable for students to be halfway through their academic career? Should they be closer to graduation? This was the first hurdle for the Alumni Board's newly created Mentoring Committee to consider. For its first foray into mentoring, the committee decided to offer mentors to students who were about to take comprehensive examinations. The committee reasoned that the number of graduating students, then about twenty-five, was manageable, and that this group would benefit most from immediate career planning. The program got under way through bulletin board advertisements, letters of invitation in student mailboxes, and appropriate response forms. Mentors for this

first group of students were selected from the current Alumni Board, all of whom were eager to volunteer.

The initial response to a written solicitation was modest but encouraging—eleven mentors and nine students. When the response forms came in, they were reviewed by the Mentoring Committee with the assistance of a library science faculty member. Next, matches of students to mentors were made using various criteria: similarities in student and mentor responses, student course selections, career interests, the mentor's professional experience, etc. Once the matches were determined, letters indicating the matches were mailed to mentors and students. These letters provided basic information about each individual's background and professional interests. From this point on the Mentoring Committee left it up to the students and mentors to make contact with each other.

“Proof of the Pudding Is in the Tasting”

As the academic year progressed, each of the nine mentors was contacted by a Mentoring Committee member to see how the mentoring process was progressing. Although there were some rough edges, usually in arranging the important first contact, the program, as visualized, seemed to work.⁶ Most of the students contacted their mentor at least once; several students spoke with mentors on more than one occasion. The help most students frequently requested was to have their mentors review resumes in various stages of drafting. Another popular topic was qualifying for federal employment, in particular the mechanics of completing

Form OF 612, an employment form required for most federal librarian positions. Students also asked about employment opportunities in special libraries. TV news anchors will be happy to note that news and broadcasting libraries seemed to be most popular.

From the start the Mentoring Committee's motto was "keep it simple." Thus the committee was not at all disappointed by the program's modest beginnings. "You are fulfilling a very real student need," recounted one newly assigned mentor, "by just confirming impressions about the existing job market over the telephone."

The Mentoring Committee's assessment of the first year's progress included several recommendations to make the program stronger. First, the committee suggested that mentors contact students earlier in their academic career because graduating students have many obligations that compete for their time and energy. After much discussion, the committee agreed that eighteen credit hours would be deemed sufficient for students to benefit from the mentoring experience. Second, new methods of publicizing the program were suggested: informal discussion groups, colorful flyers, and humorous posters, to name a few. Third, it was suggested that more student input would help guide the committee in evaluating the program. Likewise, mentors should be asked to describe in more detail their overall experience in working with students.

In conclusion, the Alumni Board believes that the mentoring program holds great promise to launch library science students on successful careers. The board recognizes that mentoring will give students an opportunity to

maximize their exposure to career opportunities as they interact with successful alumni, not to mention networking with the professional library community. The Alumni Board also hopes that mentoring will generate greater alumni involvement in the activities of the library school. However, the ultimate mentoring goal, one might boldly suggest, is for students to come out of the mentoring experience as library leaders of the future and mentors of tomorrow.

References and Notes

1. Jennifer Cargill, "Developing Library Leaders: The Role of Mentorship," *Library Administration and Management* 3 (Winter 1989): 13.
2. Beverly J. Bernstein and Beverly L. Kaye, "Teacher, Tutor, Colleague, Coach," *Personnel Journal* 65 (Nov. 1986): 44.
3. Jamiene S. Studley, "Management: Mentoring Means More Than Being Pals," *Legal Times* 14, no. 30 (Dec. 1991): 24, citing Kathy E. Kram, *Mentoring at Work*, 1985, at 53.
4. In addition to these four reasons there are others. A mentor can also be a "positive role model, developer of talent, opener of doors, protector, sponsor, and successful leader," as noted by Jennifer Cargill, *supra* note 1, at 12; however, these seem more characteristic of a work-related membership. Also see Joan Kaplowitz, "Mentoring Library School Students—A Survey of Participants in the UCLA's GSLIS Mentor Program," *Special Libraries* 83 (Fall 1992): 219, in which the author indicates that students "learn about the political dynamics of the profession."
5. Joan Kaplowitz, "Mentoring Library School Students—A Survey of Participants in the UCLA's GSLIS Mentor Program," *Special Libraries* 83 (Fall 1992): 219–33.
6. Mentors usually acknowledge a bit of

awkwardness during the first encounter with the student. Some mentors like to diffuse initial awkwardness by meeting in informal settings, such as at lunch at the Library of Congress cafeteria, or over punch at the annual alumni/student Christmas reception.

Educators and library school students who would like to write about teaching methodology, review relevant books, abstract articles, or comment on specific teaching methods are invited to send their contributions to Ling Hwey Jeng, Assistant Professor, School of Library and Information Science, University of Kentucky, 502 King Library South, Lexington, KY 40506-0039. Contributions should be 1,000 to 1,500 words.