

Librarian-Faculty Mentorship

The Missing Link to Departmental Culture

In academic libraries, mentoring programs play a pivotal role in supporting professional growth and fostering meaningful connections. These programs span various models, including the dyad approach, peer mentoring, group mentoring, and co-mentoring.¹ These established approaches focus on orienting new librarians to their departments and to institutional processes, but for subject librarians, the programs neglect to demystify the unique cultural nuances of their assigned faculty departments. The Librarian-Faculty Mentorship Program at University of Victoria (UVic) Libraries strategically pairs new librarians who have subject responsibilities with an established faculty member from one of their liaison departments. The new librarian is positioned to benefit from the institutional wisdom of the faculty mentor while building relationships that are crucial to their success as a subject librarian. This intentional librarian-faculty mentorship ensures the program's outcomes go beyond professional development, resulting in a community-building effort that fosters a sense of belonging and mutual support.

Institutional Context at University of Victoria

UVic is a mid-sized public research university located in Victoria, British Columbia, Canada, with approximately 22,000 students and 900 faculty.² The university offers undergraduate, graduate, and professional programs. As of August 2024, 35 librarians play a central role in supporting teaching and research at UVic, and among them 16 liaise within the departments to provide subject-specific support.

The authors of this article joined UVic Libraries as liaison librarians amid the challenges posed by working remotely due to the COVID-19 pandemic. Although all employees were taxed during this time, new employees were uniquely challenged to adjust to a “new normal” with no prior experience or understanding of the organization's pre-pandemic culture. We also stepped into our roles as members of a newly established unit, Advanced Research Services (ARS), which was formed in 2021 as part of a library-wide restructuring. In 2021, UVic held its annual orientation for new faculty members virtually, which Zahra attended. By 2022, the university had reverted to its pre-pandemic orientation activities, and new faculty members, including Monique, who had a new role at the library, attended in-person events that brought together all new university faculty members regardless of discipline. Although our university-sanctioned orientations looked different, we both received one-on-one onboarding from our supervisor and were paired with a librarian peer as part

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of an internal library mentorship program. These conventional structures helped to support us in feeling welcomed into the UVic Libraries' organizational culture, but they were not sufficient in familiarizing us with the departmental culture of our assigned faculties, which varies significantly across departments. The outgoing subject librarian may have been able to offer some insight, but apart from them, there is no one in the library who possesses department-specific knowledge.

In our literature exploration we learned there is much published about academic library mentoring programs. Notably, a 2015 scoping review found 40 unique programs with different objectives including onboarding or orientation; career progress, often related to navigating tenure, promotion, or leadership development; community building, which includes relationship building and getting to know peers; research and writing or supporting publication; training or learning, both ongoing or also to facilitate role changes when the person is not new to the institution; or psychosocial functions to improve retention.³ We found no reports of a mentorship program that pairs a new subject librarian with a faculty member from an external department; such a program, however, would help fill the remaining gap in knowledge that a subject librarian needs to ensure a successful start in their new role.

The Librarian-Faculty Mentorship Program at UVic Libraries

The Librarian-Faculty Mentorship Program was a new, year-long initiative by our librarian supervisor, J. Matthew (Matt) Huculak, who piloted this program in ARS in 2021. The program was a thoughtful response to the challenges brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic, and it was designed as a proactive means of integrating librarians into departmental cultures whose socially distanced members were slowly starting to reengage. Matt began by selecting a suitable mentor for each of us. This step was key, as mentor-mentee fit is an essential factor that impacts the success of a mentorship program. Matt selected mentors who were established, mid- or late-career, tenured faculty members from one of the departments we would support. This strategic pairing ensured that the mentor, with their experience and deep understanding of the department's needs, could provide relevant and invaluable guidance to us.

Zahra's Experiences

My faculty mentorship with Nathan Lachowsky officially commenced in August 2021, but initial contact began beforehand, in June 2021. A warm email from Nathan prior to my arrival at UVic set the tone for what would become a welcoming and supportive mentorship experience. In the first semester, we established a recurring 3–4-week check-in, which consisted of walking meetings. During our initial meeting, Nathan gave me a tour of the campus, including a visit to the best coffee shop. Nathan also shared details about the department's history, culture, and processes. He provided information about the people in the department including insights on their roles, research interests, and responsibilities—essentially a who's who of the department. These insights reduced my anxiety about starting a new role during the pandemic and helped me anticipate the department's needs and strategize outreach efforts. Nathan also facilitated introductions to key people in the department and individuals at the campus's research centres. In the second semester, Nathan facilitated further networking opportunities for me via email, in-person events and

meetings, or serendipitously if we encountered someone during our walking meetings.

Over the first year of mentorship, I received invitations to present at five meetings/events, each introduced or facilitated by Nathan. These presentations allowed me to introduce and establish myself and my new role to various stakeholders around campus. Those introductory presentations, in turn, led to further opportunities to collaborate on research, deliver workshops, and provide consultations. I also benefited from Nathan's objective opinion and guidance on a variety of topics, including navigating faculty benefits and writing my biennial performance review as per institutional guidelines. Our shared joy of walking meetings ensured that our conversations took place in the natural environment around UVic campus and away from our offices. Being outside nurtured a sense of confidentiality and promoted our well-being, as this was an activity we both looked forward to. Having an insider's guidance and gentle encouragement in my first year at UVic reduced my apprehension and paved the way for success.

When the mentorship term ended, we agreed to continue our walking meetings and stay in contact on a less frequent basis, allowing time for future ideas to come to fruition. As a passionate advocate and educator in evidence synthesis methods, I noticed a gap in course offerings for graduate students, as there were no graduate-level courses on systematic review methods. In the year after the mentorship term ended, Nathan played a key role in promoting both the need for such a course to the department and advocated for my expertise and knowledge on the topic. This led to a summer 2023 pilot of the course HSD 580—Systematic Review Methods, which I led as a co-instructor.

In comparison to the first year, where outreach and networking were most important, our recent conversations have changed focus to other elements of academic life related to career progression. Beyond the impacts mentioned above, Nathan's encouragement, guidance, and sponsorship helped to increase my confidence in navigating changing or new academic environments and increased my sense of belonging at UVic.

Monique's Experiences

In August 2022, I began my role as the science and research data literacy librarian with liaison responsibilities in the department of Psychology. My supervisor, Matt, chose Stephen (Steve) Lindsay, Psychology Department chair, to be my mentor. Matt facilitated the initial introduction and communication and offered to buy our first coffee. This was a welcoming gesture that set the tone for the mentorship relationship. After an initial introductory message from Steve, we established an in-person mentorship meeting schedule, which was eventually replaced by frequent email exchanges. From the outset, Steve actively included me in departmental meetings and emphasized to his faculty peers the role I could play in supporting research data management (RDM). Steve also took on coaching actions by sharing relevant articles, conferences, and research initiatives pertaining to reproducibility, a topic relevant to my work as a data librarian. After several months of mentorship, we co-taught a joint workshop titled "Steps, Tools, and Resources for Promoting Reproducibility," where we merged our expertise to offer approachable strategies for improving reproducibility and transparency in research.

Not only was Steve instrumental in establishing my subject knowledge among the Psychology faculty, but also his endorsements of my expertise within RDM helped to facilitate broader connections to my portfolio. He consistently highlighted my skills during faculty

meetings, introducing me as a valuable resource for data-related queries and projects. His generosity and encouragement succeeded at lessening my impostor syndrome and cultivated a genuine feeling of inclusion within the department. Steve's consistent affirmation of my expertise helped to build my confidence, allowing me to see myself as an authoritative voice in my field. Inspired by his encouragement, I applied for and received funding to attend an Open Science retreat in the Netherlands. This development has since sparked a new avenue in my professional development.

On a personal level, Steve's mentorship made me feel valued and appreciated because he took an equal interest in my career goals as well as my personal well-being. He also offered advice and shared his own experiences, so the relationship felt reciprocal. Overall, the sense of belonging nurtured through Steve's mentorship not only elevated my professional performance but also enriched my well-being and dedication to my role.

Considerations for Implementation

We felt our participation in the Librarian-Faculty Mentorship Program was an enriching and rewarding experience. The program was designed to encourage open communication, collaboration, and mutual respect among participants. This created a welcoming environment where we felt valued and included. Based on our experiences, to implement a similar librarian-faculty mentorship program necessitates thoughtful selection of mentors to ensure a harmonious match between librarians and faculty members. The incoming librarian's supervisor should collaborate with the departing subject librarian to identify suitable matches within a department. Ideally, chosen mentors should already be established in their field, within their department, and demonstrate a capacity for additional meetings without causing undue burden. They should possess awareness or knowledge of the unique cultural dimensions of their department.

Moreover, selecting a faculty mentor who recognizes the importance of the library in the academic setting, acting as a library champion, eliminates the need for the librarian to justify their role and allows for a reciprocal exchange of experiences. To promote sustainability, librarians and their faculty mentors should consider sharing food or joint physical activities, as these practices foster camaraderie. Additionally, these practices contribute to healthy physical and mental wellness and deepen one's connection to the natural environment.

In conclusion, academic libraries put significant effort into orienting new employees, but for subject librarians specifically, an additional intentional strategy needs to be put into place to orient them to the cultures of the departments they will be working with. The relationships we built during the Librarian-Faculty Mentorship Program were invaluable, and not only provided professional guidance but also fostered personal growth. A librarian-faculty mentorship program may be the missing link that benefits the faculty member and the new librarian. This extra support increases the likelihood of professional success for subject librarians and enhances a sense of belonging. The sense of belonging we experienced through this program has instilled a deep appreciation for the power of community in fostering academic and professional success.

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Notes

1. Diane L. Lorenzetti and Susan E. Powelson, “A Scoping Review of Mentoring Programs for Academic Librarians,” *The Journal of Academic Librarianship* 41, no. 2 (March 2015): 186–96, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.acalib.2014.12.001>.

2. University of Victoria, “About the University,” UVic.ca, accessed January 5, 2024, <https://www.uvic.ca/about-uvic/about-the-university/index.php>.

3. Lorenzetti and Powelson, “A Scoping Review of Mentoring Programs for Academic Librarians.”