MARTA K. LEE

MENTORING IN THE LIBRARY

BUILDING FOR THE FUTURE
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When I was a child, I loved using the local public library, especially during summer vacation. I visited the library twice a week, every week for the entire summer. “Books became her friends and there was one for every mood. . . . On that day when she first knew she could read, she made a vow to read one book a day as long as she lived.”1 Like Francine in *A Tree Grows in Brooklyn*, I love reading; books are my friends. In high school, I decided to pursue a library career so I might read all day like I thought librarians did. Since beginning work as a professional librarian, I have learned that librarians do not sit around all day reading like I thought they did as a child.

Over the years I found that the most important part of being a librarian is mentoring. Mentoring does not mean helping only those looking at becoming a library professional but helping anyone needing assistance. In my current academic position, as most librarians, I mentor students daily through the library. Often they are stressed over not being able to locate what they need. Just sitting next to patrons and helping them find the book or article needed enables them to replicate the same procedures to help themselves, and this makes happy students. Mentoring can be used in public, school, special, or academic libraries. It involves your knowledge. You have a commodity that others are able to tap into, gain knowledge from, and use to make a difference.
in the world. In addition to mentoring, sharing knowledge with others is vital. Passing on knowledge to others can make the world a better place.

A better place means taking the time to listen to individuals who need assistance. Library school students come with various needs, different needs as classes change. They might need to attend a public library board meeting, to complete an internship, or to ask a librarian questions regarding an assignment. You can be that individual who makes a difference for someone else, just like someone made a difference in your life. Over the years I have been touched by many: Judith Atwater, middle school librarian, Jeanne Klesch, Audrey Amerski, Robert Sivigny, and Jon Ritterbush, all of whom are librarians extraordinaire. Each person gave me back more than I could possibility have given him or her. Writing this book enabled me to realize how I have been helped and how I have assisted others along my life’s path.

Be open to mentoring opportunities everywhere. For example, attending American Library Association (ALA) conferences provides opportunities to help others in the field. In the past I have taken advantage of résumé reviewing at the annual conference, and this involved only an hour of my time. Many of the individuals seeking assistance with their résumés were just entering the field. By taking the time to look at someone’s résumé, you can find out what new librarians learned in library school.

Mentoring in the workplace requires library administration support; if you have this support, you can do wonders for others. For those longer mentoring opportunities, have a plan whenever possible. Having a plan enables the supervisor-trainee relationship to proceed smoother and provides for better evaluation upon completion. Remember, mentoring relationships benefit all involved. I hope that you gain something beneficial from this book to use in your professional career.

**NOTE**

Prior to developing the idea of mentoring in the library, the term mentor should be defined. The Oxford English Dictionary defines mentor as a descriptive form of the proper name Mentor. Linguistically, the word can be traced back to mean advisor, from the men, to remember, think, and counsel. The Oxford dictionary further defines mentor as “an experienced and trusted counselor.”

Mentor, as a term, has many synonyms that may be used interchangeably; these synonyms include teacher, advisor, and guide.

Why do people need mentors? Developing and growing professionally can be difficult for the individual entering into the workforce after graduating from high school, college, or graduate school. Young people are not always aware of where to go to learn the ropes of the job or who to speak with regarding joining a professional association. Having a mentoring program available in the workplace can be helpful to those who strive to grow professionally. Implementing mentoring programs in the library can benefit all individuals involved; the supervisor can share accumulated knowledge with the trainee, the trainee learns about a new area that is being mentored, and in many cases, a relationship develops between the two colleagues.

Mentoring in the workplace is often referred to as coaching and may be defined as a “private tutor who prepares a candidate for an examination.”
Coaching or mentoring can be thought of as a way to provide instruction or training that allows skills to be developed. Margaret Law points out that coaching is an activity directed at building on existing skills or improving these skills, whereas mentoring is geared toward one individual assisting another to broaden the trainee’s perspective. For the purpose of this book, the term mentoring will be used to discuss how the supervisor, teacher, or manager benefits the trainee, student, or team member.

**Implementing mentoring programs in the library can benefit all individuals involved; the supervisor can share accumulated knowledge with the trainee, the trainee learns about a new area that is being mentored, and in many cases, a relationship develops between the two colleagues.**

## SOME BACKGROUND ON MENTORING

Mentoring or coaching is not a new idea. Judith Field states that mentoring occurred as early as the sixth century BC. In a 2001 article, Field references a book written by Shu Chin entitled *Chinese Book of History*; Field states that Shu Chin maintains that individuals seeking mentoring shall rule the earth. In ancient China, individuals became skilled workers through apprenticeships. Apprentices would work under a master for a period of one to three years in order to learn a new trade. Once the exit tests were completed, the apprentice would then be able to conduct the work independently. Library staff can benefit from a type of “apprenticeship” or mentorship in that the individual is learning from a more experienced staff member.

Mentoring relationships revolve around two individuals: a supervisor and a trainee. The supervisor acts as a guide, a coach, and a motivator but can also become a friend and confidant. The trainee may be defined as an individual who is being mentored but also may be referred to as a protégé or an apprentice. The term *mentee* is often used in mentoring and it alludes to a less-formal relationship, a relationship in which a friendship may grow. The supervisor needs good communication skills to make the mentoring relationship work. According to V. Heidi Hass and Tony White, good communication skills include “active listening, paraphrasing, clarifying, and feedback.” The supervisor should

- expect excellence;
- affirm others;

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coach, teach, and impart knowledge to others;
be encouraging and supportive;
promote growth and creativity; and
provide counsel in difficult times.

These are just a few characteristics and responsibilities that make excellent leaders. Librarians use these characteristics as an ideal to strive for in mentoring, but they also attempt to remain flexible, to continue to learn, and to improve.\(^\text{10}\)

Skills that trainees should have include the ability to communicate, organize, manage time, and maintain realistic expectations. According to Hass and White, trainees’ characteristics and responsibilities include the following:

- enthusiasm;
- loyalty;
- dedication;
- a strong desire to learn;
- initiative; and
- good listening skills.\(^\text{11}\)

Further, mentoring relationships need a welcoming environment. Ideally, both the supervisor and trainee will have good listening skills and respect for each other’s opinions. The supervisor should use examples to illustrate library experiences that he or she has dealt with in the past. Limits need to be established whenever appropriate, but the supervisor should remain open to change. At the end of a mentoring period, collaboration between the supervisor and the trainee is a real possibility; for example, Doreen Harwood and Charlene McCormack presented their experiences at a 2007 conference on their collaborative project.\(^\text{12}\) Harwood and McCormack point out that a pilot library intern program dealing with the growth of research assistance from business students was established at the University of Washington–Bothell. Interns collaborated with the faculty and the business librarian to build “Web-based tutorials for business assignments.”\(^\text{13}\) The collaboration became a way to entice business students to enter the library field.

There are benefits of mentoring for the organization, for the individual acting as trainer, and for the protégé. The organization benefits from a higher level of employee retention and a more efficient introduction of newly hired
employees to the company. The librarian doing the training benefits from experiencing satisfaction in helping a colleague, developing a renewed purpose in the profession, and being recognized by the organizational leadership. Benefits for the trainees include gaining promotions, higher salaries, and career satisfaction.

ESTABLISHING A MENTORING PROJECT

Prior to beginning a mentoring project, the supervising librarian should spend some time communicating with the trainee via phone or e-mail to determine what the associate expects from the relationship. Do the trainee’s expectations involve cataloging, experience in reference services, or assistance in developing a dossier for promotion? Whatever the situation, the mentoring should address these individual needs. In addition, the managing librarian must be committed to the idea of facilitating others in career development. Furthermore, the mentor should be self-confident and not have a personal agenda.

Mentoring can be completed in an informal situation or in a formal setting. Informal programs are established when two individuals come together unofficially for one of the individuals to gain assistance. Even though many professionals willingly mentor colleagues, often they are left on their own to determine what is needed and to implement the help needed. According to Barry Sweeny, informal mentoring often can be inadequate, so formal mentoring programs are established. Formal programs are set up within the organization and have prescribed requirements and procedures. This type of program is often overseen by the head of the department.

Sweeny provides factors to consider when establishing both informal and formal mentoring. Factors to consider when contemplating informal mentoring follow:

- Low expectations make mentoring easier but less effective.
- Little to no training is needed to begin the mentoring process.
- Often, employees who use or desire mentoring do not ask for assistance because they do not wish to appear “dumb.”
- Often, experienced employees are reluctant to volunteer because they do not want to appear to be a know-it-all.
- Often, the workload and the need to be productive can overwhelm the desire to take the time needed to help others learn.
Consideration factors for formal mentoring follow:

- More training is required with this type of mentoring.
- Employees who desire to grow professionally or need assistance expect to ask questions.
- Veteran librarians know that collaboration is expected and desired. These individuals are able to handle the challenges of mentoring with finesse and skill.
- Knowing who is acting as mentor allows the organization, in this case the library, to provide an appropriate reward.17

In a 2001 article, Lois Kuyper-Rushing divides mentoring into three distinct areas: informal, supervisory, and institutional. Informal mentoring allows for a senior librarian to help a newly hired librarian become familiar with and ultimately participate in the library’s culture. Supervisory mentoring involves the newly hired librarian receiving basic orientation information; this is often completed by the supervising librarian. Institutional mentoring is overseen by the personnel director as it involves documentation and explanations (e.g., tax forms or retirement benefits).18 Supervisory and institutional mentoring are considered to be formal as they are set up to handle the daily business operations of the library.

Hass and White state that formal mentoring programs can be part of a library program or part of an association.19 According to Sha Li Zhang, Susan J. Matveyeva, and Nancy Deyoe, “Formal mentoring programs are increasingly recognized as a means of recruitment and retention in a library setting.”20 Formal programs are established to assist librarians in gaining promotion and adapting to a new position or to an entirely new library. Library associations provide mentoring to assist librarians when they are new to the field or new to the association and desire to become involved with a committee.

The following techniques are useful when establishing a successful, effective mentoring program:

- Set goals.
- Gain an understanding of the individual situation.
- Build on self-knowledge prior to beginning the relationship.
- Deal with all roadblocks as they occur.
- Think creatively when entering the relationship.
- Build a wide network of influence, learning, and support.
In truth, “Development of successful mentoring programs is a creative process.”21 Mentoring programs take time and effort to work, and there is no guarantee that each mentoring relationship will be successful. Be prepared to spend time thinking, making decisions, having discussions, correcting errors, making changes, and experiencing successes along with failures.22

By playing an important role in the lives of library trainees, librarians show belief in the individuals along with providing the trainees with encouragement and affirmation. Walter C. Wright Jr. points out that “the mentoring relationship is an intentional, exclusive, intensive, voluntary relationship between two persons.”23 Providing time and building confidence are invaluable gifts for anyone. Even so, realization of the gifts they received sometimes comes too late for trainees to appropriately thank the mentors. Frequently, the trainee will provide this gift to others by becoming a mentor, thus providing the experience for someone else.

Keep in mind that even with the information provided on the attributes of good mentors, trainee characteristics, and techniques that make good mentoring programs, “Mentoring cannot be reduced to a formula.”24 Mentoring can be viewed as framework in which individuals can place their experience in a way so that others may “interact with it, make sense of it, take ownership of it, and work at reaching new levels of humanity and leadership on their own.”25 Max De Pree and Walter Wright further state that “mentoring [is] about lifelong learning.”26 Many of us learn on a daily basis without realizing that we are learning. For example, how many of us still believe as we did when we were ten or twenty? We continue to progress and learn throughout life. Working in a library makes learning somewhat different because we are constantly helping others find information; we learn from each information encounter and add it to our knowledge, which we can pass on to others by mentoring.

Mentoring in the library comes in several venues; these venues include working with a library school intern, orienting a new librarian on how a particular library operates, providing guidance to a librarian switching from technical services to reference, or advising on drafting a dossier for promotion. Mentoring discussed in this book largely stems from the perspective of the academic library but could easily be used as a model for a public, special, or school library. Each case study examines a mentoring experience with various librarians, students, or staff. In addition, library volunteers are examined in chapter 7, because volunteers mentor others while at times they are also being mentored.
NOTES

5. Field, 270.
8. Field, 270.
10. Ibid.
11. Ibid.
13. Ibid., 201.
15. Field, 271.
17. Ibid.
20. Sha Li Zhang, Matveyeva, and Deyoe, n.p.
21. Ibid.
22. Ibid.
25. Ibid., 2–3.
26. Ibid., 5.
Developing an individual’s interest in pursuing any career may not be easy. Often the idea has to be planted and developed over a period of weeks or years. All professional staff should actively listen to what an individual says and does. Individuals can become disillusioned about the career path they have chosen and are receptive to career suggestions. Librarian and author Antonia Olivas felt disappointed, lost, and trapped in a career field that was no longer appealing: “By the end of my senior year in college and after many semesters of student-teaching hours, I decided that teaching high school was definitely not for me.”

Librarians at Olivas’s local library, where she worked part-time while attaining her bachelor’s degree, encouraged her to start a master’s in library science. For the individual who is receptive to different ideas, just planting the seed will allow the idea to germinate and to grow, and at this point in time, Olivas was open to thinking about such suggestions. The librarians were very supportive, pointing Olivas to scholarships and providing recommendations. Like Olivas, all that some individuals may need is to have someone listen and suggest librarianship as a possible career choice.
MENTORING AND CAREER CHOICES

Mentoring can change and develop as the mentor acquires individual skills after mentoring a variety of individuals. Every mentoring situation is totally different; it can expand the mentor’s horizon and make the mentor grow. Helping someone decide on a career choice is different from working extensively with an intern or aiding another student in passing a course. When I took courses at a community college in Michigan, the campus geography professor approached me to help another student study, as this student was failing the geography course. For the remaining portion of the semester, the student and I studied together in the campus learning center. The following semester, this student thanked me for the help and told me that she had obtained a solid B in the course. She stated that the study skills I provided helped her in her current classes, and she was appreciative regarding my assistance. This was the beginning of my mentoring others along their way toward obtaining a college degree. Following this first semester, the professor arranged for me to become a paid tutor at the community college learning center for all of his geography courses.

Students were encouraged to attend the tutoring sessions by being offered two extra-credit points per tutoring session attended, up to twenty extra-credit points. Students liked this extra-credit idea because it could mean a letter grade difference in their final grade. However, after realizing that their test grades went up after tutoring, they continued to attend tutoring sessions even after the extra credit stopped. The tutoring was handled as a discussion of the material that was presented in the lectures and from the book. The students liked the discussions as opposed to a lecture format and felt that they could ask questions in order to understand the material better. Students stated that it helped reinforce what was taught in the classroom. Many of the attending students encouraged other students to come to the tutoring sessions. Within nine months, because the number of students increased with each semester, and we needed a larger space with more tables where we could make use of maps and so forth, the learning center provided me with my own room for these tutoring sessions.

During this time, the geography professor and I became fast friends. He encouraged me in the field of geography as he perceived that I had a gift for the subject. Because of my husband’s military transfer, I located a university that offered geography in southeastern Virginia. At the university I chose
to attend, a geography professor became my mentor; he provided help with course selections that would help me finish the four-year degree. Part of the mentoring involved whether I ever considered going to graduate school to obtain a master’s degree in library science. I had thought about it but was not sure if I could complete the necessary degrees. Because I was within a few months of finishing a bachelor’s degree, doing a master’s degree was not as overwhelming as it once had been. During the next three and a half years, I pursued a master’s in library science from Catholic University of America (CUA) while earning a master’s in humanities from the school where I obtained my undergraduate degree. I knew that my final wish was to work in an academic library so a subject master’s would only be an asset in pursuing this goal. Having a second master’s is not mandatory to be hired as an academic librarian, but having one is helpful.

Having two wonderful mentors over a period of seven years meant that I would, at any opportunity, mentor others in their academic quests. Becoming a librarian has provided me with opportunities to mentor many students working on a bachelor’s degree, a master’s degree, or a doctorate. In addition, the academic library has given me the opportunity to provide mentoring for library school students. This includes providing potential librarians time to shadow me or other reference librarians, answering questions, and offering networking opportunities whenever possible.

Mentoring opportunities for library students have grown as more library programs gravitate to being partially or fully online. Some of the programs are a hybrid type of program, with a combination of both online and in-person classes. During the time I attended CUA, nine of the required twelve classes could be taken at one of their off-campus sites in Virginia; the remaining three courses were required to be taken on campus. The latter has since been dropped, and all courses may be taken off campus or online. Many of the courses have become available both in person and online. It is reassuring to have the flexibility to take courses on campus, off campus, or online. Many students choose to take classes all three ways. However, with online courses, it is important for students to have actual library experience and to have a librarian with whom they can ask questions. Without either, how can the student really know that the library field is the correct career choice?

Other library schools offer their library programs online because many “adults with a full-time job and home responsibilities” have trouble finding the time to attend classes. Online courses allow students to complete the
course work when the individual has time, which is often in the late evening
when other responsibilities are finished. This flexibility is attractive to many
teachers desiring to become media specialists. Time constraints and desire
can be magnified when the college or university that mainly serves a rural
community is a distance away. Eastern Carolina University is one such col-
lege that serves rural eastern North Carolina. Many of the students have a
commute time of one to three hours one way to attend courses in the library
program. Having it online has meant a savings of two to six hours drive time
every day these students attend classes. Online programs are flexible, with
students doing the course work when it is
convenient, but many students miss the
interaction of the classroom environment.
Enrollment in the library program at East-
ern Carolina University has increased
since going online. Having online col-
lege programs provide the opportunity
for course assignments for the students to
locate a local librarian to act as a mentor. In addition, requirements such as
doing an internship or having the student interview a librarian about his or
her job allow students the chance to gain insight to the library field in general
and not just theory.

Over the past two years, two potential library school students have ap-
proached Regent University Library desiring to spend quality time within
the library. They were wondering if becoming a librarian would be the cor-
rect occupation. The first student interested in librarianship was a daughter
of a Regent University government professor; the professor brought her to
the library to talk with me. The student had just finished her undergraduate
degree and was deciding whether she would go to library school or pursue
something in the medical field. At this time, I was working with a library
intern, and the library’s reference and circulation areas were in the process of
moving to a combined information commons. I agreed to talk to the potential
library school student. I began having her shadow me and other librarians
to help her make the decision. On the days that the potential library school
student would come to the library, I would first get the intern started on
one of the assigned projects, then have the other student come in to discuss
librarianship, to shadow library personnel, and to talk with me and other
librarians regarding whether the librarian field was for her.

As head of reference, I could get called away at any time by facility services
regarding the location of the reference desk, where we wanted the phones or
computers located, how to change the desk to accommodate power or phone cords, or any other number of details to make the move to a commons successful. During such times, I attempted to have the potential student talk with another librarian, but when this was not possible, I would have her come with me to problem solve. I felt that this would help her see that librarianship is not always the same job, and there are many multitasking opportunities; often there are so many opportunities to multitask that it is hard to complete any job. Musician John Lennon observed that life is what happens when you are busy making other plans; well, some days multitasking is what happens when you had other plans.

One day I had the potential library school student working with the instructional design librarian when I got called away by facilities services. When the potential student was finished with the job, she and the librarian came looking for me; they found me on the floor with a facilities services staff member deciding how and where a hole could be drilled in the desk for computer cables. Seeing librarians when they are at their busiest and being pulled in multiple directions can be a benefit for those choosing whether to come into the profession. It helps the student have a more accurate picture of what the librarian does on a day-to-day basis.

The discussions with the potential library school student included the type of classes she should take to be an academic librarian, what kind of things librarians did as part of their job, why and how to take part in professional librarian associations, and many other topics. We discussed the possibility of her combining her interests and becoming a medical librarian. This student decided not to become a librarian but to go into the health field instead because she wanted to work more directly with patients.

Regent University Library had a second potential MLS school student seeking help with her career decision; she became a library volunteer as well (see chapter 7).

**CHOOSING THE RIGHT AREA IN LIBRARIANSHIP**

Providing potential library school students with learning opportunities can only furnish students with the right kind of experience when they become a professional. It is important to know how circulation operates, how materials are processed, how a collection is shifted, or any of the multitude of library jobs. In addition, it helps them think about the area in which they would like to work upon completing their degree.
With the current and continuing advancements in technology, library education is constantly changing and adapting. However, as Mary Ellen Bates states, library school students still need to know some basic principles:

- “Libraries are a business and you are the president of your company.
- Whatever the question, you can either find the information or find someone who can find it.
- Being a librarian means thinking creatively about information.”

Learning these principles does not always happen in library school; practical, on-the-job experience goes a long way in building these skills. Also having a good mentor who can assist in setting an example helps in building these skills. Even with a good mentor, there are some librarians who never learn these principles. By realizing that you are a form of a blank slate and absorbing all you can during library school, an internship, or any library opportunity, you will become a better librarian. Even after becoming a professional librarian, continue to absorb and learn as much as possible. Having graduated ten years ago, I find myself still learning from my coworkers, and definitely from the students.

Mentoring others along their way through life will only make you a better librarian. Good mentoring means providing guidance so the student can make an informed decision regarding his or her career path. Just keep in mind it is not your career path; it is their career path. Mentoring students interested in becoming librarians helps you to remember the reason you chose the profession in the first place. I try never to forget the idealism that I felt while attending library school and after I received my degree. This idealism has provided me with the ability to remember that I was a new student once—and a technology challenged one—and to be patient.

NOTES

2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
5. Ibid., 212.
VOLUNTEERS IN LIBRARIES AND LIBRARIANS AS VOLUNTEERS

Volunteers play vital roles in the daily operations of libraries. It has been stated that “the library belongs to our community and to everyone in it.”¹ So it seems appropriate that the community should be involved in helping to operate the library. Historically, volunteers have provided many services that would not have occurred otherwise. For example, “Prior to the 1930s, volunteers provided many lending services, especially to the homesteaders of the West.”² Without volunteers, libraries would not have continued to develop and expand around the world and especially in the United States. Over the years, the nature of volunteering “has not diminished the importance of volunteers,” but the group of people who do the volunteering has changed.³ In the past, volunteers were largely unemployed, middle-class housewives. Only about 10 percent of the volunteers fall into this category in recent years. Even with the change in the demographics of volunteers, Americans have continued to volunteer.⁴
VOLUNTEER DUTIES

A recent trend is to have volunteers help answer e-mail inquiries. The volunteers answer the questions that they are able to and leave the more difficult inquiries for the professional staff. Answering e-mails does not have to take place in the library but can be conducted from the volunteer’s home through an Internet connection. “Volunteers can also help libraries continue provid[ing] a human touch that library users continue to need when using libraries’ information retrieval systems.” Many businesses fail to provide either that human touch or effective customer service. The library continues to be contacted, states Erica Nicol and Corey M. Johnson, because a library is viewed as a “reliable human intermediary for information retrieval.”

It has been predicted that as online usage of libraries grows, the need for additional staff will increase. This can place additional stress on the library because of a shrinking or stagnant budget. Budgets often cannot take on the additional costs of a larger staff. Volunteers do not need to be tech savvy; just the willingness to respond to patron questions can be enough. Volunteers with good reference questioning skills can refer the patron to print sources. Knowing and identifying the proper print source can relieve the patron from waiting for the online source to be available.

Often, the patron does not know what he or she really wants so it is helpful to ask questions about the topic. This leads to the correct information and relevant sources. For example, the undergraduates at Regent University are required to take a general course related to locating scholarly materials and research. The course syllabus brings the students into the library to locate information on postmodernism. The reference interview reveals that the student needs information on postmodernism in regard to sin or evil. Librarians introduce the student to Academic Search Complete, a general database that has proven fruitful for this topic. Highly trained reference volunteers or graduate assistants have been extremely helpful answering this type of question in an academic setting and especially at Regent University Library.

Many volunteer programs began during a library’s time of financial difficulty. Nicol and Johnson contend that library services can suffer when volunteers replace professional staff. When this is done, the authors argue, the duties of paid and volunteer staff overlap, with volunteers performing essential services. What happens when the volunteer leaves? Plus, it makes it difficult to justify hiring more paid staff when finances are better. The authors further state that quality volunteer programs take time and money to operate. For example, volunteers need to be recruited, supervised, trained,
and recognized. It can be a problem when the library depends on volunteers to assist at service points. For example, York County Public Library, in Yorktown, Virginia, has scheduled volunteers at the public service desk only to have them not show up. When the director called to see where they were, they responded by saying that they were just volunteers and could come and go as they please. However, a benefit of utilizing volunteers is that they provide many quality programs and services for the library. Volunteers operate reading programs for preschoolers in public libraries and often reshelve materials, which gives the paid staff time to assist patrons or to conduct other types of work.

Volunteers more often work in public libraries but play important roles in special, school, and academic libraries as well. Volunteers at schools help in the library or in the classroom; they might welcome those visiting a special library; volunteers can shelve and process books in technical services or handle a score of other jobs in academia. Public libraries utilize volunteers in various aspects of operating the library.

MENTORING VOLUNTEERS

Volunteers need direction as they complete assigned jobs in the workplace. Mentoring the volunteer is an opportunity to provide interesting jobs, or at least make the work appear to be appealing. This is important in that all tasks need to be completed and are vital for the library’s operation. How does mentoring come into play in volunteer work? Nearly every work opportunity with volunteers offers a chance to be a mentor. Yet often volunteers have bestowed on me as much mentoring as I have given them; it is a two-way street. Two-way mentoring benefits both individuals involved. Remember that mentoring does not always mean the same thing in every situation. Mentoring volunteers is different than mentoring or supervising an internship for a library school student. Many volunteers have no official training in the library field, which can mean that they do not understand the big picture of library work. Volunteers often do not desire to handle certain jobs they feel are beneath them. However, any type of mentoring can benefit both the teacher and the student.

While in library school, I volunteered at the local public library to add experience to my résumé and to gain practice in the area of technical services. During this period, a paraprofessional cataloger worked with me, asking me to assist in the maintenance of the card catalog. When I worked at the catalog, patrons would ask me for assistance in locating materials or for suggestions on their topics, help I was able to give thanks to the paraprofessional’s sharing
her ideas and experiences with me. Moreover, the librarian, who managed
the small-town library system, became a wonderful mentor for me in that I
could ask her anything to do with libraries and get straight answers.

MENTORING PUBLIC LIBRARY VOLUNTEERS

Other public libraries use volunteers to assist with special projects, and men-
toring is needed to teach the volunteers the necessary tasks. For example, a
public library in Denver came up with a unique program involving disabled
middle-school students. The librarian “posed the idea of having the teens do
some simple volunteer tasks on their weekly visits, to channel their energy
into a more focused direction.” Jobs that the students assisted with included
alphabetic sorting, tidying up the board books, collating handouts, and
shelving materials. All the jobs made the student volunteers feel important,
and they did jobs that the staff did not have to complete. Another pub-
lic library system has volunteers take
reading materials to homebound seniors.
This program is rapidly expanding, as
the volunteers like the interaction with
the seniors, and the seniors like the one-
on-one interaction with the volunteers.

A public library in Indiana utilizes
teens as volunteers; this fosters good
relations with the public. The Friends of the Library have collected donations
to inaugurate a college-scholarship program that would reward the students
for their hard work. In 2001, four students who worked in the library were
granted $500 scholarships for college. Some public libraries have special
projects that are operated solely by volunteers. These projects include assist-
ing the children’s librarian with the story time for preschoolers; the volunteers
are called the Story Time Ladies. This program is so popular that the library
had to increase the number of story times per week. Another program has
volunteers operating a “slightly used book store,” which yields the library
about twelve thousand dollars a year. Many public libraries use volunteers
to benefit the library and to provide the volunteer with a purpose.

York County Public Library utilizes volunteers to assist with many jobs.
Ninety-five percent of the volunteers working in this public library sys-
tem are willing to do various jobs that need to be completed. Even so, as
Kevin Smith, director of York County Public Library, notes, “Volunteers are
very enthusiastic about working for the library until the first day of work,
Volunteers in Libraries and Librarians as Volunteers

when they [become] dismayed that [the library staff] do more than sit around and read books all day.”14 This can be a typical reaction of many individuals who have never thought about the day-to-day operations of a library prior to volunteering. These same volunteers are surprised to find that shelving books can be tedious. In addition, some volunteers are amazed to realize that while shelving books, they can encounter some rather unpleasant patrons.15 Mentoring such individuals requires sharing with them some of the realities of library work and assuring them that many good times come along with the not-so-good times.

Once York County Public Library had a volunteer who liked to clean and polish the books. Often the volunteer would be so involved with cleaning the books that patrons would be “delayed from leaving until all of the books were nice and shiny.”16 While shelving, the volunteer would clean books, so not many books could be reshelved. But volunteers at the York County Public Library system have implemented many successful programs and services. For example, the summer reading program could not be completed without the teen volunteers. One individual who is trained in repairing books enables the library to save money on binding and repairing of materials.17

While working at a public library system near Richmond, Virginia, Smith mentored a high-school-student library volunteer. The student went from volunteer to page to several different paid library positions and has now gone to library school to become a library professional. According to Smith, the experience of providing guidance to someone along his or her career path was very rewarding.18 Plus, Smith’s working with volunteers has been very rewarding, and he plans to continue.

MENTORING SCHOOL AND SPECIAL LIBRARY VOLUNTEERS

The media specialist delivers more than access to library materials; he or she is “also teacher, an instructional partner, and an information specialist.”19 The media specialist handles technology along with assisting every student who attends the school. Larger school systems have media specialists for each school but often have to rely on volunteers to help in the library. Schools that cannot afford a media specialist often depend on parents to volunteer in
the library. Twenty years ago, as a school library volunteer, I managed the checkout process for all grades, from prekindergarten to eighth grade.

Special libraries rely on volunteers just as museums rely on docents. Docents give tours that might not occur if the museum had to rely on paid staff. Some docents or volunteers give their time because they enjoy the topic or history of the institution.

At the Mariners Museum in Newport News, Virginia, many of the volunteers and docents help in researching topics for museum displays. The volunteers utilize the museum’s extensive library in their research. The library depends on volunteers to assist the archivist in processing and cataloging materials, researching projects, and answering patron requests. Mentoring in special libraries provides an opportunity to instruct others in administering quality service to the patron while presenting appropriate materials and teaching about a specialized area. Specialized areas might be about maritime history, law, or corporate issues.

**MENTORING ACADEMIC LIBRARY VOLUNTEERS**

Academic libraries also depend on volunteers to complete jobs. Regent University Library has depended on volunteers for a number of years, as noted in chapter 4.

In the fall of 2007, one potential MLS school student approached the library dean about the possibility of shadowing a librarian in order to explore the field as a possible career choice. The student met with me, the mentor, to discuss her interests. She was interested in reference as a career choice; this helped me set up projects for her. Times for her to come to the library were established along with scheduled time for her to meet with staff members. An overview of the library’s operation gave her a better understanding of the library as a workplace.

After she spent time in each section of the library and with each librarian, she and I sat down to discuss librarianship as a profession. I even had her talk to the paraprofessionals in Circulation, Acquisitions, Periodicals, and Interlibrary Loan, as these jobs are usually supervised by a librarian. Librarians need to know how these jobs are completed in order to be a better librarian. Because the student had no library experience, I asked her if she had time to volunteer in any library. She did have time, and she volunteered in the library two half days per week. Any type of experience is better than having no library experience on a résumé when applying for a professional position, and this volunteer work would look impressive on her résumé. Because she was new to library work but wanted to be a librarian, I thought

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that it would be good for her to gain experience from the “bottom” up, so she began in Circulation, shelving, checking materials in and out, and assisting with other jobs.

After several weeks, we expanded her experience by adding labeling materials in Technical Services. The volunteer student was shown how to do the job so that she could work independently when she arrived. An important part of mentoring any individual is imparting the confidence to do a job, and do it well. Thus, in both departments, she was trained by supervisors who fully understood the work and could help her understand it—and enjoy it—as well. Both Circulation and Technical Services appreciated the extra help as the student assistant budget was cut in half.

Regent University Library has had one volunteer working in the library for more than ten years. After I was hired as a reference librarian, I was designated as the liaison to the School of Government. The volunteer, a retired government documents librarian, was asked to work with me and help me learn about call number ranges, among other topics. The volunteer mentored me on how things were accomplished by the previous government librarian and provided assistance on locating where various materials were kept. In addition, she helped with many projects and gave advice when asked for it. After I became acclimated to the library culture and the way things were completed in the library, the volunteer and I worked on many projects together.

Within a month of my beginning work, I began putting a collection of materials from the 1988 presidential election in order and indexing the materials. The volunteer helped me sort the materials, including newspapers, which are a large part of the collection.

While the volunteer began sorting these newspapers, I began looking at the entire collection. At the time we started, a government student was working as a graduate assistant at the reference desk. The student was in the campaign-management track with the School of Government, so the project was of strong interest to him. Because he knew the subject matter well, I had him sort through the material, put like things together, and list the contents of each box. After each box, we would discuss what was there; I had the student tell me his ideas on the materials and how he put it together. Sometimes supervisors will find trainees with excellent skills and knowledge in other areas. As noted earlier, mentoring is often a two-way street, and the supervisor can learn much from the trainee. This was certainly the case here, and much information was shared during the project’s long duration.

Because she was new to library work but wanted to be a librarian, I thought that it would be good for her to gain experience from the “bottom” up.
MENTORING LONG-TERM VOLUNTEERS

Working with a long-term volunteer or a volunteer program offers different challenges. For one thing, each day the volunteer comes to work, time needs to be taken by the supervisor to find out how things are going both with the job and at home (with volunteers, especially, home situations can affect work schedules and performance). As with all mentoring, be prepared for minor interruptions to answer questions or to address problems. Remember, the volunteer is giving up his or her time to aid the library; be sensitive to the volunteer’s time, and find ways to show your appreciation. For example, each year around Regent University Library’s long-term volunteer’s birthday, I bring in cupcakes or cake and we celebrate. She takes the remaining cupcakes or cake and shares with the technical service staff. I do it this way because I know that she does not like public appreciations and that she can share with the staff on her terms.

Working with volunteers means planning ahead so that jobs are ready when the volunteer arrives at work. Plus, a certain amount of supervision by a staff member is necessary to ensure that the job is completed in a satisfactory way and in a specified amount of time. Decisions need to be made by a paid staff member, who will be responsible for the outcome. If supervising a volunteer takes a large amount of time, then it would probably be best to handle the job yourself instead. Some believe that it is important to maintain a quality program if the library goes ahead with volunteers. Quality programs involve having jobs for the volunteer to handle that are important to the library and not just busywork. However, the library can assign a full- or part-time staff member to manage the volunteer program.

Does the cost outweigh the benefits of volunteers? Certainly, there is a downside to working with volunteers. Some volunteers may not take the position seriously, which can mean dealing with their not showing up when they said that they would. This can be difficult when they are assigned to a service point, like the circulation desk. In addition, staff can be affected by the volunteer’s idiosyncrasies (we had one volunteer who liked to clean the books with Goo-Gone). Even so, the benefits of working with volunteers outnumber the problems, so do not hesitate to work with a volunteer or start a volunteer program.
My experience with volunteers in an academic setting has meant spending a small amount of time thinking about the jobs that the volunteer can do for the library but receiving a great return. There are more jobs than I can ever conceive of completing, and with a bit of mentoring, volunteers can help. Having such help allows me to concentrate on the bigger picture and services.

NOTES

2. Ibid.
3. Ibid., 155.
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid., 155–56.
6. Ibid., 155.
7. Ibid., 157.
8. E-mail correspondence with Kevin Smith, director of York County Public Library, August 5, 2009.
9. Emily Dagg, “Middle School Volunteers with Special Needs at the Denver Public Library,” Young Adult Library Services (Summer 2006): 40.
10. Ibid., 41.
14. E-mail correspondence with Kevin Smith, director of York County Public Library, August 5, 2009.
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18. Ibid.
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