



Evidence Summary

Formal Mentoring Programs Can Provide Organizational and Professional Benefits, but are Few and Far Between in Canadian Academic Libraries

A Review of:

Harrington, M. R., & Marshall, E. (2014). Analyses of mentoring expectations, activities, and support in Canadian academic libraries. *College & Research Libraries*, 75(6), 763-790. doi: <http://dx.doi.org/10.5860/crl.75.6.763>

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Abstract

Objective – To determine the extent to which formal and informal mentoring is present in Canadian academic libraries and how such activities meet expectations for new librarians, practising librarians, and library administrators.

Design – Online surveys.

Setting – Canadian college and university libraries.

Subjects – Three groups were defined and surveyed: graduates from one Canadian MLIS program; librarians practising in a Canadian

academic library, and library administrators directing a Canadian academic library.

Methods – Participants were selected using stratified, purposeful sampling and were invited to participate in an online survey in December 2010. Three surveys were distributed in total; one for each of the three target groups defined. The surveys contained both closed- and open-ended questions. Students from one specific MLIS program graduating in December 2010 and Spring 2011 were directly invited to participate. An incentive was offered to the student group and the librarian group to encourage participation.

Main Results – Mentoring programs in Canadian colleges and universities are present but are largely informal. Mentoring activities are positively correlated with student population, how long a mentor has worked professionally, and whether or not librarians had been mentored early in their careers. 83% of new graduates expected to be mentored when hired by a Canadian academic library while less than one quarter of librarians and no administrators reported having similar expectations when starting their professional academic careers. Over 50% of the students who responded to the survey reported that they had experienced some form of mentoring while completing their MLIS, though that may be related to the cooperative placement component of their educational program. All respondents, with the exception of university administrators, indicated that library colleagues are appropriate mentors, while academic librarians and administrators felt that the mentorship relationship would not benefit were the mentor also the supervisor.

Respondents placed the greatest weight of importance on mentoring activities related to academic expertise, career guidance, psychosocial support and role models, while indicating that evaluation was not considered to have a significant place in the mentor-mentee relationship. Networking, cultural complexities, general encouragement, and career counseling were seen as important mentorship aspects for both new graduates and practising librarians. Administrators in both college and university libraries were less likely to support mentoring particularly in the areas of assisting with grant writing, evaluation, and career counseling. In general, administrators were reluctant to develop or support formal mentor programming even though a significant percentage agreed that it would benefit succession planning.

Conclusion – New graduates and practising librarians expect to participate in some form of mentoring activities yet there are very few Canadian academic libraries providing formal mentorship programming. The value of the mentor-mentee relationship with respect to organizational planning, recruitment and

retention, as well as career planning, is perceived as high amongst new graduates, practising librarians, and administrators.

Commentary

The authors provide a thorough literature review on librarian mentoring activities in academic institutions, noting a gap in the literature in terms of formal and informal mentoring programs in Canadian academic libraries. This is especially relevant given the importance placed on the 8Rs Study (2005) that highlights recruitment, retention, and restructuring, which the authors view as directly intertwined with mentoring. Using a critical appraisal checklist (Glynn, 2006), the study is determined to be valid.

Three data collection instruments for three different groups provided the authors with a large amount of data that was compared and described clearly, thus providing a multi-faceted view of the varying perceptions of expectations and the importance placed on mentoring. It is unclear whether or not the surveys were validated or exactly how they were distributed, however the surveys were included thus allowing further transparency. The response rates for the administrators and practising librarians was stated, however no information was provided as to the expected response rate or the power of the study. One may surmise that the exact number of practising librarians and directors was known to the authors in order to calculate an exact response rate, though this information is not clear. Given the low response rate and the use of purposeful stratified sampling (typically used for small sample sizes), it may not be possible to generalize results to the broader population.

The choice to survey recent graduates from one specific program is both interesting and controversial. While the program was not directly identified, it is easy to glean which one it is given the author's description of the program. Knowing both the institution as well as the graduating class dates compromises the privacy of this particular study group. In addition, it is possible that students attending

a program with a strong placement component may respond differently than students from other programs, thus presenting a potential bias. The authors note this as a study limitation, implying that external validity may have been affected.

The perceived value of mentoring is clear for the new graduates and practising librarians in terms of academic expertise and career guidance, yet the primary benefits for these two groups relate to psychosocial support and role modeling. It is interesting that administrators did not indicate strong support for formal or informal mentoring programs in spite of the fact that librarians at universities reported more informal mentoring activities. It may be that administrators are unaware of informal mentoring activities amongst librarians. That said, administrators provided valid reasons for not supporting formal programs including a lack of available time and resources, confines related to Collective Agreements, difficulty matching mentors with

mentees, and the general absence of a structured program with defined outcomes. Without formal mentoring programs in place, informal mentoring practices depend on individual time, interest and commitment to continue. The conundrum presented is that this and other research points to the fact that mentoring has a positive effect on organizational restructuring and succession planning, suggesting that it may be in a library's best interest to encourage and support such formal programming.

References

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