University of Nebraska - Lincoln
DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln

E-JASL 1999-2009 (volumes 1-10)

E-JASL: The Electronic Journal of Academic and Special Librarianship

Winter 2009

Increasing Retention Rates in Minority Librarians Through Mentoring

Antonia Olivas
California State University, San Marcos

Richard Ma
Mira Costa Community College

Follow this and additional works at: https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/ejasljournal

Part of the Communication Technology and New Media Commons, Higher Education Commons, Race and Ethnicity Commons, Scholarly Communication Commons, and the Scholarly Publishing Commons

Olivas, Antonia and Ma, Richard, "Increasing Retention Rates in Minority Librarians Through Mentoring" (2009). *E-JASL 1999-2009 (volumes 1-10)*. 120.
https://digitalcommons.unl.edu/ejasljournal/120

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the E-JASL: The Electronic Journal of Academic and Special Librarianship at DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln. It has been accepted for inclusion in E-JASL 1999-2009 (volumes 1-10) by an authorized administrator of DigitalCommons@University of Nebraska - Lincoln.

Copyright 2009, the authors. Used by permission.

Electronic Journal of Academic and Special Librarianship

v. 10 no. 3 (Winter 2009)

Increasing Retention Rates in Minority Librarians Through Mentoring

Antonia Olivas, Education Librarian
Kellogg Library, California State University San Marcos, USA
tolivas@csusm.edu

Richard Ma, Outreach Librarian
Mira Costa Community College, California, USA

Thesis

Maintaining healthy mentoring relationships throughout librarians' careers helps to increase retention rates among minority librarians and promotes diversity in upper-management.

Abstract

Recruitment of minority librarians has been at the forefront of library literature for decades. However, what happens to those librarians after they graduate from library school and get their first library jobs? Do they stay in the profession for long? Is there a support system to help them maintain the excitement and novelty of their career choice after they've been wooed by scholarships and residency programs? This article will discuss the results of a study conducted by librarians new to the field, which indicates that minority librarians who have had constant interactions with mentors, regardless of distance, tend to have better job satisfaction and go on to become mentors and leaders themselves. It also gives a full account of a successful mentoring relationship that is promoting minority leadership in academic libraries.

Background/Purpose of Study

Mentoring relationships are delicate and time-consuming at best. Yet those relationships are needed in order to help increase the number of minority librarians in upper management. Current literature shows plenty of research on how to create formal mentoring programs, what to expect in a mentoring relationship, and the experiences of mentors/mentees in general. However, few articles discuss the value of maintaining those relationships when the recruitment phase of a new librarian has ended. Once a mentorship is developed, what are the strategies used for not only helping the mentee cultivate useful skills that would prepare him for the "real world" of librarianship, but increasing a librarian's chances of staying in the profession and becoming a leader in the field? The purpose of this study is to show the reality beyond the honeymoon phase of recruitment and the correlation between stable, healthy mentorships and the possible increase in minority librarian retention rates.

Recruitment of minority librarians is of course necessary to build a foundation of future possible library leaders. Such noteworthy recruitment efforts are ALA's Spectrum Scholarship and the Knowledge River Initiative at the School of Information and Library Resources (SIRLS) at the University of Arizona. Both programs offer minority students the funding and training opportunities to succeed in finding a position as a new librarian. Each program, partially funded by the Institute of Museum and Library Services grants, helps increase minority representation in entry-level library positions.

While programs such as these are praiseworthy, they do not address the issue of retaining new minority librarians once they enter the profession. After these librarians have been recruited, what are the opportunities for professional development and promotion? Research suggests that those who do not have these opportunities will likely encounter frustration and stagnation that may drive them to leave the profession all together.

The reality is that many librarians in administrative and middle-management positions will soon retire, and inadequate retention efforts will make filling these high-level positions with minority librarians very difficult. Demographic studies conducted by Wilder for the Association of Research Libraries found that 30 Academic Research Library director positions would be vacant by the year 2008 (Bonnette, 2004). It is clear from the literature that more aggressive retention strategies must be used to secure the future of minority librarians because not only are those positions of higher management at risk of not being filled with qualified individuals, but the growing changes in demographics are not fairly represented.

U.S. Census data reflects that between 1990 and 2000, the Latino population increased by 57 percent and the Asian/Pacific Islanders population increased by 60.9 percent. It is important to note that by the year 2050, it is estimated that over half the U.S. population will be ethnic minorities (Bonnette, 2004). How can libraries realistically be expected to provide "quality library service from a cultural and intellectual perspective" (Reese & Hawkins, 1999) for all patrons if the demographics behind library walls do not reflect its outdoor reality?

E. J. Josey, a leader in diversity library education, affirms that recruitment should not end when minorities enter the profession, but should continue to involve promotion into middle- and upper-management positions (Josey, 2002). What happens to minority librarians who quit being librarians or decide to take another career path after they become frustrated with the field? According to the National Center of Education Statistics it appears that minorities who "traditionally entered the relatively low-paying careers of nursing, elementary education, and librarianship are now exercising new and better-paying options" (Bonnette, 2004) such as in the fields of business, engineering, public administration, health professions, and computer science.

Minority librarians choose these other professions because there are fewer opportunities to exercise power and authority in librarianship (Gandhi, 2000). In other words, minorities may feel positions in upper management are out of their reach because they have no one to guide them properly.

Methods/Procedures

In spring 2008, an electronic survey was sent out to various listserves using a Likert scale from 1 to 5 (where 1 was extremely dissatisfied and 5 was extremely satisfied). The target audience for this survey was minority librarians who have been in the profession for more than one year. Various questions were asked regarding their mentorship experiences and the level of mentoring they continued to have (if any) throughout their tenure as librarians. The main question behind the survey focused on job satisfaction as it correlates to mentorships and the type of relationships these participants had with their mentors.

Participants were asked to remain anonymous but asked to include their ethnic minority affiliation, the number of years they have been in the library profession, and the extent or satisfaction of their mentoring experience. Anonymous results were returned via email (using an electronic survey tool) and tallied using whole numbers. Then, the average was totaled for each section and reported in terms of percentages. Unfortunately, since the survey went out on various listserves, the number of librarians reading the initial survey is not known. The numbers used in these findings

reflect the number of "usable" surveys returned. The term "usable" indicates surveys which were completely answered and no missing information was found.

Analytical Discussion of Findings

Of the surveys sent out to eight electronic listserves including REFORMA, American Indian Library Association (AILA), Chinese American Librarians Association (CALA), Asian/Pacific American Librarians Association (APALA), Black Caucus of the American Library Association (BCALA), Spectrum Scholars, Knowledge River, Minnesota Institute for Early Career Librarians, 157 were deemed "usable." Of those usable surveys, 20 percent of minority librarians said they felt they were mentored sufficiently in the first five years of their careers. Those librarians were the ones who stated they had greater job satisfaction and planned to pursue higher levels of employment in the library profession. The librarians who are planning on leaving the profession stated lack of professional growth as the major reason behind their decision, but also said they would consider staying if they had a more personal connection with a senior librarian to help them navigate the profession better.

A number of "first-year" librarians (librarians who have been in the profession between 11 months and 23 months) stated an interest in mentoring minority librarians in the future because of their own successful mentoring relationships thus far. Some of the librarians surveyed stated they are still in contact with librarians who mentored them in graduate school and/or their first-year librarian jobs. Overall, the job satisfaction rating for those who stayed in contact with their mentors was significantly higher than those who did not remain in contact with their mentors or those who claimed not to have a mentor in their first five years. As a result, a majority of these "stand alone" librarians rated their job satisfaction as very low and planned on leaving the profession within the next 5 years.

For future study, another survey should be sent out to former librarians polling why they left the field of librarianship in the first place. Evidence from the current survey suggests an overwhelming number of participants will state, when asked about their mentoring experiences, their dissatisfaction with the amount of mentoring they received as a new librarian.

Recommendations

St. Lifer and Nelson cite Jon Cawthorne, a reference librarian and coordinator of outreach services at the University of Oregon Library, as saying, "If your leaders aren't committed, it won't happen" (1997). Forming a mentoring relationship, whether formal or informal, must first have the approval of administrators involved. Regardless of the strategies implemented, administrators and directors must be

committed to diversity in their organizations. Once the leaders are on board, mentoring relationships can flourish as much as those involved are committed to the mentorships.

While ALA provides mentoring to new professionals through the Black Caucus Mentoring Program and REFORMA's Mentoring Project, among others, and many state library associations have begun offering mentoring services, (Bonnette, 2004) the best form of mentoring is the one-on-one kind that is formed unexpectedly—also known as "accidental mentorships." Through these mentoring relationships, a bond is formed greater than nearly any formulated mentoring relationship.

While mentoring offers benefits to everyone involved, it is especially helpful for librarians from diverse backgrounds, since they may feel alienated from the principal culture of the organization. It is possible that these librarians may not immediately understand the "subtle nuances, politics, and social dynamics of the library's administrative hierarchy" (Howland, 1999). Therefore, it is important for a librarian, with whom he feels comfortable, to offer guidance and individualized advice at appropriate times.

Through the mentor's help, the mentee should seek a formal level of interaction with the library leaders, which opens new opportunities within the organization. Together, sit down and toss ideas around on how to structure a mentorship. Finally, if the current organization does not offer opportunities for growth, do not be afraid of looking elsewhere for professional growth and development.

Beyond the internship experience, the mentor should remain in constant contact with the mentee to show support and offer encouragement when needed. Below is a brief description of the mentoring relationship formed between Ms. Antonia Olivas, Education Librarian at California State University San Marcos (CSUSM), and Mr. Richard Ma, Outreach Librarian at Mira Costa Community College (MCCC).

Just out of a residency program herself and new to the CSUSM Library, Ms. Olivas found herself wanting to pay back her previous mentors by becoming a mentor herself. Mr. Ma sought concurrent real-life experiences to complement the theoretical underpinnings of his MLIS education. He stated his interest in academic libraries and spent time examining and seeking internship possibilities among the nearby community colleges and four-year institutions. After submitting his application to CSUSM, Mr. Ma and Ms. Olivas had a formal face-to-face meeting which centered on the expectations of each person involved in the mentorship.

Clear guidelines and protocols for the Mr. Ma were established, and as time progressed, an understanding and communication between him and Ms. Olivas grew. Clear communication with each other, on a continual basis, regarding the timely completion of projects was needed in order to set the stage for the next set of benchmarks to accomplish. As the mentor, Ms. Olivas always made sure to ask if Mr. Ma had any questions and addressed each inquiry professionally and adequately.

After months of working together, Ms. Olivas and Mr. Ma established a trust that lead to a friendly and comfortable working relationship. Ms. Olivas welcomed a certain amount of autonomy in Mr. Ma because he already possessed a great deal of experience when he came looking for an internship position. Since Mr. Ma already worked in a school environment before this internship, Ms. Olivas played on his strengths and encouraged him to work in collection development to help support the growing curriculum room project she was working on. Because of her interactions with Mr. Ma, she had every confidence the job would be completed in a timely and correct manner.

As the mentorship developed over the months to follow, the Ms. Olivas introduced new library work skills to Mr. Ma slowly and thoroughly. For instance, he expressed a desire to learn more reference skills and participate in departmental meetings. But instead of jumping into these experiences, Ms. Olivas developed a strategic plan to get the rest of the library's involved in Mr. Ma's learning. She could not be at the reference desk every day Mr. Ma was present, but she arranged for other librarians to share in the mentoring experience by allowing them to have the opportunity to establish how much they wanted to let Mr. Ma participate in each reference interaction.

California State University San Marcos (CSUSM) Library has a unique reference model where the reference desk is operated by students and librarians hold a cell phone and are "on-call" for reference questions. Mr. Ma sat out at the research help desk and answered the same types of non-reference questions the students answered. When real reference questions arose, he called the librarian on duty and shadowed the on-call librarian during each reference interaction. Often times, depending on the librarian's comfort of his involvement, Mr. Ma was able to answer difficult, in-depth reference questions under the watchful eye of the reference librarian.

By sharing the mentoring responsibilities, Ms. Olivas was able to monitor her mentee's progress from a distance and listen to librarian feedback on Mr. Ma's job performance. Also, by sharing the mentoring responsibilities, Ms. Olivas was able to continue her day-to-day job duties without interrupting the flow of her work too much.

The librarians at CSUSM were welcoming and understanding when Ms. Olivas asked for help and participation. Each of these librarians, including the dean, expressed their desire to help in Mr. Ma's learning experience anyway they could. This meant each of them agreed to take the time to sit and discuss with him their own experiences in librarianship. This mentorship could not have been possible without the complete support and flexibility of the library staff, faculty and administrators at CSUSM Library.

Since the initial mentorship ended in May of 2008, Richard Ma has gone on to attain a faculty librarian position at Mira Costa College Library and was awarded a Spectrum Scholarship to help him finish his MLIS studies at Drexel University. Mr. Ma and Ms. Olivas continue to exchange emails and phone calls discussing the ups and downs of being a new librarian and are working collaboratively on various research projects. With the help of new mentors at Mira Costa College, Mr. Ma is currently coordinating the instruction program there, establishing a community outreach center and cultivating his leadership skills to be an administrator in an academic library setting.

In order for any healthy mentorship to work, micromanaging is not an option. The mentee must be a self-starter and enjoy the work he does at the library. A mentor should not feel like she has to checkup on the mentee's work because it would not only disrupt the mentor's daily duties but cause distrust between the mentee and the mentor. The mentee must establish a respectful working relationship with everyone in the library, and everyone must share in his learning experience in order for the mentorship to succeed.

Conclusion

The key to maintaining minority librarians in the profession is not only recruitment efforts, but retention efforts, especially through mentoring. Years later, as the demographics change once again in American society, our libraries should reflect the numbers represented beyond the stacks. Mentoring fledgling minority librarians will ensure greater success in accomplishing that goal.

Works Cited

Bonnette, A. E. (2004). Mentoring minority librarians up the career ladder. *Library Administration & Management*, *18*(3), 134-139.

Gandhi, S. (2000). Cultural diversity and libraries: Reaching the goal. *Current Studies in Librarianship*, *24*(1/2), 55-66.

Howland, J. (1999). Beyond recruitment: Retention and promotion strategies to ensure diversity and success. *Library Administration & Management*, *13*(1), 4-14.

Josey, E. J. (2002). Diversity in libraries. *Virginia Libraries*, *48*(1), 5-9. Retrieved from http://scholar.lib.vt.edu/ejournals/VALib/v48_n1/josey.html.

Reese, G. L. & Hawkins, E. L. (1999). *Stop talking, start doing: Attracting people of color to the library profession*. Chicago: American Library Association.

St. Lifer, E. & Nelson, C. (1997). Unequal opportunities: Race does matter. *Library Journal*, *122*(18), 42-46.

Back to Contents

http://southernlibrarianship.icaap.org/content/v10n03/olivas_a01.html.