

## WHAT'S IN IT FOR ME? MENTORING AS A BRIDGE TO SPAN PERSONAL AND CAREER DEVELOPMENT

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## **BIOGRAPHIES**

### **Dr Gillian Hallam**

Gillian teaches in the Graduate Diploma in Library and Information Studies course at QUT. In her earlier career she was a corporate librarian in the business/legal information sectors. She is a currently Convenor of the ALIA Quorum and QUILL committees. Gillian has established the QUT/ALIA Queensland Student Mentoring Program for students in the final semester of their studies, a program which won a QUT award for Innovation in Teaching in 2002. In addition, QUT has funded a research project to examine the personal and professional development outcomes of mentoring in the LIS profession. The research is also encompassing other models of mentoring, such as the group mentoring program run by ALIA in Western Australia.

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Karen is Convenor of the ALIA Queensland Mentoring Program and Coordinator of the Professional Program. She has worked in libraries for over 15 years and is currently the Manager of the University of Queensland Gatton Library

### **Chris Gissing**

Chris has been involved in the ALIA Queensland Mentoring Program since 2000 when she was Program Convenor. More recently Chris has worked on the establishment of the QUT/ALIA mentoring partnership and is undertaking research on mentoring in conjunction with Gillian Hallam. Chris is currently the librarian on staff with ourbrisbane.com. Her career of 20 years in the library and information sector covers academic, public and special libraries in Queensland and the Northern Territory.

## ABSTRACT

The current information environment presents many new challenges for Library Technicians, both professionally and personally. The speed of changes in the workplace often makes it difficult to pause and reflect on what all these changes really mean in our working and personal lives. With the focus on understanding the needs of our clients so that we can deliver improved services, we should not overlook the need to understand what we already have to offer as individuals and how we can further develop ourselves to meet the diverse challenges we face.

Mentoring has long been recognised as providing valuable opportunities for personal and professional growth. In the context of *Bridging Services: embracing reality*, therefore, there has never been a better time to explore the potential for mentoring in the library and information sector. A mentoring program can offer a relationship of support and understanding which effectively adds a personal dimension to career development. ALIA's Mentoring Program in Queensland is making a significant contribution to the development of a highly trained workforce in the library and information sector, with a strong commitment to high quality standards.

The presenters highlight the specific benefits for Library Technicians who engage in mentoring, including the opportunities to develop new networks, enhance communication skills and fast track skill development. Research currently being undertaken to better understand the personal and professional learning outcomes of both mentors and mentees is presented, as well as guidance on how Library Technicians can join the upcoming ALIA program.

## INTRODUCTION

Mentoring... The title of this paper builds on the theme of the conference: "What's in it for me? Mentoring as a bridge to span personal and career development". When you hear the term 'mentoring', what springs to mind? What is mentoring all about? Much has been written about the topic, yet it remains rather mysterious – is it *secret women's – or men's – business*? Both the research literature and more informal sources, such as a whole range of websites about mentoring, offer a considerable range of definitions and interpretations. While dictionary entries for the word 'mentoring' generally include the idea of trust and experience, the scope of definitions in the literature covers concepts such as leadership, growth, development, advice, support, coaching, counselling and motivation (Gehrke, 2001; Gibbons, n.d.). However, we feel that the following definition captures the essence of the mentoring programs currently available to library and information professionals:

Mentoring is a supportive learning relationship between a caring individual who shares his/her knowledge, professional experience and insights with another individual who is ready and willing to benefit from this exchange to develop his or her skills, confidence and abilities and to enrich his or her professional journey. (Faure, 2000, p.3)

Faure has highlighted the importance of mentoring as a reciprocal and beneficial relationship: "Mentoring is a long term relationship that meets a developmental need, helps develop full

potential, and benefits all partners, mentor, mentee and organisation” (Faure, as cited in Gibbons, n.d.) The concept of the mutually beneficial relationship is central to the work of Beyene, Sanchez and Ballou (2002). A good mentoring program can therefore offer a relationship of support and understanding which effectively adds a personal dimension to your career development.

This paper will introduce you to the mentoring opportunities available to you through the professional association, outlining the program run locally by the Mentoring Committee of the ALIA Quorum group here in Queensland, but referring you also to programs run in other States and Territories. The findings from a current research project, funded by the Queensland University of Technology, which examines the perceived benefits of mentoring programs and strives to develop an understanding of best practice, are also discussed.

## **THE PROFESSIONAL PROGRAM**

The Australian Library and Information Association (ALIA) supports a number of mentoring programs across the country. In this State, the ALIA Queensland Mentoring Program has two streams: the QUT/ALIA Queensland Student Mentoring Program and the Professional Mentoring Program. The Student Program is tailored for students enrolled in the Professional Practice unit of the Graduate Diploma in Library and Information Studies course at the Queensland University of Technology (QUT), and so is a distinctive program. The Professional Program, on the other hand, is open to all current members of ALIA, working in all areas of the library and information industry, and so this includes both qualified library technicians and librarians. The program is facilitated by a committee convened under the auspices of the ALIA Quorum group, with all committee members and program participants volunteering their time. The 2002-2003 program had twelve participants.

The program runs from February to November each year. In previous years the program covered the financial year, July-June, but for a number of reasons it made sense to bring it into line with the calendar year. This means the next intake, for the 2004 program, will take place in October/November this year. Library technicians can apply to join the program either as mentors or mentees, simply by completing the relevant questionnaire on the ALIA Queensland Mentoring website at <http://www.alia.org.au/members-only/groups/quorum/mentoring/>. As this is now located within the ‘members only’ area of the ALIA website, you will need your membership number and password to access the questionnaire.

Once applications close, the committee meets to match mentors with mentees in order to establish the mentoring pairs. To date the program has only used pairings, so one-on-one, but group mentoring may be introduced in the future. The Graduate Mentoring Program (GuMP) in Western Australia, for example, runs as a group mentoring program to support new graduates. In the one-on-one model, however, pairs are matched based on the skills and experience that the mentee wishes to develop and then correlated against the skills and experience of the potential mentors.

The Queensland program is officially launched with a function which gives the participants the opportunity to meet both in a group context and as a pair. During the launch a range of issues are discussed, such as:

- Benefits of mentoring to both mentors and mentees
- Key activities for mentors and mentees
- Attributes of mentors
- Relationship guidelines
- Concerns, pitfalls and how to overcome hurdles
- The value of reflective practice to deepen the learning experience.

The pairs then go on to complete the Mentor/Mentee Agreement. This agreement is a written document, signed by both parties and the committee, which provides the mentoring partners the opportunity to discuss and record on the agreement the following:

- Goals of the partnership, including mentee and mentor objectives
- Understanding of the agreement, including initial contact (when, how and by whom), further contact (where and how often) and expectations of both mentor and mentee.

The agreement forms the basis for the relationship and ensures that all parties understand what is required and expected.

During the year-long program the committee organises events such as social get-togethers and professional development or training sessions. These events provide participants in the mentoring program with the opportunity to meet and to network with the group. One development session conducted during the 2002-2003 program, for example, was a workshop on Electronic Products.

Communication between members of the group is encouraged and supported by the program's own community website. Through this site mentors and mentees are alerted to events of interest, relevant professional readings and can exchange ideas and views through the discussion forum.

In the second half of the program from July to November, joint activities with the QUT/ALIA Queensland Student Mentoring Program are held, so that the opportunity for networking widens.

## **THE RELATIONSHIP**

After attending the launch the pairs are ready to develop their relationship. The committee provides guidance to the pair, but does not stipulate how the relationship should develop. Completing the Mentor/Mentee Agreement is an important process, as it opens up the channels of communication to establish the relationship, starting with both parties agreeing on where and how often to meet. There are no set rules and it solely depends on the pair and their time and commitments. The program is all about flexibility. Survey comments from a previous mentor and mentee highlight this point:

*The program's strength lies in its flexibility – in allowing pairs to determine their own needs, interests and communication/meeting arrangements, whilst offering support and guidance where needed.*

*I really liked how it was up to the individual pairs to determine when and how to meet and compared to group mentoring or scheduled activities.*

*That way my mentor and I could be flexible in our time together and organise our meetings around our busy lives.*

Some pairs find that they meet face-to-face once a month, other pairs find that phone calls and email suit their needs better. Mentees are advised to plan for their meetings by thinking about issues that they would like to discuss, as this ensures that their meetings have a focus and goals.

## **THE CHALLENGE – FINDING MENTORS**

Every year the mentoring program attracts many applications from participants wishing to be mentees. However, the same cannot be said of participants wishing to be mentors. There appear to be many myths relating to what makes a good mentor, which should be examined more closely to determine their veracity:

*Myth Number 1* – The mentor needs to be a high-level manager or has been in the professional for over 20 years.

*Truth Number 1* – Any qualified and experienced professional can be a mentor. There are many people working in all levels of the profession for varying years of service who could share their vast knowledge with a mentee.

*Myth Number 2* – I will not know all the answers to the mentees' questions

*Truth Number 2* – We are information professionals and, as with any other question, we may not know the answer, but we will know where to find it or know someone to contact who may be able to help.

*Myth Number 3* – What would someone learn from me?

*Truth Number 3* – Whilst networking at a recent ALIA function, the issue of being a mentor was raised and the response was precisely in the words of Myth Number 3. After further discussions it was highlighted that the person in question had a wonderful range of attributes and knowledge – she was well respected, a member of various ALIA committees and groups, had vast networking relationships, excellent communication skills, was a great teacher, had skills in the areas of management, promotion, reference - the list just went on and on.

You need to look within yourself to identify your own personal strengths and weaknesses. A good way to start is to update your resumé, or to undertake a skills analysis. This will start you thinking about the skills, knowledge and experience that you have obtained during your career. We're sure you will be pleasantly surprised about the qualities you already have. There are so many attributes that can make you a good mentor, so think about:

- Your knowledge and experience
- Your ability to facilitate learning
- Your ability to provide feedback
- Your willingness to share
- Your network of professional contacts
- Your well developed communication and interpersonal skills

- Your trustworthiness and your respect for confidentiality.

Think about how you can use these personal capabilities to support the personal and professional development of someone new to the profession, who wants deeper insights into the world of libraries and information management. It is essential to remember that as a mentor, you are not alone. The committee has developed a 'getting started pack' for new mentors to help guide you through the early days of the mentoring relationship. At the beginning of the program, so in February, there will be a workshop to learn how to make the most out of the partnership, and regular sessions will be held after that to offer further guidance throughout the year. The community website provides additional resources as well as the opportunity to explore issues and share ideas through the discussion forum. On top of this, the committee members can be called on at anytime for support.

## **THE BENEFITS**

Mentoring is a popular topic in the literature – both in print and online – although much of the documentation tends to be rather superficial and anecdotal. QUT is currently funding a research project to examine the perceived benefits from the student mentoring program, focusing primarily on the three main areas: learning outcomes, personal development outcomes and professional development outcomes from the perspective of the participants, both mentors and mentees. The research project commenced with an extensive literature review, to examine the different models of mentoring. Given the vast amount of material identified, it was essential, within the context of the student mentoring program, to refine the search process to look specifically for literature covering the 'transitional' models of mentoring (ie mentoring programs that support the mentees in their transition, for example, from university into the workplace), as well as the literature specifically presenting case studies within the LIS field. By focusing on transitional mentoring, it should be noted that the research project would eliminate reviews of workplace or executive succession programs and any school-based mentoring programs, all of which are valuable in other contexts.

This initial focus, however, has broadened as the project has moved into the area of comparative research. As noted, the QUT student program is a transitional model. Earlier in the paper we referred to the program run by ALIA in Western Australia for new graduates, ie post-university, using a group model (GuMP). The GuMP committee has joined the research project, with a joint paper to outline the comparative results to be presented by Gillian Hallam and Carol Newton-Smith at the ALIA Specials, Health and Law Conference in Adelaide in September 2003. We are fortunate here in Australia that there is a growing 'community of practice' linking the different States and Territories to support mentoring for LIS professionals.

The research itself involves capturing the initial expectations of the participants in the mentoring program, and then at the culmination of the program, to track the perceived outcomes. The questionnaire specifically invites respondents to consider the career related areas (eg job application skills, awareness of career opportunities, professional support networks etc), the learning related areas (eg identification of training needs, commitment to lifelong learning, acquisition of new skills and knowledge), and the personal development areas (eg self-esteem, oral communication skills, self-insight etc). The questionnaire also looks at the positive and negative aspects of the program to seek constructive feedback for

future improvements and enhancements. As the research project is currently a work-in-progress, detailed findings will be discussed in the conference presentation itself.

At the beginning of the paper we noted that “Mentoring ... helps develop full potential, and benefits all partners, mentor, mentee and organisation” (Faure, as cited in Gibbons, n.d.). It is commonly agreed that, in the LIS context, there are three groups which benefit from a mentoring program: the mentors, the mentees and the library community. In August 2003 Gillian Hallam and Chris Gissing presented a paper at the International Federation of Library Associations (IFLA) conference in Berlin, reporting on the tangible benefits a successful mentoring program can have on the professional association, ALIA, so the positive aspects do indeed spread far and wide (Hallam and Gissing, 2003).

At a general level, the mentees are often considered the principal beneficiaries from mentoring, with obvious benefits spanning the spectrum of personal, professional and learning outcomes, including:

- Expansion of their knowledge and understanding of LIS skills and practices
- Opportunities to discuss issues
- Honest and constructive feedback
- Increased self-confidence and heightened career aspirations
- Improved communication, negotiation, decision-making and self-appraisal skills
- Increased opportunities for networking

Responses from current and previous program mentees have included:

*Being able to talk about how things are done in different libraries has been educational*

*Hearing how an experienced librarian's career has developed has been valuable*

*My mentor has helped me make some big decisions, as well as provide me with great suggestions on how to handle issues in my workplace*

*I have become more confident, learnt tricks about the profession and made educated decisions about my career*

*It is great to talk to my mentor – I have taken great deals of wisdom from her.*

However, the benefits for the mentor cannot be understated and once again are broad ranging across the different dimensions of personal and professional life:

- Exposure to new ideas and interests
- Incentive to stay current
- Sharing knowledge, skills and experience
- Opportunity to contribute to the profession.
- Greater understanding of the changing skill set being brought into the profession and the potential new employee base

Responses from current and previous program mentors have included:

*Interesting to see the profession from a different point of view  
Deeper understanding of a recent graduate's experience, perceptions and expectations*

*Insight into the management and purpose of another type of library  
Technical tips and tricks*

*Conference feedback*

*Great new friendship*

*I have learnt from my mentee about new library trends and some listening skills*

*I am [now] more aware that my experiences could benefit a new library graduate*

*I respect my mentee for her differing skills and have probably thought a lot more about doing the QUT library course*

*[I have been able to introduce my] mentee to a range of other LIS staff and their differing workplaces and modes of operation*

Beyond this, experience has shown that a mentoring program, such as the ALIA Queensland Professional Program, benefits the library community by making a significant contribution to the development of a highly trained workforce, with a strong commitment to high quality standards. The library and information sector gains from:

- Enhanced professional growth
- Shared of skills and knowledge
- Increased productivity and effectiveness
- Stronger relationships within the profession (eg the mentors themselves may form closer alliances through their involvement in the program)

Comments from previous and current participants in the program include:

*A chance to talk openly and honestly with someone in the profession who is not linked to your place of employment*

*Being able to bounce off ideas/problems with a more experienced person was valuable*

*It offers a great opportunity for those of us who have just entered or recently entered the profession to gain insight and experience from those who know the ropes.*



As noted, findings from the current QUT research project should provide further evidence of the value of mentoring, specifically for the LIS profession. The findings will certainly help the ALIA Queensland Mentoring Committee make informed decisions as they continually seek to refine and improve the mentoring experience for all involved and ultimately to benefit the whole profession.

## CONCLUSION

The theme for today's conference program is the importance of professional interaction and networking, with Jean Bailey's keynote address on "Human doing and human being: the bridge to where?" and Janine Schmidt's paper on the importance of networking. This paper has built on this theme and presents a framework that you can use to reduce professional isolation, build up your network of LIS contacts, develop new skills and acquire new knowledge.

The current information environment is an exciting time for you as a Library Technician, presenting you with many new challenges, both professionally and personally. The speed of change in the workplace often makes it difficult for you to pause and reflect on what all these changes really mean in your working and personal lives. While it is essential that you focus on understanding the needs of your clients so that you can deliver improved services, you should not overlook the need to understand what you already have to offer as an individual and how you can further develop yourself to meet the diverse challenges you face. Mentoring is, we believe, a strong bridge that spans both personal and career development – as Field (2001) indicates:

Mentoring is a natural act in which information professionals should engage. It is part of the ethos of our profession to share knowledge. We are not natural competitors like those within the business world. It is an excellent way for professionals to leverage their expertise and serves as a mechanism to continue their own professional growth (p.273).

A conference such as this is a tremendous professional development opportunity for you, but we also invite you to think about mentoring as an ongoing career development activity which will benefit you both professionally and personally. Perhaps the title of the paper could be rephrased: "What's in it for me? Mentoring as the *springboard* to personal and career development".

## RESOURCES

For details on ALIA mentoring programs throughout Australia, visit <http://www.alia.org.au/education/cpd/mentoring/> .

For information on the ALIA Queensland Mentoring Program, contact:

Karen Seymour [k.seymour@library.uq.edu.au](mailto:k.seymour@library.uq.edu.au)  
or visit

<http://www.alia.org.au/members-only/groups/quorum/mentoring/>

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