Chapter 13
Feminist Co-Mentoring as Advocacy:
Collaborative Reflective Practice for Professional and Personal Growth

Alyssa Berger
University of Washington Libraries, USA

Nicole R. Gustavsen
Gonzaga University, USA

Penelope Wood
University of Washington Libraries, USA

ABSTRACT

This chapter serves as a case study describing three science, technology, engineering, and mathematics librarians' processes, reflections, and growth through co-mentorship. The authors discuss the processes and limitations of traditional, hierarchical mentorship structures in academic libraries and outline their work moving beyond this model to create and maintain a feminist co-mentorship community. The peer mentorship model is intentionally non-hierarchical and works as a complementary support system alongside formal mentorship relationships. They outline the benefits of this model, which include the provision of support around the emotional labor inherent in working in higher education, balancing professional and personal growth, and navigating the academic landscape. This chapter lays the foundational work the authors undertook to develop their co-mentorship group and community of care and addresses the practical benefits of this work in each of their lives.

INTRODUCTION

Our feminist co-mentorship community came together somewhat unintentionally. It grew organically from our desire to gather informally among colleagues and support one another in a judgement-free, non-hierarchical setting centered around care for each other and for ourselves. This care includes sharing the emotional aspects of our professional lives and engaging in feminist practice to process these emotions. While there is research in the library and information science literature on employee emotion within library workplaces, much of it is focuses on managing and regulating emotion (Quinn, 2017; Miller, 2017) and avoiding burnout (Harwell, 2008; Huprich, 2007; Tsigilis, Koustelios, & Togia, 2004). We were interested in a collaborative space that was not solely focused on the management of emotions in our work, but also about feeling them, giving and receiving validation around them, and making sense of them in the context of our work. Together, our group imagined what a holistic, feminist, peer to peer mentorship community might look like, and created that space for ourselves. This chapter focuses on the formation of our community, the theoretical underpinnings that have shaped this collective work, and each of our professional and personal experiences as part of this peer mentorship group.

When we began our co-mentorship group, the three of us were colleagues at the University of Washington Bothell/Cascadia Campus Library. The University of Washington Bothell is a branch of the R1-designated University of Washington that serves students seeking Bachelors and Masters degrees; and Cascadia College is a community college, serving students seeking Associate and Bachelor's degrees as well as professional and technical certificates. The Campus Library serves both institutions. Students on these campuses range from high-school students completing their degrees through Washington State's Running Start program to adult learners working toward career expansion.

As liaison librarians to Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (STEM) departments and programs, we are deeply integrated into the curricula of the institutions we serve. In addition to teaching information literacy within core institutional lower division research writing courses, we also support the campuses' Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics programs, including Computing and Software Systems, Engineering, and the Physical Sciences. While none of us have educational or professional backgrounds in the subjects that we liaise with, which is common at our library, we each develop subject-specific information literacy curricula with the broad scope of our diverse learners in mind. We also provide robust research support for students and STEM faculty. This requires us to be proactive in learning about the information needs of STEM researchers and practitioners, using our skills as experts in research and scholarly knowledge to remain current in these highly specialized areas. It also requires that we accept the discomfort of developing our subject-specific knowledge and recognize that we are continually learning along with the faculty and students that we serve.

The institutions where we work are distinct in fostering a very high level of collaboration and inter-disciplinarity in research and teaching, both within the library and between the two campuses, where we have built deep partnerships with faculty collaborators. Though we are fortunate to work with colleagues in the library who openly share their work and provide constructive feedback on the theoretical and practical aspects of information literacy instruction and other duties, as STEM librarians, we found ourselves frequently seeking out one another for ideas and feedback that were not available from our other, non-STEM colleagues. We wanted and needed support and conversations specifically focused on specialized and highly technical STEM disciplines, on course-integrated library research lesson plans, support around our liaison work, and on our professional lives more broadly. We must acknowledge that we are lucky to work in an environment with multiple STEM librarians and that the three of us are

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