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From Support to Solidarity: Recognizing the Nonhierarchical Mentoring Environment Within

by Bridgette Flamenco, Wendy Lee Spaček, and Erin A. Sulla

The 2021 Washington Library Association (WLA) Conference's shift from in-person to virtual was a decision that felt appropriate and not at all surprising, given the uncertainty surrounding large in-person events due to the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic. We, a group of three early-career librarians at Central Washington University (CWU), had been eager to set off on a mini road trip together to bond, gain insight into the field of librarianship, and network with our peers at other institutions. When the conference changed to a virtual format, we decided to make a collaborative document to share our notes on the conference sessions, live-text each other during sessions, and to meet up in the evening after the conference to have dinner, reflect, and socialize.

Although we hold different positions at the CWU Libraries, our duties overlap and interconnect. Bridgette Flamenco is the ACRL Diversity Resident whose duties align closely with that of a non-tenure track research and instruction librarian. She is the library liaison to the Law and Justice and Political Science departments. Her two-year ACRL residency also requires her to complete a project related to first generation students at CWU. Wendy Lee Spaček is the Arts & Humanities Librarian, which is a tenure-track faculty position. Her primary duties include liaising with eight departments in the Arts & Humanities, and providing research support, instruction, and collection development. Erin Sulla is CWU's First Year & Transfer Experience Librarian, which is a tenure-track faculty position. Along with research and instruction duties, she collaborates with units across campus to support incoming students at CWU.



Image courtesy of authors. From left to right: Wendy, Bridgette, and Erin.

Each of us arrived on campus and began our positions within a few months of one another, and we instantly connected professionally based on shared interests in critical information literacy and librarianship, and the fact that we are all recent MLS graduates and early-career librarians. We also connected personally based on our worldviews, relatively similar age, shared humor, identities as members of systemically oppressed groups (Bridgette as BIPOC, Erin and Wendy as LGBTQ+), and complementary personalities. Almost immediately after meeting we began communicating in various formats both in and out of work and connecting around our professional and personal lives.

While the three of us were not able to fulfil our dream of a little road trip over the mountains together, we still found WLA's virtual sessions enlightening. One session in particular left us feeling quite inspired: "Nonhierarchical Mentoring to Disrupt the System!

Creating Communities of Solidarity within the Library," presented by Nicole Gustaven, Shayna Pekala, and Anthony Tardiff. The contributors focused on explaining the creation and function of a nonhierarchical mentoring group at Gonzaga University's Foley Library. An interest in mentoring as a concept, especially in tandem with nonhierarchical power structures, motivated us to attend the session. As explained in the panel, nonhierarchical mentoring is "formed by similarly situated peers" and can be established through "solidarity in difficult times [and] among people with similar experiences."¹ While attending the session, we all immediately recognized the parallels between our budding relationship and the relationships of the presenting librarians. As we all remarked on the similarities to each other on our shared text thread and our shared document, we came to realize that we had already begun to form our own nonhierarchical mentoring group at our institution.

At the Central Washington University Libraries, Bridgette Flamenco is the ACRL Diversity Resident, Wendy Lee Spaček is the Arts & Humanities Librarian, and Erin A. Sulla is the First Year & Transfer Experience Librarian. The three of them are passionate about critical librarianship and MarioKart.

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Our relationship came together in part based on solidarity in difficult times: the major life transitions of graduating, beginning a career, moving to a totally new place, and acclimating to a new work environment—all during a global pandemic. We all agreed that, though we felt palpable warmth and welcome from our other CWU colleagues, we felt a certain sense of understanding, solidarity, and support within our cohort that has been extremely important in easing the difficulty of these life and career transitions. We also recognized that we had organically established a community of care between

us which the presenters described. The non-judgmental tone of our interactions fit perfectly into the presenter’s concept of nonhierarchical mentoring; as new faculty adjusting to the same new environment, this lateral support created a community of care and cultivated personal and professional respect within our group. Our positions share and differ in responsibilities, but we unite over the common factor of being new to our positions and to our field. We all also entered CWU from three large R1 institutions; this transition to a smaller public university required us to reconsider our previous notions of instruction, collection development, and research support. Despite our differing roles and varying backgrounds, we are guided by our shared dedication to common goals like equity in librarianship and critical information literacy. Our group enables us to bridge our different experiences, synthesize our perspectives on the field of LIS, and ask questions and brainstorm ideas without any pressure on us or our roles and professional standing at the library. Since attending the panel, we have been prompted to continue to nurture our relationships and are furthering our shared and individual goals through supportive peer mentoring.

The insights we gained while attending the panel session led us to write this reflection and contribute to the discourse surrounding how library associations promote critical conversations and build community within libraries. Would we have been able to identify our group dynamic for what it was and what it could be? Maybe or maybe not, but it is certain that attending this panel session helped us to recognize the full potential of the informal support system we had already intuitively created. It is in fact appropriate that our first project together be a reflection on the WLA Conference, because it was the conference that gave us our first real opportunity to connect and collaborate. Moving forward, we will take what we learned in the WLA session and incorporate some of the techniques described by the presenting librarians with the goal of strengthening our peer mentoring relationship to maximize

“As new faculty adjusting to the same new environment, this lateral support created a community of care and cultivated personal and professional respect within our group.”

the community of care we are creating. We will implement more structure into our group, which we have affectionately dubbed

“The Cult of Stacks and Snacks,” by establishing monthly meetings, preferably alongside a few sweet treats, to discuss instruction and projects. We will offer one another intentional support by observing each other in instruction sessions, giving feedback on lesson plans and syllabi, co-creating scholarship, working together to plan courses, and connecting each other to campus and community networks. As we continue to adjust to this new environment,

our dedication to this newly codified nonhierarchical mentoring group will provide a vital space for developing a sense of solidarity across our positions and strengthening our library cohort. 📖

NOTES

1 Nicole Gustaven, Shayna Pekala, and Anthony Tardiff, “Nonhierarchical Mentoring to Disrupt the System! Creating Communities of Solidarity within the Library,” presentation by Nicole Gustaven, Shayna Pekala, and Anthony Tardiff, WLA Conference, September 30–October 2, 2021.

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