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Group Mentoring in a Tenure-Track Environment

Danielle Skaggs and Rachel McMullin

Introduction

It was predicted that a surge in librarian retirements would be a factor in requiring academic libraries to change their mentoring practices.¹ Author Sarah Anne Murphy's 2008 prediction became our reality. In 2018, our library switched from a traditional one-to-one mentoring model to a group mentoring model for our faculty librarians because we faced a shortage of mentors. This chapter uses our experience with group mentoring as a starting point to discuss group mentoring as a model for tenure-track librarians, focusing on its strengths, weaknesses, and best practices for success. We hope other libraries will be able to use this chapter to decide if group mentoring fits their needs and, if so, begin to develop their own program.

The major factor in our change to a group mentoring model was a necessity. We were in the midst of a large number of librarian retirements. West Chester University (WCU) is a master's comprehensive university with an enrollment of more than 17,000 students. Our University Libraries have a full complement of fifteen faculty librarians, all of whom must engage in librarianship, scholarship, and service for tenure and promotion. In the near future, we expect to reach a

point where we have only five tenured faculty librarians and ten tenure-track librarians. The small number of remaining tenured librarians realized that a paired mentor/mentee model would no longer be sustainable under these conditions. It would require each tenured librarian (including the one serving as faculty department chair) to support two mentees at a minimum, with that ratio growing if any tenured librarians were unwilling or unable to serve as mentors.

While a dearth of potential mentors was our top consideration, two other factors also encouraged our decision. One of those considerations was consistency. Recently, a tenure-track library colleague had been denied tenure at the university level and we felt that a lack of consistent communication about expectations, particularly regarding scholarship, had played a role in that decision. The third factor was the authors' own experiences with a one-to-one mentoring system. While we did not have bad mentoring experiences, neither of us had formed a particularly strong mentoring relationship with our assigned mentors and sought out more informal mentoring. While we were both nevertheless successful at achieving tenure and promotion, we wanted to offer something different and hopefully more robust to our new colleagues.

What is Group Mentoring?

There is no lack of library scholarship on mentoring programs, especially those aimed at librarians. For those wishing an overview of the LIS literature on the topic, review articles by Freedman and by Lorenzetti and Powelson cover the relevant materials from the early 1990s through 2014.² Articles on formal programs using traditional one-to-one assigned pairings dominate. In fact, one study of librarians found that they tended to assume one-to-one mentoring is the only possible model, and if that was not feasible, mentoring simply cannot happen.³ Surprisingly few articles address a group mentoring approach, either within or outside of LIS literature.⁴ So, what exactly is group mentoring? It depends a bit on whom you ask, as multiple definitions have been used.⁵ In some cases, people use group mentoring to describe a single mentor with multiple mentees, where the mentor and mentees meet as a group, rather than individually.⁶ Others use it in the context of a small group of mentors working together to mentor a group of mentees.⁷ We have also seen the phrase used to describe mentoring programs offered by professional organizations.⁸ Our own context is the second one—a small group of tenured faculty working together to provide mentoring content for tenure-track colleagues. Group mentoring of this type has some similarities to another mentoring model—peer mentoring. In peer mentoring, individuals

at similar levels of their careers work together to support each other.⁹ In some cases, a peer mentoring program might be established by senior colleagues or administration, but in many cases, peer mentoring groups have been self-initiated by tenure-track librarians.¹⁰ There are some strong similarities between the group mentoring and peer mentoring formats, which are discussed in more detail below. Ultimately, we felt the group model best fit our needs.

Figure 16.1
Strengths of Group Mentoring

Strengths	Weaknesses
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Addresses a shortage of mentors • Sharing of mentors' experiences • Acculturation • Consistent messaging • Provides multiple perspectives • Encourages both peer/peer and mentor/mentee bonding 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Less flexibility than one-to-one mentoring • Different mentees may have different needs • Overlap between mentors and tenure and promotion evaluators

We already introduced one of the core benefits of the group mentoring model: it allows mentoring to take place even where there is a shortage of potential mentors.¹¹ In addition to cases like ours where retirements have caused a shortage, it is also a very attractive model for smaller libraries that never have a very deep mentor pool or in circumstances where few senior employees want to mentor.

A second benefit is that group mentoring retains the hierarchical aspect of the traditional pairs model, with more senior colleagues sharing their knowledge in a top-down approach. Hierarchical models of mentoring are well-suited for coaching and role modeling.¹² This aspect was an important consideration of our own decision to go with a group model rather than a peer model. A major goal of our mentoring is to support tenure-track faculty in achieving tenure and promotion, a situation in which the sharing of the accumulated experience of senior colleagues is especially valuable. Moving beyond general coaching, the group model also allows for the mentors to pass on specific opportunities—perhaps the name of a committee or a professional organization that would be a good fit, a promising venue for their scholarship, or sometimes the name of a specific person who might assist them in a particular context. In their chapter on mentoring models for faculty, Bland et al. highlighted the specific importance of this networking aspect of mentoring for faculty.¹³

Another strength of group mentoring is that it supports acculturation.¹⁴ We have found that we need to provide a large amount of institutional knowledge to our tenure-track colleagues. In addition to our university being one where the tenure/promotion process is exactly the same for librarians as it is for classroom faculty, we also are a union environment, part of a large state system, and work under nine-month contracts. For most of our tenure-track librarians, at least one if not several of these factors are new to them. There is a lot of context for them to learn in order to understand how and why our library and our university work the way they do.

The acculturation process in a group model could actually be stronger than in a one-to-one model because the group model exposes the mentees to multiple mentors, who can talk about their individual perspectives and experiences.¹⁵ In a tenure-track environment, the various mentors bring to the table experience with different types of scholarship/research methods and service in a variety of campus committees and professional organizations. Bosch et al. highlighted the benefit of multiple mentors from the mentors' perspective, indicating it benefited the mentors because they shared the workload, and each mentor was "not required to have all the answers."¹⁶

The ability to be consistent with the information and advice we were disseminating as mentors was an important benefit of the group model for us, given our past experience.¹⁷ Reflecting on their own library's mentoring program, Level and Mach highlight inconsistency as a potential problem for one-to-one mentoring in a tenure-track environment in their observation that "mentors had typically received tenure five to 20 years earlier in their careers, under very different rules. Informal discussions among tenure-track librarians uncovered different mentors and supervisors doling out different, sometimes contradictory, advice for the tenure process."¹⁸ Given the high stakes involved in the tenure process, we strongly wanted to avoid this situation. Providing important information about the evaluation and tenure/promotion processes in group meetings meant that we could immediately correct someone if they misspoke or if their past experience did not match current standards.

A final strength of the group mentoring model is one that it shares with peer mentoring: both models encourage peer interactions and the development of support systems among the mentees.¹⁹ For this reason, it has been suggested that group mentoring is a model that will especially appeal to Millennials, as they value developing social connections at work.²⁰ Group mentoring may actually have an advantage here, as it provides opportunities for mentees to form bonds with both peers and mentors.

Weaknesses of the Group Model

As we considered revising our one-to-one mentoring program to a group structure, we identified three major weaknesses of the group mentoring model (see figure 1). Two of them have been reported previously in other literature, and one is one that we have identified from our own experience.

First, the group model is less flexible than a one-to-one system. While a pair grouping allows for informal interaction, say popping into the mentor's office to pose a question, group mentoring requires formal, scheduled meetings.²¹ These become more and more difficult to schedule as the size of the group increases, as everyone has a busy schedule and it is common for librarians to work evening and/or weekend hours.

The second limitation is that different mentees may have very different mentoring needs. It can be difficult to balance those different needs in a group setting.²² For instance, some of our newly hired librarians have quite a bit of prior scholarship experience and need only guidance on the particular tenure/promotion expectations at our university, but others have never had a past position that encouraged much less required scholarship. The larger the mentoring group gets, the less likely it is that individualized attention can be given, so the more pronounced this problem may become. While a large group could be split into two smaller groups, this would have the downsides of expanding the time commitment for mentors and reducing the peer-bonding opportunities for the mentees.

A final problem has arisen in our own program. Our number of tenured faculty has shrunk so much that there is a significant overlap between the members of the mentoring committee and our evaluation committee, which completes performance reviews of tenure-track faculty. Our departmental evaluation committee is composed of four faculty librarians, all of whom must be tenured. In addition, our faculty chair conducts a separate evaluation. While the service of multiple tenured faculty on both the mentoring and evaluation committees is great for maintaining consistent messaging, we feel that it may be inhibiting our junior colleagues from expressing concerns or speaking as freely as they might for fear of having a negative impact on their yearly review. This same problem may impact other libraries that choose group mentoring because of a shortage of potential mentors and also applies to non-tenure-track situations where a mentee's direct supervisor may be part of the mentoring team.

Even in the face of these limitations, we still felt that group mentoring was a far more viable model for us to pursue than either pair or peer mentoring. We were also encouraged by the fact that although group mentoring has not

been studied extensively, one comparative study of two mentoring programs in Australia (comparing a traditional mentoring pairs structure to a group model) found that the mentoring structure did not impact participant satisfaction—that is, participants from the two models had similar levels of satisfaction with the programs and related outcomes.²³ Therefore, we moved forward with implementing the new model over summer 2018 in anticipation of our first cohort of new tenure-track librarians starting that fall.

Our Implementation

The first step in setting up our group mentoring program was to formalize who would be involved in serving as mentors and running our program. In summer 2018, anyone who was tenured and interested became a member of what we call our mentoring committee. The mentoring committee membership consists of one senior member of the faculty, the head of our promotion and tenure evaluation committee, and two recently tenured librarians. Fortunately, this committee composition gave us a nice balance of tenure experiences.

As we began setting up our group mentoring program, we were clear on our goals. First, we knew what our program wasn't going to be: general mentoring into librarianship. Our mentoring program does not address orientation to job responsibilities or to the larger profession that largely benefit early-career librarians since we usually hire mid-career librarians (often with five or more years prior professional experience) who have a good feel for their job responsibilities. Professional organizations, both local and national, offer opportunities geared to orienting and networking in the larger profession.

Instead, our program aims to help librarians adjust to working at WCU and University Libraries and to assist librarians with achieving tenure. The larger focus is on familiarizing our new librarians with tenure requirements, including scholarship (publishing, presenting, grants, etc.) and service requirements. Since our new librarians are typically familiar with how to fulfill their job responsibilities (called primary responsibilities in our tenure formula), we wanted to spend time on how to balance those responsibilities with the other two parts of the tenure formula (scholarship and service) that may be new to them.

To help orient librarians to our library and its culture, our previous mentoring program used a checklist of informational points that each mentor needed to go over with their mentee. Since our group model didn't have individual mentors, we needed to figure out a new way to orient our new librarians. Fortunately, our new librarians start at set times, with most of our new librarians starting at the

beginning of the fall semester, like classroom faculty on our campus, or more rarely at the beginning of the spring semester. If we were to have a meeting to review this information with new library faculty hires, it might take a while to set up since it involves coordinating schedules that are often already full with desk shifts, classes, and meetings at the beginning of the semester. This didn't seem like a good idea to us, and it seemed unwelcoming to put the orientation off until someone had been at our library for a week or two. Instead, we decided to flesh out the existing checklist in an orientation LibGuide (<https://library.wcupa.edu/orientation>), turning it from a listing of items for discussion to more of a handbook. While we tried to make the orientation guide as comprehensive as possible, it also lists the members of the mentoring committee and indicates that questions and concerns can be shared with those individuals. This information is included in the email with the orientation guide link sent to new librarians. Having an orientation LibGuide ensures that all new librarians are getting the same information about how our library and our department work, which speaks to our desire for consistent information and advice to all mentees. It's also a time-flexible activity, such that our new librarians can review it before starting (since we usually send it to new library faculty hires during new faculty orientation in the middle of August) or during the empty spots in their first week or two before they are balancing a full load of reference shifts, library instruction sessions, meetings, and other responsibilities. There is a final, administrative benefit of moving to an orientation guide: updating is easier because there is only one document to review and update before a new librarian starts, and we don't have to worry about making sure each mentor has the latest version of the checklist.

West Chester University also has a campus-wide faculty mentoring program, which matches incoming faculty with newly tenured faculty members in a traditional one-to-one mentoring relationship. We encourage our new librarians to participate in this program as well as ours since it provides them with another way to get familiar with campus culture. It also provides them with a perspective outside of the library, and a place to ask questions they don't want someone evaluating them to hear. The campus-wide mentoring program also provides a wider perspective, one not limited to the library, on the requirements for scholarship and service. This wider perspective is helpful since the university tenure committee consists of representatives from faculty departments across campus, with only one non-classroom representative (who may not be a librarian).

With mechanisms for acclimating new librarians to our library and our university in place, we turned to what we wanted our group mentoring program to look like. We decided that there were two main, cornerstone topics that all of our new

librarians needed to understand to be successful in gaining tenure: understanding the evaluation process and understanding the Statement of Expectations (SOE) document. The evaluation process is complicated, with multiple levels of evaluation (evaluation committee, department chair, and library dean) and multiple required observations of teaching or other job responsibilities by both the evaluation committee and the department chair. The SOE is a document unique to our university that defines each faculty member's responsibilities and is the basis of evaluation for both yearly reappointment and the final tenure process. It consists of three parts (primary responsibilities, scholarship, and service), and each part is assigned a percentage indicating its weight in the final tenure decision (50 percent primary, 35 percent scholarship, 15 percent service). Understanding what scholarship and service look like and how to add them to a robust slate of job responsibilities can be confusing to our mentees at first.

The mentoring committee decided on two "starter" meetings on set topics to take place each semester we had new librarians. The first meeting explains the evaluation process in depth, covering the different levels of evaluation and how many teaching/job observations need to happen each semester. The second meeting addresses the SOE, emphasizing the importance of conducting scholarship (35 percent of the tenure decision) and encouraging new librarians to be selective in their service commitment given its relatively low weight and the need to have time to pursue scholarship. This involves making recommendations for conferences to consider presenting at and identifying campus committees that are a good fit for a mentee's responsibilities/interests. We also established a listserv that included all mentors/mentees, which we used to coordinate meeting times and to forward scholarship and service opportunities to mentees. Part of the reason for this was consistency: we wanted all mentees to see the same opportunities and advice.

In the first year of our group mentoring program (2018–2019), we had two mentees and held our two starter meetings in the fall. We had all four mentors present at these meetings, with one mentor informally leading each one and the others offering their experience and advice as they saw fit. In spring 2019, we decided not to hold any formal mentoring meetings because our two mentees were doing great with service and scholarship, but we would have held more if we thought they needed more formal support. Throughout the year, we provided informal support via the listserv and through one-to-one conversations in passing.

In the second year of our program (2019–2020), we had five mentees and once again held our two starter meetings in the fall. This time around, we invited our second-year mentees to these meetings, and they added their experiences with evaluation and managing the different aspects of the SOE to the advice offered by the mentors. This added an element of peer mentoring into our program without

putting the burden on our new librarians to establish a peer mentoring group. During the fall, we also had informal meetings with individual mentees to revise their SOEs (created by our department chair and library administration) to better reflect their jobs and to be easier to write for evaluation purposes. In the spring of our second year, we added a sixth mentee and held only the evaluation starter meeting. Since we are adding a seventh mentee in fall 2020, our sixth mentee will attend this initial starter meeting as well as the SOE starter meeting in the fall. Our plan was to hold two meetings: one focused on crafting curriculum vitae (since they are reviewed closely by the campus tenure committee and are used when applying for campus grants and initiatives) and the second on publishing at which mentors would answer questions and provide advice on journals. However, we did not end up holding any additional meetings due to the university's move to remote teaching for the second half of the spring 2020 semester in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. Covering these topics in the coming year is a priority for us.

Following the spring 2020 semester, we did a basic assessment of our mentoring program. Although not everyone responded, all respondents agreed that our program helped them understand tenure requirements at West Chester University and agreed that our program helped them feel prepared or somewhat prepared to go up for tenure. Since getting our new librarians through tenure is a clear aim of our program, we are pleased with these results. In terms of helping our new librarians adjust to working at our library and WCU, 75 percent of respondents agreed that our program helped them. We'll be working to improve the acculturation aspect of our program, starting by incorporating the suggestion to hold more meetings each year.

Figure 16.2

Best Practices

Group Mentoring Program Best Practices

- Start with the basics. Decide whether a mentoring committee will be formed, who will mentor, what the mentoring goals are, and how long mentoring will continue.
 - Decide how essential information will be provided—in documents, at meetings, or other communication methods.
 - Select your mentoring topics and activities. Start with essential topics and then incorporate ideas from both mentees and mentors.
 - Plan how many meetings to have in advance. Try to hold at least two formal meetings a semester.
 - Have a “who's in charge of what” list for orientation purposes.
 - Start fostering a sense of community early.
-

Getting started. Determine who is going to be running your program and whether the program coordinators will be serving as mentors. Depending on the size of your library, decide if you need to have more than one group and how many mentors for each group.²⁴ Set the goals for your program and decide on the timeframe. For tenure-track mentoring, the program might last several years.

Providing essential information. Will information only be distributed in meetings, or do you also want to have an online resource for mentees? We recommend having an online resource to provide basic information about your institution, including a list of who to contact about various library functions. (See “Have a “who’s in charge of what list” below.) How will mentees and mentors communicate outside program meetings? Think about how communication happens in your library and consider setting up a communication channel for your mentoring program, whether it is through an email listserv; online chat, audio, and video conferencing system; teamwork and communication channels; or another tool your library uses.

Selecting mentoring topics and activities. We recommend figuring out the essential topics for success at your institution based on your goals. Our program is very tenure-oriented and our two starter meetings reflect this focus both in topic (the two cornerstones of the WCU-specific tenure process) and in structure (informative with Q&A). Knowing your essential topics saves time since you can start planning without having to first poll mentees and since meetings with a focus tend to be shorter (having a topic helps keep you on topic). In general, mentees found that structured meetings and activities increased the effectiveness of mentoring programs, and topics or activities focused on tenure portfolio construction are popular for those on the tenure track.²⁵ Once you’ve got your initial meetings planned, ask your mentees what they’re interested in learning more about. We asked our mentees what activities and topics they would like to see in the future as part of our assessment. They all had suggestions and included ideas for workshops (such as loading observation documents into the tenure portfolio system and preparing CVs) and discussion topics (such as tenure timeline adjustments due to the COVID-19 pandemic, what evidence to keep for tenure files, and how to start the process of publication).

How much time to spend on formal mentoring activities. Balancing full workloads and an already full slate of meetings with providing structure for mentees is a tricky act. However, having “formalized, regular meetings” is beneficial for both mentees and mentors.²⁶ Based on our experience, we recommend starting with two formal meetings a semester and then adjusting based on feedback from your mentees. If you are providing orientation for new librarians as

well as tenure-track support, you might want to meet more frequently at first, by having monthly meetings for instance.

Have a “who’s in charge of what” list. One major part of orientation to a new workplace is knowing the librarian or library staff in charge of various functions. Providing a list of common functions and who to contact about them is extremely useful for mentees.²⁷ At our institution, it’s in the orientation guide we are now regularly updating and sending to new librarians. This is especially helpful in a group mentoring context, as mentees won’t necessarily have someone sitting nearby to quickly ask questions.²⁸

Fostering a sense of community. Start incorporating new librarians into your community early by having a representative of your mentoring program be in touch before the first day of work.²⁹ When the group first meets, take time to get to know each other by sharing professional backgrounds and some personal information.³⁰ Encourage mentees who have questions to contact mentors and other mentees between meetings, and model the behavior of asking questions yourself in meetings.³¹ Finally, try including several more informal acclimation opportunities, such as brown bag sessions or occasional group lunches (in-house or going out depending on your library’s culture).³²

Future Plans

Based on feedback from our mentees, we’ll be modifying some aspects of our mentoring program. We will consult our first rounds of mentees to improve the orientation experience. Some changes we are considering implementing next year are to assign one member of the mentoring committee to be the new librarian’s orientation contact (starting in the lead-up to new faculty orientation) and to have them check in regularly with the mentees for the first few weeks (in person if possible).

In addition to the need for more support in adjusting to working at WCU, another mentee commented that more meetings would be helpful. We originally started with set topics for only two formal meetings and did not have a goal for total meetings per year, which perhaps made it easier to let our busyness prevent us from scheduling spring meetings. Heading into our third year, we plan to have two formal mentoring meetings each semester, and we’ll assess again at the end of next year. Since we have a new librarian starting this fall, we’ll do our two starter meetings with a third meeting in the fall specifically covering any changes to the tenure process due to our new faculty contract and COVID-19. Then in the spring, we’ll have one meeting on a scholarship-related topic and the

other on a tenure-process topic, which are the two areas that most concern our mentees. Our goal is to have one meeting devoted to each area, each semester, going forward. Ideas for scholarship-related meetings include panel discussions on the research of tenured faculty members (both before and after tenure) and on publishing. Our current ideas for tenure-process meetings are structured workshops: hands-on time uploading observations and evaluations to the tenure portfolio system, hands-on time building CVs, and reading and commenting on the tenure portfolio documents from three of our mentors.

Currently, the mentoring committee membership is static, based on the small pool of those who are both tenured and interested. As our mentees become tenured, we'll need to establish a process for determining who serves on the mentoring committee. Should it be restricted to the three or four librarians who have most recently gone through the tenure process? Will members be elected, be volunteers, or be appointed? We'll probably set these ground rules in a future meeting of our group mentoring program.

Conclusion

We do still have improvements to make—to the structure of our program and to our orientation procedures—and still must deal with the temporary conflation of mentors and promotion and tenure evaluators. However, we are likely to continue this model instead of returning to a one-to-one model after this period of intensive hiring ends. Group mentoring offers the consistency we initially desired, and it also requires us to present a slate of systematic programming that benefits all our mentees, content that not all individual mentors had been offering. Through group mentoring, we provide intentional guidance instead of expecting each mentee to ask questions of their individual mentor. It provides an atmosphere that encourages peer mentoring without requiring as much organizing on the mentee side. For these reasons, we think our experiment with group mentoring is successful and we will continue using it as our model.

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