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Our experience as minority residents

Benefits, drawbacks, and suggestions

In an effort to increase the presence of minorities in academic libraries, several institutions have implemented residency programs to recruit new library graduates into the profession. In fall 2002, we had the opportunity to participate in a two-year minority residency program at Miami University in Oxford, Ohio.

Entering the residency excited about the possible opportunities, but not fully aware of the uniqueness of the program, we began to experience some unforeseen and frustrating circumstances created by the distinctiveness of the program. After coming across a new book entitled *Diversity in libraries: Academic residency programs,* in which former participants of various residency programs in academic libraries give firsthand testimonies about their experiences, we discovered that we were not alone.[1]

It has been a couple years since the book was first published. To the best of our knowledge it is the only source of its kind to date, and some testimonies in the book actually recounted experiences from more than a decade ago. Since residency positions are somewhat unique, it is difficult for recent graduates to find informative sources on such programs. The purpose of this article is to provide new graduates with a more recent account of two librarians' experiences as residents. Hopefully, it will help them if they decide to apply for a similar position. At the same time, we also want to offer library administrators, from our perspective, some advice on how to improve the valuable and well-intended program.

History and the program

Miami University is situated about 35 miles north of Cincinnati, Ohio, in the small college town of Oxford. Among its approximately 19,000 students, less than 10 percent of them belong to an ethnic minority group. As a result, increasing enrollment and recruiting staff from minority groups became a hot topic on campus.

Over a decade ago, the library established a minority residency program in an effort to increase diversity among its staff. It is a one-year contract position with an opportunity for a second-year renewal. Traditionally, recruitment for new residents is done on a national level, and qualified applicants are invited to campus for a one-day interview. New residents start the program with a detailed orientation, and based on the interests and strengths of individuals and the needs of the library are placed in a department or departments in which they would like to gain more experience.

At the time of our departure in the summer of 2004, there were approximately 35 librarians in nonresident positions, only 3 of whom belonged to a minority group, and 2 of them started at Miami University as minority residents.

Orientation

The residency program at Miami University provides opportunities for new graduates

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to explore different areas of librarianship. At the beginning of our program, we visited most of the departments in the library and received detailed training in each of them. The process lasted about a month, and the experience we had during this initial period helped us understand the responsibilities of different departments and how they each contributed to the daily operations of the library.

Upon completing orientation, we both decided to stay with the information services (IS) department, which consists of both traditional reference and electronic services. We were each interested in some aspects of IS operations: traditional reference, collection development, the impressive electronic projects IS librarians were developing, and the cutting-edge multimedia facility that was under IS management   the Center for Information Management (CIM). We felt that acquiring the skills required of that department would prepare us to become well-rounded 21st-century librarians.

Opportunity

Our tenure in IS began with a series of trainings on reference sources. During our second semester, we joined our colleagues on the reference desk. Initially, we were paired with veteran librarians during our shifts, which proved to be a valuable experience. The veteran librarians were all very eager to help us get familiar with the reference sources and continuously offered us suggestions on how to conduct effective reference interviews when the opportunity occurred, and we learned a great deal by observing and working with them. Our responsibilities soon expanded to participating in chat reference service for state-wide institutions.

Since both of us expressed desires to gain more knowledge of new technology, we also spent several hours a week assisting students in CIM. This library facility was equipped with the newest multimedia hardware and software, which students used to scan and create images, digitize video and audio, print posters, etc., for class projects. The

hardware and software changed constantly and we sometimes found keeping up with the updates rather challenging. Nevertheless, this unique experience in CIM exposed us to how some of the newest technology was being used in higher education. This was great experience that we otherwise may not have had the opportunity to gain in other capacities.

With the departure of two librarians, each of us was given a small discipline in our subject area and received training from collection development and acquisition librarians. In this capacity, we gradually obtained skills in outreach, instruction, and collection development. Because our subject areas had only a few instruction sessions, to enhance our instructional skills, we were also encouraged to take part in teaching library workshops, and we each taught about two workshops per semester.

The fact that the resident position did not have a detailed and   xed job description worked as a double-edged sword. Although it provided opportunities for getting involved with various projects, we could easily step into our colleagues territories. It was fortunate for us that our supervisor was very supportive by including us in different projects. She was willing to communicate with our colleagues and ensure our participation in various endeavors. Some examples of the projects we took part in during our tenure at Miami University are: Girl s voice databases (Demetria), co-instructor for a credited course, and helping in the creation of the online tutorial program E-Learn (Sylvia). When working on the projects, we also received great support from our colleagues in learning new programs and software.

Aside from the day-to-day duties, we also received excellent support for professional development from library administrators. Even though our positions with the libraries were short-term and temporary, we enjoyed the same kind of support and encouragement to attend workshops and conferences as our colleagues.

Disadvantages

Despite the abundant opportunities in the resident program, we inevitably experienced some frustrations. But, just as we bene ted from the good, we also learned a lot from the disadvantages and frustrations.

Shortly after we started our orientation, we discovered that we were often addressed and sought after as interns, but new entry-level librarians holding nonresident positions were treated like real librarians. As residents, we very much acknowledged we were new to the profession and welcomed the opportunity to learn. But we were surprised and confused by how we were addressed. After bringing the issue up to the associate dean, we realized that the program started out with intern positions and some staff still associated the position as such. As a result, we decided to deal with the situation by making a conscious effort to educate others about what our position really was and the difference between being an intern and a resident.

The residency program was created with good intentions to increase minority representation on campus. Since diversity was a hot topic on the predominantly white campuses, the success of diversity was very much measured by the number of minorities that had been recruited. It is unfortunate that we seemed mostly thought of when multicultural and diversity programs came up and representation from the library was required. Inevitably, we felt that our existence was more about politics rather than an honest attempt to recruit and retain minorities. Although we welcomed the opportunity to participate in some diversity initiatives, we felt that we were often asked to take on tasks not because of our interests or strengths, but merely due to our physical appearances. We believe diversity initiatives are important, but that they should be addressed by all, not just by those who are visible minorities. Our understanding, when we applied for the position, was that the residency program was designed to give new librarians a chance to experience different areas of librarianship, not just the multicultural part of it.

Suggestions for library administrators

Having a well-planned structure and system is the key to the success of residency programs. Since residents are temporarily inserted into an established organization, it can be dif cult for them to nd their place in the library. In most residency programs, new graduates are encouraged to search for their strengths and interests within the library network. In a program that is without an effective and organized structure, residents can end up wasting energy trying to nd and ght their way in, instead of learning useful skills and making a contribution to the institution. Therefore, having someone who is passionate about the program designated as a coordinator of activities to handle any problems becomes very essential to the success of the program.

When recounting their experiences in *Diversity in libraries,* several former participants in residency programs pointed out the positive impact of having more than one resident, whereas those who were the sole resident at the institution expressed a sense of isolation. It is our belief that because resident librarians are not in a conventional appointment, it can be dif cult for them to nd someone who can relate to the rewards and frustrations they experience.

In our experience, we found that, because there were two of us, we were able to have our own support group that got us through some tough times as well as shared success. This, we strongly believe, was a positive factor of our experience.

We also would like to stress the importance of not pigeonholing residents into areas related to diversity and multicultural issues. A major drawback we encountered as minority residents was being seen as minorities before being seen as quali ed librarians. Our experience, however, does not seem to be all that unique. In *Diversity in libraries,* several former minority residents mentioned being handed tasks related to multiculturalism and diversity more than they had anticipated and wished.

A *C&RL News* article pointed out that, [institutions] take newly graduated students, insert them into often hostile environments,

and expect them to address all the problems of diversity. . . . [these kinds of programs] become examples of what not to do. [2] We could not agree more, a successful minority resident program, should not be used as merely an instrument and solution to diversity problems on campus.

Advice for perspective residences

Resident programs provide many exciting opportunities to explore academic librarianship and can help new graduates ease into their professional careers. Talking to formal residents before applying or accepting a particular position can be most informative and helpful. Also, geographical location and institutional climate can also impact the programs. Institutions located in areas with a diverse population and student body would likely have a different agenda toward diversity issues than those that struggle with recruiting minorities. Depending on the career goal of the individual, some of the programs might not be the best choice for new graduates.

For residents who enter a program without good structure, speaking up and being assertive is also essential. Residency programs often do not have a de ned job description (which can provide both an opportunity and obstacle); therefore, it is important for residents to actively communicate with their supervisors about their interests and concerns. Negotiating placements during residency within the library might require some work and time, and it is in the interest of the residents to get as much out of the program as possible.

Conclusion

Despite some drawbacks, our experience as resident librarians was positive. During our tenure at Miami University, we gained a broad understanding of library operations and further identi ed the areas of librarianship we were more interested in working. The tremendous experiences and diverse skills we acquired as resident librarians certainly made us marketable when we were searching for new positions. Shortly before the end of our two-year appointment at Miami University, we both secured permanent positions at other institutions.

We feel that we learned a great deal from this experience. We also believe there is room for improving such programs. Because of the length of the article we were not able to recount our time as resident librarians in great detail. It is our hope, however, that we have provided suf cient information for both library administrators and new library graduates who are interested in improving, implementing, and/or considering such well-intended and valuable programs.

Notes

1. Raquel V. Cogell and Cindy A. Gruwell eds. *Diversity in libraries: Academic residency programs. (*Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 2001).

2. Rebecca Hankins, Michele Saunders, and Ping Situ, Diversity initiatives vs. residency programs: Agents of changes? *College and Research Libraries News* 64, no. 5 (2003): 308-10, 315.

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