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Apprenticeships, MLIS Students, and Neurodiversity

Centering the Humanity of Student Workers, Part 2

Academic Library Workers in Conversation is a *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. This two-part conversation demonstrates that student labor is labor and that our student workers and apprentices need room to grow and advocate for their own needs. This is the essential continuation of last month's conversation.—*Dustin Fife, series editor*

Alaina C. Bull: Let's pick up where we left off.[1] We started our program rebuild with students that had been hired under the previous model, and then three months in we got to hire our first two students. The students we inherited came in with a very specific understanding of what they would be doing and how work would be assigned. When we hired our first two, we were able to start shaping our new model and redefining not just how work is done, but what work *is*. We started encouraging the whole cohort to read articles and then engage in discussion and reflection about the ideas on work time. We started creating a framework for what we refer to as "reflective practice," and this became a normal part of our meetings. And we started having the continuing students help guide the new students in learning these processes and procedures so that it wasn't top-down, but a peer2peer modeling by students.

Johanna M. Jacobsen Kiciman: I really want to underscore this piece around reflective practices as an intentional part of our methodology. This practice is really neuroinclusive because it creates space to center one's own mental and physical needs and helps students understand and articulate a non-capitalist reason for *why* they are doing the work they are doing. We have self-identified neurodivergent students who prefer chat to in-person things, for example, because the computer reduces complex social cues and offers a very clear workflow. Reflective practices create the space to essentially tell your supervisors "I don't like this type of work; I am drawn to this instead, and here's why." And later, with more built trust: "This work and my feelings around it are tied to who I am as a human being, and thus here is the type of environment I need to learn and grow and thrive." This sort of community of care would not have been possible five years ago at this institution. We unknowingly created a framework that, as you said, Alaina, created the space for what *we* would have needed as students. This framework happens to be very anti-ableist and neuroinclusive because of our own identities.

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We do want to share a student voice around the impact of these practices:

> I came into my position as a student reference specialist with almost unbearable trauma and burnout from former jobs. I had kind of resigned myself to thinking that . . . as a neurodivergent person, I would always just have to deal with feeling alienated and dehumanized at work. . . . Working with the Ref Specialist team did so much to help me not only recover, but also learn to work in a way that was healthier long-term. Working with [Alaina and Johanna] was the first time where I felt that my neurodivergence wasn't just tolerated, but actually understood and even embraced. Instead of masking constantly, I was able to work more comfortably (and, as a result, better). There seems to be a popular perception that if you support an employee too much they'll . . . slack off; however, I found that having more support helped me get out of the . . . survival mode . . . for long enough to actually learn effective self-management, self-motivation, and self-advocacy.[2]

Alaina: Yes, I think as we started to pull these pieces out and recognize that, for our own practices, we were doing a lot of reflection and recognition of what aspects of our jobs we were having strong reactions to, what aspects we were pushing back against. We recognize that this is something that the grad students should be doing for themselves. And I recognized that when I was in the program, I felt like I was very much surrounded by the vocational awe of "We do labor to serve because this is a service profession."

One of the things that I don't think we've touched on but is part of this whole reflective practice, is learning to advocate for ourselves. Every time we meet with the grad students, both as a group and individually, we finish the meeting by asking them, "What do you need from us to make what you're working on go smoothly?" And I think that that's a really important piece that taps into the neurodivergency, taps into apprenticeship and mentorship, and all of the things we've been talking about. It's not just shifting the power and making an acknowledgment that as supervisors, it's our job to make your job go smoothly.

But it's also teaching the skill of self-reflection. *What do I need in order for this job to go smoothly?* I feel like so much of my career is getting things done and getting things done as messily and chaotically as happens with ADHD, because no one was asking me "what did I need" to make it go smoothly. So starting that self-reflective practice, making that a piece that we all think about as we're planning each project and the end result, or the question that you're trying to answer: what would make this smooth and what do I need to ask? It's a huge shift.

Johanna: Well, our profession is deeply entangled with the idea of the white savior complex and is also a deeply feminized profession. We couldn't ethically hand this over to students without reflection. We also know that the field is plagued with high burnout and low morale, to draw on Kaetrena Davis Kendricks's work. By learning to know yourself and your boundaries, you are setting yourself up to have less burnout in this field. There is also a structural impact in changing the *modality* of learning to not be grounded purely in the mastery of a sole task.

Alaina: We were able to so radically set up this new approach because of where we were with the pandemic and how much our home lives and our work lives had just been mushed together. We all have lives outside of work. And in that place of complete disruption, we

were all figuring out how to articulate these boundaries, and talk about this giant anxiety, in a way that previously we may not have done in a workspace. This really spoke to me as a neurodivergent human being.

I think a huge deconstruction and reconstruction happened because of all of the chaos we were surrounded by. It made the students willing to let go of past structures. It allowed us to dehierarchize and build what we needed, which was very much rooted in our neurodivergent worldviews of what would have been helpful. And as we started building this model that we thought was rooted in mentorship, what we actually were constructing was an apprenticeship model.

Johanna: I would like to share a definition of apprenticeship. From Mirriam-Webster: "a position as an apprentice and arrangement in which someone learns an art, trade, or job under another."[3] When someone learns a trade or job under another, they do not just learn one concrete skill. They learn the entire art of librarianship, the trade of librarianship, the job of librarianship.

I think our mentorship of the graduate students through an apprenticeship program has been iterative. We have created the space to actually get feedback from the students on how they would like to be mentored. Whether students want more structure or less structure really is dependent on that individual. But by focusing on relationship-forward community building and cohort building with access to the holistic *art, job, trade*, there is the room for constructive feedback that we can receive and use to adapt what we provide.

Alaina: And a very important piece of this apprenticeship model is the space to fail. It's letting go of that idea of learning a skill perfectly and is encouraging engagement and inquiry based on the idea that it's okay for things you try to not work, you'll learn something in that failure.

Within academia, everyone is trying to make sure everything is perfect: be the top scholar or have the highest impact factor. Having the space to say, "We'll try it and see if it works. Did that work? No, okay, that's all right," that's teaching them a valuable skill that helps combat burn out.

Johanna: Student work that is interest-driven creates meaningful learning for students and meaningful change for an institution. We are at a smaller campus, there is room for students to meaningfully pitch in. Their work is impactful. One of our students created a roaming reference program that serves more students than the research help desk.

A high percentage of MLIS students do not have practical experience and enter the job market unprepared and are thus underserved by the degree that they spent so much money on to get the title. Apprenticeship can change that.

Alaina: Since we finished our degrees, the databases have changed, the tools have changed. Apart from having to publish, because we work at an academic institution that wants us to publish. I've never used the theory in my day-to-day practice. I don't interact with a student and say, "You know what information-seeking behavior I'm seeing right now? This is the cherry-picking method." You don't actually use any of those theories in the practice of librarianship. I feel strongly that we need to be funding apprenticeship positions within the MLIS school structure as opposed to relying on individual units to have the funding to have these positions.

Apprenticeship should be a significant and necessary portion of an iSchool curriculum. And yes, I'm in academic libraries, so I would have wanted an academic apprenticeship. But

we need to find ways to have these opportunities in the public libraries, in special libraries, and school libraries as a part of our iSchool curricula. We need to find a way to make this so that our students are entering the field with working knowledge.

Johanna: That's right! We need our students to understand what the actual work is, as opposed to being able to write a really good paper about the theories behind the work. We need them to know and articulate their own limitations to prevent burnout. How much can this program be sized up and scaled? We deeply believe that other institutions should be doing this kind of work. We deeply believe that what you are doing in this sort of apprenticeship program is creating healthy colleagues who you will work with in the future, and who will impact your own well-being in a job environment. I will throw out that we have a nearly 100% job placement rate over the past three years. Students who graduated years ago are still collaborating with us. Relationships have been maintained and they go both ways. Our students *are* our colleagues, then and now.

Notes

1. Johanna M. Jacobsen Kiciman and Alaina C. Bull, "Apprenticeships, MLIS Students, and Neurodiversity: Centering the Humanity of Student Workers, Part 1," *College & Research Libraries News* 85, no. 9 (2024): 366–68, https://doi.org/10.5860/crln.85.9.366.

2. This quote is used with consent. It was submitted August 31, 2023, via a Google Form survey and is a response to the question of how leadership values impacted the experience of the student in their student job.

3. "Apprenticeship," Merriam-Webster Online, last updated October 13, 2024, https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/apprenticeship.