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Significant Value Found in Mentoring Programs for Novice Tenure-Track Academic Librarians

A Review of:
Goodsett, M., & Walsh, A. (2015). Building a strong foundation: Mentoring programs for novice tenure-track librarians in academic libraries. *College & Research Libraries*, *76*(7), 914-933. http://dx.doi.org/10.5860/crl.76.7.914

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Abstract

Objective – To examine the effectiveness of mentoring programs for novice tenure-track academic librarians, and to identify critical elements that define a successful mentoring program in various academic library settings.

Design – Survey questionnaire with a voluntary phone interview.

Setting – Academic libraries in the United States of America.

Subjects – 283 librarians participated in a survey questionnaire. Researchers conducted additional interviews with 6 out of the 12 librarians who had volunteered on the survey questionnaire and who met the inclusion criteria.

Methods – Researchers recruited participants through two professional e-mail lists: the Information Literacy Instruction Discussion List (ILI-L) listserv and the American Library Association's New Members Round Table (NMRT) listserv. Interested participants completed a secured online survey that was hosted using SurveyMonkey. The researchers then coded and analyzed the collected survey data using the same software. At the end of the online survey, participants were given the opportunity to volunteer for an additional interview. Potential interviewees were selected if mentoring programs were available for tenure-track librarians at their institutions.

Once selected, researchers contacted potential interviewees and conducted interviews. The interviews were transcribed, the data anonymized, and original recordings deleted. Researchers coded the anonymized interview data to identify common themes.

Main Results – Researchers identified six themes from the survey data and interview transcripts: traits of an effective mentor; configuration of mentoring programs; elements of effective mentoring programs; mentoring partnerships within or beyond the library; role and training of mentors and mentees; and the mentor/mentee relationship. Overall, the survey and interview data suggest that mentoring programs provide valuable assistance with professional tenure-related activities, and facilitate less-tangible effects such as an increased understanding of an institution's culture and an improvement of communication and time-management skills. The data also provides insight into effective program elements and areas for improvement.

Conclusion – This study suggests that there is significant value in implementing a mentoring program. The results from this study can be used by academic libraries that are considering implementation of a mentoring program or improving an existing one.

Commentary

As the authors note, the implementation of mentoring programs in libraries or the mentoring effects on new tenure-track librarians are topics that have been covered extensively in the literature (Bosch, Ramachandran, Luévano, & Wakiji, 2010; Freedman, 2009; Ghouse & Church-Duran, 2008; Osif, 2008). However, the authors recognize that most of the studies only provide "isolated perspectives from specific libraries" (p. 917) rather than providing a broad overview. As a result, the authors sought to fill this gap in the literature by conducting a study that takes a "broader look at the perspectives of mentors, mentees, and program facilitators across a wide variety of academic libraries that employ tenure-track librarians" (p. 917).

This reviewer critically appraised the article using Glynn's EBL critical appraisal checklist (2006). The main issue affecting the validity of this research is the lack of diversity in the sample and the small number of responses from the target group. The recruitment pool was limited to librarians on the ILI-L and NMRT listservs, although no reason is given for limiting distribution of the survey in this way. This resulted in the study excluding an unknown number of librarians who may have been eligible to participate. Furthermore, due to the narrow focus of the two listservs, the number of participants identifying themselves as "novice tenure-track librarians" was very low (only 36 respondents from a total of 283 respondents). The authors acknowledge both of these limitations in the study.

Another issue to note is that of the 283 survey participants, only 156 indicated that they were in an academic library setting, while the remaining participants did not respond. It is unclear whether the data from the unresponsive participants were removed from analysis since the survey was intended to target academic librarians. The authors do not address how the survey instrument and interview questions were created. As a result, it was unclear whether or not the instruments were validated.

Aside from the validation issue, the questions on the survey and interview were clear enough to elicit precise answers. Furthermore, with the exception of the questions focusing on librarianship, the instruments can be modified for studying other academic departments. This speaks to the generalizability of the study instruments. The authors helpfully include both the survey and interview questions as appendices.

With regard to observer bias during the data collection phase of the research, it should be noted that the authors themselves conducted the interviews. They do not mention any possible measures taken to minimize inter-observer bias. Both survey and interview data were coded by the authors, but again, they do not mention whether the coding was done independently of one another, nor whether

there was a third researcher available to resolve any disagreements in the coding.

This study provides a broad look at mentorship in academic libraries, with a special focus on novice tenure-track librarians. With some modifications to the sampling process and additional information on the survey instrument creation and interview process, this study would be worth exploring for future research.

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