

Leaders Wanted: Mentoring and Retaining Librarians of Color

Nicole A. Cooke, MLS, M. Ed.
School of Communication & Information
Rutgers University
4 Huntington St., New Brunswick, NJ 08901
Nicole.Cooke@Rutgers.edu

ABSTRACT

In order to successfully mentor, and hopefully retain, new professionals in the field, especially those from underrepresented populations, we need to know what professional information they are seeking and deem valuable. Using the 2009 American Library Association (ALA) Spectrum Scholar Leadership / Reach 21 Institute as a specific example, this poster explores the information needs of current MLIS students and brand new MLIS graduates, and provides insight into what this group wants and needs to know from experienced professionals.

In July 2009, 50 ALA Spectrum Scholars (masters level scholarship recipients) and 20 Reach 21 Scholars (students from other minority library science scholarship initiative) attended the institute as a supplement to their academic scholarships. The IMLS-funded project, *REACH 21: Preparing the Next Generation of Librarians for Leadership*, builds on Spectrum's past accomplishments and extends the community and support benefits of the program to even greater numbers of future librarians. The leadership institute and REACH 21 aim to foster the recruitment, matriculation, and early career development of racially and ethnically diverse students in master's-level library and information studies programs, provide mentoring, coaching and support networks for these students, and aid in educational and early career retention. Institute participants represented a variety of iSchool member institutions including UCLA, Rutgers University, Drexel University, Florida State University, University of North Texas, University of Illinois, Indiana University, University of Maryland, University of Pittsburgh and University of Washington.

In 1998 social learning theorist Etienne Wenger wrote the book *Communities of Practice*, in which he asserts that learning is a social process and is based upon participation; it is this participation that allows us to form and engage in communities. "Such participation shapes not only what we do, but also who we are and how we interpret what we do" [6]. Wenger describes communities of practice (COPs) as being everywhere and encompassing all people, students, family members, coworkers, professionals, etc.

Mentoring, whether formal or informal, is an important outcome of professional COPs; there is a large body of literature on mentoring that can be applicable to professional communities of practice. The literature suggests that mentoring is a reciprocal growth process, benefiting the mentor and the mentee, and is a good vehicle for developing leadership skills. "Growth, even highly desired and positive, is not easy. Leadership growth is a process where personal paradigms are challenged and pushed beyond one's comfort zone. Mentoring helps soften the discomfort and provides caring and helpful individuals for encouragement and support" [4]. Mavrinac (2005) concurs by

stating that mentoring is an inclusive, democratic and motivating relationship that can "serve to widen an employee's learning context within and outside the organization" [5].

Using Brenda Dervin's concept of sense-making to frame this research project, the goal is to identify the information needs of new MLIS graduates so that designated mentors can provide appropriate and valuable information to help them succeed in their new professional positions. It is theorized that new library professionals can benefit from the information and expertise of those already in the field; once students graduate they no longer receive parceled and structured information from their professors, rather they must take charge of their own continuous learning, and begin to "learn on the job." At this juncture, students / new professionals can encounter information gaps. Dervin refers to these gaps as knowledge gaps, information inequities, communication gaps, information voids and information deficits [2]; these gaps represent points at which discontinuities occur, or points at which information ceases to flow and the individual cannot move forward without "constructing a new or changed sense" [1]. Individuals must construct new meanings, based on their contexts and situationality, in order to learn and continue intellectual expansion.

Sense-making provides a frame with which to study the information needs, seeking and use of this group [3], and provides a "set of methods which have been developed to study the making of sense that people do in their everyday experiences" [1]. Specifically, sense-making guides the researcher to ask when the information gap occurs, what the nature of the information gap is, and what information will suffice the gap. In this particular research project, the gap occurs when new library professionals straddle the time period between graduation and entry into a new job. The nature of the gap occurs during a professional and academic leadership workshop in which the MLIS students / new graduates were asked what future workshops and seminars they would find valuable, and their own responses reveal the type of information required to fulfill their information gaps.

Over the course of the three day leadership institute, the students were presented with a variety of workshops and seminars covering a wide range of topics applicable to library leaders, including interviewing skills, resume development, community involvement, diversifying the library and finding a mentor. At the conclusion of the institute, participants completed a survey which asked, in part, "If we could have incorporated more time for any one activity or topic, what would it have been?" In conjunction with the responses provided in the "additional comments" section, this qualitative data was analyzed to determine what programs should be developed for future institutes, and to ascertain what information the group deems necessary and valuable as they prepare to enter their first library positions.

In order to determine the information necessary to suffice this information gap, the constant comparison method was employed to analyze the qualitative data provided by the surveys. The data were compared and contrasted, and as a result 3 categories of responses emerged and were defined: (1) topics the participants would like to explore further, (2) activities the participants enjoyed and found useful, and (3) outcomes (lessons and goals achieved during the institute). The analysis indicated that information related to information about the profession (specialties, professional organizations), outreach and advocacy, job skills (navigating the job search, resume and cover letter preparation, and interviewing), networking, and increasing diversity in the profession, are the information corpora that will suffice the information gaps of graduate students in library and information studies and new librarians.

With this information in mind, those who choose to serve as mentors to this demographic of librarians will be armed with appropriate information to best serve their mentees, hopefully providing them with the knowledge and support that will encourage their retention in the field. Among the goals of this research is to cater to a specific group (ALA Spectrum and Reach 21 Scholars), while gleaning insight and knowledge that will benefit larger populations of new library graduates, and inform the literature on mentoring.

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