

Recruiting diverse librarians: Residency programs as an entry point to the academic librarian profession in the United States

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Abstract:

The profession of librarianship in the United States of America remains predominantly white. According to an American Library Association (ALA) Diversity Counts survey in 2012, nearly 88% of professional librarians identified as white. As the population of the United States becomes more diverse, this lack of representation of people of color in librarianship remains problematic as librarians are increasingly less representative of the populations they serve.

Some academic libraries have attempted to address the lack of diversity in librarianship by creating librarian residency programs. These programs are aimed at recent graduates of MLS programs and are meant to provide them with professional level experience, often by exposing them to different areas of librarianship through departmental rotations. Many of these programs focus specifically on recruiting LIS graduates from underrepresented racial/ethnic groups.

While residencies are by no means a new idea, they are gaining in popularity, as demonstrated by the recent creation of the Association for College and Research Libraries (ACRL) Diversity Alliance, a group of 37 (as of 2018) North American universities that have committed to creating residencies specifically for early career librarians from underrepresented groups. While the impact of this renewed interest in residency programs remains to be seen, it is important to engage with the experiences of past and current residents. By engaging with these experiences, it becomes clear that any library considering undertaking a residency program should do so thoughtfully and strategically. This paper will give an overview of the history and present state of residency programs in the United States as well as discuss key components for these programs to be successful, including institutional buy-in, mentorship, strategic planning, and assessment.

Keywords: residency programs, early career librarians, librarians of color, recruitment

With entry-level jobs often requiring prior professional experience, it can be challenging for recent LIS graduates in the United States to land their first professional position. Many students and recent graduates feel that they don't have enough practical experience to be competitive in the library job market (Goodsett & Koziura, 2016). Library residency programs are one way that institutions have attempted to recruit and develop early career librarians. The Association of Library and Information Science Education (ALISE) defines a residency program as "post-degree work experience designed as an entry-level program for professionals who have recently received a graduate degree" (Cogell & Gruwell, 2001). These programs are distinct from internships in that residents already hold an LIS Master's degree. The types of work they perform and the level of professional development support they receive also distinguish residents from interns.

The vast majority of library residency programs have been implemented in academic libraries in the United States and Canada. These positions typically last for 1 to 3 years and largely follow a departmental rotation model, where the resident works in multiple departments within the library to gain exposure to a variety of roles in librarianship. Some residencies culminate in a final project or allow the resident to specialize in a specific functional area, while some residencies are focused on a particular area of librarianship for the entirety of the residency. Libraries may choose to hire one resident at a time, or they may follow a cohort model, where they hire two or more residents at once. Resident positions typically offer the same support for professional development that any other entry-level librarian would be given at the same institution. This provides the resident with the opportunity to attend and present at conferences as well as to participate in leadership and continuing education programs if desired.

Another significant aspect of residency programs in the United States is that many focus specifically on recruiting librarians from underrepresented racial and ethnic backgrounds. The first residency programs were established in the 1960s, but in the 1980s, these programs began to be influenced by affirmative action policies. In 1984, the University of Delaware became one of the first residency programs to explicitly focus on recruiting librarians from underrepresented groups. While a backlash against affirmative action policies in some states in the 2000s resulted in some residency programs no longer hiring people of color exclusively, diversity continues to be a focus of many librarian residency programs (Boyd, Blue, & Im, 2017).

With the recent establishment of the Association of College & Research Libraries (ACRL) Diversity Alliance, a group of North American universities that have committed to maintaining residencies specifically for early career librarians from underrepresented groups, the focus on recruiting diverse librarians through residency programs has increased. In 2018, 37 libraries were listed as members of the Diversity Alliance ("ACRL Diversity Alliance," 2016), which started in 2015 with four institutions: American University, University of Iowa, Virginia Tech, and West Virginia University. While many existing residency programs already focused on diversity, the creation of the Diversity Alliance has also coincided with the creation of a number of new diversity residencies. Overall, there has been an increase in active residency programs since 1997, when there were approximately 18 diversity residency programs (Brewer, 1998).

The librarian profession in the United States continues to lack diversity. According to an American Library Association (ALA) Diversity Counts survey in 2012, nearly 88% of professional librarians identified as white ("Diversity Counts," 2012). While ALA hasn't released a more up-to-date study, indicators suggest that there has been little improvement in diversifying the profession. Looking specifically at Association of Research Libraries (ARL) institutions, a recent Ithaka S+R report found that over three quarters of librarians and nearly 90% of academic library leaders identified as white (Schonfeld & Sweeney, 2017). While this only represents a subset of academic libraries in the United States, it is still highly indicative of the continuing lack of diversity in the academic librarian profession. According to the last United States Census in 2010, 61.3% of the population identified as non-Hispanic white, 17.8% as Hispanic/Latino, 13.3% as black, 5.7% as Asian, 1.3% American Indian/Alaska Native, 0.2% as Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, and 2.6% as two or more races ("U.S. Census Bureau QuickFacts," 2010). These demographics are expected to continue shifting and are increasingly at odds

with the whiteness of the academic library profession. In many communities, academic librarians do not reflect the demographics of the patrons they serve.

The conversation on the lack of diversity in librarianship has been ongoing. In addition to library residencies, other programs have been implemented to increase recruitment and retention of librarians of color. This includes the Spectrum Scholars Initiative, which provides scholarships and mentorship to LIS students, the ARL Leadership and Career Development Program (targeted at mid-career librarians), the ARL Initiative to Recruit a Diverse Workforce (aimed at LIS students), and the Minnesota Institute for Early Career Librarians From Traditionally Underrepresented Groups, a week-long leadership institute. Many of these programs have been running successfully for years or even decades now, but while many participants report having a positive experience, the demographics of academic librarianship remain relatively homogenous.

Many former residents have expressed satisfaction with their experience as a resident. In Boyd, Blue, and Im's 2017 survey of current and former residents, all respondents agreed or strongly agreed that they had gained valuable skills and knowledge. Several former residents have written about their experiences (Alston, 2010; Barrientos, 2018; Brinkman, Johnson, Sekyere, & Tzoc, 2015; Cichewicz, 2001; Davis, 2001; Diaz & Starkus, 1994; Galindo Alcorta, 2007; Goss Jr., 2003; Hu & Patrick, 2006; Juárez, 2001; Pickens & Coren, 2017; Reynolds, Daniels, Chenault, & Porter, 2011; Scherrer, 2010; Sekyere, 2009; Taylor, 2005) and many others have presented on their experiences at local and national conferences. The ACRL Residency Interest Group (RIG) has shared many interviews with former residents through a Member of the Month feature ("ACRL Residency Interest Group," n.d.). Many of these pieces highlight positive experiences in residency programs, while some also share constructive criticism. Understandably, many of these pieces would not be overly negative because former residents may not want to burn any bridges. There have been fewer systematic surveys of former residents, which may have elicited more negative feedback in addition to positive (Alston, 2015, 2017; Boyd et al., 2017). As of the writing of this paper, a group participating in the ALA Emerging Leaders program is conducting a survey to collect residents' oral histories in another attempt to more systematically record the perspective of current and former residents.

By reading through these narratives, it is possible to get a sense of what components contributed to a positive or negative residency experience for participants, and to draw from these experiences to suggest best practices for the implementation of residency programs. From this literature, it is possible to identify four components that contribute to a successful residency program.

Institutional Buy-In

Institutional buy-in is essential to implementing a successful residency program. This includes providing proper funding for the program, such as salary and professional development funding for the resident(s), but it also includes ensuring that all library staff are aware of the purpose of the residency program. One resident shared: "I was the first resident at my university. I don't think there was and is a ton of cultural buy-in. I still don't think a lot of library staff know or understand what a residency is or does. I was constantly explaining what I did and why I was there" (Boyd et al., 2017). It was a frustrating experience for this resident to feel misunderstood by their colleagues. If library staff do not understand the purpose of the residency program, this may interfere with their ability to work collaboratively with the resident to provide them with valuable professional-level work experience. Anantachai et al write, "Unfortunately these positions can also be mistakenly considered by some staff as "charity," which serves to indirectly undermine the value of the program, the resident and diversity librarians themselves, and the strategic goal the library is attempting to achieve in creating such a program or position" (2015). This illustrates how important it is for library staff to understand and respect the work that the resident is there to perform and to understand why having a residency program is a priority for their institution.

A survey of former residents by Alston (2015), found that 65% of respondents had been referred to as "interns" during their residency, and while most of them did not find this to be malicious in nature, it

still may have contributed to feeling disrespected as a professional. 50% of respondents indicated that they felt respected as professionals while 23% did not feel respected and 27% were unsure if they were respected. This survey had a small sample size (n=26), but it still raises an important point. In order for residents to get the most out of their experience, they should be doing professional-level work instead of the types of tasks that would be assigned to an LIS student intern. Other librarians and library staff should provide adequate training to ensure that residents can meaningfully contribute to the library's strategic initiatives and daily work. This benefits both the resident and the institution, which is exposed to new ideas and the latest LIS training through the hiring of new graduates.

However, in addition to securing institutional buy-in for the residency program itself, libraries should also demonstrate institutional buy-in for diversity, equity, and inclusion. Because many residency programs are specifically meant for librarians of color, it is essential that the institution itself have a culture of equity and inclusion. Residency programs, while capable of providing valuable opportunities for early career librarians of color, should not be seen as the sole solution to recruiting more diverse librarians to the profession. Rather, systematic changes need to be made at all levels of the librarian talent pipeline to create a more inclusive profession. A 1990 ACRL Task Force on Recruitment of Underrepresented Minorities found that the main causes of low diversity in the profession were lack of institutional commitment to change and accountability, personal and institutional racism, and barriers to advancement and recruiting" (Diaz & Starkus, 1994). These issues are still relevant today and sometimes emerge in the narratives of former residents.

A lack of understanding of what residency positions are can potentially intersect with microaggressions towards the resident librarian of color. Hu and Patrick, former residents at Miami University shared, "It is unfortunate that we seemed mostly thought of when multicultural and diversity programs came up and representation from the library was required. Inevitably, we felt that our existence was more about politics rather than an honest attempt to recruit and retain minorities" (2006). Residents may feel tokenized if they are expected to take ownership of all library diversity initiatives just because of their racial or ethnic background. There should be substantial work put towards equity and inclusion by the library as a whole before a residency program is even put into place. Pickens and Coren (2017) suggest that diversity and inclusion training should be encouraged for residency administrators and coordinators. An anonymous respondent from the Boyd et al. survey stated, "I really, really, wish that those in the library had a greater understanding of diversity and why residency programs are imperative to the growth of libraries as relevant cultural institutions in the future. But I imagine many minorities in this field probably feel the same way regardless of their title" (2017). Building a culture of equity and inclusion is important not only for libraries to successfully manage a diversity residency program, but also to recruit and retain librarians of color at all levels of the organization.

Securing institutional buy-in for the residency program, both financially and ideologically is essential for providing a welcoming and productive experience for prospective resident librarians. This means that library staff should have a clear understanding of what the resident position is and what type of work it entails. Additionally, residents of color should not be tokenized or made to feel like they are obligated to represent the library in diversity work.

Mentorship

Mentorship is also essential to a successful residency program. As early career librarians, residents benefit from having an experienced mentor to help them navigate their specific institution as well as the larger landscape of academic librarianship. Libraries can provide structured mentorship opportunities to residents by assigning them a formal mentor at the beginning of their residency. However, libraries that have a culture of informal mentorship also can be beneficial for residents by providing them with many potential mentors. While some residents go on to secure a permanent position at their residency institution, the majority will go on to work in other libraries, so having formal and informal mentors can be especially useful when the resident is pursuing their next professional position.

One of the things that draws early career librarians to residencies is the opportunity to gain professional experience in a supportive environment. Marissa Galindo Alcorta, a former resident from Purdue University, wrote, “I was looking for an environment where I could gain professional experience in an academic setting as a librarian but also be given the time and support I needed to grow as a professional before looking at tenure. I was really looking for a supportive, learning-based transition into a professional position” (2007). Mentors can provide part of that supportive structure to help residents identify professional areas of interest and help set them up to be competitive in searching for a permanent position.

Residents should also be encouraged to seek out peer mentorship opportunities outside of their institution. For example, connecting with the ACRL RIG can facilitate meeting residents at other institutions for residents who may be the only resident at their institution or even in their city or region of the country. Peer mentors can also be found through committee work, formal mentorship programs, or networking events offered by ALA and ACRL sections as well as the ethnic caucuses (American Indian Library Association, Asian/Pacific American Librarians Association, the Black Caucus of the American Library Association, Chinese American Librarians Association, and REFORMA: The National Association to Promote Library & Information Services to Latinos and the Spanish Speaking).

Strategic Planning

A residency program should be planned out well before the resident steps foot on campus with room for flexibility depending on the prospective resident’s professional interests. There should be clear documentation of residency procedures as well as a thorough on-boarding process. Most residents are assigned a supervisor who checks in with them throughout their residency even as the resident works with specific department heads depending on what their functional responsibilities are. If the residency is organized around departmental rotations, the supervisor should work with the department head to design rotations and/or projects for the resident to work on that will align both with their professional interests and with the needs of the department.

While residencies can provide a flexible environment for early career librarians to explore their professional interests, there still needs to be some structure to facilitate this. In Alston’s (2015) survey, a former resident complained, “For the first 2-3 months I did very little work, but (would) just sit at my desk. I was given nothing to do...The library Dean had started this program then retired.” This can be a frustrating experience for residents who may feel like they are falling between the cracks since they are often not located in a particular library department. A supervisor can help provide direction for the resident by setting up meetings with department heads to discuss potential projects or goals that the resident might work on if they decided to work with that particular department.

Department heads should think strategically about what kinds of projects they could use a resident librarian to help with in order to best leverage their skills while giving them an overview of the kind of work done in their functional area. The resident may bring specific goals to the table that they’d like to work towards based on their past job experience and LIS coursework. While there may be areas of librarianship that the resident is unfamiliar with, it is important to ensure that they can have the opportunity to complete professional-level work in areas they are interested in exploring. It will take a collaborative conversation between the resident and their supervisor(s) to determine where they can contribute immediately and where they might benefit from further training. Department heads should also be mindful of what times of year would be ideal to have a resident work with them in order to provide the most relevant opportunities and to be available for any needed training.

Some residency programs have taken a different approach than the departmental rotation model. These programs focus on emerging areas of librarianship like data management which can give an early career librarian a chance to gain new skills while the library takes only a short-term risk in exploring offering new services to its patrons (McElroy & Diaz, 2015). One institution that has done this is the University of Chicago, which has hired residents who focus on user experience, and online learning. Residency

coordinators should also decide if they would like there to be any sort of culminating experience to the residency, such as a capstone project or a specialization in an area of the resident's choosing.

By having in place policies and procedures for the residency program, institutions can provide a structured yet flexible environment in which residents can explore their professional interests and contribute to the work of the library.

Assessment

Ongoing assessment of residency programs will allow the program to continue to improve and adapt to the needs of current and future residents. Pickens and Coren (2017) suggest that residency coordinators be prepared to assess the program before, during, and after implementation and to share the results widely. The resident should have regular check-in meetings with the residency coordinator to assess progress towards goals and the quality of the residency experience. If the resident does not feel like they are getting the experience they desire, these meetings can be a valuable opportunity to adjust the program to better address the resident's interests or to bring up any issues with the resident's performance.

The resident should also participate in regular performance reviews. This could include having the resident complete an evaluation with the department head after each rotation or participation in regular annual or merit review processes that other librarians are expected to complete. The former provides the opportunity for the resident to debrief with the department head what worked well and what could be improved for future residents working in that department as well as gain feedback on their own performance. It also provides helpful documentation for the resident and for the program.

Residents should also participate in exit interviews when they leave. This provides a final opportunity for the resident to reflect on their experience and offer any additional suggestions for improving the residency program. Libraries can keep track of the feedback they get through this and other venues over time to see if they are effectively addressing the needs of resident librarians. While personal work styles and preferences mean there is no one-size-fits-all model for residency programs, ongoing assessment will allow institutions to be responsive to the needs of new residents.

Conclusion

Residency programs can provide valuable professional experience to early career librarians of color. However, in order for these programs to be successful for both the resident and the institution, they must be well-structured yet flexible enough to meet the needs of all parties as well as assessed on an on-going basis. With the establishment of the ACRL Diversity Alliance, it seems that there is a resurgence of interest in creating residency programs. It remains to be seen what effect this increased number of residencies will have on the profession, particularly in regards to retaining librarians of color. Further research needs to be done on the effectiveness of residency programs. While personal narratives and a few studies have provided much-needed insight on the experiences of former resident librarians, more systematic research could be done on the retention of former residents and formal assessment of residency programs.

Residency programs require commitment from the institution, but they are only one way that institutions can invest in making academic librarianship a more equitable profession. Residency programs are a way to recruit and retain early career librarians by investing in their professional development and providing a true entry-level position in a profession that often lacks them. The barriers that make it more difficult for recent graduates to break into the field also present significant barriers for diversifying the profession. A residency program will be most successful at libraries that are already committed to addressing institutional racism. Providing a supportive environment for early career librarians of color is essential for the profession to stay relevant by better reflecting the different experiences of the communities we serve.

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