

# MENTORING & MANAGING

Students *in the Academic Library*



**Michelle Reale**

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**Michelle Reale**



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*Dedicated to my parents, Russell and Dorothy Messina, by far my first and best mentors*  
*To Dr. Jeanne Buckley with immense gratitude for consistently and gently showing me the way*  
*To Mary Gillis and Francine Sabino for such fine attention to detail*  
*To Erin Bruno for summing it up in a way that only she could*



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# Introduction

THE ACTUAL ORIGIN of mentoring as a practice has roots in Greek mythology. When Odysseus left to fight in the Trojan War, he placed his son Telemachus in the care of his most trusted friend, Mentor. In young adulthood, the goddess Athena assumed Mentor's identity as Telemachus went in search of his father. What began as a seemingly masculine tradition now knows no gender limits, though some of the literature would suggest that men prefer to be mentored by men and women by women.

Now, mentoring is a common and increasingly growing practice in nearly every profession, though the concept of mentoring will mean different things to different people in different contexts. At its very basic definition, mentoring is a close relationship between, let us say for clarity's sake, someone who seeks guidance and one who is in the position, by intellect, temperament, and experience, to be able to provide it.

## A Personal Approach

The idea of writing this book came out of the many experiences I have had over the past seven years working closely with students at the suburban university where I am a faculty librarian. Because our library employs so many federally funded work-study students in order to run smoothly and offer the

liberal open hours that the campus community enjoys, it is in our interest to hire the best students that we can, train them well, and teach them something along the way about how to “be” in the work world, while also encouraging their own career goals whatever they may be.

While all of this seems such an obvious approach—indeed, isn’t all of the above what we should be doing, anyway?—the day-to-day responsibilities of most librarians in the university setting do not allow for the time it will often take to really work with a student who may be shy, reluctant, bored, or simply uninterested in the job at hand. Not every student who gets placed at the library wants to be there. In fact, with a few very strong exceptions, most of the students who may approach you at the beginning of any given semester, their work placement in hand, probably did not want to work in the library; it was simply the luck of the draw. Stereotypes being what they are (i.e., fierce and persistent), to many students, especially those fresh from high school, the atmosphere of a library is believed to be one of stagnant, mind-numbing boredom, to say nothing of the negative image held firmly in their minds of the librarians who work there.

As for the librarian’s point of view, the time it takes to train a student in all of the various aspects of technology and customer service will send up a collective sigh among most of us in the profession. It is a difficult task, at best, to give consistent and even service with a group of students for whom work is not their first priority. We understand this, though, at the outset, and work toward our goals anyway. Our students are extremely valuable commodities in our libraries, a great boon to the functioning of the day-to-day operation, and necessary to keep the library open when most, if not all, professional staff have left for the day.

For both librarians and students, there seems to be so much to overcome, but I suppose that is why they call it “work.” Working with students in the library setting is just that: work. And the hard work is, indeed, the very beginning of the mentoring process whether or not you frame it that way in your own mind. Working with students is different from working with your colleagues. Obvious reasons aside, our students are a work in progress; they are in formation. We have the capacity to inspire and influence them in incredibly positive ways.

For some students (not all, of course), the library job may be their first job ever. One of the most basic responsibilities we have, then, is to tell them what is expected and then show them how to “be” in the workplace by modeling behav-

ior. My idea of what we do with our students in the library came about, quite honestly, from a sense of deep frustration early on when I tended to perceive certain students as being deliberately uncommunicative, lazy, or unwilling to learn, when really they were simply shy, did not know, fully, what they were expected to do, and did not know how to take the first step. I learned quickly that their library job will probably be their “kindest” job ever and that I was perfectly positioned to teach them professional behavior, instill confidence, give them projects that will not only help me and the library in general but give them a sense of how their part, small as it might be, is part of the greater whole—and, hopefully, of the greater good!

This is most assuredly a process that takes time and careful attention. For me, personally, it has meant taking a more holistic approach to my students in order to see them, really see them, as people in their own right, with their own fears, feelings, responsibilities (quite apart, of course, from their library job), relationships, strengths, and shortcomings. They do not come to me “perfect,” which is a good thing since I myself am not either. Remembering that we were once as they were will help to frame their experience and leave both student and librarian open to all of the possibilities for learning.

## The Reality

I would be remiss if I did not mention that it is not easy. And that you cannot mentor everyone at the same level. And that some will reject you outright. And some may eventually turn on you, suddenly rejecting everything you have tried to do, leaving you lost and disappointed. But that’s okay, because a mentoring relationship is not unlike other relationships we must negotiate every day with others in our lives: they take constant work. Sometimes we are successful. Sometimes we aren’t. But in the library we are perfectly positioned among and within the educational environment to offer so much to the students we are incredibly lucky to have.

I have experienced nearly every possible scenario while working toward mentoring students. I have been pleased, ecstatic (especially about those who decide to enter the profession!), disappointed, tired, unsure, and, yes, heartbroken when a mentoring relationship has gone awry. Thankfully, that has happened only once, and in a later chapter I will talk about what to do if that happens.

## The Scope of This Book

This book is not meant to be an exhaustive look at mentoring as a practice in its most formal aspects or in areas outside of the academic library setting, such as in the business, education, or medical fields. Instead, this book will highlight a practical approach to meeting students *where they are* and helping them to work toward greater confidence in themselves as people and to achieve particular goals while learning to be capable participants in the workplace. There is precious little information about the actual act of mentoring students who work in academic libraries, so much of the information contained in this book is based on general aspects of mentoring and adapted for the librarian's use. Much of the book blends the general tenets of mentoring with my own experience with students whom I employ.

Throughout this book, you will find sections highlighting various aspects of mentoring students in the library, both philosophic and practical, two aspects that cannot be separated from each other. Paying close attention to some practical aspects, such as hiring, I have found, minimizes a multitude of problems later on, though it does not mitigate them entirely. And while I have said that a student may come to you unwilling and with preconceived notions about working in the library, it is up to you as the student's potential supervisor whether that particular student is one whom you choose to hire. For instance, I, personally, would not have the time or stamina to work with and mentor all fifty of the work-study students I have each semester if they did not want to work in the library, so a short but careful interview is incredibly helpful. Still, as a librarian, you will find that you will be teaching all of your students how to work and mentoring a portion of them in one way or another. There should be no guilt in being unable to mentor each and every student who comes your way. It is, simply put, not possible. When you begin the process of thinking about mentoring, *however informal you will find the process*, it will become immediately apparent to you that it is a personal investment in time, emotions, and other resources.

What you will find in this book will be, I think, helpful no matter what the size of your library or the number of students you employ. Be advised that mentoring, no matter how informal the process, is like any relationship: personal and unique. And relationships tend to unfold in their own time. As always, guidelines are meant to be just that: guidelines, not hard-and-fast prescriptives for everyone in every situation.

Far from being the stern, wrinkly-lipped, “shushing” people dressed in droll colors, trolling the stacks for transgressors, librarians are highly educated professionals who will “meet” the student in a variety of places, for example, as a teacher in the classroom, as a supervisor in the library, and as a research guide at the reference desk. We are perfectly positioned to make a difference in the lives of students. If most students can remember a teacher or librarian who made their life miserable, imagine the effect of one who has done just the opposite. In the library world, that has the potential to be downright revolutionary.

*Merriam-Webster* defines the word *mentor* simply—“a trusted guide or counselor”—and classifies it as both a noun and a verb. As librarians working closely with students every day but never thinking of what we do as mentoring, we need to rethink our role with the students who work with us. Every one of us, at the very least, has the potential to be a trusted guide. At our very best, we can be wise counselors, attentive to the development of the students as future professionals (in any career they may choose) as well as training them to be an asset to our library. As professionals, we will have a myriad of situations in which to offer students not just mentoring “moments,” but days, weeks, months, and years. Investing time in our students now means that all of us, in one way or another, reap the benefits later on as our students leave the confines of the educational institute in which they have been safely ensconced and go out into the world to be the people they were meant to be: confident and capable.



# Mentoring Students in the Library Setting

*What we must decide is perhaps how we are valuable, rather than how valuable we are.*

—E. Scott Fitzgerald

MOST ACADEMIC LIBRARIES could not function or provide extended hours without the help of work-study students. Federally funded work-study students are the backbone of most if not all college libraries. Often, they are the public face of the library, indeed, the first impression that visitors—faculty members, trustees, alums, students or prospective students—will see upon entering.

It is clearly in the best interest of libraries to train their students well, not only in the art of service (which I truly believe is an art), but as young adults who will be entering and facing the actual work world themselves. In other words, a library job can be just another job (and most will certainly see it that way) and the student standing before you can be just one of many going through the motions of showing up when they are told to, if you are willing to forego the larger possibility of being a mentor. That is, if you are content to remain in a silo, small and safe, where you tend to your professional duties, divorced from the very students you serve both in the library and the university at large.

Mentoring students in the academic library has larger implications. We, as library professionals, are at the same time partnering with the educational process. And if we aren't, we should be. This larger relationship is a responsibility worth taking on and holds rewards for both the librarian and the student mentee. For the librarian, the opportunity



- to make a positive difference;
- to teach professional behavior in a professional setting; and
- to help student retention

can be personally fulfilling. For the student,

- gaining a realistic view of expectations in the workplace;
- building student confidence;
- having the opportunity to learn, grow, and excel under guidance;
- gaining valuable skills for a résumé; and
- providing the capacity for the mentoring relationship to continue beyond the library job

are clearly rewarding experiences. For both parties the capacity for the mentoring relationship to continue beyond the job is a bonus, as well.

Marina Snow, a librarian at California State University, details in a fine essay, “Librarian as Mentor,” the many benefits a student gains by choosing, by happenstance, a librarian as an informal mentor. The reasons she states make perfect sense: librarians are more largely available than most professors, who have limited office hours. A reference desk is usually staffed for most of the day and part of the evening in most institutions, increasing the incidence and serendipity of the “drop by.” Younger students may view the librarian as a survivor of academe, while older students enjoy the opportunity to share common work experiences, values, and challenges.

Snow goes on to make a point that I believe in very strongly: that the conversation and practice of mentoring students in the library is not to advocate a formal program to be instituted by “already overburdened reference librarians,” but that close and concerned relationships between librarians and students can be both beneficial and rewarding to everyone involved. She goes on to state how often these relationships live beyond the college experience, which gives credence to both the necessity and the value of the practice. If students can gain benefit from such an informal mentoring transaction as the one that Snow discusses, then how much more of an impact might a more deliberate mentoring relationship have in the academic library and in the life of the student?<sup>1</sup>

While mentoring means different things to different people in different situations in the context of the academic library, it will often take on a less formal aspect in practice. For the purposes presented here, mentoring can be

any process by which a student is taught or nurtured along in professionalism as it relates immediately to his or her job setting and to the work world at large. In addition, the mentor acts as a kind and concerned friend, who encourages and believes in his or her students' efforts toward their career goals. We engage in all these processes in the setting in which we will encounter these students: in the library.

How this is approached and accomplished will be unique depending upon the personality of the professional, the student, and any number of other factors. It can be a more formal or informal process: it can occur daily or weekly or monthly, in person, on the phone, or online. However and how often the practice occurs, its existence is most important to the development of the student and such efforts should not be diminished.

There are those who might argue that mentoring is a specific activity whose function is tightly focused on specific career goals and whose place among student workers in an academic library is misplaced. After all, the students are working their campus jobs usually for one reason and one reason only: to earn money. How many of them are actually working in the library because their lifelong dream is to become an academic librarian? Many students, at least at my institution, have no idea whatsoever what librarians do all day. Even the fact that librarians need master's degrees, more often than not, will befuddle students: "A master's degree—for what?" they ask. How many do we imagine actually want to go into the field? When we employ students, we must recognize that their main goals (to receive an education, to make money) are not mutually exclusive of the goals of mentoring students in the academic library.

There is much wisdom in being able to simply "meet students where they are." That means to be able to accept them, initially as we find them, and make an honest attempt to discern what their goals are. If we, as academic librarians and other paraprofessionals, are working side by side with students day in and day out, we have to seize the opportunity to help them along in their job, which will most likely be the kindest they will ever encounter. It is a great opportunity for both the librarian and the student. The payoffs are numerous and myriad and not just for the student. And what would be so terrible if a few who were helped along the way actually became interested in the changing field of library science?

Carl Jung coined the term "The Dream" to describe career and lifestyle aspirations held in early adulthood. Every student we encounter in the library setting has unique aspirations and dreams, though some students may not exactly be aware of what they are. Developing life goals is a process and

unfolds over a period of time. In fact, we may encounter students who, during the entire time that we know them during their college years, will not be able to figure out what it is, exactly, that they want to do with their lives. A few will be so inner-directed that any sort of mentoring relationship attempted may be viewed by them as simply icing on the cake, making it easy for us. For those who have dreams and goals, but no clear blueprint for how to get there, and no one to whom they can address the “Big Questions,” mentoring provides a safe and solid road map that can get them, if not from point A to point B, then at least from A.1 to A.2.

Developmental processes cannot and should not be rushed. Development may not be linear. Just as we think a student may have leaped a few steps ahead, he takes two steps back. Though it often takes a great deal of patience for the mentor to watch and wait, that is part and parcel of the job.

The best kind of mentoring is focused on the student’s needs and expectations and not on a rigid agenda that the librarian may have in mind. This should not be confused with asking and expecting students to perform their job requirements to satisfaction and hopefully beyond. It means, though, that the results of the “extra added value” you give as a mentor with careful attention, guidance, and structure will often occur over an extended period of time and cannot be rushed. Developmental processes must be honored and a trusting relationship must be given the time that it needs to grow and develop. The amount of time will likely be different with each student. Mentoring that occurs in the academic library setting sets the tone for collegiality both on the job and during the college experience at large.

## NOTE

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