

Jillian Speck and Kristina Clement

Finding a Mentor in Libraries

You're Not Alone, Even If You're Solo

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 was proposed by the authors, and the authors were given space to explore. This issue's conversation returns to mentoring and how it is essential for healthy careers and our profession. - *Dustin Fife, series editor*

Kristina Clement: Let's jump right in—Jillian, what do you think are the benefits of mentorship?

Jillian Speck: I think there are a lot of benefits. For one, it creates a connection with someone who's in the same boat as you. Someone who's experiencing the same things—the same problems and challenges. Someone else who has a similar job, someone you can bounce ideas off. It's also nice to commiserate with someone else about the other aspects of the job or subject, or even just to learn from another person. When I first came into this job, I didn't really know anything about business librarianship. So, having a mentor to give you some resources to start with really helps.

Kristina: You said something that I think highlights one of the biggest benefits of mentorship: having someone with whom to commiserate. And I think that's especially important if it's someone outside of your institution. Commiseration is important, but it doesn't just have to be complaining. Having someone outside your institution who may have had similar experiences is not only a great way to talk through new ideas before testing them out, but also someone who you can temperature check with. "Are you experiencing something similar that might be frustrating?" "Have you tried this before? Did it work? Do you think it'll work here?" Having a person in your professional network you can ask those questions to is so valuable. I've mentored quite a few people in our field over the years, and there's been plenty of productive commiseration. So, yeah, I think you hit the nail on the head with commiseration, especially because it's not a bad thing.

Jillian: It's also good to know if I'm having a problem, so I can ask, "Is this problem unique to my own situation, or is this actually a very common problem in business librarianship?" I'm telling you, half the conversations that can go on in business librarianship are "Which databases should we get?" "I'm getting rid of this database." "I'm trying to look for a new database." "I'm trying to find a replacement for this database that costs thousands of dollars." I think everyone has their own unique process because all institutions are going through

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changes at different times. It's just good to know if something is a common problem so we can all come together and try to problem solve. We don't always have to have a solution, but we can create better steps to get to where we want to go, as opposed to, "Is this something just unique to my particular institution or context?"

Kristina: That's a great point, Jillian. I think mentors can be useful in helping us check the reality of our situations. If you have a mentor who is outside of your institution, they likely have no stake in what's happening. And, so, I think there's a lot more honesty about how we're feeling and what we're doing. Something that I do with a couple of the people that I mentor is we do a story check where I ask them, "What's the story you are telling yourself?" This is helpful when my mentees are experiencing conflicts because it allows them to step back and see if they might be seeing reality differently from the others involved. And because I have no stake in what happens, I feel like I can ask them the questions that challenge them to think critically about the situation. I think if someone from their institution asked them that, especially if it was their boss, that might not help them be as reflective because there is a hierarchical authority structure at work. With your external mentor, it's just helping people grow.

Jillian: I think that's also a good thing that I like about that relationship, especially if they're outside your institution. You do get that extra point of view. And yeah, just trying to help us grow as best we can in our professional positions, when we don't always have resources or professional networks that are freely available as opposed to those hidden behind paywalls.

Kristina: I'm curious. How did you find your mentor, and how has it helped you on your professional journey?

Jillian: I didn't have any sort of formal mentorship program to fall back on, so I found a mentor on my own. Basically, I started with a list of things I wanted from my mentor. I needed someone familiar with the basics of business research and who knew how to develop student engagement opportunities and activities. At the time, I wasn't looking for anyone who would help me build a career in business librarianship, just someone who could give me advice about the subject.

I also wanted someone whose experiences were like my own. I've worked at different types of libraries, like public, school, and academic, so I thought it would be easier to relate to a mentor that had done the same. I also aimed to have a mentor in the same time zone as me because trying to keep track of meetings in different time zones requires more time management and scheduling.

As far as benefits go, I've really appreciated the resources my mentor gave me. Business librarianship is somewhat niche, so it's not easy to find professional development materials that are free. But she gave me a great listserv that I've used, where anyone can post a question and receive feedback or more resources.

Kristina: Your consideration of time zones, while it seems small, is actually wise. While I think mentorship is incredibly important, it's equally important to acknowledge the invisible labor that we're asking of people. We're asking for their time, for their effort. I think it goes both ways between the mentor and the mentee. I think one barrier to seeking mentorship is not wanting to take someone's time. Did you ever feel like that when you were looking for a mentor, or did that never cross your mind?

Jillian: I think it definitely crossed my mind at one point. As librarians, I know we have a lot to do, and when I looked at my mentor's list of publications and scholarship, I thought,

“Wow. She’s done so much and knows a lot. I want to learn from her, but what if she doesn’t have the time because she’s doing all these things? I don’t want to take away time from her own work to ask her to help me.” But you sort of have to put yourself out there if you want to learn more. You must go for it, even if you’re nervous about taking up someone else’s time.

Kristina: I think that could be a big barrier for people just joining the profession, not feeling like they have the right to ask someone for their time and knowledge, when in reality, I think, we’re in a very giving profession where everyone in it benefits from sharing. We often give our time very freely, maybe a little too freely. Personally, I like mentoring people. I think it’s a lot of fun. I’m usually hard pressed to say no to someone who asks me to be their mentor.

I started volunteering to be a mentor early in my career. Maybe I had a bit of a full head, but I think we always have something to learn from one another, regardless of where we are in our careers. I volunteered for the ACRL Instruction Section’s mentoring program a few years ago as a mentor and got paired with a mentee who was new to doing library instruction but had been in the profession almost 10 years longer than I had. That was a little awkward to start. But I think it worked out well, and it eventually transformed into more of a friendship than a mentorship, which was nice because I gave her advice on instruction stuff, and she gave me advice on being a manager. We learned a lot from each other.

Jillian: So, you’ve been part of some more structured mentorship programs. How did you find those structured programs to be?

Kristina: The structured programs can be good. I think when you’ve got someone or a group of people who are really dedicated to running them well and giving clear guidelines and expectations for mentors and mentees, they do well. One of the structured ones I participated in had a topic of the month that they would send out, which I thought was helpful. My mentee and I used them now and then but tended to talk about other things. So, when a mentorship program is well run and thought out, I think they can be incredibly valuable. The opposite is also true—poorly run programs lead to poor mentor/mentee experiences.

Jillian: You just touched on this, one of the big frustrations and barriers of mentorship is that if there is the structure of a formal mentorship program, it must be consistent. There must be people who have time to volunteer and make it what it is. And so often, we’re stretched so thin because again, libraries are underfunded. We don’t have very big budgets. We’re given more to do with less resources, and that puts a strain on our own mental states. It’s like having this other extra thing to do. You can’t put as much effort or energy into it as you would like, no matter how much you really want to. I’m wondering, Kristina, what have you gotten out of these relationships?

Kristina: The mentor-mentee relationships I’ve gotten the most out of were impromptu and either ones that I sought out or kind of fell into. So, my favorite example of that is back when a lot of librarians were on Twitter in the before times, someone tweeted that they were in their first faculty role, and they needed help learning how to “faculty,” and I tweeted back and said, “I can help you with that.” I had been a faculty librarian for maybe two years at that point and decided that I knew enough to mentor someone. Maybe I did, maybe I didn’t, but we started meeting regularly and talking about what it meant to be a tenure-track faculty member versus a staff librarian. She had been a librarian for about as long as I had, but in a staff role. Our conversations were fantastic, and now she’s a very close friend. I’m so glad I volunteered my time for her.

So, Jillian, any final thoughts on mentorship?

Jillian: I think mentorship is important, and I wish librarians in general weren't so stretched thin at times, so we could put more effort into networking with each other and talk more with each other about all the challenges and advantages of our jobs. It's helpful to have someone else to talk to, especially when you're just the only person in your position, and you're like, "Wait, how do I do this?"

Kristina: Mentorship can be great. But we must be very conscious of our time and others' time and strike a balance between asking for what we deserve and what other people can give. If we don't, we won't have anything to give. 