LIBRARY MANAGEMENT TIPS THAT WORK

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MENTORING GRADUATE ASSISTANTS IN THE ACADEMIC LIBRARY

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THE RESEARCH and instructional services department of the University of North Texas Libraries is committed to mentoring the library and information sciences graduate students who staff our face-to-face and virtual reference services. Two subject librarians have developed a formal mentoring program to grow the graduate assistants (GAs) from library newbies to entry-level librarians in the course of a year. The mentoring activities occur in the context of weekly meetings with the GA team.

The GAs have been successful in securing jobs within six months of graduation, even in a depressed economy. The library also reaps benefits because the appreciative GAs are dedicated employees, and in their new jobs they promote the reputation of the libraries and extend our network. The activities described in this chapter effectively prepare graduate students for professional librarianship.

PERFORMANCE DOCUMENTATION

When GAs join your organization, give them binders in which they can gather training materials and project documentation. Explain to them that professional academic librarians prepare something similar for annual evaluations and that the documentation helps them prepare for interviews. You can give them some extra guidance by putting labeled dividers into the binder for performance plan, evaluations, documentation, and training.

PERFORMANCE PLANNING

Start mentoring GAs immediately after orientation to your department by having them create a performance plan. Explain that this activity prepares them for drafting annual performance agreements. The plan also helps you assign tasks consistent with the GAs' career aspirations.

Give GAs a week to craft two to three goals each for career and work, with one or two objectives for each goal. Then edit the documents and meet with GAs individually to discuss the performance plans. Be ready to suggest professional development activities to support their goals. GAs may not be aware of the following options, which are usually accessible and affordable for students:
• training in technology, instruction at work
• doing library projects in their areas of interests
• interviewing librarians that share their career or research interests
• taking human-resource courses on campus
• joining discussions lists
• joining subject area or library professional organizations
• publishing reviews or presenting posters
• attending workshops or conferences

After the meetings, have GAs revise their performance plans and return them to you for a final review. The GAs should place the finalized plans in their binders, and you should put copies in your personnel files to consult over the year. To encourage GAs to follow through with their objectives, consider making their progress a factor in their evaluations.

INTRODUCTION TO CAREERS

Take advantage of departments and librarians at your institution to introduce GAs to careers within librarianship. Tours of library departments at which employees explain their work and roles in the library overall are enlightening for budding librarians. Ask individual librarians to visit GA meetings and describe their average work day, how they prepared for their careers, and what opportunities exist for employment and advancement.

To recruit speakers from outside academic librarianship, use your contacts in the community and professional organizations. Most are happy to share their experiences with GAs. If distance is a problem, consider having the speaker meet with the GAs through chat or classroom software such as Wimba.

JOB HUNT PREPARATION

As GAs approach graduation, increase the number of activities that prepare them for job hunting. First, introduce them to the multitude of professional development resources available, which you can also use to prepare lessons:

• librarians in your organization
• professional development books at your library
• career counseling on campus
• professional development websites, e.g., LibGig.com
• professional development workshops, or services at conferences

PROVIDE SAMPLES

Younger graduate students have had little or no experience preparing a performance agreement, documenting their work, or applying for a professional job. Therefore, they need substantial guidance in the form of sample documents to facilitate understanding.
• job listings, e.g., ALA JobLIST, state library associations’ job listings
• library discussion lists that post jobs

The next step is practicing the components of looking, applying, and interviewing for librarian positions. Lead these activities in the order below to mimic the job-hunting process:

1. Finding job descriptions suited to the GAs’ level of experience
2. Writing cover letters in response to job descriptions
3. Writing resumes or CVs
4. Learning to teach a class about library resources
5. Preparing handouts for classes
6. Answering interview questions
7. Drafting thank-you letters to interviewers

Review the students’ products and give them feedback on their efforts. This need not be done individually; there are usually common mistakes that can be addressed with the entire group.

**PREPARATION FOR THE REAL THING**

Mentoring continues as GAs eventually apply for jobs. Make yourself available to proofread cover letters and resumes before they are sent off. When GAs advance to the phone interview stage, make sure to remind them to not use a cell phone because reception may be poor or inconsistent, and to make sure there will be no noise or distractions during the interview, such as pets, children, or nearby construction.

Finally, when GAs are invited for on-site interviews, you and the other GAs can assist with preparation. For GAs who might need it, offer advice on how to dress appropriately for interviews. Conduct mock interviews if they desire them. Arrange locations and times when GAs can practice the presentations they will do at on-site interviews. Open the presentations to GAs and other library staff so that students can practice in front of an audience and answer impromptu questions; afterward, you can critique the presentations and make suggestions. Pick only the areas of the presentations that need the most work; you do not want to overwhelm GAs shortly before their interviews.

Inevitably, some GAs are not invited for interviews or offered jobs. Create an environment of support for GAs from the start of mentoring by making it clear that
job hunting is not easy and that one is more likely to fail than succeed on the first few tries. Use the setbacks as opportunities to further advise GAs on improving their presentation and interviewing skills.

TOO MUCH TIME?

Are you thinking that mentoring sounds too time-consuming as you read this chapter? Mentoring is a big commitment, but your coworkers can help with planning and leading different activities. You can also take on just a few activities; some mentoring is still better than none. And think about this: Do you want to be proud of your profession ten years from now? Then someone has to pass wisdom on to up-and-coming librarians.

AFTER THEY GRADUATE

Once GAs graduate and leave your library, you still have a mentoring role to play. If they have not secured jobs yet, you can alert them to job postings and proofread cover letters and resumes. For those who have jobs, you can let them know that you are available to give advice. It is reassuring for them to have an ally outside work to answer their “stupid” questions.

Why continue mentoring librarians who are no longer in your employ? Over the course of their assistantships, they have become your colleagues. You will care how they progress in their careers and be proud of their contributions to the profession. And one day they will start sharing contacts, resources, and knowledge with you. With each GA you send off, your library’s network broadens and its access to resources increases. There are no losers with mentoring.