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A New Shape to Mentoring

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What we tend to think of as mentoring is a one on one relationship between people with differing levels of experience, however, there are other shapes and sizes that mentoring can take. Stephen Bell (2013) discussed the millennial generation and newer professionals seeking non-traditional relationships such as peer mentoring or cohorts. Add in virtual mentoring programs, sponsorship programs, and expert databases, and there are many choices to make when designing a new program. Mentoring is not new by any means, but it does seem that newer generations of librarians are seeking it out more, and in different ways. (Neyer, L., & Yelinek, K. 2011)

In 2014–15 an ad hoc committee for the Academic College and Research Libraries Distance Library Section (ACRL/DLS) was tasked with designing a member engagement program. There was careful consideration from both the committee and the DLS executive committee to not call it a mentoring program. The ad hoc committee researched five different types of engagement models, traditional mentoring, peer to peer mentoring, expert database, sponsorships, and co-horts, sent a single question survey to the DLS membership, and compiled a recommendation for the executive committee. While the committee has tabled the proposal for now, the results of the research and the survey give a different shape to what a mentoring program could be.

This article seeks to provide an overview of some of the shapes of mentoring. While some citations are given, this is in no way an exhaustive literature review. Someone seeking to start a program or investigate a shape of mentoring is strongly encouraged to delve deeper and do further research.

Traditional Mentoring

Traditional mentoring programs are what we tend to think of when the word mentoring is used. These are a one on one relationship between people with varying degrees of experience. The relationships can focus on something specific such as tenure (Kuyper-Rushing, L. 2001) or be a more general matching program like the Library Leadership Administration Management Association (LLAMA) mentoring program.

Technology has opened these types of programs up so that they may be e-mentoring programs where you never meet each other in person, but know each other quite well through other forms of communication. (LLAMA Mentoring Committee, 2015). There are vast numbers of these types of programs available in both face to face and less conventional models. However, mentoring is not a one shape fits all proposition.

Peer-to-Peer mentoring

One alternative, but closely related shape to traditional mentoring is the peer-to-peer model. Again, this is a one to one relationship, but often the participants are at a more similar level of experience. Similar to the model described by Kuyper-Rushing (2001), the model described by Level, and Mach (2005) is meant to support people in the tenure process. The difference is that the people involved are at a more peer level, instead of a senior to junior level. This type of arrangement may help to ease some discomfort people may have confiding in a superior by having mutual coaching toward a common goal (Mavrinac, M.A. 2005). Eldridge (2010) discusses this peer-to-peer model in virtual or e-mentoring programs that may benefit colleagues who work at a distance with a strong model and training module on the front end to provide guidance.

Co-horts

If one mixes the traditional model with the peer-to-peer model, a co-hort would emerge. In this structure there is a group of peers working together, learning from each other, and one or more people with more experience to guide the group. Mullen (2010) calls these knowledgeable facilitators. A class setting is one manifestation of this shape of program. In an article by Mulle and Tuten (2010) they use a case study of doctoral students working on a thesis. The students receive support from each other and the dissertation advisor while still working independently.

Another example that might be more familiar to readers is the American Library Association (ALA) Emerging Leaders program. Each participant in the program participates in a project team that works together on a common project. Projects are proposed by a project host (often a roundtable or division level project), and has access to an ALA staff liaison for clarification and connection. (ALA, ND)

Expert Databases

Virtual mentoring or e-mentoring is something mentioned previously. In many cases this type of mentoring is thought of in the context of email or chat, or similar synchronous communications. It does not have to be that way, and with a bit of experimentation other avenues may open up. Hutchinson, and Colwell (2012) discuss a model using a wiki. This method may have brought forth more creativity in both mentor and mentee interactions.

While a wiki and an expert database are not the same thing, they both use technology to connect people in a way that other programs may not. One example of an expert database is the New Member Round Table (NMRT) resume review service. This service keeps a list of resume reviewers, the experts, to pair review seekers, the mentees, up with. (NMRT, ND) Currently this is being done by email with the resume review committee. It has also been done through ALA connect in the past. Using a network such as ALA connect or a wiki would allow mentees or mentors to self-select.

An example of this type of self-selection occurred with the ACRL conference buddy sign up. Conference attendees who wanted a buddy, or mentor, for the conference, could post a profile. Buddies, or mentors who had previous conference experience could sign up and select a mentee based on that profile, all in one process. (ACRL, 2015). Another example of this self-selection is the Educause Affinity Finder. This tool is a membership directory meant to connect people for networking purposes. (Educause, 2015)

Sponsorships

Sponsorship may be stretching the definition of mentorship for some. The word may bring up images of 12 step programs, or kids going door to door in a fundraiser. Even an image of a Kickstarter or Gofundme program may come to mind before a mentorship program. A sponsor is someone whom the mentee seeks out, usually as a resource to a specific outcome. Chynoweth (2012) writes that women sometimes seek sponsors in the more long term mentoring type of relationship before men. While this can happen, it is not the intended outcome usually. Golden (2012) mentions sponsors as a role model, cheerleader, or potential door opener in a career path. This was the least researched shape identified and often only briefly mentioned in other studies or literature reviews. No current examples were found.

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The Survey

A single question may not be a survey. As the committee was only asking the section membership, just over 1,000 people at the time, the demographic type questions were not needed. In a wider research study of mentoring style preferences a researcher would want to know that type of data. The recommendation the ad hoc committee gave was a twofold approach involving an expert database and a cohort model. These were the top two preferences on the survey results. Peer to peer was the third, with a large gap in the results between it and the remaining two.

Looking at the data, and the literature on the different types of mentoring programs, the results speak to a shift from the traditional shape of a mentoring program. A desire for more collaboration is demonstrated by cohorts being a group of people at the same level working toward a common goal, and the peer to peer being two people at the same level learning from each other, leaning on the expertise of peers. There is certainly still place for the traditional mentorship program in the profession. No single type of program will ever be one size fits all. It is important to take into account many of the shapes of mentoring when choosing and developing a new program or evaluating a current program. More research for a specific need is recommended, especially anytime the targeted population can be asked before a new program is put in place.

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