

Joseph Fennewald and John Stachacz

# Recruiting students to careers in academic libraries

## One chapter's approach

One of the crucial issues facing the profession today is finding academic librarians to replace a rapidly graying workforce. So serious is the matter that ACRL recently rated recruitment as one of the top seven concerns facing the profession.<sup>1</sup> To recruit students to careers in academic libraries, the ACRL Delaware Valley Chapter (ACRL DVC) developed a mentoring program linking students in area library schools with librarians in academic institutions.

### Mentoring library students

The library profession provides a wide range of mentoring programs for new colleagues, new directors, and new members of library organizations, such as ACRL. In addition to programs for librarians entering the field or advancing within it, library schools often provide mentoring programs to their students that offer opportunities to enhance their classroom experience. A technical service course may require students to find a cataloger, acquisitions librarian, or an information manager to serve as a mentor; a library management class may require students to seek library administrators as mentors.

ACRL-DVC envisioned a program that would offer students opportunities in addition to these class-related experiences. Our goals were to provide support and guidance for students interested in academic librarianship careers, to offer experiences specific to the students' interests, and to share our profes-

sional experience and knowledge. The success of the program attests to its need.

The mentoring program, which began in 2001, is the ACRL-DVC's newest outreach to library school students. We have always offered students reduced membership fees and special rates for our programs and workshops. Since the mid-1990s, we have awarded annual stipends to students interested in academic librarianship careers. During the past three years, ACRL DVC members have served as mentors to 26 library school students attending school or living within the chapter's membership area.

ACRL-DVC has a large membership area from which to recruit mentors and students. Although our membership is concentrated in the Philadelphia area, the chapter stretches west to the center of Pennsylvania and southeast to include all of Delaware.

### Reaching the students

For the mentor program, the chapter targeted the library schools at Clarion University of Pennsylvania, Drexel University, and Rutgers University, and the students in the chapter's membership area enrolled in the University of Pittsburgh's online program. We supplied the deans and administrators of these schools with print and

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electronic flyers to distribute to students and post throughout their schools. They emphasized that this was an ACRL activity that would directly connect students with a practicing professional librarian. The flyers featured our slogan, "When a librarian mentors a student, the profession benefits."

Library school students contact the ACRL-DVC by e-mail and indicate their interests. Some want to gain experience working at a reference desk or by providing library instruction. Others want to learn more about work in a specific subject area, such as government documents, a humanities collection, or engineering. Alternatively, they may simply want counsel from someone in the profession on their courses and assignments.

Students can contact us at any stage of their education, from entering library school to graduation. We have even heard from potential library school students who, after seeing the flyers during visits to the school, asked the contact person to add them to the list once they started classes. We have also heard from students preparing for job interviews. Several expressed appreciation for the interviewing tips and job leads that their mentors provided. One student reported that the mentor "gave me more confidence in my skills and she was also very, very helpful in job interviewing tips, and sending out a variety of job ads she had seen. . . . It can be reassuring to know that there is someone on your side when you are venturing out into a career for the first time."

Once established, the mentoring relationship may extend beyond the student's graduation. We continued to communicate after his graduation from Drexel and, while he was seeking a professional librarian's position, I [the mentor] was there to urge him not to be disappointed when he was not hired and was able to steer him to a job he eventually landed.

Students enrolled in online programs have found it particularly helpful to discuss library

assignments with a mentor. One such student, with limited library experience, wrote that the mentor "can give a lot of feedback and advice about what it is really like out there in the field, which can differ greatly from some of the theorizing we do in class. Being able to call upon a librarian for advice and feedback is especially vital for library students who have never worked in the field, or for those, such as myself, who are taking courses through distance education and may feel isolated."

### **Making it work**

Administering this program is simple. Through our newsletter and e-mail list, we ask for volunteers to serve as mentors. The membership has enthusiastically embraced this project, and we often have more mentors than students. If we are unable to make a good match from those who volunteered, we contact other librarians. When this has happened, we have always found librarians willing to serve. (This has had an added benefit for the chapter. We require all mentors to be current chapter members and have been able to recruit several librarians to the chapter.)

Although it is not viewed as essential, we attempt to match the student with a librarian in the same geographical area. Once they have been introduced, usually through a series of e-mail messages, the mentor and mentee determine how best to communicate. E-mail is used frequently, but it is often followed up with phone conversations and personal visits. In addition to visits to the mentors' libraries, mentees and mentors have met at restaurants, coffee shops, and conferences. The mentee and mentor decide the frequency of their meetings. One mentor explained, "During the year, we corresponded by telephone and e-mail, and I arranged for us to meet in-person for the first time at the 2003 ALA Midwinter Meeting in Philadelphia, which was interesting and dynamic for someone attending their first ALA conference."

## The role of the mentor

The mentor will advise and inform, but more importantly, will listen. One mentor commented, The mentor should get to know the student by asking questions and listening to his answers. What are the student's expectations of this profession? What are his special interests and expertise? Does he want to be a public services or technical services person? As the mentor comes to know the student, he or she can determine how they can best meet the student's needs. As another mentor wrote,

Matching two people, both interested in the profession, one already in the field and one planning to go into the field, is a good way to develop a relationship that can be beneficial to both.

The program has benefited the mentors as well as the mentees. The professional gains insight from the student's questions, fears, anticipations, etc., and the student derives comfort from knowing that what he is experiencing is not unique to him alone.

One mentor wrote, The mentor gains so much more than they give. It is so invigorating to be involved with a current library science graduate student. It is worthwhile (and fun) to learn the latest curriculum offerings in graduate school programs. It is also personally rewarding to pass along advice and information that the mentor has learned working in the field to a protégé. It helps the mentor gain some perspective on [his or her] career and a sense of satisfaction that one has accomplished some goals, even if not everything one dreamed of, when beginning a career in librarianship.

In addition to the personal rewards the mentors may experience, the program has provided other unexpected benefits. I have asked [my mentee] for help when we went to hire for a temporary, part-time position. With her graduate school connections, she spoke with fellow students who then sent their resumes to me.

## Looking to the future

ACRL-DVC plans to maintain the program's

informal structure. We believe it meets the diverse needs of library school students and allows the student and mentor to establish a means of communication that best meets their needs. We continue to look for ways to promote the program, especially to students in our membership area involved in online programs outside our membership area. We are planning to sponsor a luncheon for the mentors to provide them with an opportunity to talk about their experience with one another. It also provides ACRL-DVC with an opportunity to express our appreciation for their willingness to serve as mentors.

The mentoring program has been a success. The initial student response was tremendous. A student at Drexel University, for example, wrote to communicate with someone who occupies a position you'd like in the future, and learn that they had similar experiences and opinions about library school and the profession, has been an invaluable experience. I feel that I have a better idea about how to proceed professionally, and with greater confidence.

Not only have we received positive comments from the students and their mentors, but mentees are now beginning to refer new students to the program. I would emphatically encourage them to take advantage of the opportunity. I think it is a very valuable experience where a student can get a good look at what it is like to work in the library world, especially if the student is planning to enter into a type of library that they are unfamiliar with. What better indicator of success than having students promote the program to their fellows?<sup>2</sup>

## Notes

1. W. Lee Hisle, Top issues facing academic libraries, *C&RL News*, 63, no. 10 (2002): 714.

2. Further information about the mentoring program is available by contacting the authors. Students living in the membership area can learn more about the program by visiting our Web site at [www.acrl-dvc.org](http://www.acrl-dvc.org). 