



Are You My Mentor? New Perspectives and Research on Informal Mentorship



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ABSTRACT

The goal of this study was to investigate the characteristics and perceived value of informal mentorship by conducting a survey of academic librarians and non-librarians with MLIS degrees in Illinois. The body of literature surrounding informal mentorship comprises of a very small portion of that which relates to mentorship in general. The literature often presented problematic definitions and posed questions of legitimacy as informal mentorship has qualities that have been cited as examples of poor mentoring relationships. Our survey data highlighted characteristics of informal mentoring relationships and suggested that informal mentorship has been considered as valuable and more widely accessible to mentees than formal mentorship.

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INTRODUCTION

Informal mentors have been very important in the lives of the authors. These are people who have never identified themselves explicitly as mentors, or if they did, no other formalities were developed. Informal mentors are consulted when we need career advice, a perspective on an issue, or even just assurance or a morale boost. Mentors are those with whom we are able to discuss librarianship as it applies to the profession and to our lives, not just to our current jobs. They keep our interests in mind and volunteer their perspective when we do not know that there is a question to ask. Unlike formal mentorship, which has a large body of literature surrounding it, informal mentorship is usually the stuff of casual mention. At the A.C. Buehler Library at Elmhurst College, there is no formal mentorship program. Without formalized relationships, we as new librarians initially thought that we simply did not have mentors, yet once we started identifying informal mentorship we realized that there were people within our library who acted as mentors when needed. Some of these people were chosen (or chose us) because of a personality match or a specific skill set, but none of these people had been chosen for us by a third party. They did not schedule time specifically for mentorship unless we asked, and then it was a one-off deal: they were simply available and willing to provide mentorship when it was needed. Having an awareness of informal

mentorship enabled us to talk about mentorship and thus identify new possibilities and be able to ask for mentorship, without creating unwanted pressure to change the relationships that existed.

The goal of this research is to investigate and clarify what characteristics apply to informal mentorship, and to ask mentees if they considered it to be of value. Once informal mentorship is better understood, there will be more facts on which to base the discussion of how informal mentorship relates to formal mentorship, and it will be possible to make better use of the body of knowledge surrounding formal mentorship to facilitate informal mentorship. This research is relevant to the interests of organizations that do not have formal mentorship programs in place. Smaller or isolated libraries that do not have a large pool of potential mentors to draw upon, and people who are not able or willing to participate in a traditional mentorship could benefit. This research will help individuals and organizations who don't have formal mentorship programs to facilitate and value informal mentoring relationships. It will also help those who participate in formal mentorship to reach more people by recognizing and actively encouraging informal mentorship rather than considering it a second-rate option.

A single definition of informal mentorship is difficult to parse, not just because it is less established in the literature, but because informal mentorship is a less specific kind of relationship than formal mentorship; it encompasses traditional senior–junior relationships as well as group, bottom-up, situational, and lateral or peer mentorship. Long-term commitment is not required, and institutional support is not needed to begin a relationship. Because of its inherent flexibility informal mentorship may be better suited than formal mentorship to meet mentees' needs (Fyn, 2013), especially at a time when career trajectories tend to be non-linear and librarians and the skills they need are increasingly diverse. It is ideal for those who cannot find a mentor within their organization or who cannot organize physical meetings on a

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regular basis, and for distance or online relationships as it does not require on-going meetings or coordinated schedules (Kang, 2007). In times of tight budgets, informal mentorship is ideal and should be recognized as a legitimate form of mentorship.

LITERATURE REVIEW

A review of the literature related to mentoring in libraries revealed that informal mentorship has not been as thoroughly studied as formal mentorship, but its occurrence is not rare. Of the literature found to relate specifically to informal mentorship, none carried out or referred to a data-yielding study, but were instead case studies or anecdotal in nature; our research aimed to add some data to the mix. Occasionally informal mentorship was described without being identified explicitly: the value of bottom-up mentorship was highlighted, which is when juniors teach the seniors, and of using social media to maintain “wider social and asynchronous support networks” (Ballard, 2013, p. 4–5). Online relationships tend to be quite informal, especially when asynchronous, and are not well suited to formal mentorship (Kang, 2007 p. 53). Kang found that formal mentorship was untenable in her position as a solo professional, and advocated for a less committed form of mentorship where networks are built and mentors are met with as-needed with no need for follow-up. Nicole Pasini (in Smallwood & Tolley-Stokes, 2012) also did not use the term “informal mentorship”, but asserted that “spot mentorship” in the form of short-term help may be all that is required to make a good mentorship experience.

Defining informal mentorship succinctly is evidently not easy, and articles that mention or attempt to define informal mentorship were not always helpful. Jamal L. Cromity (in Smallwood & Tolley-Stokes, 2012) overstated a point made in the United States Office of Personnel Management's “Best Practices: Mentorship” document when he stated that “poor planning and fuzzy goals are the primary reason mentoring fails.” This document, itself a very helpful resource that addressed multiple kinds of mentorship, in fact stated that “both mentoring programs and relationships sometimes fail due to a variety of causes and problems (e.g., lack of participation, no leadership involvement, poor planning, unrealistic expectations, and “fuzzy” goals). Successful mentoring programs require proper understanding, planning, implementation and evaluation.” (Best Practices: Mentoring, 2008). It has been our understanding of the Best Practices document that, while the above statement does apply to all forms of mentorship, certain aspects apply more to some than to others. For instance, if the expectation is for a “Flash mentorship” session where mentors and mentees meet for a one-time session with little or no pre-organization or required follow-up, then a proper amount of planning and goals could be zero. The Best Practices document offered a definition of informal mentorship which is well suited to librarians, and which requires no goals: “informal mentoring has minimal to no structure and oversight and may or may not have a clear and specific goal.” This concise definition was later expanded upon in the Best Practices document as there are many types of mentorship that can be undertaken informally (Best Practices: Mentoring, 2008, September, p. 15). To summarize, in informal mentorship anyone can mentor anyone else, for any length of time, with as many people involved as desired, with meetings or encounters happening physically or virtually. This summative definition was not adopted as a working definition by the authors, but rather serves to show just how loose a definition the reviewed literature collectively yielded.

It has not been the case that informal mentorship is unrecognized in real world practice. Academic libraries that have established traditions of informal group mentorship include Oakland University's Untenured Librarians Club, University of Kansas Libraries, Wake Forest University, Colorado State University, and Bowling Green State University (Fyn, 2013). These institutions have created groups or other opportunities for informal mentorship to occur, rather than simply relying on happenstance. A case study of an informal tenure support group at the Sterling C. Evans Library at Texas A&M University highlights the flexibility of

informal mentorship. The informal mentoring program had administrative support and a regular schedule, but allowed mentees to participate without requiring a regular time commitment (Miller & Benefiel, 1998). The informal aspect was in demand after a previous formal mentoring program, and offered tenure candidates an opportunity for lateral mentorship while the organizing members provided research assistance for tougher questions and would occasionally invite speakers.

Informal mentorship also works well at our small college library, as our colleague Jacob Hill illustrated in his book chapter about the fruitful experience he had with his informal mentee (Jones & Hill in Smallwood & Tolley-Stokes, 2012). This is a small library where all staff work within close proximity, so there are no physical barriers to the formation of informal mentoring relationships. There is no formal mentorship program, and the staff size and close proximity seem to justify the lack of a formal program. A formal mentorship program might present a burdensome time commitment to organize and carry out, would most likely involve people who interact on a regular basis regardless, or would be supplanted by other more organic informal relationships. Because of the small pool of mentors, it may be that prospective mentees would be best served by finding a formal mentor outside of the institution if they are not comfortable recruiting from within, rather than having an in-house mentor forced upon them by a formal scheme. Certainly there are opportunities for mentorship outside the institution that can provide a better match if needed; availability and personality may be factors, as is ethnic group and gender (Iuliano, Royster, Johnson, Larrivee, & Driver, 2013). There is a large body of literature concerning the matching of mentor with mentee; as this topic applies only tangentially to informal mentorship, our review of the literature and survey questions do not inquire specifically about matchmaking.

We don't know if everyone is well served by the informal mentorship model, especially as self-initiative is usually required to fully take advantage of informal mentoring opportunities (Pasini in Smallwood & Tolley-Stokes, 2012; Robbeloth, Eng, & Weiss, 2013). With that in mind, the prevalence of informal mentorship is one of the lines of inquiry pursued in our survey. Another question we wanted to ask is if informal mentorship can help underrepresented librarians access mentorship by making it more readily available and recognized. Minority librarians are under-represented in libraries and benefit from having a mentor, which the authors believe also applies to informal mentors (Chang, 2013, p. 191). As higher satisfaction is reported when a mentor shares the mentee's ethnic group (Iuliano et al., 2013), respondents were asked to report their ethnicity in order to ask if the correlation holds true in informal mentoring relationships.

METHODOLOGY

The survey, shown in Appendix A, was developed with the aid of the behavioral criteria of perceived mentoring effectiveness established by Hamlin and Sage (2011). These criteria were developed in a context of formal mentorship, but the authors believe they can be applied to informal mentorship. Question #14 includes adapted forms of these criteria as qualities to be rated in answer to the question “Thinking of your most recent informal mentorship, to what extent do these qualities apply to your experience?”, as does question #18 for formal mentorship. Revisions were made following a pilot survey given to the staff at our library in order to test for ease of use, vocabulary usage, and design. The survey was sent to employees of academic libraries in Illinois, and included non-librarians as other research we have encountered did not survey people with MLIS degrees employed at academic libraries but not as librarians. Institutions were identified as being academic institutions in Illinois using the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) Academic Library Survey. Contact information for library staff was gathered from each institution's website, where it was publicly available without limitation. Of a possible 2707 participants, 223 respondents completed the survey, of which 153 held MLIS degrees. All 223 respondents filled out demographic information, while the 153

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