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A different kind of fellowship

Joyner Library's SPA fellow program

One of the richest sources of new professional librarians can be found in the ranks of library support staff and paraprofessionals. Such individuals already have experience working in libraries, and encouraging them to transition from paraprofessional to professional is an excellent way to keep them in the field. While there are a number of scholarship opportunities for support staff who wish to earn MLS degrees, opportunities to gain professional-level library experience—the kind that can make a difference when engaged in a job search—are rare. As a library that encourages its paraprofessional employees to pursue MLS degrees, Joyner Library at East Carolina University (ECU) decided to do something about this.

ECU is a research-intensive institution with more than 24,000 students. J.Y. Joyner Library and the Music Library comprise Academic Library Services (ALS). Together, the two libraries offer more than 1.2 million bound volumes; 13,000 periodical subscriptions; 12,000 electronic journals; 2.4 million microforms; as well as federal and state document, archival, and special collections. ALS has a \$2.8 million materials budget and a staff of 35 professional librarians with faculty status and more than 70 paraprofessionals. Professional librarians at Joyner are designated as EPA; that is, they are exempt from the terms of the North Carolina State Personnel Act. Paraprofessional library employees, known as SPA, are subject to this act. This is an important distinction to keep in mind.

ECU has a library science program, and it offers an ALA-accredited MLS in cooperation with North Carolina Central University. In recent years, a number of ALS SPA employees

have taken advantage of this opportunity to earn a professional library degree, with the active encouragement of library administration. Unfortunately, those Joyner employees who obtained an accredited MLS and wished to transition to a career as a professional librarian faced a major obstacle.

The SPA employees who earned MLS degrees went to school part-time while still working full time. Thus, they were unable to engage in internships, directed field experiences, and the other opportunities full-time MLS students have to obtain professional level experience. This put Joyner Library paraprofessionals with MLS degrees at a competitive disadvantage in the professional librarian job market. In the fall of 2006, Joyner Library decided to try to fix this inequity.

After several support staff who had obtained MLS degrees expressed such concerns, the director of academic library services created a task force to come up with a proposal for a library fellowship program. The purpose of this program would be to offer permanent Joyner SPA employees with MLS degrees the opportunity to earn EPA-level library experience that would help them obtain permanent professional jobs.

The task force was asked to submit its proposal by mid-December, so that the application process could be implemented in time for the 2007-08 academic year.

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The task force consisted of seven members: four EPA faculty and three SPA support staff. We began our efforts by establishing certain basic principles. For one thing, the fellowship would be an annual prize, and would be awarded on a competitive basis. The successful applicant would be required to do professional librarian (EPA) level work for the period of one academic year (July-June), and would be compensated at the same level as starting EPA librarians over the course of the fellowship. In addition, receiving the fellowship would carry no guarantee of a professional position upon completion of the award, merely the opportunity to gain valuable experience that would give the winner a leg up in pursuing professional librarian opportunities.

Most importantly, the task force quickly determined that the recipient of the fellowship should retain their SPA status, despite performing EPA-level work. This was important in that it ensured that library fellows would not lose their accumulated SPA benefits, and would be able to return to their paraprofessional positions at the end of the fellowship, if all else failed. By guaranteeing that SPA employees would not lose anything by pursuing the library fellowship, we eliminated a major barrier for possible applicants. Finally, we made provisions so that the supervisor of the successful applicant would be able to hire a temporary employee to take his or her place for the duration of the fellowship period.

One priority for the task force was to look at other fellowship programs. To the best of our knowledge, there is no precedent for a fellowship targeted specifically towards paraprofessionals looking to transition to professional status. The majority of fellowship programs in the library world have two purposes: to recruit and offer experience to new librarians and to support research at particular libraries and archives. Since the former category was much more relevant to the task at hand, this was where we looked for inspiration.

In particular, we examined the fellowship program at North Carolina State University

(NCSU).¹ This is a two-year program designed for new library school graduates. NCSU fellows are assigned to a home department for 20 hours a week, and spend the other 20 hours on a special project outside that department. In the course of our deliberations, we decided to adopt this model, but to modify it.

For the Joyner Library SPA Fellowship, we wanted to offer the successful applicant the chance to both focus on a particular department, and to gain a breadth of experience across the library. Therefore the fellowship task force determined that the library fellow will spend 20 hours per week in a primary department for the duration of the fellowship. They will spend their additional 20 hours working in a secondary department. The library fellow will rotate between three secondary departments, spending four months in each. The fellow must choose one secondary department from each of the three main areas of librarianship: public services, technical services, and systems/digitization. The goal is to give the fellow the opportunity to develop expertise in a particular field of librarianship, while also getting a broader exposure to professional librarianship.

In terms of measuring success, the goal of the fellowship program is to produce new librarians who are well rounded, have a broad vision of the library profession, and are fully prepared to take the next step from support staff to professional librarian, wherever that may be.

As the Fellowship Task Force pursued its charge, two tangible products emerged. The first was a document clearly outlining the requirements for the fellowship, while a background report offered a detailed explanation of the relevant issues that influenced the group's recommendations. Both of these products can be accessed via the fellowship program Web site.²

One of the goals of the fellowship is to provide the successful candidate with significant professional experience. This involves more than just work experience; familiarity with the job search process is also important.

Therefore, the task force decided that the fellowship application and selection process should simulate an EPA librarian search as closely as possible. Interviews should be daylong affairs, and the applicant would be required to do a brief presentation. This will help prepare the candidate for actual professional librarian interviews.

The task force finalized the criteria for application. Each candidate is required to be a permanent SPA employee of Joyner Library, who has earned an ALA-accredited library science degree by the fellowship start date. Applicants wishing to work in special collections as their primary area are allowed to substitute a graduate degree in History or another relevant humanities field. The full set of application requirements is available on the Joyner Library Web site.

The fellowship selection process began in January 2007, when the task force put out a call for applications. Two candidates applied for the inaugural fellowship, and both were invited to interview. As part of the interview, each candidate did a 20-minute presentation outlining their proposed work plan and what they hoped to get out of the fellowship opportunity. These presentations were open to all library employees, and those in attendance were asked to submit written evaluations of the candidate. These evaluations were an important source of feedback to the task force in making its selection. Joyner Library uses a similar evaluation form for EPA librarian candidates.

Each candidate also met with the Fellowship Task Force. Both were asked a standard set of questions (developed in advance), designed to help determine their ability to transition from paraprofessional to professional. Again, this was modeled on the procedure used in interviews for faculty librarian positions.

After completing the interview process, the SPA Fellowship Task Force evaluated all of the available data and made its selection. The first ever Joyner Library SPA Fellow began her term in July 2007, and will continue until June 2008. If all goes well, the current

fellow will gain valuable professional librarian experience, and should be well on her way to transitioning from paraprofessional to professional status. Meanwhile, the task force is busy working with both the fellow and her supervisors, helping them develop workplans, providing guidance, and soliciting feedback.

One particular challenge involves how to evaluate the fellow's job performance. Since the fellow is still officially an SPA employee, she will still need to be evaluated by her permanent supervisor, using the university's online performance evaluation system. To aid in this process, each primary and secondary department head will submit a brief written evaluation of the fellow's performance in that area of the library. These will be used by the fellow's permanent supervisor as the basis for her formal evaluation. The Fellowship Task Force will coordinate this process and prepare its own assessment to be included in the fellow's personnel file. Just like with the rest of this process, the task force will analyze the evaluation and supervision component of the fellowship program and think of ways to improve it. Again, this whole process is very much a learning experience. In fact, the task force has already identified some additional challenges.

To begin with, it was difficult to simulate the full experience of a faculty search. Unlike a position search, where all candidates are measured according to how well they meet a set of specific job qualifications, Joyner SPA Fellowship candidates are only required to have completed an MLS program by the start of the fellowship period. Beyond that, they are evaluated based on their perceived ability to transition to professional librarianship, a more amorphous concept. Since each applicant will want to pursue different interests and develop unique skills using the fellowship, it has proven difficult to develop an instrument that allows for objective comparison of candidates.

In addition to performance evaluation and candidate selection, other issues have arisen

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Open Access to Their Work Through Their Institution, discusses several action strategies promoting the development of institutional policies.⁶

Norms are always more difficult to change than technologies. We are now witnessing a key shift in norms for sharing scholarly work that promises a giant step forward in leveraging the potential of network technologies and digital scholarship to advance research, teaching, policy development, professional practice, and technology transfer. Librarians need to seek and promote today's burgeoning opportunities to accelerate these positive changes toward openness. The next important strategy to pursue is developing institutional policies that ensure institutions receive limited distribution rights.

Notes

1. Ray English and Heather Joseph, The NIH mandate: An open access landmark. *C&RL News*, Vol. 69, No. 2. February 2008, www.acrl.org/ala/acrl/acrlpubs/crlnews/backissues2008/february08/nihupdate.cfm

2. Kathleen A. Newman, Deborah D. Blecic, and Kimberly L. Armstrong, Scholarly Communication Education Initiatives, SPEC Kit 299. Washington, D.C.: Association of Re-

search Libraries (2007), www.arl.org/bm~doc/spec299book.pdf.zip (accessed May 2008).

3. Michael Carroll, Complying with the National Institutes of Health Public Access Policy: Copyright Considerations and Options (February 2008), www.arl.org/sparc/advocacy/nih/copyright.html (accessed May 2008); and Kevin L. Smith, Managing Copyright for NIH Public Access, ARL: A Bimonthly Report. no. 258 (June 2008), www.arl.org/resources/pubs/br/br258.shtml (accessed May 2008).

4. Tempe Principles for Emerging Systems of Scholarly Publishing available at www.arl.org/bm~doc/tempe1.pdf (accessed May 2008).

5. Harvard To Collect, Disseminate Scholarly Articles For Faculty, www.fas.harvard.edu/home/news_and_events/releases/scholarly_02122008.html (accessed June 2008); and Harvard Law Faculty Votes for Open Access to Scholarly Articles, www.law.harvard.edu/news/2008/05/07_openaccess.php (accessed June 2008).

6. Thinh Nguyen, Open Doors and Open Minds: What faculty authors can do to ensure open access to their work through their institution (April 2008), www.arl.org/sparc/publications/guides/opendoors_v1.shtml (accessed May 2008). *ZZ*

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during the implementation of the fellowship program. These include teaching proper interview skills, communicating what is required of the fellow's supervisors, and making professional mentoring available. The task force has discussed these concerns with both the current SPA fellow and other library faculty and staff, and will take measures to provide future fellows and fellowship applicants with the needed advice and assistance.

Despite these challenges, everyone involved in the process agrees that the SPA Fellowship Program is a worthwhile endeavor that holds enormous promise for both support staff wishing to transition to professional librarianship and Joyner Library as an institution. Obviously it is still too early to tell if the program is successful. The ultimate test will

come once we have library fellows who have completed the program and pursue full-time professional positions. That is when we will find out if the program is truly working as we intended. At this point, the feedback from both the inaugural library fellow and her co-workers and supervisors has been overwhelmingly positive. While there are still lessons to be learned and issues to be addressed, the fellowship program has worked out well so far and will certainly be continued.

Notes

1. For information on the NCSU Libraries Fellows Program, see www.lib.ncsu.edu/fellows/.

2. Available at www.ecu.edu/cs-lib/SPA/Fellow_Com/Index.cfm. *ZZ*