Reaching Out to Minority Librarians: Overcoming Diversity Challenges through Mentorship

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Background and Introduction

Increasing and supporting diversity within the workforce is by no means a new issue within libraries. Diversity awareness in librarianship can be traced back to the 1930s.[1] A casual search for 'diversity efforts' reveals scholarship going back to the 70s and 80s outlining proactive recruitment and retention efforts. Literature shows that a diverse workforce provides libraries with a broad range of strengths.[2–5] Mentoring programs are well-known among administrative professionals for their benefits.[6–9] Outside of librarianship, diversity and mentoring efforts have been studied in the corporate and nonprofit sectors which have yielded a great amount of scholarship on the successful elements of diversity and mentoring programs. Library science has considered and integrated many diversity-related best practices of the business and human resources world, however, there is little research tying these best practices back to mentoring relationships. There have been very few previous studies that have extracted quantifiable data on mentoring relationships between minority librarians and their mentors. Field research would greatly complement the vast amount of prescriptive and case-study literature on the benefits of mentoring relationships to allow for the further development of mentoring programs and retention efforts.

A supportive work environment is fundamental to nurturing new librarians and supporting their success. Successful mentoring programs should, in theory, produce successful mentors, who will in turn create a more supportive and diverse community for new librarians resulting in the retention of a diverse workforce. But is this really the case in academic libraries?

Awareness of the issues of recruiting and retaining minority librarians is well-documented on the national level.[10] The American Library Association (ALA) and its related divisions have reported the low representation of minorities in librarianship and have responded to this issue by developing diversity-related initiatives, scholarships, and groups. Many library and information studies programs have responded by establishing residency programs such as those at the University of Delaware, Pennsylvania State University, and the University of Iowa among others to attract and train minority librarians. Scholarships such as the Spectrum Scholarship, the ARL Diversity Scholars program, the LITA/LSSI Minority Scholarship, and the LITA/OCLC Minority Scholarship, and leadership institutes focused on diversity efforts have also worked to increase support for minority librarians.

In our study we wanted to learn more about the context of mentoring programs within academic li-

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braries. We theorized that, although mentoring programs have a positive effect, their beneficial effects may not impact everyone in the same way; retention efforts must become an essential element of the program. Through our study we discovered evidence of a direct correlation between mentees and the value of their mentoring relationships, which is especially important within a homogenous library work environment. Satisfaction can be gained from librarianship as a profession, however preliminary evidence suggests connections to library community are an essential function of the mentoring relationship and must be addressed at an institutional level.

Literature Review

Black and Leysen[11] point out that the lack of professional preparation in library graduate school programs makes the need for professional socialization even greater. Minority librarians new to the profession must navigate through the double challenge of being both a neophyte and a minority in librarianship.[12] Black and Leysen also found that minority librarians place more importance on formal mentoring programs than did their non-minority counterparts.[13] The tendency of search committees to gravitate towards more experienced candidates decreases the opportunity for new minority librarians to enter the profession and gain much-needed experience.[14,15] Challenges facing new librarians, such as decreased entry level positions and lack of preparation in graduate school, impact new minority librarians more deeply and prevent the expansion of minorities into the profession at large. Even after being established in a position, minority librarians struggle to have their potential recognized.[16] Bonnette describes the weak recruitment strategies as impacting entry level positions whereas weak retention strategies impact middle management positions.[17] Mentors have historically been a key component in recruitment.[18]

It is well-noted that recruitment does not ensure automatic retention.[19] Further review of the retention dilemma reveals the lack of longevity for minority librarians has less to do with discrimination and more so to the lack of conducive working environments.[20,21] In order for libraries to develop and nurture the full potential of new librarians, they must first develop cultures of inclusiveness.[22] Creating supportive multicultural environments, however, has proven to be difficult. All levels within an institution must be fully committed to diversity initiatives for lasting impact to be measured. One essential component for success is administrative support. Administration must be willing to invest in the necessary resources to ensure that the novice minority librarian has ample opportunities for professional development, including financial assistance.[23] Johnson provides further details by focusing on the benefits received by the novice minority librarian. Johnson states, "retention is fostered by opportunities for growth and enrichment (professional development and continuing education), assistance with career advancement, working conditions (especially a collaborative environment), feeling valued, and membership in peer group".[24] Mentoring is an essential component to an effective retention strategy.[25]

Regarding the nature of mentoring relationships and the effect of mentoring on recruitment and retention, much has been written exposing the positive effects of mentoring. Mentor librarians function as advocates for their mentees and assist in professional developing and networking connections.[26] This support is critical for novice minority librarians. Minority mentors who share common cultural background and serve as role models establish positive rapport and deeper connections; which increases retention of minority librarians in the profession.[27]

While there is consensus over the positive effects of mentoring relationships, the elements of a productive mentoring relationship have been scrutinized by a number of studies. Ensher describes the correlation between perceived similarity based on factors such as shared gender and racial similarities between mentor and mentee and increased satisfaction with the mentoring relationship.[28] It follows that having more minority mentors would increase the number of satisfying relationships with minority mentees, thus precluding the necessity of more minority leaders in the library profession, raising yet another challenge, considering the low number of minorities in the profession. In a profession with so few minorities, opportunities to connect with mentors who are minorities are extremely limited. Other authors have suggested that leader-member exchange theory, which focuses on the relationships between leaders and group members, also influence vocational mentoring relationships.[29,30]

It is essential to address the issues of recruitment and retention in tandem. Recruiting minority librarians into entry level positions without an effort to

support their career development through mentoring programs leads to stymied retention efforts which, in turn, can further stunt recruitment. Black and Leysen describe the importance of the role of the supervisor in a librarian's orientation into the profession.[31] Ensher describes the importance of perceived similarity in mentoring relationships, with race and gender as being parameters in perceiving similarity.[32] Thus, it is evident that retention in necessary in order to provide new minority librarians with supervisors and mentors with mentoring relationships that will spur retention of new talent and foster professional development. Paradoxically, it seems the best method for retaining minorities is through mentoring from more experienced minority librarians, who in turn must have been nurtured through mentoring in order to have been retained in the profession in the first place. Unfortunately, unsuccessful retention efforts may result in few to none minority mentors, which may lead to less retention for new librarians.

Diversity in librarianship has been recognized by the American Library Association as being a major setback in the profession.[33,34] Many approaches to increase diversity focus on recruitment and retention efforts. Mentoring programs have long been studied for their beneficial effects, some of which are increased job satisfaction and retention. In order to encourage diversity in the profession, it is essential to establish programs for minority librarians that will increase both retention and job satisfaction. While encouragement of retention efforts is clear in both the literature and the workings of national library groups, it is necessary to study minority librarians' perceptions of their environments to discover if retention and recruitment efforts are resulting in diverse and supportive environments. This study seeks to explore the state of mentoring programs and their effects on minority librarians as well as to explore the correlations between librarians involved as mentees in a program and their perceived satisfaction with their library environment and the profession as a whole. In studying mentoring relationships and mentees' perceptions of their environments, this study seeks to highlight the importance of continuing retention efforts and the importance of mentors and inviting communities. Studying minority mentee librarians' perception of similarity reveals the weaknesses in retention efforts, both past and current. Successful retention efforts in the past would theoretically produce more minority

mentor librarians with experience and would in turn create a community within the libraries that would retain new minority librarians as their own perception of the community would be more positive.

Survey Construction and Methods

Ensher explores the effects of perceived similarity on mentoring relationships and mentor-mentee satisfaction within mentoring relationships. In order to construct the survey, elements of Ensher's survey were incorporated in order to measure perceived similarity that mentees had of their mentors.[35] In searching for tools previously used to measure mentor functions and the relationship between mentors and mentees, studies in human resources and business literature were considered but ultimately, mentoring studies done within the context of new teachers were the most appropriate in terms of describing the roles and behaviors of mentors and mentees. In order to discern whether perceived similarity is related to job satisfaction and positive attitudes towards librarianship in general and the working environment in specific, the mentoring function scale from Tepper was combined with a questionnaire modified from Reiman and Edelfelt.[36,37] As a result, the survey is a composite of tools to explore the mentee's self-reported relationship with his/her mentor(s), the functions of the relationship(s), and the mentee's self-reported perception of his/her environment.

The survey was distributed to listservs and ARL member libraries identified on the ARL website. Some ARL respondents declined, citing the lack of a structured mentoring program or being in the midst of constructing a mentoring program. General listservs including ili-L were included as well as listservs focused on special populations, such as NEWLIB-L for new librarians and BCALA, CALA and other divisions of ALA. The intention was to target recent graduates and minority librarians as well as librarians in institutions likely to have formal mentoring structures in place. Although public and special libraries were included, the vast majority of individual libraries targeted were academic libraries.
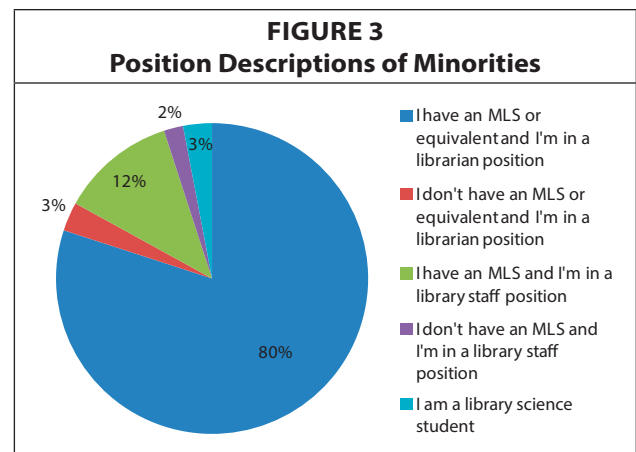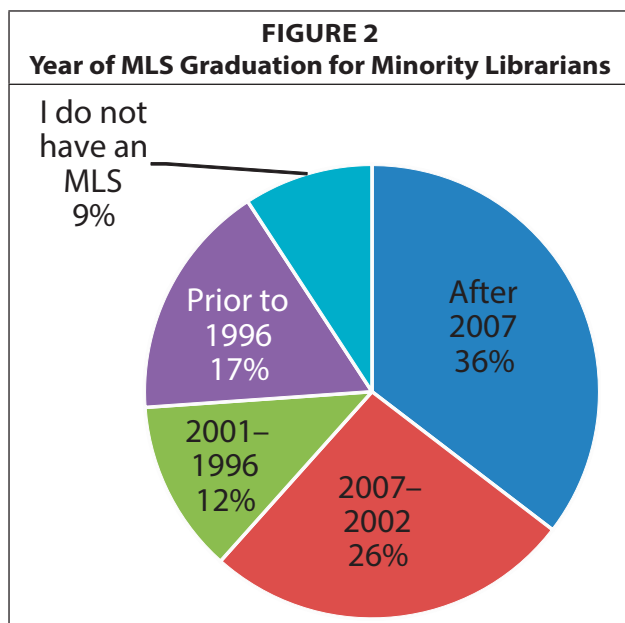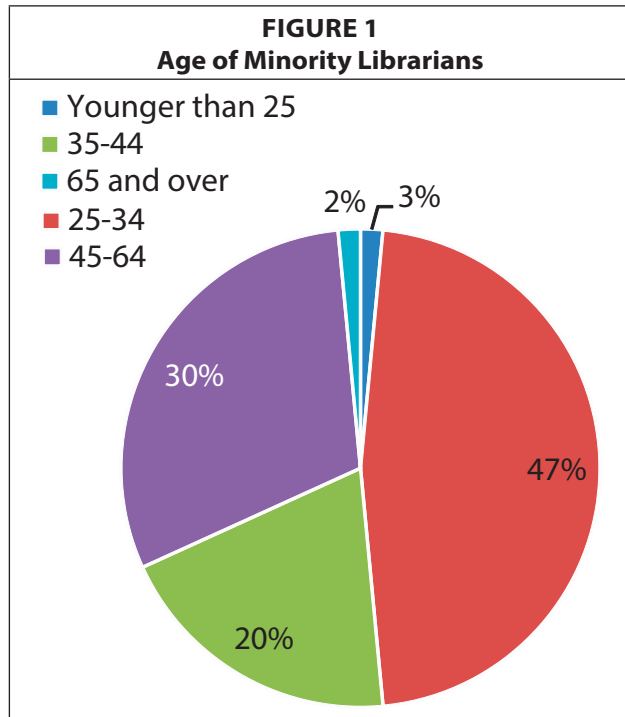
Preliminary Findings

There were 445 respondents in the total data pool. Overall, respondents were split across age ranges with 32% identifying themselves as being 25-34 years old, 25% 35-44 years old and 39% being 45-64 years old. Minority respondents as a whole were younger than the overall

population with 48% being 35 years or younger. Minority respondents were also more likely to be recent graduates, with 36% having attained their MLS after 2007.

Preliminary findings show that all minority groups should be included together as no single racial or ethnic minority was large enough to analyze as stand-alone data. Minority librarians are far more likely than the overall population to have an MLS but not hold a librarian (professional) position (12%

FIGURE 1
Age of Minority Librarians

- Younger than 25
- 35-44
- 65 and over
- 25-34
- 45-64

2%   3%
30%
47%
20%

FIGURE 2
Year of MLS Graduation for Minority Librarians

I do not have an MLS
9%

Prior to 1996
17%

2001–1996
12%

2007–2002
26%

After 2007
36%

of minorities compared with 4% of all respondents). Minority mentee librarians were even more likely to have a degree but not a professional position. Most respondents described their library as having faculty positions and adhering to a tenure process. Although minority respondents were more likely to be younger and to have graduated recently, they were slightly less likely to participate in mentoring programs as mentees than the general survey respondents. Although survey distribution methods may have skewed details towards one proclivity over another, the picture that emerges is one that suggests minority librarians are still in need of vigorous mentoring and retention support systems. As minority respondents are more likely to be younger and recent graduates, recruitment strategies may be seen at least tangentially as having a positive effect. In contrast, the preliminary survey results seem to suggest that mentoring programs may be skipping over new minority librarians in nonprofessional positions.

FIGURE 3
Position Descriptions of Minorities

2%
3%
12%
3%
80%

- I have an MLS or equivalent and I'm in a librarian position
- I don't have an MLS or equivalent and I'm in a librarian position
- I have an MLS and I'm in a library staff position
- I don't have an MLS and I'm in a library staff position
- I am a library science student

Unfortunately, the small sample size of respondents who self-identified as minorities and as mentees limits the applicability of the findings as well as hindering the ability to detect significant relationships within the data, in part due to the low numbers of minorities in the librarian profession. The percentages of respondents identifying themselves as non-white in the survey did mirror the percentages of non-white members in the librarian profession.[38] A comparison of mentees versus non-mentee librarians was more productive. There remains a need for a larger and more systematic survey of minority librarians, both mentees and non-mentees, in order for larger significant relationships to emerge. As a result, it is difficult

to wholly support or disprove the earlier hypotheses although many casual observances can be made. Additionally, the qualitative data, while also a small sample, did reveal many statements that seemingly supported our theories. Again, more systematic research is needed to confidently assert the relationships between librarians and their environments.

Although the pool of minority librarian respondents was small, over a third chose to share comments regarding their experiences as a mentee or as a librarian without mentoring. Minority librarians connected mentoring with tenure, employment and professional growth. "Having a mentor was crucial to me getting the kind of experience I need to get my first professional position," one minority librarian commented. "I've benefitted from having mentors who have been open to discussing all issues related to my jobs," remarked another. Relationships between job support and mentors were clearly connected in the comments of minority librarians, regardless of whether or not they were in a mentoring program.

Qualitative data from the survey corroborates feelings of inclusion as a result of mentoring to the point of non-mentored librarians recognizing the benefits of mentoring even though they themselves were not currently being mentored. "I wish there was a structure mentoring program at my library because I believe it is a necessity and it helps build [cooperative behavior] in any organization," noted a non-mentee minority librarian. The negative effects of not having a mentor were also expressed, with some minority librarians expressing their desire to leave their current positions or the field as a whole. "Without a mentor relationship, I have found it extremely difficult to find my place within the field," one minority librarian commented.

Most negative comments were related to the dearth or complete absence of mentors or issues with the structure of mentoring programs. Some problems noted regarding mentoring programs were whether or not to have mentors in the same institution, mentoring experienced librarians, and faculty-staff mentoring relationships. As minority librarian survey respondents were more likely to have an MLS but not a professional librarian position, mentoring programs designed for professional librarian positions may not be providing the much-needed support. "There is very little attention paid to mentoring internal library staff support members…or those who are degreed but not

employed in a professional capacity," remarked one minority librarian. Although the pool of respondents is small, the data suggests that the lacuna between mentoring programs geared towards professional librarian positions are overlooking MLS-holding minority librarians that are underemployed in staff or other non-professional positions.

Additionally, there is anecdotal evidence that mentoring programs provide a much-needed connection between the individual librarian and the library community he or she inhabits. When expressing dissatisfaction, many minority librarians made the distinction between their environment and the librarian profession as a whole. "I haven't had a mentor since my mentor retired…I feel I have no agency or belonging in my library environment," remarked one minority librarian. "I think often about how my career would have blossomed much earlier had I been in a more supportive, mentoring environment," wrote one minority librarian. "On several occasions I've felt that I hated librarianship but realized with the right environment, I probably would enjoy it," noted one librarian. The distinction made between dissatisfaction with librarianship as a whole and one's library environment is critical.

The small pool of data limits the ability to detect statistically significant relationships, particularly when using the Cronbach's alpha at 0.05 as the measure of reliability; however, our data suggests that there is likely to be a relationship between mentoring and feeling included in the library community. Minority respondents that were also mentees rated the statement 'I feel like a part of the library community' more highly than minority respondents who were not mentees. Similarly, minority mentee respondents rated the statement 'I see myself staying in this library community for at least the next five years' more highly than minority respondents who were not mentees. Data analysis did not reveal a clear statistical significance but clearly more research is needed to explore the effect of mentoring on mentees' perception of their inclusion in their communities. Data analysis did reveal a significant relationship between mentee respondents and their feelings of inclusion in their library communities. Overall, mentee respondents regardless of race were more likely to agree with the statement 'I feel like a part of the library community' more highly than non-mentees. Additionally, mentee respondents were more likely to agree with the state-

ments 'I will be a librarian five years from now' and 'I see myself staying in this library community for at least the next five years' than non-mentees, seemingly support our earlier hypothesis that mentoring leads to feelings of inclusion regarding the community. Preliminary study suggests that mentoring can lead to feelings of inclusion with the community as a whole, although further study is needed.

Conclusion

Librarians interact with their work environments in different ways. No one-size-fits-all mentoring model can be applied to every librarian. Depending on their background, people have different needs and strengths they bring to the workforce. Despite the range of differences, new librarians clearly benefit from mentoring relationships. Mentoring increases a new librarian's sense of connection with the community and with the profession. Given that mentoring often fulfills the universal need of feeling a connection, it is essential to create a mentoring system that adjusts to every librarian; one that seeks out the needs of the mentee and assigns appropriate mentors that can connect with their mentee. Mentor relationships are imperative for minority librarians to ensure retention and to build diverse communities within libraries. The challenge is mentoring minority librarians in environments that are not currently diverse. Within library environments that lack diversity, minority librarians may, at times, feel alone in their environment and possibly question their sense of belonging. Although the survey sample of minority librarians was small, remarks from minority librarians reveal the shortcomings of working in communities that are unsupportive. Additionally, the benefits of mentorship resounded anew in librarians' self-reported statements of inclusion in their communities. Many librarians admitted having to seek resources from outside their institution for support of connections. It is our hope that further research into library communities and efforts to create diverse environments will reveal practical information that can increase the support for minority librarians that will, in turn, result in truly diverse and supportive library communities in the future.

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