Challenging the Glass Ceiling: Collaboration as the Key to Increasing the Number of Librarians of Color in Academic Libraries

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Cover Page Footnote

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From the Field

Challenging the Glass Ceiling: Collaboration as the Key to Increasing the Number of Librarians of Color in Academic Libraries

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Abstract

Currently, libraries are engaged in creating environments that embrace diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI). This includes having candidates for hire submit statements regarding their approach to DEI and internal committees to look at policies and procedures regarding DEI. Also, there is a lot of both internal and external training designed to help organizations and their members become more adept at creating environments with DEI in mind. What is often missed in all of this activity is how individual librarians, through mentorship and collaboration, can come together to foster DEI and support each other in success. This field report shows how two librarians, from different backgrounds and experiences came together to not only support each other through their regular work day, but elevate their partnership toward professional success and retention. The report provides recommendations for creating a more inclusive workplace through mentoring and collaboration.

Introduction

The glass ceiling for librarians of color in non-management or supervisory roles and retention is ever present. The latest Association of Research Libraries (ARL) Salary Survey reports that 16.8 percent of professional librarians are from underrepresented groups[1]. In addition, as professional librarians move into management positions that percentage goes down considerably, with the highest number at 14.5 percent and the lowest at 6.7 percent.[2] Academic libraries must make it a strategic priority to invest more time, talent, and resources in the areas of recruitment, onboarding, mentoring, and retention to remove barriers to inclusion and advancement. At Virginia Commonwealth University Libraries (VCU) in Richmond, Virginia, the collaboration between the Business Research Librarian (part of the Research and Learning Division) and the Business Collections Librarian (part of the Collections and Discovery Division) has enabled both librarians to accomplish traditional tasks and foster professional and personal development as well as address and minimize several diversity and inclusion hurdles.

Background

To set the context for this report, we wanted to introduce ourselves. Janet Reid, the Business Research Librarian, is African American and the Mentee in this article. She has worked as a professional librarian in the following special libraries: law school, law firm, business library in a newspaper company, natural gas, health insurance. For the last four years, she has worked as the Business Research Librarian at a large, urban

public university library. In this role, Janet fosters relationships with students and faculty by providing research support ranging from point-of-need assistance to in-depth discipline-specific consultation. She develops and delivers course-integrated instruction sessions, materials, and workshops. Additionally, Janet pursues outreach activities to promote library services, to advance research as well as learning, and creative endeavors. Furthermore, she works closely with the collection librarians to enhance collections and services in designated subject areas.

Patricia Sobczak, Business and Public Affairs Collections Librarian, is Caucasian and the mentor in this report. She has worked in university libraries for over 25 years and has also served as a development officer, campus director, adjunct faculty, outreach librarian and interim assistant dean at a private university. As a Collections Librarian, Patricia provides collection development, management, and curation services. She is one of the library liaisons for the School of Business, the L. Douglas Wilder School of Government and Public Affairs as well as the department of Political Science. She researches and selects resources, including books, ebooks, journals, and electronic resources that support her disciplines. She works closely with her fellow subject-matter liaisons, faculty, and students to ensure that the appropriate and relevant resources are available.

While our positions are different in focus and located in different divisions of the library, we must note that it is not the difference between our jobs that has an impact on this report. The contrast between our *experiences*, coupled with our willingness to share our skills and knowledge with each other, allows us to participate in this rare opportunity.

Our Library

Our library is an ARL-member academic library at an urban, public research institution with approximately 28,000 full-time equivalent (FTE) students, which is in central Virginia. Our library strives to transform our communities by enriching scholarship, learning, and clinical care through our teaching, our collections, and our leadership. VCU employs a total of 57 librarians. Eleven librarians are people of color. Of the 11 librarians of color, two have management roles.

The library encourages collaboration, but individual achievement is rewarded. A librarian's success in the profession is built on collaborative endeavors; however, the path to promotion is singular. As a result, time and energy needed to bring about strong and mutually beneficial mentor-mentee relationships is not valued or supported. Librarians creating an authentic mentor-mentee relationship is not always recognized. Therefore, collaboration and mentorship may come at a professional cost to future success.

Collaboration

Collaboration is one of the critical components of success in academic libraries, including VCU Libraries. In the best-case scenario, fellow-librarians are poised to help onboard new librarians and share important aspects of their work, introduce them to key people, and share the tacit and informal norms of the organization. These activities create an inclusive and welcoming workplace. The library profession acknowledges the importance of diverse and inclusive environments, the reality is academic libraries are not diverse.

This report shows how collaboration led to a mentor/mentee relationship that helped answer the following:

- How and why work here?
- What internal skills are needed to succeed?

- What is the path to uncovering and strategizing methods for conquering institutional hurdles?
- What are the steps to enable institutional success and promotion?

The methods include scheduled weekly meetings, ongoing updates regarding student and faculty issues, the commitment to resolve these issues, and finding new, innovative ways to address the needs of our stakeholders. The hurdles we encountered include the speed of information and the necessity of impromptu, open, and honest conversations to address issues that occur in our daily activities. We succeeded in building trust in each person's decision-making skills. We trust our colleague to act on the behalf of the stakeholders, which is vital to adequately serve them.

Essentially, mentor/mentee type of collaboration can be the key reason that librarians decide to stay in a position or with an employer. Our report describes a scenario of a partnership between two librarians from different departments, divisions, and perspectives. Our collaboration grew from mutual support that we actively nurtured. This mutual support was needed to fulfill our responsibilities and produce an environment where we felt respected and honored for our contributions as well as prepared us for future opportunities.

Mentoring in Libraries

The library literature is filled with research about the value of mentoring as a tool for creating an inclusive environment at academic libraries.[3] Many librarians agree that being a mentor or being mentored had a positive effect on their careers.[4] Mentoring can be used in academic libraries to accelerate the libraries diversity, equity, and inclusion goals. Diversity can be achieved with collaborative mentoring that is focused on accomplishing goals through ongoing development of the mentee and the mentor. We

recognized the importance of guiding each other toward useful and strategic actions through the mentoring relationship. Mentee librarians appreciate having a mentor librarian to discuss and analyze techniques and approaches for successfully executing work assignments in addition to learning about institutional norms.[5] Mentors provide mentees with useful guidance and support for navigating the intricacies of the promotion process, conducting research, and engaging in service. Mentors often have rich experiences to share.[6] Dependable mentors can be the most impactful component for new librarians maneuvering in a new work setting.[7]

Collaborative Mentoring

Collaborative mentoring, or peer mentoring[8] is a model where librarians at the same level mentor each other. Although this approach is not widely investigated as to its efficacy, our intention is to show that the collaborative mentoring approach is the key to creating inclusive workplaces that serve to help librarians contribute to their greatest ability and ultimately, stay at their institutions.

Mentoring through collaboration is a mutually beneficial relationship where both parties can use their shared goals to exchange ideas and share learning[9]. In his research[10], Yang et. al identified a collaborative mindset as one of the five key skills needed for success in libraries. The mindset can be cultivated through activities (formal meetings, retreats, etc.) and by the intentional act of colleagues who seek to support and serve each other[11]. In our intention to collaborate is to support and serve each other. Effective collaboration incorporates some of the aspects of Servant Leadership Theory. In his article, "Servant Leadership: Creating a Context for Collaboration," Van Brugge[12] posits that servant leadership sets the stage and promotes three key behaviors that are foundational to collaboration: communicating effectively, modeling the way, and valuing people. Servant leadership and the

notion of helping others succeed are not positioned into academic environments. According to Adam Grant in his book *Give and Take: How helping others drives our success,*[13] a more sustainable approach for organizations is recognizing that valuing the contributions of others and supporting their success is a critical part of building an inclusive culture and retaining key employees.

Supporting Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Goals

Collaborative mentoring can eliminate the glass ceiling or barriers to advancement as well as achieving success with diversity, equity, and inclusion goals. Mentors can help mentees conquer the challenges and roadblocks of a new environment, assist with new culture assimilation struggles, develop a sense of belonging, affirm steps to advancement, and cultivate pipeline development. Mentors can coach mentees in proven methodologies for success and assist with eliminating hindrances as well as identifying necessary skills for advancement. As a mentee, librarians of color can be encouraged to stay in a work environment where they have partnered with an experienced colleague who they work with on a regular basis. This partnership can develop into a relationship that helps them understand cultural, political, and social characteristics unique to the university and library.[14] As result of the partnership, the library becomes an inclusive place for librarians of color. This type of uplifting support and sharing can be used as effective recruitment and retention stories to encourage potential employees[15]. Mentoring, especially collaborative mentoring, can have a positive impact in academic libraries. When academic libraries create an environment of diversity, inclusion, and equity, this milieu provides a platform for challenging the glass ceiling and assists in retaining librarians of color at their institutions.

Field Reports

Field Report from a Business Research Librarian

As the Business Research Librarian for the School of Business, I support and promote information literacy and research services. I started my career as an academic librarian. However, I ventured into working as a corporate librarian for the next 24 years. My return to academic librarianship is successful because I am afforded the opportunity to collaborate with and be mentored by an experienced collections librarian who has extensive experience working across a variety of library settings, including corporations and academic institutions.

We had stumbled on a natural mentor/mentee relationship that could be used to develop and promote the effective use of the business collection in support of research and teaching needs of the School of Business. We met weekly to accomplish our goals. We have found that sharing our classroom experiences assists in supporting teaching and producing assignments for our students. Each semester, we review class offerings, research assignments, and faculty communication as well as marketing services and newsletters. Simultaneously, we develop the business collection and identifying new resources to support the curriculum of the business school.

I found the collaboration with a seasoned librarian who eagerly communicates her knowledge to be advantageous. The mentor's knowledge and willingness to share lessens the load of learning new things and creates opportunities for growth in a safe and inviting environment. This type of sharing provides skill development by working through examples of service provided. I benefited because the mentor provides leadership, and I gain new skills.

As librarians, we identified our shared passion for education and the advancement of the library. As we worked to become acquainted and identify the components of our responsibilities,

we recognized that we could benefit from sharing our experiences as librarians enlightening each other to new concepts as well as challenges and evaluating processes for accomplishing our assigned tasks.

The promotion process in an academic library is dramatically different from a corporate library. Therefore, a mentor is useful in assisting a librarian who has transitioned from a corporate to an academic library. We cover all the components of promotion: purpose, pitfalls, and recommendations for improvement. In addition, we delve into how we can use our work projects to contribute and succeed in local and national professional organizations via service and scholarship. Examples include hosting conferences, guest speaking, and submitting articles.

A by-product of a collaborative relationship is sharing daily library experiences and observations of library activity. Sharing these observations is critical to helping a newcomer acclimate to the culture and give the mentee a sense that with determination and agility their contribution will emerge as a part of the community. We exchanged revelations about our successes and failures as a team, determining what yields the best outcome. Additionally, we evaluate everything from assessing the effectiveness of our workshops, to effective marketing with the student engagement office, as well as the usefulness of vendor management techniques.

Field Report from a Business Collections Librarian

In my position at VCU Libraries, I am responsible for selecting materials to support the curriculum and research efforts for the School of Business, the L. Douglas Wilder School of Government and Public Affairs, and the department of Political Science. In this capacity, it is imperative that I work closely with my research librarian colleagues to ensure that I am supporting their efforts and goals. I took on the role of mentor to

assist my colleague, Janet, to learn about academia. I wanted her to have the knowledge and tools she needed to be successful in this environment. I am fortunate to have learned early in my career the value of being both a mentee and a mentor to create an environment of mutual support. I am a strong advocate for collaboration. I am such a strong advocate that I seek out those with points of views different than mine. I believe that I learn and grow from others' perspectives and ideas. I believe that I do my best work when working with others. From this perspective, I approach collaboration and mentee/mentor relationship with Janet, my business research librarian partner.

In academic libraries, developing a strong and trusting relationship is not always the norm. However, it became evident that this partnership was based on more than professional courtesy. Through my initial interactions with Janet, I recognized her infectious enthusiasm for librarianship, her strong service ethic, and her desire to learn. Her approach to work was like mine and I was inspired to connect with her and make a positive difference in our respective departments, the library, and the community. While it was in my best interest to strive for reciprocally advantageous outcomes, I recognized that we were helping each other. We began our partnership with weekly meetings to ensure that we were both informed and able to address the issues that were in our areas. These sessions provided the platform for establishing an informal mentor/mentee relationship and provided additional opportunities for further collaboration.

My colleague was a law school librarian and corporate librarian before coming to VCU Libraries. There are large differences between being a librarian in the corporate world and in higher education. While she brought an immense amount of knowledge to VCU Libraries, learning the ropes in academia is not for the faint of heart. Her inexperience in academic li-

braries provided me with a wonderful opportunity and I was happy to provide support and guidance to help put her vast talents to use in this new space. Importantly, it was critical for me to make sure that she felt included, respected, and valued. While many libraries have DEI policies, it is less about written policies and more about an individual's commitment to treat others respectfully.

Through these last four years, we have built a trusting and supportive relationship that enables us to address any challenges we face, together and separately. Through being a mentor, I learned the power of teamwork and how working together expands the options toward more productive outcomes for each person. Since I care for my colleague and her success, I used this opportunity to learn new ideas and find new ways to grow as a person and a professional.

Recommendations and Lessons Learned

Business Research and Collections Librarians previously worked together to maximize their expertise to create the most valuable work products for the faculty and students. They can take this perspective one step further and use their collaboration to achieve diversity, equality and inclusion goals while also cracking the glass ceiling to advancement for librarians of color in academic libraries. Here are a few recommendations for librarians who want to implement this strategy to achieve these goals:

- Take time to identify what you have in common; doing this ignites the bonding process and kick-starts the ability to maximize your shared interest in the profession.
- Make the effort to get to know each other beyond the job description. This work will be the foundation for creating a highly effective team and work relationship.

- Decide how you want to work together. This includes setting up regular meetings and finding joint projects that serve both of your areas.
- Recognize that team care is vital for constant growth so regularly take the time to consider how you will help each other when one of you is struggling.
- Go outside your comfort zones, individually and collectively, and encourage each other to take on new tasks and support each other to be braver.

Each of these realities will motivate the team to do their best and see that each player has all the possibilities, opportunities, and necessary skills.

Conclusion

We believe approaching partnerships through the lens of collaboration and the mentor/mentee relationship are the keys to success in academic libraries. Our mentor/mentee relationship has enabled us to support the goals of diversity, equity and inclusion as well as continue to crack the glass ceiling. We encourage each other to be creative and look beyond the traditional cookie cutter perspective of completing work in the same way. We work together to continually analyze, evaluate, and innovate our roles and projects so that we achieve the maximum outcome. The Collections Librarian's willingness to mentor and share her expertise regarding skills, the profession and the community and the Business Research Librarian's willingness to be mentored, challenged, and cultivated, allowed us both to equally experience benefits. Additionally, we believe the proof of our success culminated in both of us recently being promoted from an Instructor to Business Research Librarian to Assistant Professor and from an Assistant Professor to Collections Librarian to Associate Professor. What better outcome to such a mutually supportive and beneficial relationship brought about through collaboration.

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