Leaping from Fellow to Mentor in a Single Year

By Kathryn H. Carpenter

Leadership development programs are the surest way for library administrators to recharge their vision, rekindle their enthusiasm, and renew their commitment to a positive and effective future for libraries, and especially for their libraries. After three years of experience, two as a Fellow in the ARL Research Libraries Leadership Fellows Program, and one as a mentor in the NLM/AAHSL Leadership Fellows Program, I can state with confidence that the benefits of participating are nearly identical, whether you are the mentor or you are the mentee.

What makes these programs so meaningful? First and foremost is their investment in the individual. Most programs launch with an uncomfortably intimate self-assessment, and some enhance that with an even more intrusive 360-degree assessment by peers, subordinates, and superiors. It’s a shock. It is also self-affirming, because there aren’t too many opportunities to dig this deep while working and being productive. The workshops, webinars, research projects, and evaluations of the same also provide time and focus for reflection. This is golden for mentors and fellows, because most library administrators and aspiring administrators do not have a portal to reflection nor the time to pursue it. They may have time for complaining or gallows humor, but true reflection, no.

Reflection in turn enables learning, which is essentially the return achieved on investment in the individual. What is institutional culture and what power does it have over you? How can you make a case for funding and move it forward, gaining support along the way? What should you accomplish in the first 100 days on your new job? Learning strategies, skills, techniques, ways of assessing them, and then putting them into practice at home is a valuable return on the time and energy that each mentor or fellow invests in the program.

Finally, the development of a community, one that is invigorated with the integration of each new cohort, is an incredibly empowering outcome of participating in a leadership development program for mentors and mentees.
alike, but especially for mentors. Library directors can be isolated, as they have no peers within the library and potential competitors outside it. Avoiding favoritism, preserving confidentiality, maintaining authority, and successfully competing for resources are all necessary behaviors that also create a distance between a library administrator and others at the institution. The leadership development experience creates a bond among participants that endures long after the program is over. Participants provide each other with sounding boards, informal consulting, news and trends in the field, and information about available positions, all of which are grounded in a shared language and shared experience. It’s a powerful outcome.

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