

The accidental mentorship

Library managers' roles in student employees' academic professional lives

"Thanks so much for your understanding and down-to-earth attitude, and for trusting me with a supervisor position. The skills and experience I gained through my work at the library will carry through no matter where my career takes me. I especially enjoyed the chance to use my creative energy!"

The evidence may sometimes be rare, and the actual managers and supervisors may not feel it, but they have been mentors to their student library staff. Requesting examples of student mentoring relationships from our colleagues met with, in several instances, blank stares and a strong misunderstanding of what exactly a mentor was. It was their belief that a mentorship *only* involved a formalized relationship, between professionals, one more knowledgeable and skilled, the other seeking this knowledge and skills.

But from one of the great leadership sages, Steven Covey, comes this very personal, 180-degree definition of a mentor: "someone who believed in me, even more than I believed in myself, who trusted me, had confidence in me, even more than I may had in myself. And because of that . . . I knew that they wanted my best interests . . . not their own agenda . . . [and this] . . . enables me to trust fully, completely."¹

Unexpectedly we have become mentors to many of our student employees regardless of their professional lives after school. But what does this mean exactly? What really is a mentor? What is an *accidental mentor*? And, what can we do as library managers with this information?

What is a mentor?

The word *mentor* (the Greek root of the word means "to remember, think, counsel") made its first appearance in Homer's *Odyssey*.

A *formal mentoring* relationship is one in which the mentor and the protégé meet on a regular basis, they hold structured discussions, there is an expectation of a certain degree of commitment. The protégé does what the mentor says, they set goals, parameters of the relationship, and there is usually a time frame in which the relationship begins and ends.² The relationship is often geared towards a new professional paired up with an older, wiser professional in the same field.

A perfect example of a formal mentorship, one that is recognized globally, is the mentorship between Obi-Wan Kenobi and Anakin Skywalker of the fictional Star Wars universe. But the mentorship that we are providing to our student employees is not formalized: it has no program, no schedule, and no time frames. No Jedis here.

An *informal mentorship* is the antithesis of the formal mentorship in structure: there really is none. The relationship is usually created spontaneously out of an immediate need. It is rarely identified, and because of that fact it is seen as less effective and significant than a formal mentoring relationship.

Kate Burke is reference librarian at the University of Saint Thomas in Minnesota, e-mail: kmburke@stthomas.edu and Belinda Lawrence is public access librarian at St. Catherine University in St. Paul, Minnesota, e-mail: belawrence@stkate.edu

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Because they are not planned and do not require schedules and goals and timelines, informal mentorships are easier to begin and to end and are accessible to anyone. Informal mentors can also be from all walks of life, not necessarily the CIO of the company you work for; they can be the person you work with, a member of the clergy, or a friend.

But the mentorship we provide needs to be further defined. Not only is it informal mentorship but it is *accidental*. It is an unexpected role for the mentor, and this role is uncommonly realized until much later, or maybe never at all.

Surprisingly, most people would initially not identify these sorts of individuals as mentors until prompted with this further definition. Then the floodgates open.

Accidental mentorships are also performed in different capacities. From the examples given by many library managers, we discovered activities anywhere from helping students put together their résumé, to assisting them with getting their car out of the impound lot.

Library managers as accidental mentors

We may not be in their career field and we aren't their professors, but student library jobs offer a place for learning and growing outside of the classroom and help student employees figure out how to balance work and academic responsibilities. And as the managers of these student employees, we are responsible for that. We are in the right place at the right time for the right reasons. We support these students and aid their transition to a more independent adult life.

We are supervisors, educating, training, helping to form students' work ethics and habits. We are, after all, employers in higher education.

As supervisors we spend more time with the student employees on average than any one professor, counselor, or advisor. "In 2007, about 46 percent of full-time, and 81 percent of part-time, college students ages 16 to 24 were employed," and roughly "30% of these

students are working 20-35 or more hours per week, over six times the amount of time they spend in any one class."³

In our role as supervisors, we have the potential to be great role models—we have our own accomplishments to exhibit and share.

Some already consider us their mentor: As McCarthy noted in her study, ". . . one half of the undergraduate business majors sampled identified faculty members, administrators, parents, friends, relatives and members of the business community as mentors."⁴

Benefits all around

How does the student employee actually benefit through this sort of mentorship?

- Applied skills (needed and expected in the workforce).
- Experience, this is sometimes their first job: and they will learn proper work ethic and good habits.
- Learning essential skills needed in professional/work environment, such as working as a group, etc.
- Getting feedback from someone not handing out grades.
- Getting a seasoned employee to show them the best practices.

As one of the authors recalls from early in her career while she was an undergraduate studying history, "I know the profound affect my informal mentor had on me. Without my knowledge she helped me get a paid internship when I was all set to work on an unpaid internship in her department. I knew she was interested in my future success."

Besides providing a benefit for the protégé, the mentorship also offers the mentor:

- satisfaction in seeing the positive effects of the relationship on employees,
- growth of the protégé reflecting positively on the manager's performance,
- growth of the protégé improving overall service/productivity of the department, and
- development of a trustworthy source for feedback.

As student supervisor Judith Michalski relates, "I often receive notes from student

assistants—many are for no reason except to show gratefulness. It feeds my soul and I never take them lightly.”

So what can we do to be part of an accidental mentorship?

The accidental mentorship is an excellent opportunity for any student employee. So what can we do to make it an option for every student employee? It’s accidental after all, so how do you prepare for that? Similar to a play in a theater, there is always some setup involved to create the stage magic. Imagine being part of that props or stage crew. Most preparation is done before, or backstage, behind the scenes and hidden from the audience. It’s also done on your time, too, as the play is ongoing and it starts and stops whenever you want it to.

Things that can help set the stage: inclusion, fostering relationships, additional responsibilities, treating the job as part of the educational experience, and feedback.

Inclusion. Ownership of a job, or feeling like you are part of a team, does not happen unless the employee knows they belong or feel included. Create opportunities for student employees to work with and alongside their peers, as well as with other support staff and supervisors.

Traditions are a great way to include students. David Gehring, night circulation supervisor at the University of Wisconsin-Parkside Library, hosts an annual picnic and invites former and current student employees, along with staff and family. “The idea of the picnic itself, at the time, was just to get all the student library workers together in one spot to grill out, toss the Frisbee and play some bocce ball,” he recalls.

Inclusions do not have to be a costly or time-consuming affair either. The author keeps photos of most every student employee who has worked for her since 1997 taped to the wall of her office. Inclusions can also be as little as saying “hi” to them during their shift or thanking them.

Fostering relationships and networking. Try to “(f)oster interactions between the

employees with faculty, full time staff and administrators. By incorporating the student employees with permanent staff, they not only feel like a ‘real employee’, but they will learn so much more from their adept counterparts.”⁵ Sometimes listening to their concerns and problems is helpful to them. I start by listening to their problems and woes and say “What an interesting problem. How you are going to solve it?”

Additional responsibilities. Give the student employees additional responsibilities. Initially they may feel overwhelmed, but many of them will accept the new responsibility, take ownership of it, and get a sense of “my job, my library.”

The author as public access librarian gave student workers additional tasks, such as creating displays for the library. “Initially they were quite intimidated: they didn’t know where to begin. Once they started working on them and realizing what an impact they were making, they began to really enjoy it, and owning it.”

Giving feedback. Don’t shy away from the annual review. No one likes to be critical of others, but it is important for their growth. If the student employee is never told how to improve, they may never improve. The evaluation process also helps bridge communication. In many instances the student employee may have not done something wrong but just failed to communicate it effectively.

The bottom line. Library managers are not trained in the ways of mentoring, advising, or in therapy. But regardless of this lack of training, they will be spending large amounts of quality time with student employees advising, encouraging, teaching, and becoming their accidental mentors. The process usually happens unplanned and spontaneous, but with a little prestage planning, this activity can be encouraged and can grow. It doesn’t take a lot of effort and the benefits obtained by both involved parties are rewarding and last a lifetime.

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are always a couple of staff members who are reluctant to make changes without anticipating and accounting for every potential outcome. Perhaps perfection is the enemy of good implementation because many in the library profession seem to want to solve all the problems, real and imagined, associated with a new idea before it gets put into action. They have difficulty accepting that it is often not possible to forestall every outcome and consequence, intended or not. As library leaders, it is important to have the skills to bring the overly concerned to a place of comfort with the ambiguity that comes with new ideas and ways of doing things. In short, it is an opportunity to lead from the middle, as Lubans would say.

While management and leadership are not the same thing, many use the words interchangeably. And they are very much part of the same branch on the tree, fused to each other in many ways. But the root of management is managing. In any new activity or procedure, there will be planning prior to implementation. But the key to success will be to manage the implementation as it rolls out and through the process. In this case, managing is tracking the roll-out and dealing with issues as they arise, solving problems and creating solutions as they are called for.

Leading is one of the tools of management, and Lubans has several examples of how coaching and collaboration have proven to be successful in the library environment. His analysis of the Duke University women's basketball team is an excellent case study.

After spending a year attending team practices, strategy sessions, and games, he finds a number of ideas that transfer to implementation of new plans. The most prescient: never forget that there is no magic bullet that will solve every problem.

Planning is important, but once the plan is in place, then managing it to success is equally important. Sometimes, frontline personnel are so focused on the specific applications of new processes that they get bogged down in the details and want answers to every concern, real and perceived. This is not always possible. Help them understand their role in managing a new implementation. Make them a part of the problem-solving team, and give them confidence to deal with the unintended consequences of change. Lubans promotes the PDCA system (plan, do, check, act), pioneered by Edward Deming, which allows for this sort of approach.

We shouldn't let the pursuit of perfection derail good implementation plans, and we can lead those plans (perfectly?) from the middle to success. Lubans' book is filled with advice and messages such as this, and it is both readable and "thumb-able," meaning you can just open it up, start reading, and become absorbed into the narrative. There may not be a better recommendation than that for professional reading.

Note

1. John Lubans, *Leading from the middle* (Santa Barbara, CA: Libraries Unlimited, 2010). ¶

(*"The accidental mentorship" cont. from page 101*)

Notes

1. Steven Covey, "Who are your mentors?" Retrieved July 27, 2009, from orlando.jobing.com/video_details.asp?segment=19370&i=45882.
2. S. Ginsberg, "The Three types of mentors. Hello, my name is BLOG!" Retrieved June 3, 2009, from hellomynameisscott.blogspot.com/.
3. Brigham Young University, Human Resources. (n.d.) "Brigham Young University

Manger's Toolbox: Student mentoring," Retrieved June 3, 2009, from training.BrighamYoungUniversity.edu/documents/t-student.pdf.

4. M. McCarthy and T. Mangione (2000), "How Undergraduate Students Identify and Utilize Informal Mentors," *NACADA Journal* 20 Fall (2) p.31-37.

5. Brigham Young University, "Brigham Young University Manger's Toolbox: Student mentoring." ¶