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Meeting a Need: Piloting a Mentoring Program for History Librarians

Amanda Binder, Brittany O'Neill, and Malia Willey

Abstract

Mentoring is a mainstay of librarianship. Professional organizations can offer specific guidance for librarians through mentoring programs. This article describes the development and assessment of a mentoring program for history librarians by the Academic Librarians Committee of the Reference & Users Services Association's History Section. The study examines the findings from a survey of participants. Respondents indicated overall that the program was beneficial. Mentors and mentees who interacted through web conferencing tended to report higher satisfaction. The responses suggest improved practices for future iterations of this program, including evaluating the process for pairing mentoring matches, creating an onboarding process, providing more structure for communication, and considering the potential of peer mentoring. These findings could be applied to other mentoring programs for librarians.

Introduction

Mentoring programs through professional organizations partner librarians with knowledgeable colleagues for specialized guidance. These opportunities provide librarians access to expertise that might not be available otherwise. The Academic Librarians Committee developed a mentoring program for history librarians in support of the RUSA (Reference & Users Services Association) History Section.

A mentoring program for history librarians addresses the unique nature of their work. History librarians require discipline-specific knowledge and skills to support their users. They may be responsible for research consultations, curricular instruction, collection management, outreach, and more. Subject content can range the course of human history across the globe. Researchers may need help navigating primary and secondary resources in a variety of locations. Experienced history librarians can offer guidance to those new to the field through mentorship.

Background

The Academic Librarians Committee is part of the RUSA History Section. RUSA is a division of the American Library Association (ALA). The committee formed in the summer of 2018 to address the needs of history librarians working in academic institutions. A mentoring program

for librarians new to the field was identified and selected as a priority in 2019. A small group formed to begin scoping the program. A committee co-chair provided leadership and organization for the group. Group members identified and created reports on other existing librarian mentoring programs to serve as models, especially the mentoring program through the Instruction Section of the Association of College & Research Libraries (ACRL).

After the review of other programs, the group decided to proceed with creating a mentoring program. The mentoring program was designed to run from September to May in order to coincide with committee terms. The committee co-chair led the drafting of guidelines and application forms. The guidelines included tips for mentoring and suggestions for discussion topics. There was then a coordinated effort to promote the program on various professional listservs in 2020. There were roughly the same number of applicants for mentors and mentees, and ultimately 12 mentoring pairs were matched. Mentors and mentees were intentionally paired based on their application responses.

An official Mentoring Program Subcommittee was formed that fall. The subcommittee had three members, including two co-chairs. The subcommittee co-chairs sent a discussion prompt through email each month to inspire conversation between mentors and mentees (see Appendix A). Some of the topics included providing instruction and reference for history research, establishing your presence on campus, managing collections for history, and guiding patrons in using archives. Participants were also encouraged to discuss what they would like and to also consider ways to foster equity, diversity, and inclusion throughout their work. The subcommittee hosted a virtual midwinter meeting for mentors and mentees in the program to connect and share their experiences. Conversation focused on what the participants had learned through the program so far and then on how attendees had incorporated diversity, equity, and inclusion in their practice. An assessment was distributed to the participants at the end of the program.

Literature Review

Mentoring programs for academic librarians gained increasing attention in the last two decades. They emerged internally and externally to better support librarians joining the profession. Programs have also been developed to ensure that librarians have mentorship opportunities as they move through different phases of and changes to their careers in academic librarianship. Some mentoring relationships are made available through employer programs while others are offered through professional organizations. Research on mentoring practices in academic libraries have explored formal and informal opportunities and discuss the benefits, challenges, and best practices of such opportunities.

Studies of professional organization-sponsored mentoring programs for academic librarians have been explored by Jordan (2019) and Zabel (2008). Jordan explores the formal mentoring program offered through the Library Leadership and Management Association (LLAMA) that afterward became a part of ALA's Core: Leadership, Infrastructure, Futures in September 2020. One of the major challenges identified in the mentoring relationships in the LLAMA program was communication. Zabel offers an overview of mentoring programs offered through professional organizations. Through discussions with the leaders of library professional organizations, Zabel outlines the benefits of offering these programs, including "practical on-the-job advice, career guidance, and the opportunity to network" (350). These programs also benefit the professional organizations. They offer a membership benefit which could help with recruitment and retention. Benefits to mentors are also discussed and could be important to incorporate into mentoring program recruitment efforts. Barriers to the effectiveness of mentoring programs include the time needed to manage these relationships and the marketing of these opportunities to members.

Davidson and Middleton (2006) explore the availability of discipline-specific mentorship in their study of mentoring opportunities for science and engineering librarians. This study is especially relevant to those librarians supporting specialized areas of research. This study reveals that professional organizations can play a role in mentoring science and engineering librarians through the networking that occurs in the membership. Networking can serve as informal mentorship. A small percent of these survey respondents had participated in formal mentoring programs offered by their membership organizations. Most of their mentoring experiences were "informal or through institutional programs" (216). This study suggests that better marketing could help new librarians learn about the formal mentoring programs offered by professional organizations.

A study by Ackerman, Hunter, and Wilkinson (2018) explores the support of early career librarians with regard to research expectations and the need for mentoring opportunities to guide them through the process and ensure their success. The researchers call on libraries and library organizations to offer this support. Freedman (2021) surveyed the ACRL New England Chapter membership and found that participation in mentoring programs through professional organizations were most common. Several factors contribute to successful mentoring relationships, including "goal alignment" between mentor and mentee, as well as the "mentors' accessibility, encouragement, integrity, content expertise, approachability, guidance, providing resources and challenges, both from career guidance related support and psychosocial aspects" (17). Much of the success of the mentoring relationship does rely upon the ability of a mentor to

offer this level of access and support for their mentee. Brillat and Mendez (2016) explore the role of mentorship in serving the “professional and psychosocial needs of librarians” at different points in their careers. This research supports the need for mentoring opportunities at all levels and stages of a career in librarianship. There are several chapters in the edited book *Beyond Mentoring: A Guide for Librarians and Information Professionals* (Lowe-Wincentsen 2016) that explore the value of peer mentoring opportunities.

Case studies of institutional library mentoring programs (Colosimo, Desmeules, and McKinnon 2017; Goodsett and Walsh 2015) can be helpful to those academic libraries hoping to find examples for developing their own internal mentoring opportunities. Davidson and Middleton (2006) offer an understanding of how professional organizations that support librarians working with specific areas of research can supplement these types of institutional mentoring programs. Several studies discuss the importance of mentorship for the retention of academic librarians (Freedman 2021; Davidson and Middleton 2006). Freedman suggests that mentorship is an important strategy in the retention of new librarians, especially those with diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds. Mentoring can also serve an important function in supporting librarians during the pandemic and post-pandemic era. When change is constant, “mentorship may be necessary for our psychosocial comfort and self-care” (18). One could argue that mentoring programs have never been more important than during a pandemic.

Research suggests that there are challenges with mentoring programs hosted by professional library organizations. Davidson and Middleton (2006) found that members of professional organizations that support science and technology librarians were largely not aware of the formal mentoring programs available to them. Zabel (2008) came to the same conclusion. Marketing and visibility are important when developing these programs. Another challenge to participation in mentoring opportunities sponsored by professional organizations could be the cost of membership (Davidson and Middleton 2006). Offering these opportunities to non-members could expand the reach of these programs.

Several major themes emerge from the research on mentoring opportunities for academic librarians. These include the types of opportunities that exist (formal vs. informal), the sponsoring organization (institution/employer or professional organization), and the challenges, benefits and best practices of these programs. Not one mentoring program or opportunity can necessarily serve all of the needs of librarians as they navigate through their career. It is worth encouraging and creating these opportunities wherever possible. The research demonstrates the need for mentoring opportunities and offers guidance to professional organizations interested in developing such programs.

Methods

All study methods were reviewed by the Institutional Review Boards of the authors' institutions and determined to not need formal review.

The authors created a survey using Google Forms in Spring 2021 (see Appendix B). The authors solicited responses from individuals participating in the mentoring program piloted by the RUSA History Section's Academic Librarians Committee. Participants were recruited through email from a co-chair of the committee, whom they had already received communication from as part of the program.

The survey sought to gather feedback on the program and data on its participants. Participants were asked to identify how they participated in the program, including whether they served as mentor or mentee, how they engaged with their partner, and the organizations in which they held membership. Participants were also asked how or if they would like to participate in the future, how well they felt they were matched, and to provide feedback on the midpoint event the organizers held. Finally, participants were given the opportunity to provide general suggestions and testimonials.

The survey was open May 10, 2021 through May 19, 2021. The authors analyzed the data over Summer 2021.

Results

Out of 24 participants in the program, 58% responded to the survey (n=14). The response comprised an equal number of mentors (n=7) and mentees (n=7).

When asked if the pairs used the prompts the committee chairs sent out each month in their conversations, 79% of respondents did (n=11) and 21% of respondents did not (n=3) (see table 1).

Table 1.

Used Monthly Prompts		
Yes	No	Total
11 (79%)	3 (21%)	14 (100%)

When asked what methods the pairs used to communicate, 64% used web conferencing software (n=9), 36% used email (n=5), and none communicated via phone call (see table 2).

Table 2.

Method for Meeting	
Web Conferencing	9 (64%)
Email	5 (36%)
Phone	0 (0%)
Total	14 (100%)

Participants were also asked how often they communicated with their partner. The majority of respondents met once a month (64%, n=9). The remaining respondents selected the “other” option, with some indicating they met less than once a month (21%, n=3) and one person each stating that they met more than once a month (7%) or on no set schedule (7%) (see table 3).

Table 3.

Frequency of Communication	
Once a Month	9 (64%)
Less than once a month	3 (21%)
More than once a month	1 (7%)
No set schedule	1 (7%)
Total	14 (100%)

The authors asked how well the pair was matched for the program on a scale of 1-5, with 1 representing a perfect match and 5 indicating that the committee could have done a better job

matching them. Match ranking responses were fairly evenly dispersed between mentors and mentees. The majority of respondents said it was a perfect match (57%, n=8). Two respondents chose a ranking of 2 (14%), one respondent chose a ranking of 3 (7%), and three respondents chose a ranking of 4 (21%). No respondents chose a ranking of 5 (see table 4).

Table 4.

How Well Respondents Were Matched (1= Perfect Match, 5= Could Have Been Better)	
1	8 (57%)
2	2 (14%)
3	1 (7%)
4	3 (21%)
5	0 (0%)
Total	14 (100%)

Of those who indicated an average or below average match (a ranking of 3 or 4), all communicated by email. Only one respondent who had an above average match (a ranking of 2) communicated by email. All perfect matches (a ranking of 1) communicated by web conferencing. Of those who had an average or below average match, only one met at least once a month. Only one respondent with an above average match met less than once a month. All perfect matches met at least once a month.

Participants were asked if they would participate in this program again in the future. The majority of respondents indicated that they would (86%, n=12). One respondent said they would not (7%) and one respondent chose "maybe" (7%) (see table 5).

Table 5.

Would you participate again?	
Yes	12 (86%)
No	1 (7%)
Maybe	1 (7%)
Total	14 (100%)

Participants were also asked if they would participate in a future peer mentorship program. A majority of respondents said they would (71%, n=10), with an equal number of respondents indicating “no” (14%, n=1) or “maybe” (14%, n=1) to participating in a peer mentoring program (see table 6).

Table 6.

Would you participate in peer mentorship?	
Yes	10 (71%)
No	2 (14%)
Maybe	2 (14%)
Total	14 (100%)

Participants were asked to indicate which memberships they held in relevant professional organizations. Two participants did not respond to this question, leaving 12 responses for analysis. Participants could select more than one option. The majority of respondents (n=9) were members of the RUSA History Section, the organization that hosted this program. Almost equal numbers of respondents (n=8) were members of the ACRL History Librarians Interest Group. One respondent held membership in the ACRL Rare Books & Manuscripts Section. Five respondents

shared other organizations to which they belonged, including other sections, chapters, and roundtables of ACRL and the ALA (see table 7).

Table 7.

Membership in Professional Organizations	
RUSA History Section	9
ACRL History Librarians Interest Group	8
ACRL Rare Books & Manuscripts Section	1
Other	5

Finally, respondents were asked to share feedback and testimonials about the program. Five respondents shared feedback (36%) and six respondents shared testimonials (43%).

Discussion

The results indicated that most participants used the prompts the committee sent out and met once per month, which aligns with how often these email prompts were sent out. Although prompts were sent out via email, more participants used web conferencing platforms than email. The majority of respondents felt their mentoring match was perfect or near perfect, but there was still a sizable number of participants who thought this match could have been better. There is some indication that those who communicated by web conferencing felt they had better matches, so there is some data to suggest the committee should encourage this as a method of communication going forward. Nonetheless, the results indicate that the committee should revisit criteria for matching pairs and include in future assessments feedback on why a participant felt they were poorly matched. As Jordan (2019) stated, communication was an important factor in their program, and the results of this program seem similar. Many used web conferencing in that study, as did the participants in this study. This likely reflects more familiarity and comfort with using these platforms, especially for the participants in this program, which began in 2020 as many library workers had shifted to remote work due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Meeting often also appeared to correlate with better fit. The committee did not instruct participants on how

frequently they should meet, so these findings indicate a need to encourage setting regular meetings in the future.

Overall, respondents seemed interested in participating in the program again in the future and in a proposed peer mentoring program. The authors feel that better matches might be made through peer mentoring for those who didn't feel they were matched well in a traditional mentor-mentee pair.

The majority of respondents indicated that they held membership in the mentoring program's organization, the RUSA History Section, and in its analogous organization, the ACRL History Librarians Interest Group. These findings suggest that broader outreach may be needed to invite those outside those groups. The program's organizers should also further promote this program within the History Section, as Davidson and Middleton (2006) and Zabel (2008) argue that there is a need for organizations to better market their programs internally. Based on these findings, the committee intends to add information about the program to the section's website so new members can learn about it.

Although the results of the free-response questions are not fully detailed in this study, respondents provided some useful feedback that is noteworthy for future iterations of this program and those who seek to create programs of their own. One participant indicated that they enjoyed the prompts, while another felt they needed more structure or training on how to most effectively approach this relationship. Lowe-Wincentsen (2016) and Usova and Anderson (2017) discuss the need for onboarding in mentoring programs, so this structure should be implemented in future programs. One respondent indicated that they would have found this program more useful if they were a newer librarian. Offering a peer program could prove more useful for history librarians in the mid- and later-stages of their careers. Another participant shared that they appreciated the committee filling their request to be paired with a woman of color. Two respondents stated that having a mentor during the COVID-19 pandemic was encouraging for them, giving them someone on which to lean during a challenging time. This mirrors Freedman's (2021) findings on mentoring programs, conducted around the same time, that these sorts of programs may help with retention, especially during difficult times. Other feedback included statements that this benefited both the mentee and the mentor and that they had found a new research partner and friend, reflecting both the career and psychosocial benefits of such programs (Brillat and Mendez 2016; Freedman 2021; Hussey 2017).

Next Steps

Based on the findings from this study, the authors recommend modifying subsequent application questions to include more information that might assist in selecting better matches for mentoring pairs. Likewise, as the results seem to indicate that frequency and method of communication within pairs have some relationship to respondents benefitting from the program, future iterations should include the addition of an onboarding process or welcome session to introduce new mentors and mentees to best practices for participating in the program. Results also showed some interest in a peer mentoring program, so the committee should investigate creating such a program in the future.

Conclusion

As the first mentoring program created specifically for history librarians, the results from its first year indicate the need for more mentoring opportunities that address the unique needs of different areas of liaison librarianship. Organizers of future mentoring programs can learn from the results of this study by providing some structure in how pairs communicate, creating an onboarding process, and considering the potential of peer mentoring. Overall, both mentors and mentees in this program found this experience mutually beneficial. The timing of this program -- launching during the COVID-19 pandemic -- allowed pairs to navigate both the typical demands of history librarianship and the unique challenges presented by doing this work remotely together. This pilot project enables new opportunities to help history librarians develop and share their skills and experiences in ways that can benefit the individuals, their institutions, and history librarianship as a whole.

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Appendix A: Discussion Prompts for Mentoring Pairs

This is adapted from the "RUSA History Section Academic Librarians Committee Mentoring Program – Guidelines," reprinted with the permission of the Reference & User Services Association.

Program Curriculum

These prompts are suggested topics for discussion each month. We encourage participants to consider ways to foster equity, diversity, and inclusion throughout their work.

1. September: Instruction and Reference for History Research
 - How to design instruction sessions for history
 - How to effectively deliver instruction sessions (in person and online)
 - How to approach the reference interview for history
 - Helping patrons refine research questions
2. October: Establishing Your Presence on Campus
 - Identifying important contacts
 - Outreach/publicity techniques
 - Making connections
3. November: Important Resources for History Research
 - Primary source collections in print and online
 - Indexes and bibliographies
 - Important subject headings and classification numbers
4. December: Collection Development for History

- Significant publishers and vendors
 - Identifying the best mix of access-vs.-ownership, print-vs.-electronic for your library
 - Weeding
5. January: Guiding Patrons in Using Archives
- Identifying archival collections of interest
 - Registering as a user
 - How to handle archival documents
 - Accessing online archives
6. February: Professional Development—Service
- Identifying opportunities to serve
 - Deciding what to focus on
 - How much committee work can you handle?
 - How to be a good committee member/chair
7. March: Professional Development—Research and Presentation/Publication
- Finding topics to write about
 - Managing your time to allow for writing
 - Finding collaborators
 - Identifying conferences to present at
 - Identifying journals to submit to
8. April: Working with Colleagues in Other Departments
- Understanding what acquisitions/cataloging/serials/electronic resources/systems needs from you to make their work easier/better
 - How to say “no” and maintain good relationships
 - Supporting digital humanities projects

9. May: The Job Search

- Preparing a resume
- Writing a cover letter
- How to interview well
- When is it time to look for a new employer/ask for a promotion/apply to move up within your organization?

10. Summer months (optional further discussion as desired by participants)

- Building good relationships with your supervisor (“managing up”; good communication; when to take initiative)
- Maintaining productivity in an unstructured job
- Preparing to move into management

Appendix B: Survey Instrument

RUSA HS ALC Mentoring Program

This survey will help inform future offerings of the mentoring program. Thank you in advance for your feedback!

* Required

1. Study Title: History Librarians Mentoring Program.
2. The purpose of this research project is to gather information and feedback on the Reference and User Services Association History Section’s (RUSA HS) mentoring program for history librarians. Participants will be asked to identify how they participated in the program, including whether they served as mentor or mentee, how they engaged with their match, and the partner organizations in which they hold membership. They will also be asked for feedback, including how they would like to participate in the future and feedback on the midpoint event the organizers held. They will also have the opportunity to provide general suggestions and testimonials. The entire study will be conducted online through Google Forms.
3. Inclusion criteria: You are eligible to participate if you are aged 18 or older and participated in the RUSA HS mentoring program.
4. Exclusion criteria: You are ineligible to participate if you are under the age of 18 and did not participate in the RUSA HS mentoring program.
5. There are no risks involved in participating in the study.

6. The following investigators are available for questions about this study: Brittany O'Neill, boneill@lsu.edu; Amanda Binder, abinder3@uncc.edu; and Malia Willey, willeyme@jmu.edu.
7. Subjects may choose not to participate or to withdraw from the study at any time without penalty or loss of any benefit to which they might otherwise be entitled.
8. Results of the study may be published, but no names or identifying information will be included in the publication. Subject identity will remain confidential unless disclosure is required by law.
9. This study has been approved by the Louisiana State University IRB. For questions concerning participant rights, please contact the IRB Chair, Alex Cohen, at 225-578-8692 or irb@lsu.edu.
10. By continuing to this survey, you are giving consent to participate in this study.
11. Your information collected as part of the research, even if identifiers are removed, may be used or distributed for future research.

1. Do you wish to continue? *

Mark only one oval.

- Yes, I give permission
- No, I do not give permission

2. Please select how you participated in the RUSA History Section ALC Mentoring Program.

Mark only one oval.

- Mentor
- Mentee

3. Did you use the monthly prompts sent to you for your mentoring conversations?

Mark only one oval.

- Yes
- No

4. How did you meet with your mentor/mentee?

Mark only one oval.

- Email
- Web conferencing
- Phone
- Other:

5. How often did you meet with your mentor/mentee?

Mark only one oval.

- Once a month
- Other:

6. How well did we match you with a mentor/mentee?

Mark only one oval.

1 2 3 4 5

Perfect Match! Could Have Been Better

7. Would you participate in the program again?

Mark only one oval.

- Yes
- No
- Maybe

8. Would you be interested if we also offered peer/mutual mentorship?

Mark only one oval.

- Yes
- No
- Maybe

9. If you attended the midwinter online mentoring event, what did you like about it and/or what would you change?

10. Please mark your membership in ALA groups.

Check all that apply.

RUSA History Section

ACRL History Librarians Interest Group

ACRL RBMS

Other: _____

11. Please share any suggestions or feedback for the RUSA HS ALC Mentoring Program.

12. Write a testimonial for the program!

If you have enjoyed the experience of participating in the mentoring program, a testimonial can help us promote the program to others through our website and social media.

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