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Un-mentoring in the Last Frontier

The University of Alaska Anchorage experience

In the fall 2005, when two faculty librarians at the University of Alaska Anchorage's (UAA) Consortium Library realized that three people on the library staff were enrolled in library school, they saw the perfect opportunity to start a discussion group that would benefit both currently employed librarians and students entering the information field.

The original three students were enrolled in the MLIS distance program at the University of Washington, working in the Consortium Library, and taking classes part-time. The two faculty librarians had been out of library school for more than ten years by then, so the intent was to organize a forum with an informal, relaxed atmosphere that would be an engaging way to keep up with current curricula, to learn about class projects the students were working on, and to hear about their experiences. While the librarians learned from the students, the students could, in turn, share their new expertise with the library faculty.

That was the beginning of what came to be known as FLIP: Future Library and Information Science People.¹ Now, nearly seven years later, FLIP is still going strong. What the name stands for has changed slightly—to Future Librarians and Information Professionals—and the membership has expanded to include anyone considering a career as a librarian or enrolling in an MLS or MLIS program. Characterizing FLIP as a “mentoring” program misses the mark, since so much more than just mentoring is happening. Because the benefits go both ways, we

prefer the term “un-mentoring” to describe FLIP. Regardless of its definition or description, however, the original purpose remains the same: to provide an informal discussion forum that enriches library school studies with librarian expertise, advice, and insight.

FLIP meetings are open to anyone interested in current issues in the information field. Created as a monthly brown-bag discussion series, FLIP usually meets on Fridays over lunch so that Anchorage library community members can take advantage of free campus parking. Often there is a theme or topic on the agenda, but, at other times, a spontaneous and free-wheeling conversation occurs. A forum on e-books, reports from a recently attended library conference, the opportunity to practice an upcoming presentation, a discussion of a timely journal article, and demonstrations of student portfolios are just a few examples of topics featured at FLIP meetings.

Following are three perspectives of FLIP and the benefits experienced by a newly graduated student currently employed in the library, a recently hired librarian, and a librarian with many years working in the profession.

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Kristi: New MLIS graduate

Fall 2008 marked the beginning of my library school adventure. Starting graduate school in my mid-30s, along with balancing a full-time job and a family, meant that I was high on stress, low on sleep, and struggling to keep my head above water. Looking back at that time it all is a blur, but I clearly remember two things. First, I realized that I suffered from what Nicholas Belkin called “non-specifiability of need:” a state in which “the individual does not know what aspects of knowledge will be useful and especially does not know precisely in what way his or her knowledge ought to be modified in order to achieve the eventual goal.”² The second thing I remember was I began attending FLIP meetings.

From the beginning, FLIP allowed me to get to know other LIS students, and, before long, I became aware that I was not the only one struggling to comprehend various information behavior models while trying to figure out what to make for dinner. As an informal meeting group, FLIP provided my first real chance to communicate directly with both co-workers and other LIS students on issues meaningful for all of us, and within a forum that was unthreatening and comfortable. FLIP was a great source of advice, encouragement, and support during the three years it took me to complete my MLIS degree.

FLIP also provided an opportunity to sit alongside librarians in various stages of their careers and to gather some insight from their personal perspectives of librarianship. It was extremely helpful to be able to discuss the theories I was learning in my graduate courses, and compare them to the realities occurring daily by reference, systems, and other types of librarians. Those of us who participate in FLIP meetings attended library school at different times and in different places, but the values of librarianship are common to all of us, regardless of the number of years of experience.

FLIP allowed me to gain confidence in my ability to network, collaborate, and communicate. Volunteering to help plan and organize the monthly meetings is not unlike

being a part of a more formal committee or professional group: it meant taking the initiative to send meeting reminder notices, maintaining an e-mail list, helping propose discussion topics, articulating ideas, and working with others on special projects (such as this article). FLIP has also been a chance to build and administer a community blog,³ so that discussions can continue outside of the meetings.

As a graduate student, I came to appreciate FLIP as a valuable resource for library expertise, individual skill building, peer feedback, and reinforcement of professional goals and values. Before I was ready to participate fully in library conferences or organizations, I was able to get my feet wet by practicing my leadership skills through FLIP meetings. Although I’ve recently graduated, I’ll continue to rely on the group for assistance with my future career planning, ideas for continuing education opportunities, and as a source for interesting discussions about all aspects of librarianship.

Christie: Recently hired library faculty

When I first started the online program at the University of Washington in fall 2003, I felt very fortunate to be working in a library while taking LIS classes. My professors and fellow classmates brought a wide array of knowledge and experience to my academic studies, but I really wanted to know how LIS theory played out in the real world. I began seeking opportunities to chat with long-time librarians about what I was learning in library school and what their perspectives were on the topics I was studying. When my co-workers and I were approached about starting a discussion forum, I thought it was a great idea. (Although I secretly thought the librarians were hoping I would stop pestering them with so many questions.)

Distance students develop a virtual support system online, but the lack of a library school in Alaska makes it difficult to find networking opportunities within local library communities. Many library schools offer job-hunting workshops and career fairs on their

campuses, but distance students are unable to participate in these events. As I approached the completion of my MLIS program, I was very concerned about my future employment prospects. Since my fellow students shared the same concerns, we scheduled a series of FLIP meetings dedicated to job hunting, focusing on the academic library hiring process—writing effective curriculum vitae and cover letters, and practicing interview skills.

My participation in FLIP also gave me the confidence to increase my involvement in the library profession. I began by serving as a panelist on distance studies at several Alaska Library Association conference sessions, and gradually increased my level of participation in conferences, committees, and leadership programs.

As I reached the end of my studies and was preparing to write the required portfolio for graduation, I was amazed at how my coursework, paraprofessional library employment, and library association involvement all meshed together. My portfolio received glowing remarks for demonstrating how my experiences during library school contributed to my growth as an information professional.

Recently I was hired into my first professional librarian position at the Consortium Library, and I credit FLIP with helping me evolve from a library clerk to MLIS graduate to full-time, tenure-track faculty.

I will continue to remain involved in FLIP as I still have much to learn from both experienced librarians and current MLIS students, and I am eager to share my knowledge with others entering the field about navigating library school, job hunting, and transitioning from paraprofessional to professional librarian. I feel very fortunate to be surrounded by such supportive colleagues at my own library and also in the Alaska library community.

Daria: Experienced librarian

When my colleague and I started FLIP seven years ago, we hoped it would be a worthwhile endeavor, but neither of us expected it to be so successful and sustaining. To date, 12 FLIP participants have either graduated

from, enrolled in, or are seriously considering library school—an impressive number, given that the Consortium Library employs 66 staff and faculty, along with 17 students.

Since Alaska lacks a library school, distance education has become an attractive option. Distance programs at Drexel University, University of Washington, and the University of Alabama are all represented by FLIP participants; one is attending library school in residence at Syracuse University. Interests of FLIP students past and present vary widely, from technical services and archives, to scientific data management and instructional design.

It is satisfying to play a part in growing our own professionals, and the library, as much as is possible, offers opportunities for real-life understanding to FLIP students, whether it be internships, special projects, practicums, or in a few cases, full-time employment. FLIP helps prepare students for the job market through these practical experiences, and offers library staff the chance to mentor participants by sharing tips and advice.

It speaks well for the collegial environment in the Consortium Library—students realize that being a librarian is more than just checking out books, and come to see the positive energy of working in a library setting. Because of FLIP, they also learn about the many possibilities and directions that a MLIS degree can take them. In the present economy, the uncertain employment future for new graduates is certainly a concern; however, FLIP gives the students a major advantage over the competition because of the practical knowledge they gain while working in the library.

Because of FLIP, I am more engaged in my profession. I find it easier to keep up with current issues in librarianship, even more than if I had only read the blogs and professional literature. Hearing about the LIS classes and assignments, and having the students share new technology, all add to my broad base of experience. By the same token, I can share my thoughts and advice on interviewing for jobs, attending conferences, or dealing with

difficult patrons at the reference desk. The opportunity to learn from each other through FLIP has been invaluable.

FLIP's influence has been beneficial to the library, as well. As Consortium Library Dean Stephen J. Rollins comments:

Keeping current with new ideas and uncovering emerging trends require time and attention. At the Consortium Library FLIP is a new voice in some of our old conversations. FLIP helps to focus our vision to see what is new on the horizon. FLIP provides an opportunity for UAA librarians to discuss contemporary issues with students interested or enrolled in graduate library school.

Conclusion

FLIP began as an experiment, but has proven to be successful in that LIS students and long-

time library faculty mutually benefit from sharing information and experiences in an informal and collegial environment. FLIP shows no sign of going away, and, in fact, has become stronger, with wider participation from other library staff members and the Anchorage library community. For those who have been already been a part of FLIP and for those in the future, it will continue to be what Rollins summed up as "a comfortable place for one generation to learn from another."

Notes

1. Tracy Leithauser, "FLIP—Future Library & Information Science People," *Newspoke* (Alaska Library Association), 2006, January/March: 5.
2. Nicholas J. Belkin, "Anomalous States of Knowledge as a Basis for Information Retrieval," *Canadian Association for Information Science* 5 (1980): 133–43.
3. consortiumlibrary.org/blogs/flip. *zz*

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