Mentoring untenured librarians

All it takes is a little Un-TLC

by Dana Keyse, Elizabeth W. Kraemer, and Julie Voelck

As an untenured librarian, it is natural to have some important, career-altering questions above and beyond the endless routine questions that arise when learning a job. Having the "why" and the "how" at the tip of our tongues is easy. The problem is in the knowing what to ask whom when it comes to issues related to the tenure process, and when—if ever—such questions are appropriate.

When the untenured librarian is seeking the way to the Holy Grail of tenure, he or she often seeks a mentor. The natural step is to find someone who is in the know, and someone who can be trusted not to note in one's personnel file the depth and breadth of the stupidity of the inquiry.

At Oakland University's Kresge Library, we have many such people to turn to for specific answers or for help on certain projects, but, at first, we had no one to bare our professional souls to, so to speak. Then our new associate dean turned to us and spearheaded an informal mentor group focusing mostly on the tenure and promotion process. One day, she threw caution to the wind, unwittingly broke all the rules, and invited us to lunch for the purpose of establishing such a group. Had we studied the literature on mentoring and known that we had taken an unorthodox approach, we might still be lugging around our trunk full of concerns.

The literature

In "Mentoring academic librarians: The ultimate in career guidance," Jetta Carol Culpepper's literature review serves as an excellent overview of the various elements in the mentoring process, and provides many perspectives and approaches from the literature. As she states, "Mentoring in many forms and styles serves to smooth the way,"[1] and on this we must agree. Yet most of the library literature focuses rather adamantly on formal, documented mentoring programs consisting of voluntarily assigned teams of two, a senior tenured librarian, and a junior tenure-track librarian. Further, most programs insist that a mentor not be a direct supervisor of the mentee.

In "Mentoring programs: In search of the perfect model," Margaret Law also supports the formalized one-on-one relationship, stating that this approach facilitates the development of relationships that may not otherwise occur. She indicates that after testing the group setting, the results were not particularly successful as "the group setting meant that the kind of interaction that would result in an exploration of attitudes did not occur."[2]

But exactly what makes a mentoring program successful? Law writes, ". . . we tend to be very vague about what mentoring actually means, how it happens, and what organizations can do to foster mentoring relationships. Literature searches tend to add to the confusion rather than simplify things."[3] There are many different approaches, with varying degrees of success. In our lack of awareness of a perfect model, we have stumbled onto something that works perfectly well for our needs. In this article, we'd like to share our

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program at Oakland University from our perspective, by describing our history and experience, explaining what it means to us, and offering some recommendations.

Background

In order to explain the purpose and justify the need for our informal gatherings, we must provide some of the details of our formation. Our group the Un-TLC, the Untenured Librarians Club, was established in 2001. Our focus is on the tenure process, though we discuss much more. The mission of each member (except for the associate dean) is to be dismissed from the group upon receiving tenure.

Currently the Un-TLC consists of five members: our associate dean, the initiator and informal leader of the club, who joined our library as a tenured faculty member in 2001; one librarian who joined the faculty in 1998 and has passed two of three review levels; two librarians who faced their first review in April 2003 and who joined the faculty in 2000 and 2001; and a librarian who joined us in fall 2002 and will have a first review in April 2004.

We meet approximately once a month in the university commons, usually over soda and a snack. We bring our goals, our concerns, our frustrations, and our fears to the table and hash them out with each other. We've also been known to bring the occasional joke, comic strip, or library soap opera idea (should our day jobs not pan out). All discussions, regardless of relevance, occur under the guidance of our shared mentor, the associate dean.

Although she is our group leader, she is also an administrator. Her position is advantageous to us in two ways: first, she is a representative of the administration who presents reappointment and tenure recommendations to the provost, and second, she is the one who most closely, on a day-to-day basis, oversees and supports our professional development. As such, there is no fear over opinions expressed during our meetings because she is more like Harry Potter's beloved Professor Dumbledore than the detested Professor Snape. Her ultimate goal is the same as ours, i.e., to dismiss each one of us from the Un-TLC, tenure in-hand. Our discussions during club meetings are neither evaluated nor documented in any tangible form. Over the last eight months we have formed a professional bond in which we encourage and congratulate, advise, and empathize when things go awry.

The members of the Un-TLC are in the same situation as most untenured faculty librarians. In addition to the expected duties found in our position descriptions: providing efficient and effective reference service, raising the bar of information literacy through library instruction, and expanding the role of the library liaison to the academic departments and to student services, we are faced with the somewhat daunting and ever-present expectation of publishing peer-reviewed articles. Each of these elements encompasses many smaller tasks. Moreover, we must accomplish all with a brave countenance as we face the formal biannual review process before going on to the university's tenure review board. While we have the skills, enthusiasm and ambition, our motivation is clearly fueled by the relentless encouragement of our associate dean. As we toil away in the research, writing, and editing processes, she has asked us to stop and share our perceptions of what makes our mentorship successful.

How to be a successful leader of an informal mentorship program

From our perspective as untenured librarians, we offer to mentors the following recommendations, which, if followed, can help ensure the success of both the mentoring group and the individual members.

1. Assemble your group of untenured librarians in a casual and neutral environment. Neutrality is key. It is important that the untenured faculty members feel free to discuss their frustrations, talk through their anxieties, and ask questions. A casual setting is also valuable, as a less formal environment is more likely to encourage "bonding" between members, which will allow them to feel more comfortable sharing their successes and achievements, as well as their doubts and concerns.

2. Share your own impressions, feelings, and years of experiences as a once-untenured librarian and again from the tenured viewpoint. This will come to be known as sage advice. Having colleagues relate tales from their own tenure process can be a comfort: it reminds the untenured librarians that others have (successfully) passed this way before. Just as helpful are the realizations that may come from hearing a nonjudgmental tenured viewpoint on a project or experience—especially one that is particularly troubling or stressful.

3. Encourage active participation in committee meetings led by tenured fac-

ulty, where appropriate. It is easy for an untenured librarian to watch meetings from a safe and quiet distance in order to avoid potentially contentious discussions with tenured faculty members; therefore, it can be useful to have a tenured colleague encouraging the "newbies" to participate so that their opinions aren't overlooked. It must be said that it can be just as useful, if not more so, to offer a kind word to the more vocal untenured folk to take a bit more care in what they say in tense situations.

4. Share your own writing and research findings. Suggest topics or pass around ideas that you have always wanted to pursue or ideas that could use another approach. It is always valuable for untenured faculty to hear what others are researching. This can serve as motivation, inspiration, and encouragement in their own research process. Additionally, brainstorming among the untenured group not only can bring topics to light, but can also create writing partnerships between the members.

5. Provide financial means for untenured librarians to attend conferences, do research, and present their work. When untenured librarians are expected to pay travel and membership fees out of their own pockets, the need to get involved at the local and national levels can be easily overshadowed by the need to pay rent, buy groceries, and otherwise survive outside of work. Providing financial support in such situations not only allows for participation and travel, but also is a great way to encourage and reward the hard work of the untenured faculty members.

6. Advise during the draft process. Critique and edit final papers. This is actually great for all faculty members, not just the untenured folk. It's vital to have someone to share ideas with who is willing to read, adjust, reread, readjust, and reread again a piece of writing.

7. Provide written (or at least unwritten) quantifiable guidelines for tenure. There's almost nothing that can overwhelm an untenured faculty person more than not having an actual goal. All the writing and publishing in the world won't do any good if you're not writing and publishing enough of the types of articles that the tenure committee and dean are looking for. Quantifiable guidelines provide the untenured librarian with a focus and dramatically reduce the stress of the unknown.

8. Consult with or address concerns with tenured colleagues and the adminis-

tration on behalf of untenured librarians. Being an advocate for untenured librarians serves two purposes. First, it assures that their opinions and perspectives are heard, even in forums in which they cannot speak for themselves. Second, advocacy proves to the untenured faculty that their opinions and perspectives are valuable enough to be heard.

9. Help untenured librarians mentor each other. There are some situations that are too troubling to share, even with your very own Professor Dumbledore. As with Harry Potter, in cases like these it's heartening to be able to commiserate with a Ron or an Hermione. Encouraging untenured librarians to support each other ensures that they will always have someone to turn to for advice. As a bonus, this also gives them experience that will help them to one day mentor the next crop of untenured librarians.

10. Continue to encourage members to research and publish, even after they have achieved tenure. It's natural for a finally tenured librarian to sit back and enjoy the leisure time that was so rarely available as an untenured faculty member; however, by continuing to encourage him or her to research and publish not only are you promoting the reputation of the library, but you are also providing role models for the next class of the Un-TLC.

Conclusion

Despite being an informal group led by an administrator, the Un-TLC has been a very successful venture thus far, affirmed by the enthusiastic commitment of its members to the club and one another. Through this close-knit mentoring network, we share in each other's professional wins and losses and have forged bonds that will last throughout our careers. This group environment will surely make our final expulsion from the Un-TLC that much more triumphant and meaningful, not only because we ourselves will have at long last achieved tenure, but also because we will have successfully modeled and shared the process with colleagues who are to follow.

Notes

1. Jetta Carol Culpepper, "Mentoring academic librarians: The ultimate in career guidance," *College & Undergraduate Libraries* 7, no. 2 (2000): 72.

2. Margaret Law, "Mentoring programs: In search of the perfect model," *Feliciter* 47, no. 3 (2001): 147.

3. Ibid., 146. ■

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