

# Strengthening the profession, assuring our future

## ACRL's New Member Mentoring Program pairs library leaders with new professionals

by Jeffrey S. Bullington and Susanna D. Boylston

*"Every Telemachus should have his Mentor."<sup>1</sup>*

*Mentor: "an experienced and trusted counsellor."<sup>2</sup>*

According to Homer, when Odysseus left Ithaca for the Trojan War, he arranged for a nobleman named Mentor to keep an eye on his son Telemachus. Mentor helped to guide the young Telemachus to maturity, and his role was significant enough that Athena, goddess of wisdom, occasionally assumed Mentor's guise to spur Telemachus to action. The term mentor has evolved since the time of Homer and is increasingly used in business, academic, and other professional settings, but still retains its original meaning, "advisor." When we speak of a mentor, therefore, we mean a wise counselor, a sponsor, a guide who instructs and encourages his or her protégé.

Last spring, in recognition of the essential role that mentors play in recruiting and retaining new librarians, ACRL launched the New Member Mentoring Program. This initiative seeks to introduce new librarians to ACRL and prepares them for leadership roles in both the association and the profession at large by pairing them with experienced librarians. The first group of mentoring pairs

is about to complete the yearlong program, and we are now accepting applications for the 2001-2002 academic year. Last year's participants are some of the strongest supporters of the program and its continued development, and their experiences confirm the value of and need for a general mentoring program within the association. Because of this, we asked the participants some questions in order to identify the characteristics and benefits of the program. This article is based, in part, on their responses.

### What makes this program unique?

The ACRL New Member Mentoring Program is distinct from other mentoring programs in its focus, structure, and goals. Last year's participants spoke approvingly of the program's focus on academic librarianship; they felt it was a welcome addition to other mentoring programs. Because it operates at a national level, provides one-on-one mentoring relationships, and has a fixed term, it fills a niche, and complements programs that have a regional, subject, or institutional focus.

### About the authors

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Professionals often acquire a variety of mentoring partners over the course of their careers; some mentors are chosen informally, through self-selection processes and others are acquired through participation in formal programs within institutions and professional organizations. Several participants in the program had been involved in other mentoring situations in the past, and they praised the ACRL program's focus on the roles, issues, and challenges that are unique to academic librarians.

Stephen Stillwell, a mentor from the University of Texas at Arlington, noted that ACRL, like any organization, needs "a constant supply of new blood and ... fresh ideas"; the mentoring program provides both.

### Program essentials

The key element of the program is the partnership formed by the mentor and the mentee. ACRL staff make every effort to match pairs with common interests; potential mentors and mentees can specify their interests and intended goals when they apply. ACRL also provides ongoing support for the program, opportunities for interaction, and tools that aid mentoring partners in defining objectives and evaluating progress.

After they are paired, mentors and mentees set their goals for the year. Last year's participants praised this feature of the program because it allowed them to tailor their activities to the specific needs of each mentee. Whereas programs within individual libraries focus on orientation, tenure, and promotion, the goals of the New Member Mentoring Program are more open-ended, flexible, and personalized.

The basic types of goals set by last year's participants can be summarized as follows:

- introduction to ACRL and assistance in becoming more involved in the association;
- career planning and development;
- assistance in expanding a network of contacts; and
- acquisition of new skills (for example, one mentor undertook a collaborative research project with his mentees).

### Benefits of participating

Last year's mentors and mentees listed a variety of benefits gained from the program, including:

- **Impartial, objective advice:** Both mentors and mentees agreed that it was advanta-

geous to have a mentoring partner from outside their home institution. This type of relationship ensured confidentiality and also permitted mentoring partners to compare and contrast experiences. In addition, mentees working at smaller institutions appreciated the opportunity to increase their network of contacts.

- **New perspectives, ideas, and approaches:** Mentees appreciated gaining the perspective of experienced colleagues. Similarly, mentors valued the opportunity to learn from new professionals. Several mentors commented that they learned as much from their mentees as their protégés learned from them.

- **A stronger sense of professional identity:** Andrew Wertheimer, a mentee and doctoral candidate at the University of Wisconsin-Madison School of Library and Information Studies, noted that "in librarianship, we rarely have a forum to discuss personal philosophies on our work, which was something my mentor and I could discuss together."

- **New acquaintances and friendships:** Several mentors and mentees commented that they plan to stay in touch after the program is over.

- **Retention of new librarians in the profession and the association:** Mentoring improves both the quality and the speed of learning for new professionals. Last year's mentors were eager to assist their mentees in getting involved in ACRL and gained personal satisfaction from helping them learn the ropes. Several mentees also noted that their mentors' encouragement helped ease their transition from library school to their first professional appointment and gave them confidence in their choice of career. In sum, the mentoring program can help strengthen the profession and ensure its continuance.

### Best practices—learning

What makes a successful mentoring relation-

**May 11 deadline for mentor program**

More information about ACRL's New Member Mentoring Program and applications can be found at <http://www.ala.org/acrl/mentoringprogram.html>. The deadline for applications is May 11, 2001.

ship? In summarizing the findings of a study of mentoring programs in the United Kingdom, Clare Nankivell noted that mentoring differs from other forms of professional development in that it is “a process rather than an event.”<sup>3</sup>

Successful mentors and mentees acknowledged this process. For example, in reflecting on his role as a mentor, Felix Chu, from Western Illinois University, defined his responsibility as “suggesting avenues for continuous learning.” This learning process certainly requires input from the mentor, who serves as guide, counselor, listener, teacher, sponsor, and ally. It also requires a high level of commitment and engagement from the mentee, who must be an active learner and contributor. In fact, the greatest obligation, as Nankivell points out, is on the learner, the mentee. This is why mentoring need not take a substantial amount of time after goals and objectives have been defined and agreed upon.

Because mentoring is a learning process for both mentors and mentees, each participant needs to approach the mentoring relationship with an open mind. These partnerships work best when goals are shared. If either partner has extremely precise expectations of the other—for example, if a mentee is only interested in working with another metadata cataloger—he or she may not reap the full benefits of this program. However, those who enter the partnership in the spirit of learning and discovery will be well served, particularly if they recognize that mentors have experience and wisdom to share, that mentees have enthusiasm and new ideas, and that each person has expressed, through application to the program, an interest in working with the other.

### Best practices—communication

“...as a mentor, I sometimes venture on a hint.”<sup>4</sup>

Communication is essential to the success of a mentoring partnership. Most participants favored e-mail communication, but ACRL also provided opportunities for mentors and mentees to meet face-to-face at Midwinter Meetings and Annual Conferences. ACRL strongly encourages mentors and mentees to attend professional meetings because one of the goals of the program is to help new librarians become more active in the association. Both partners bear responsibility for maintain-

ing contact with each other between meetings, and mentors should be particularly mindful of the need to initiate contact with mentees as soon after placement has occurred as possible. Mentees, in turn, should keep their mentors informed of their progress in meeting agreed-upon goals.

Most pairs communicated monthly and indicated their satisfaction with this level of contact. Although some potential mentors worry that mentoring will be overly time-consuming, last year’s mentors concluded that such fears were unfounded. One mentor, who took on two mentees, valued the “wonderful connections” that he made with these new professionals and confirmed that “it really didn’t take that much time.”

### We need your support!

Mentors and mentees overwhelmingly agreed that they would recommend the New Member Mentoring Program to others. The majority indicated that they would participate again, including mentees, who expressed a strong interest in becoming mentors after they were qualified. Both mentors and mentees hoped that the program would continue to develop and expand; and for this to happen, we need to enlist the help of all ACRL members.

As an ACRL member, you can help to ensure that the New Member Mentoring Program is a success. You can:

- volunteer to serve as a mentor (should be active ACRL members of five years or more);
- recommend the program to colleagues and peers;
- recommend the program to new librarians (should be ACRL members of less than two years); and
- help us to develop and expand the program by submitting your comments and suggestions to Melissa Cast ([mcast@ala.org](mailto:mcast@ala.org)).

### Notes

1. William Godwin, *noughts on Man: His Nature, Productions, and Discoveries* (London: Effingham Wilson, 1831, 51).
2. *Oxford English Dictionary*, Oxford University Press, 2000-; <http://dictionary.oed.com>.
3. Clare Nankivell, “Essentials of a Good Relationship,” *Library: Association Record* 99 (Oct. 1997): 545.
4. J. W. Marston, *The Favourite of Fortune* (1876). ■