

Annamarie Magurany and Elizabeth Dill

## **BIPOC librarians and retention**

Mentorship and supportive relationships in the workplace

Academic Library Workers in Conversation is a bimonthly *C&RL News* series focused on elevating the everyday conversations of library professionals. The wisdom of the watercooler has long been heralded, but this series hopes to go further by minimizing barriers to traditional publishing with an accessible format. Each of the topics in the series were proposed by the authors and they were given space to explore. We encourage you to follow and share these conversations about transforming libraries with ideas from the front lines. This issue's conversation with Annmarie Magurany and Elizabeth Dill focuses on mentoring and supporting BIPOC library workers.—*Dustin Fife, series editor*

**Elizabeth Dill (ED):** Annmarie, I got an idea from a *Harvard Business Review* article, and it got me thinking about our mentoring relationship. If you were to write a “job description” for your ideal mentor, what would that look like?

**Annamarie Magurany (AM):** Something like this:

“Help Wanted: Seeking an encouraging individual to be a mentor, as I’m an early-career academic librarian. Reporting to me, the mentor assists new librarians one-on-one in developing their career path. The mentor will divide their time between reference librarians of various backgrounds. A positive, encouraging attitude is a must as this position is about building me up. Specific responsibilities would include someone who is approachable, has good communication skills, and has the desire to work with persons of diverse backgrounds.”

**ED:** You mentioned that the mentor needs to be comfortable working with persons of diverse backgrounds. Would you, as a mentee, have a preference for a mentor with a (racial) background similar to yours? You won’t hurt my feelings if you say yes.

**AM:** Great question, and for me personally, the answer is not necessarily. While it would certainly be valuable to gain insight on the progression to leadership of a person with a (racial) background similar to my own, I would not want to unnecessarily limit my path to the seeking of knowledge. With the mindset of life-long learning, I would be remiss to only seek the experiences of specific peoples and not of all with whom I have an impactful connection and might exchange varying experiences.

I think that it is valuable to see representation of oneself within leadership in any organization, especially for historically marginalized groups. It helps signal the organization is not just open to theoretical inclusion but follows through on the ideals expressed in DEI

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statements. But ultimately, no, I do not believe that a mentor and mentee need to have a similar background.

**ED:** Interesting. I had assumed it would be beneficial for you to have someone who identifies as BIPOC as a mentor. I don't have the lived experience you have, and while I certainly do my best, I can only mentor what I know. For instance, our organization sends folks to the JCLC [Joint Conference of Librarians of Color] conference. What if I didn't even know about it to facilitate trips? I try to own my privilege, but what about leadership hurdles specifically pertaining to Black librarianship, for example.

**AM:** That is true. However, let me bring up what I think you have mentioned once before: the idea that one can have multiple mentors. I think that is brilliant to be able to turn to multiple people, as we all have experiences of equal value but with a multitude of perspectives. You mention leadership hurdles that pertain to Black librarianship. I think the mere fact that I haven't often seen representation of Black leadership in my time within academic libraries (or any libraries, for that matter), I may think that the role is not for me (that someone like me wouldn't be accepted into that position). Obviously, my credentials would play a role for qualifying for that position, but one hidden (or at least not so obvious) hurdle is to see a lack of examples as meaning that such roles are an impossibility for a young Black woman, even one with those qualifications. That's when representation matters—to influence the up-and-coming. It's also about finding wonderful people currently in leadership roles, such as yourself, who take chances with people they see as having the potential to carry a leadership role, regardless of similarities or differences to their own story.

**ED:** Yes, I agree. I think having multiple mentors is key. The more variety of experiences (and people!) you can encounter in the field, the better. And I'm so sorry you haven't encountered more representative leadership. I believe the latest data is that librarianship is 87% white? That said, we need to get you in more library spaces where BIPOC library leaders are visible, maybe even on Library Twitter.

I am highly concerned with retention of new librarians like yourself. For all the reasons you mentioned, there are numerous motives for why one would want to switch institutions or even leave the profession altogether. Does our mentoring relationship contribute in any way to your wanting to stay at our institution, at least for a time? If so, how?

**AM:** I appreciate your concern for the retention of new librarians as I do believe it starts with awareness, especially among our leaders. A desire to “walk in the shoes” of another could simply entail asking oneself, “If I were that person, what would I need in order to feel comfortable within my work environment?” My answer would be equality, mutual trust among my fellow staff members, and the freedom to be comfortable in my own skin.

Being comfortable in one's own skin is easier to do when the other 87% of the staff is of a similar likeness to one's own self, if I am speaking honestly. Every one of us knows what it feels like to attend an event or a social setting where you feel like the odd one out; you try to find any commonalities with the people there and hope to fit in, even a little. Our place of work is also a social setting, and we can all agree that it is hard to fit in when the prevailing culture is one that you did not spend a lot of time among. While it is important to remind and encourage all people to be open-minded and inclusive in everyday action, I believe retaining BIPOC can be a key in bringing that statistic more in line with the national racial average.

Mentoring, of all staff, is a way to show a desire to see, and take part in, personal and professional growth. It allows for a personalized outlet, a trusted advisor, for questions or comments that might feel stupid, or at least uninformed, in a larger group setting. This has the added benefit, when pairing people of different cultures as mentor/mentee, of providing an opportunity to see the workplace, the organization, the world through a different pair of eyes. In that way, everybody involved has something to gain.

To finally answer your question—does our mentoring relationship contribute to my wanting to stay at our institution for a while—my answer is very much so. It allows me to feel appreciated even though we have different lived experiences. I have not experienced a true mentoring relationship in the workplace. I can last think of having a mentor in my final two years of high school, someone who helped me with college applications. I will never forget that person because she helped me a great deal and was so kind. I have the same thoughts about our mentoring relationship.

As my high school mentor pointed out things I needed for my applications that I did not know about, you have mentioned conferences and even Library Twitter that I can look to, which I was previously unaware of! The feeling of having someone looking out for me, encouraging my success, absolutely makes me want to stay a while because it helps give me a sense of belonging. It makes me feel as though I am not just another worker in my work environment. Unfortunately, many people end up feeling that way after working in any place for a while, regardless of what culture they are from, especially if there is a lack of support from peers or leadership. This encouragement helps me to feel valued at work, which is what we all hope for in a job.

**ED:** Thank you for all your wisdom, Annmarie. Mentoring and being mentored have been essential parts of my career and journey. I hope no matter where life ultimately takes you, you'll pay it forward someday too. ♪