Peer Mentoring in Academic Librarianship: Service and Connections can Lead to Improved Scholarly Output

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Abstract

In the dynamic field of librarianship, mentorship plays a pivotal role in fostering professional development, knowledge sharing, and community building. This article explores the multifaceted benefits of peer mentorship and how it can serve academic librarians who may feel underprepared for the academy and its scholarship requirements (and opportunities), whether they are on a tenure-track or not. Typically, a traditional mentor-mentee relationship has a power imbalance but what this article describes is a peer mentoring relationship between a newer academic librarian and a mid-career, tenured librarian that provides support and engagement for both parties and is ultimately successful in helping them reach major career milestones. This type of mentorship has both partners actively contributing and receiving support. The case study shares strategies for identifying a suitable peer mentor, logistical considerations, best practices, and demonstrates the numerous benefits of peer mentorship.

Article Type: Case study

Introduction

Librarianship stands out as a highly collaborative and supportive profession, yet librarians can find themselves isolated within their institutions, often performing in multiple roles, especially in smaller institutions. While peer mentors in all types of librarianship are recommended by the authors, this article is geared towards academic librarians who are required to produce scholarship that may involve presentations at conferences, publishing papers, or other research endeavors. While the scholarship requirement is not frequently required of public or K-12 librarians,

librarians in these settings may still be involved in research and publications. Either way, a peer mentor relationship among public or K-12 librarians might operate differently than what is described; the recommendations may need to be modified for librarians in these types of libraries.

This article includes a case study of an organic peer mentor relationship between an early-career academic librarian and a mid-career, post-tenure librarian navigating uncertainties about obtaining full professorship. This relationship offers distinct advantages over the traditional mentor-mentee dyad, with both

partners actively contributing and receiving support. The revelation that others struggle with work-life balance underscores the universality of these challenges. It provides a platform for candidly discussing the obstacles to writing, handling rejections, and uneven contributions from writing partners, as well as for managing diverse and expanding responsibilities. Research should be enjoyable and fulfilling, especially when scholars foster open conversations about these challenges, model overcoming setbacks, and have someone to celebrate with. This case study demonstrates the impact of a strong peer mentorship and provides recommendations of what to consider when seeking a peer mentor.

Literature Review

Mentorship benefits can include connection with another librarian, investment in professional development, and career growth. The benefits of mentoring may far outweigh the time commitment and include increased productivity, greater diversity, and deeper connection to the workplace and librarianship (Emery et al., 2022).

The scholarly literature highlights the many benefits of mentorship at all stages of career development. Burke and Tumbleson (2019) highlight how all librarians regardless of their career stage can be supported through mentorship with early librarians being assisted in their understanding of tenure requirements to middle and senior career librarians in succession planning. Burke and Tumbleson's (2019) survey explores 14 options for types of mentoring experiences from cross-generational mentoring to formal mentoring programs to peer mentorship. Formal or traditional mentoring usually pairs an experienced individual with a novice and the experienced individual guides the mentorship. Vilz and Poremski's (2015) perceptions of support study highlighted that the majority of librarians found their mentor at their institution through a formal process and the surveyed librarians believed a personal mentor helps when navigating the tenure process. There are benefits to traditional mentoring relationships.

Peer mentoring, on the other hand, involves peers meeting in a group setting to exchange ideas, provide feedback and encouragement, and participate in group learning (Lorenzetti & Powelson, 2015). Cirasella and Smale (2011) highlight that peer mentoring can "provide junior library faculty with support and advice along the road to tenure" in CUNY's Junior Faculty Research Roundtable (p. 98). Burke and Tumbleson (2019) showcase other benefits of peer mentoring: "A number of mentees spoke of situations where working with a peer mentor in their libraries led to the design of research studies and helped them develop skills in publishing, presenting, or grant-writing" (p. 10). Eisler (2017) articulated the impact and importance of peer mentoring in her career: "The youth services librarians taught me the power of peer-to-peer mentorship and that often you can learn as much from your peers as you can from more executive leadership" (p. 44). King and Winn (2017) studied the effectiveness of a peer-mentoring relationship of early career managers in academic librarians and concluded that it "can provide librarians with the opportunity to set and evaluate their achievement of professional goals, critically reflect on and question their professional practice and establish positive working relationships with librarians at other academic libraries" (p.16). Emery et al. (2022) highlighted how using a feminist lens can lead to a successful peer mentorship group for mid-career librarians. Wallace et al. (2022) emphasize applying a feminist lens to mentorship, such as removing oppressive power structures, providing care, and recognizing individuals' lived experiences.

Among the numerous benefits mentioned throughout the literature, there is a large portion dedicated to the support of librarians through the tenure process (ACRL IS, 2019). However, it is largely focused on the development of new librarians. In Lorenzetti and Powelson's (2015) scoping review, it was discovered that "28 programs [out of 40 programs] were specifically designed to facilitate the development of junior or untenured librarians" (p. 2). Gerke et al. (2023) argue formal mentoring needs to be

offered beyond tenure, regardless of interest in further career advancement to support post-tenure librarians' success in reaching their goals, arguing that "libraries should work to resist cultures that tacitly or explicitly discourage the use of career supports" (p. 856). Their article focuses on mentorship for researching and publishing, which after all, "is required of academic librarians," and thus "should be "considered 'normal' work responsibilities to be conducted at work, not 'extra' responsibilities to be conducted on personal time" but their participants commented on how it is it impossible to conduct research at work, how they feel frowned upon to use a sabbatical, and consequently research and write on days off meant for travel and vacation (Gerke et al., 2023, p. 856). In 2020, Gerke et al. explored the obstacles hindering scholarly progress for librarians including escalating responsibilities, and a feeling of obligation to allocate time and opportunities to junior faculty for their promotion. It takes time to be part of a mentorship either as the mentee or mentor as well as the desire for this type of relationship. An individual might feel they need support but do not volunteer to be a part of a formal mentorship program because "that is not for them" or they feel like being a mentee highlights their lack of abilities and reinforces any imposter syndrome they might have. As Johnson and Smith (2019) note that nearly everyone suffers from imposter syndrome, having "self-doubt, insecurity, and perpetual trepidation that their inadequacies will be discovered" and even becoming anxious over successes and accomplishments (para. 3). As Williams (2019) mentions, "mid-career librarians may feel uncomfortable seeking out mentorship and support as they are assumed to have already established their own support systems" (p. 172). Addressing the misconception that tenured librarians no longer require support could encourage junior librarians to engage in supporting senior colleagues and enter a peer mentoring relationship despite different stages in career.

Acknowledging challenges is vital for cultivating impactful mentorship experiences that are

beneficial for both mentors and mentees. Challenges may arise in establishing, finding, and maintaining any mentorship. The power dynamics of the mentor-mentee relationship can be a significant concern. Keyse et al. (2003) emphasize needs for trust and a safe space for vulnerability and suggest "to find someone in the know, and someone who can be trusted not to note in one's personnel file the depth and breadth of the stupidity of the inquiry" (p. 378). Goodsett (2021) elaborated that three traits are needed for a successful mentorship: relationship commitment, mutual respect, and a balance of trust and honesty. Mentoring programs created within the workplace can have issues where mentoring is a required job duty, without any support or training on how to be a mentor (Burke & Tumbleson, 2019; Lorenzetti, 2016). Within a smaller institution, there simply might not be enough individuals to create a peer mentorship or have a mentor without concerns about power dynamics (Cirasella & Smale, 2011; Skaggs & McMullin, 2022). An incompatible pairing can occur in formal mentorship, such as lack of relevant experience, inconsistent communication, and unclear expectations and goals (Burke & Tumbleson, 2019). If a mentorship is not compatible, either individual, should disengage as a bad mentoring experience can cause harm, such as microaggressions, and potentially cause individuals to leave the profession (Burke & Tumbleson, 2019).

Lastly, academic librarians in tenure-track jobs are expected to participate in professional service organizations such as the American Library Association (ALA). The Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) (2021) lists professional service as a professional responsibility in "A Standard for the Appointment, Promotion, and Tenure of Academic Librarians." The time and labor in some service commitments can be undervalued and unrecognized. Wallace et al. (2022) advocate for the acknowledgment and appreciation of invisible labor. Their assertion highlights the importance of recognizing and rewarding the often-overlooked contributions made by

librarians in their professional roles. New librarians are often encouraged to join professional associations (Sassen, 2023), but are also advised not to let service take away time from librarianship and scholarship (Cox et al., 2023). Sassen (2023) recommends being selective with service opportunities as to not negatively affect scholarship and current obligations or get burnt out. Sassen (2023) provides a path for new librarians to understand association service, identifying opportunities that match one's professional skills and interests to be motivated to fulfill the service obligations. Cox et al. (2023) stress the importance of professional service in gaining a profound understanding of one's role and showcasing a strong commitment to the profession. Involvement in service activities offers opportunities for networking, leadership development, personal growth, and organizational influence. Moreover, participating in professional service enables librarians to enrich scholarship, promote learning, contribute to the profession's ongoing development, and engage in mentoring relationships (Cox et al., 2023).

Case Study

The mentoring relationship described in this case study is one that grew out of a service connection between a junior librarian, Ruth, and a tenured librarian, Heather. This case study sheds light on the necessity for mentors and the value of pairing individuals at different career stages within the academic library setting to address the needs of librarians at various career stages, promote professional development, and cultivate a supportive environment conducive to growth and success in the academic library profession.

Ruth had just taken her first academic librarian role in a new state and joined the ACRL Distance and Online Learning Section (DOLS). Through the work of the DOLS Research and Publications Committee, Ruth met Heather, a tenured academic librarian only slightly considering applying for post-tenure promotion.

Ruth and Heather are at two different institutions in two different states (and time zones) at different career points and life stages. Beyond being in the same Zoom room for the committee meetings, their first interactions were based around the committee's projects; they worked on a DOLS "Top 5 Articles" post as well as a Twitter chat event that fall semester. They continued to work together through DOLS but were looking to be more accountable in their research journey. In 2021, they started having monthly check-ins where they would discuss their accomplishments, goals for next time, and any upcoming or interesting conferences. Additionally, this one-hour meeting included discussion about recent articles, things that were occurring in their workplaces, and/or other professional concerns as they arose.

Scheduling the recurring meetings via Zoom ensured that their calendars were blocked and that they had the immediate link to the running Google Doc with the very simple agenda. The agenda for every meeting was: Ruth's Achievements, Goals, and Upcoming Conferences and Heather's Achievements, Goals, and Upcoming Conferences. This plan focused on the heart of this mentoring relationship: scholarship. It consisted of what each librarian had accomplished, what they were planning to do or needed to work on, and what they were going to do next. Keeping an agenda allowed for bouncing ideas, sharing articles or think pieces, and discussing professional development opportunities that might be good for the other person. Heather alerted Ruth to the professional development opportunity at the Institute for Research Design in Librarianship (IRDL) to help hone her research abilities after some vulnerable discussions and recognized skill gaps. It was helpful for both authors to hear from the other on "What would you do in this situation?" as well as publication outlet consideration.

By having a peer mentor, the authors gained a way to dedicate time for reflection and take accountability in the scholarship process, as well as serve as a cheerleader when roadblocks

appeared. Peer mentors can help fight imposter syndrome through sharing honest, open reflections about rejections; scheduling time to write; and aiding in the navigation of competing responsibilities. A peer mentor may see additional connections in the other's work; for example, Ruth inspired Heather into an instructional collaboration research paper with a professor after sending her a relevant article and discussion. The reciprocal relationship inherent in peer mentorship motivates both individuals to make meaningful contributions to scholarship.

For Ruth and Heather: both share a common interest in bolstering research productivity as practitioner librarians and both find their research closely connected to their job responsibilities. Ruth's additional interests are library programming and events, play in learning, and open educational resources. Heather's research interests are user behavior, usability, and the impact of K-12 librarians. Even though their specialized research interests differ, their backgrounds and general work in the profession allowed them to both be sounding boards for each other.

Ruth and Heather found their monthly check-ins allowed them to prioritize reflection; have accountability in their research journey; and share ideas, articles, and opportunities for professional development, ultimately inspiring each other to contribute meaningfully to the field of librarianship.

Discussion

Connections for a mentorship pairing can be formed in various settings including conferences, social media, formal programs, and committee work. Relationships develop based on different learning styles, stages of career, and leadership styles (Lowe-Wincentsen, 2017). Historically these connections were made in person, but online mentoring networks have been documented in the literature since the late 1990s (Reese & Hawkins, 1999). As communication technologies advanced, so did communication preferences, and mentoring relationships have developed via social media (Willemse, 2017).

Professional organizations provide opportunities for mentors through service or committee work and offer formal structured mentorship programs, but also allow for organic mentorship opportunities. For instance, the authors' peer mentorship started organically after collaborating and connecting on a project through a service organization. In contrast, formalized programs such as the ACRL DOLS Mentoring Committee require the authors to assess their fit for the mentorship service before signing up to participate. Additionally, it is important to note that professional service is in each authors' job description and is therefore regarded by their administration as work that can be done during business hours. Meeting and working on the project for the DOLS Research and Publications Committee allowed the authors the opportunity to verify compatibility prior to entering a peer mentorship. As Cox et al. (2023) stated, professional service participation supports librarians' development and scholarship. Further, providing support for research and scholarship creates a space for fostering and elevating the academic culture of librarianship.

Successful mentorship connections thrive with a well-defined framework. As emphasized in Burke and Tumbleson's (2019) survey, the essential components of effective mentorship encompass both the logistical aspects of operational procedures and the desired traits mentors should embody. Formal, structured mentorship programs may not allow a trial period between mentees and mentors. There are, however, seemingly limited peer mentorship opportunities (or these opportunities are not clearly marketed for librarians to experience). This scarcity could stem from the considerable time and energy needed from coordinators and promoters to facilitate such opportunities, as well as the challenge of identifying and engaging compatible peers for a mentorship partnership. In that light, the authors recommend an openness of individuals, pending their privilege and ability to be involved with service organizations, to evolve

committee work into networking or asking about mentoring with a compatible peer. While some "might not realize they have entered this career phase," Williams (2019) encourages mid-career librarians to make themselves available for this valuable service opportunity describing the personal benefits in that "mentoring others helps you stay on track with your own career aspirations and recognize your own needs" (p.172).

Many librarians might not recognize the potential for peer mentorship as there are mentoring relationships that develop that are not labeled as such. Eisler's (2017) personal journey highlights the lack of labeling mentoring relationships: "Never once did I call any of them mentors, although in retrospect they were some of my greatest mentors" (p. 44). Initially, Heather and Ruth did not classify their relationship as peer mentoring, but rather as a series of accountability and support meetings. Williams (2019) describes an entire mentoring spectrum and advises finding supportive people by helping those you want to see succeed. Additionally, Williams (2019) suggests librarians have multiple mentoring relationships, as mentoring does require emotional labor and that relying on one person for all professional needs is neither respectful nor fair. Eisler (2017) argues that a successful mentoring relationship requires professional distance which can allow for more vulnerability. The authors' experiences echo this sentiment as being at different institutions created space for transparency and honesty without any fear of reprisal. According to a Chronicle of Higher Education Report by Carlson (2022), the expanding complexity of information necessitates librarians to broaden their education and duties to cover a more extensive range of activities. Thus, not all librarians can connect on every professional interest or responsibility, especially in a profession with such diverse and niche areas of study.

In the peer mentoring relationship described by the authors, many common issues that affect librarians at the different stages of their careers were discussed. Therefore, it is crucial to

consider mentorship beyond familiar professional circles and connecting with mentors outside of one's institution. To address trust concerns in peer mentoring, King and Winn (2017) propose the use of cross-institutional peer dyads, emphasizing that such partnerships help alleviate apprehensions related to trust, an essential factor in effective mentoring relationships.

Due to a deep trust, the authors were able to be their authentic selves with one another and communicate if they needed to move meetings or change expectations, because of their personal lives or other professional conflicts. Burke and Tumbleson (2019) articulated, "Mentoring experience is mutual. Mentors also recognize and normalize fear and uncertainty as part of life and the workplace" (p. 10). Emery et al. (2022) reminds that "developmental peer relationships designed to enhance productivity and reach professional goals while also recognizing each other as whole people with multifaceted lives and needs" (p. 221). The ability to be vulnerable and be seen as a person led this peer mentorship pair to discuss concerns at each institution, as well as broader trends in higher education. Even though the authors have a beneficial and mutual peer mentorship at present, if either sees the peer mentorship as no longer mutually beneficial, they can end the mentorship.

Boundary setting is a common struggle for librarians, especially in a society where one is always "available" via smartphone. It is important to model and reinforce positive work-life boundaries and balance within the mentorship. Farkas (2021) described the importance of workers "feeling supported in setting boundaries" and "feeling like they can be their real, human selves" (para. 6). It is no surprise that early-career faculty are advised to be selective about service and guard their time. Post-tenure librarians, as noted by Couture et al. (2020), have stated that both research and service are deemed "less central or important" to their positions and that "administrative appointment workloads were excessively demanding, leaving

insufficient time for research" (p. 684). The authors served as each other's "no committee," a third party recommended by Rockquemore and Ocampo (2022) to review all service invites, exploring their pros and cons. At times, the authors celebrated when they said "no" to an opportunity, recognizing that this boundary setting would allow them to focus on their own scholarship and other professional priorities. Literature provides strategies to say "no" to service (Bernstein, 2017) and even instruction requests (White, 2023). Occasionally, the authors would practice saying "no" by discussing what a "yes" would look like in their life. For example, if "yes" to a service commitment that meets monthly for an hour for the next six months means that one is losing six-to-twelve hours to prepare and meet, which is lost writing time. By having a "no committee," the authors guaranteed and forced themselves to reflect on each opportunity, especially if it would allow them to meet their professional goals. They followed Rockquemore and Ocampo's (2022) advice to take time before opting in to a service or other request.

In addition to navigating issues surrounding service, peer mentoring, as highlighted by O'Meara and Stromquist (2016), offers various advantages to academic women. It contributes to agency and empowerment in academic settings, challenging gendered organizational norms and disrupting established practices. Terosky et al. (2014) also observed the impact on agency, emphasizing the absence of positive mentoring or feedback for tenured professors, and leading individuals to believe that career advancement is unattainable. Moreover, Terosky et al. (2014) emphasized that mentoring plays a crucial role in building professional networks, creating new opportunities, deriving fulfillment and satisfaction from assisting others, gaining fresh perspectives, and fostering career development. Wallace et al. (2022) discuss the variety of informal mentoring experiences that work "against entrenched systems of power" and will help to "create a better profession that upholds the values claimed by librarians and our organizations" (p. 104).

Peer mentors can engage in conversations around the changing landscape of higher education as the reduction in workforce and increasing work responsibilities can easily lead to stress and burnout. To engage in deeper conversations about the profession, the authors allowed themselves time and space to reflect and discuss. Farkas' (2021) explanation of her journey to slow librarianship states, "people need to allow time to reflect, to learn, and to be creative" (para. 15). Having regularly scheduled meetings provided the authors with this valuable ability to slow down and recognize their accomplishments and milestones. Frequently, when talking about their achievements from the last meeting, the authors said, "Oh, I forgot I did that." These meetings also helped with the authors' identifying with each other at times and calling out stress and vocational awe. Ettarh (2018) warned the profession about the dangers of vocational awe, and how librarians inadvertently perpetuate the idea that librarians are infallible and always available (Ettarh & Vidas, 2022). This forced reflective time gave the authors a chance to be mindful and aware of the internal and external pressures of the profession in order to push back on those creeping pressures.

The other side of vocational awe is challenging assumptions and exposing blind spots to make sure librarians create a welcoming and inclusive environment. Librarians pre- and post-tenure have the capacity to create a more diverse and inclusive environment. However, the literature documents the burden of addressing the lack of diversity and equity and how that would disproportionately burden those with marginalized identities. They not only face the consequences of this disparity but also bear the brunt of the labor required to rectify these issues (Cox et al., 2023). Occasionally, the authors challenged each other's assumptions and learned and problem-solved ways to improve themselves or situations; for example, they discussed how marginalized groups are often overloaded with tasks, especially for equity, diversity, and inclusion and how they could reduce this additional labor.

Conclusion

The mentoring relationship between Ruth, a junior librarian, and Heather, a tenured librarian, exemplifies the vital role of mentorship in professional growth and development within academic libraries. This case study emphasizes the significance of mentors and the benefits of pairing individuals at different career stages to foster a supportive environment conducive to success. Peer mentoring for librarians, particularly in scholarly endeavors, can have a wonderful outcome. However, it is important for it to be the right peer mentor for an individual at a particular time in their career. A mentor might be suitable for one project, career stage, or an entire career. Going into a mentorship, recognize that it might be short in duration. It can be very helpful for peer mentors to be at different institutions to provide new insights and perspective, limit other work priorities or hash out work issues from being the sole discussion, and allow for less worry about institutional power dynamics. Remember that peer mentors at differing stages of their careers can also be helpful. Imposter syndrome should not hold back individuals from seeking mentorship; each person brings a unique viewpoint and valuable contributions to the relationship. The "novice" brings a new viewpoint and a different take, which with wisdom they do not recognize they possess and can make a mentorship mutually beneficial relationship despite experience in the profession.

When seeking a peer mentor, understand why one is looking for a peer mentor and where/how their needs will be met. An accountability buddy is very different from a peer mentor. Compatibility between the peer mentor and the individual seeking guidance, from working styles to shared interests in librarianship and professional pursuits, is key. Once one finds a peer mentor, create a system of regular check-ins while being realistic about how life can impact check-ins and abilities to support each other. Finding the right peer mentor enriches and expands one's professional practice. The authors hope that this story can empower librarians to organize their own mentorship as they pursue professional growth.

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