

Is it really sink or swim for tenure tracks?

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Abstract

A panel consisting of a mentor and two mentees will share their experiences and tell their stories. They seek to exchange ideas on surviving a fast-changing environment with librarians from other academic libraries where librarians have faculty status. The San Jose State University (SJSU) experience is easy to duplicate and aims to help junior librarians achieve her/his full potential, to design/develop personal goals that fit into personal career expectations, to take one step at a time to reach those goals, to better support organizational goals and objectives, to develop leadership within the organization, to boost morale and productivity, and finally to enjoy his/her work during the tenure process.

Introduction

In the last ten years, academic libraries have begun to face serious challenges with the proportion of retirements to the recruitment of new, tenure-track librarians. This creates an imbalance between those who have many years of institutional and professional experience and those who have little or no institutional knowledge. In the California State University system, librarians have faculty status and are involved in the tenure-track process. This results in a six year process by which tenured librarians evaluate tenure-tracks' professional progress and merit, and the probationary librarians assess the institutional culture to decide if they wish to continue at that library for the remainder of their careers.

One of the many challenges academic libraries face, then, is the retention of new librarians. Acclimation to the institutional culture can be facilitated by a robust mentoring program, wherein probationary librarians can receive the fullest support for their professional goals and development.

San Jose State University is an urban university located in San Jose, California, United States. The University has nearly 31,280 students; 1,685 faculty; 4,043 bachelor degrees; and 2,311 master programs. SJSU is part of the California State University system, which--with its 23 campuses, 417,000 students, and 46,000 faculty members--is one of the largest institutions of public higher education in the nation.

The Martin Luther King, Jr. Library at San Jose State University is a unique combination of both academic and public library. Opened seven years ago, this library serves the diverse populations of the city of San Jose, California and the university community. The building itself houses 1.9 million items, and has 8 floors, 6 classrooms, 36 meeting rooms, 5 special collection rooms, as well as a Multicultural Center.

The Retention, Tenure, and Promotion (RTP) process for tenure-track library faculty at SJSU is a complex process where librarians turn in a series of reports and dossiers. These dossiers are evaluated on two major components—professional activities and scholarship. To facilitate the adaptation to this library and university, as well as the unique RTP procedures, a mentorship program was designed.

Description

At the SJSU King Library, the mentorship program was created as a six month immersion process, which encompasses logistical, operational and intellectual matters. Based on previous experiences with new faculty at King Library, the library faculty group decided to establish a mentorship program for the three new librarians who start during April-May, 2009. With this in mind, the faculty group formed a task force, conducted a literature review and designed a survey where librarians described the professional needs and support required in order to accomplish the mandatory elements to achieve a successful tenure-track process. Moreover, the analysis gave the library group a concept map to direct the development of the mentorship program.

The task force decided that one tenured librarian would take over and would be charged with the responsibility of becoming the link between the incoming librarians and the institution. The mentorship concept map clearly divided the procedure into two areas: a logistical and a scholarly part. The logistical part engages a very complex series of activities to be accomplished by the new professionals in a term of three months. Since SJSU is a large university, operational tasks are numerous and intricate. Therefore, a checklist was developed to guide new faculty through the bureaucratic labyrinth, from how to get into the building to how to set up a university e-mail account. On the other hand, the scholarly segment was composed of workshops that focused on various areas, such as scholarly publication, professional communication, review of the dossier procedures, research methods and grant writing.

The structure of the discussion session was geared towards a description of this experience and the tools that King's librarian produced to accomplish the mentorship program. In addition, the questionnaire used for beginning the mentoring program was distributed among the participants in order to facilitate to a trans-institutional analysis. From this analysis, the group moved forward to a discussion where each participant described which kind of mentorship program was offered at their institution. Attendees ranged from a variety of different academic backgrounds: from tenure-track to tenured professionals, from colleges to research universities, from small to large higher education organizations. Later in the discussion, the checklist that contains a review of the most important logistical operations was shown to the group with very positive feedback.

Key Points

The goal of the session was to create a discussion space about common experience and how the various mentorship processes can be improved from the professional point of view. Overall, the contributions of the participants took place in a conversational style where they built an ambience of cooperation towards the success of new professionals.

Attendees were anticipated to take away multiple points from the open discussion:

- First, they were able to see the logistical management workflow, which incorporated the checklist the presenters introduced to the group.
- Second, the conversational style allowed participants to express and compare similar concerns and frustrations with both the tenure process and mentorship programs at their institutions.
- Third, within this discussion, ideas were shared about different styles and types of mentorship programs. One included a three-mentor pairing with each new faculty member. Others presented the problem of how to navigate the tenure process without a mentoring program offered, and suggestions from the group made it possible to find one's own mentors through larger library associations statewide.
- Fourth, it was clear that future mentorship programs should be tailored to the characteristics of the complete spectrum of incoming professionals. A successful mentorship program should address the needs of not only a new graduate but also professionals that have many years of experience but still are new in the institutions.

In general, it was a very positive discussion session that allow each attendee to bring their own experience forward to share -- with their peers their challenges, successes, expectations, doubts and hopes for a better integration and retention of incoming library faculty members.

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