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## **MAKING THE MOST OF A CAREER IN ACADEMIC LIBRARIANSHIP: A REFLECTION**

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### **ABSTRACT**

*This paper presents methods of and approaches to mentorship are highlighted based on past experiences, and the place of formal and informal mentoring in academic libraries stressed. The article revealed that a lot could be achieved if mentors and mentees are committed to learn to be creative in practice, service and scholarly communication. The study provides information on what could be done to be a successful academic librarian. In the light of the experiences documented in this article, some recommendations were made.*

### **Introduction**

The mandate of academic librarians differs from those of other librarians significantly because of the nature of their work, the community they serve and most importantly, the call to publish. Their involvement in all these require mentoring, particularly for those who are new on the job. On the issue of mentoring on competency, career growth and leadership development in the library profession, Samson (2021) has this to say, “older professionals in librarianship must put mentoring programme to work in order to help groom the future leadership, foster professional development and promote the image of the profession to sustain competency, effectiveness and timely delivery of library services.” The mentoring processes will put new entrants to the profession on track, and help them to get it right from the beginning. Mentorship should also focus on scholarly communication that would add value to the profession, and should be based on the challenges encountered in daily work.

Undoubtedly, academic librarians who are new on the job may have questions and challenges as they progress on the job. However, the mentoring programme will go a long way to answer most of the questions and proffer solutions to the challenges. Malecki and Bonanni (2020) revealed this in their work that “academic librarians new to the profession, or seasoned with mid-career changes, have questions and challenges, as they progress in their professional careers”. That is what the mentor-mentee relationship seeks to achieve in this article. It was after I became an academic librarian that I knew the opportunities that librarianship has to offer, particularly career opportunity, and later the responsibilities that come with it. The word of Tanner (2010) aptly captures it:

Librarianship has much to offer in terms of personal satisfaction and career opportunities. I enjoy the freedom, the challenges, and the opportunity to be a lifelong learner this career provides. However, with freedom comes responsibility and the knowledge that your future is in your hands. This can be daunting a realization, whether you are just beginning your career or have



been working at it for a while.

Tanner's article entitled "Making the Most of your Career" highlights six areas that are germane, if one is to succeed in academic librarianship. I intend to use five of the tips to illustrate my career progression in academic librarianship over the years, to achieve the purpose of the article. The purpose? One, the article is intended to widen our understanding concerning academic librarianship-what it takes to succeed. Two, the purpose is to change our attitudes and thought pattern about the practice of librarianship in the academic terrain and the path to the top. The article affords the author the opportunity to offer some practical advice based on over three and a half decades of experience in the university library system. In brief, the article gives strategies for success, covering almost every aspect of the practice of librarianship in academic area; building up oneself for leadership position through the mentoring processes, both formally or informally and tenure of academic librarians.

### **Background Information**

I entered the library profession with a diploma certificate from the Ahmadu Bello University, Zaria in 1978. I got my first job a month after completing the diploma course- and began serving as a cataloguer (under an experienced cataloguer) at the National Library of Nigeria headquarters in Lagos. All I really wanted at that time was to get started somewhere before moving to a satisfying work-in academic library where I would pursue further studies. My sojourn in the world of academic librarianship started at the University of Ilorin in 1988, after I acquired a degree in Library Science.

When I started my job, I was concerned with making a difference in a unit or department of the library I found myself-both in service and research activities. As a new academic librarian, I resolved to focus my research attention on problems encountered in my daily work with a view to finding solutions to them. As I grew in the profession, the article by Fennwal (2008) revealed something similar to my position stated earlier above. The author says, "the idea of scholarly projects should be to some extent from the daily work of a Librarian, who is involved in planning and developing services, programmes and operations, and making decisions related to them."

The author's view became a strong motivation that strengthen my position to pursue research that would be firmly based on practice; every idea of research that would come to me would relate to what I am doing. This is my 'mantra' to date! Riggs (2004) lends his voice to this by saying that, "research in LIS is becoming more oriented toward current practices. Practicing librarians are writing more how we did it good in our library pieces. These best practices articles are displacing publications based on research and intellectual inquiry." The article was published seventeen years ago!

### **Practical Experience**

This section presents Tanner's (2010) tips with a view to applying them to my personal experience and advise new librarians on the way forward.

#### *Expect to Enjoy your Work*

As you take up your job in academic librarianship, the first expectation you should have is to enjoy your work. This has to do with job satisfaction-serving users with enthusiasm, bringing up innovations and building relationship across campus – among staff and students. Job satisfaction is key-a strong motivation to achieving success. When job satisfaction is not there, achieving the aforementioned will become difficult.



You have to demonstrate this not only when you have contact with users but in doing your professional job. The enjoyment you derive will be an impetus to face challenges, find answers to issues as they arise, and with the ultimate goal of contributing to the profession.

Let us dwell more on this with some practical situations. I have the opportunity of working in virtually all units of the library; serial, acquisitions, documents, circulation, reference and as I progressed to management position my experience on leadership skills widened. Because of the enjoyment derived in doing my job, I always sought how I could do things better and a search of the literature always proved rewarding. Then, it was a manual search through abstracting journals, particularly the *Library and Information Science Abstracts* (LISA). The examples that follow give a practical illustration of how job satisfaction and interest in my job helped me to investigate issues relating to my day-to-day activities.

**Article 1: *Periodical Retrenchment at the University of Ilorin Library***

- i. Due to financial constraints the university library was forced to make a difficult decision to cut its spending on periodicals.
- ii. The article examined the processes of the cancellation exercise because there were complaints from a few heads of department that they were not carried along.
- iii. The exercise created an awareness among academic staff to the value and cost of journals acquired in the university library and the huge sum of money it takes from the library's book vote.
- iv. The article appeared in *Library Review*, Vol. 39, No. 2, 1990.

**Article 2: *Reinstatements of Retrenched Journals at the University of Ilorin Library***

- i. The World Bank extended credit for the purchase of books and journals based on the agreement reached with the federal government.
- ii. The retrenched journals were to be reinstated
- iii. Procedures for cancellation revisited
- iv. Effect of cancellation discussed
- v. The reinstatement and factor affecting it
- vi. Made some observations which included errors as a result of pressure to meet the deadline given by the National Universities Commission
- vii. The article appeared in *Library Resources Technical Services* (LR&TS), Vol. 4, No. 3, 1996

**Article 3: *Problems of Collection Development in a Nigerian University Library before the World Bank Loan***

- i. The study used acquisitions statistics and other relevant sources to determine the problems that had faced book acquisitions program at the university of Ilorin before the World Bank Loan
- ii. Government fiscal policies had great effect on the free flow of books into Nigeria.
- iii. Inadequate funding was also identified as a problem common to Nigeria university libraries and has led to the World Bank credit facilities to replenish library books.



iv. The article was published in *Library Herald*, Vol. 33, No. 1-2, 1995.

**Article 4: *A Survey of News Magazines Users at the University of Ilorin Library***

- i. The use of the news magazines at the University of Ilorin Library attracted my attention, as faculty, staff, and students request for their use frequently.
- ii. It examined the importance of the collection to users.
- iii. The study reveals the extent to which the news magazines supported research and course work at the university.
- iv. The article was published in *Serials Review*, Vol. 26, No. 2, 2000.

**Article 5: *Shift Work in Nigerian Academic Libraries***

- i. There were continued complaints from staff working shifts at the university of Ilorin Library
- ii. The author was the Circulation/Reference Librarian
- iii. The study gathered information about the views of the staff concerning shift rotation, how they cope with problems caused by shift rotation.
- iv. The study revealed the need to consider environmental conditions that will make them comfortable
- v. The article appeared in *Library Management*, Vol. 22, No. 4/5, 2001.

**Article 6: *Job Rotation in Academic Libraries: The Situation in a Nigerian University Library***

- i. Received bitter complaints from library staff as Chairman of welfare committee that earlier and current managers of the university library have not applied the policy of job rotation
- ii. Reports a study of staff opinion concerning job rotation in the library
- iii. The article appeared in *Library Management*, Vol. 21, No. 2, 2000.

**Article 7: *Library Staff Welfare Committee: Its Role in Library Management in Nigeria***

- i. The author was chairman of the committee
- ii. The article examined the role of the committee in the running of the library
- iii. The study provided answers to some management problems
- iv. The article appeared in *Library Management*, Vol. 19, No. 8, 1998.

**Article 8: *Training in the Use of e-resources in Academic Libraries: One University's Approach***

- i. Examined the training methods used in the library over time to determine its effectiveness
- ii. Examined also the content of the training to determine its adequacy
- iii. Revealed areas that needed to be strengthened
- iv. Published in *Library Hi Tech News*, No. 6/7, 2020.



**Article 9:** Retro-conversion Project in a Nigerian University Library: Setting the Parameters

- i. The author was secretary to the committee that set the parameters
- ii. The article discusses the essence of retro-conversion programme, the problems and peculiarities identified and suggestions offered.
- iii. The article was published in *OCLC System and Services*, Vol. 13, No. 3, 1997.

**Article 10:** *The Burden of Change in Academic Libraries in Nigeria*

- i. Was acting university librarian at the time the library management undertook self-study of the structure on ground in the library with a view to having a simple, more flexible and workable structure.
- ii. Planning and procedure were discussed to enable similar libraries in this part of the world learn certain things from what we did.
- iii. The article appeared in *Gateway Library Journal*, Vol. 12, No. 1, 2009.

I have limited myself to only ten of over thirty articles that are directly related to daily activities in order not to bore readers. Clearly, this practical experience has shown that research that applies to daily service and operations have positive impact on the library system. As librarian, more of what we do daily in the library can fit neatly into what we publish. A cursory look at the above articles revealed that nine of them, though of local origin and experiences appeared in foreign journals of international repute. In the word of Martel (1985), “the increasing complex nature of library activities require research. There is the need to engage in creative activities through research to the dramatic changes being encountered in the knowledge society.”

*Time Management:* Aside the library work, librarians engage in committee work both within and outside the library, faculty board meeting, admission committee, examination committee among others. Keep a daily record of these activities and use them to build your dossier. Find time to be involved in everything that would boost your career. Do not turn down invitation from team and committee that would add value to your career. Join some, but protect your time and join only those that further your goal. I received an invitation from my state library association (NLA, Kwara State Chapter) to become the internal auditor. A year after, I became the secretary to the association and the Joint Meeting of Heads of libraries in Kwara State/Executive Committee, Kwara State Chapter.

At the university of Ilorin library, the University of my Primary Assignment, I was called to serve as chairman of library staff welfare committee with over 110 memberships between 1997 and 2002, again, at the library professional meeting I was unanimously appointed as coordinator, Library Academic staff seminar (1998-2002). These various services offered opportunities for valuable lessons that became beneficial at leadership position later in life; however, I ensured effective management of my time in order not to fail in my publishing obligation. As you acquire this experience, also try and keep your CV up-to-date with trainings, presentation and articles.

*Find a Mentor Early in the Process:* Mentoring, according to Sullivan and Stueart (2010) “is a process in an organization for career development as well as work place learning and benefits.” To this effect, a mentor serves as a counselor, coach, role





model, teacher and so on. You need one early in the process of building your career in academic librarianship. And let me quickly add that mentoring may come informally, however there is a formal mentoring. On formal mentoring, (Robbeloth, Eng & Weiss, 2013) say formal mentoring is valuable, and added emphasis should focus on creating formal mentoring programs to make them more widely available. Added to this is the fact that mentoring apart from sharpening and sustaining professional practice, it equips young librarians for more challenging tasks ahead of them (Ubogu, 2019). I was fortunate to have two wonderful mentors, who helped me to discover both professional and leadership skills I have and develop new skills to meet the challenges ahead of me on the ladder of career development.

One, there was an assignment to move all library books in the science, technology, engineering and related programmes and the shelves from the mini campus of the university to the main campus-a distance of about 14 kilometers. The University Librarian directed that I should coordinate the activities, using the library assistants and messengers in the university library. I did not wait to ask why the difficult assignment was given to me among the three para-professionals in the library. During the course of carrying out the assignment that spanned over a period of two months (because we were to arrange all the books and other resources on the shelves), I learnt a lot about their attitudes, emotions, and their thoughts, not only about the management but the library profession.

I said earlier that it was a difficult assignment, yes. It involved working with over twenty-five junior staff with different temperament, the stubborn and the level headed. More importantly it was a manual labour. There were issues that triggered a shouting match between us in the process of getting the task accomplished. There were occasions where uncomplimentary comments and exaggerated accusations were made about me. Let me note that I was not only coordinating their activities, but physically involved in the manual labour. Being a leader can be a very humbling experience. It was a successful task that made me a genius among the staff and earned me commendation by the library management. Surprisingly, I became an informal leader of junior staff, and a liaison staff between them and the management. I later realized that the above process was a mentoring process that became useful when I attained the leadership position in the university library. Fashola (2020) points out in her study that librarians have a lot to benefit from mentoring, and that reading aids knowledge transfer and equip mentees for leadership roles among others.

The lesson to learn here is simple, do not turn down assignments, and accept responsibilities even when they don't make any sense to you. I once assigned the teaching of the Use of Library course to a new librarian who turned it down because there was no remuneration attached and I allocated the course to his colleague who counseled him to always accept responsibilities. He came back to tender his apology and was given the opportunity to teach the course. Two years after, he went for an interview for a higher position, and was offered the appointment because of his two year' experience he had acquired in teaching the *Use of Library* course.

Two, mentoring on the job also came directly from the same university librarian that gave me the task discussed above. This was after ten years! He decided to move me to the acquisitions unit as librarian II and was directly responsible to him. This caused some disquiet among the library professionals because all other units were being supervised by senior academic librarians, and there were a few who were not



heading any unit. I enjoyed the mentoring of the university librarian until he retired two years after. To be a successful academic librarian, you must be ready to 'swim or sink' as it relates to publishing. Along the line, I had a unit boss who mentored me unconsciously at the beginning, he always assigned some research related duties to me but later he became my direct mentor, giving advice on how to get published in peer reviewed library journals. He gave practical advice, using some of his rejected and revised articles.

Where there is no formal mentoring as it was in our time, feel free to find a good mentor for yourself, and be a mentor as you mature. I was mentored, I became a mentor to a few others, and my relationship with them proves that a good mentoring relationship never grows old. When I disengaged my service from a particular university ten years ago, and moved on to the position of university librarian, one of my colleagues gave me a gift, and inside I found a note. The excerpt:

You are to me a selfless boss, a godly mentor, a resourceful coach, a friend indeed, and a loyal ally. You taught me the skills that are not written in any book to foster my personal and professional growth. I wish you more fruitful professional and mentoring career.

I still receive encouraging-mail from some of my mentees to date. In the words of Tanner (2010), "if your library doesn't have a formal mentoring program, find a senior librarian who is willing to act in that capacity. And remember that you will have a chance to give back when you're senior faculty"

*Create Time to Write and Think about Research:* Always look for opportunities to present something new at professional meetings, conferences and seminars. There are different ways you can contribute to scholarship. You can even reach out to sister university libraries to hold talks or seminars on areas of interest to such libraries; it could be on service and operations. However, you need to intensify effort on scholarly communications. Henry and Neville (2004) note, "published articles carry weight, when it comes to promotion and tenure. To write interesting paper you will need to read widely." This is an important requirement to succeed in the academic environment.

I have expressed a similar view elsewhere that you need to read wide, even outside librarianship. The literature in other fields could fit in well to your research. I had to cite related research studies in psychology, sociology, organization theory, political economy and management (Olorunsola, 2011). When you have an idea that may not be directly linked to the profession, yet can be incorporated into it, do not hesitate to share the ideas with expert in the area. I have done this a few times.

Whatever you are doing in life, if you lack creativity, it may not appeal to people for long. Thinking creatively is also important in writing publishable articles. You must bring out creativity in the way you craft your topic, the design of the body of your articles, and make the presentation appealing to editors and indeed the readers who are the ultimate audience. Of course, this is part of what editors look for in articles. During the early years of my career, I published a few articles in *Library Management*, a journal in the UK and in my working relationship with the editor, she remarked, "the topic you write about strike a chord in our numerous readers, we will continue to welcome your articles."

In 2014, I contributed a chapter to volume 38 of *Advances in Librarianship* with a broad theme of *Management and Leadership Innovations*. The editors listed possible



topics under the theme for consideration, however I proposed to write on Gossip and Library Management and it was accepted. In the editor's preface to the monographic she writes, "Olorunsola's study of the use and management of gossip in academic libraries is highly useful despite its seemingly geographical limitations. Of this, one reviewer said, that it is one of the most refreshing and interesting papers she has reviewed for *Advances in Librarianship* to date". When you show creativity and ingenuity in your writing no editor would want to push aside your work. Creativity makes a work unique and appealing to editors, let innovation and ingenuity be seen in your work.

When you think of research, you will always have topics to write on. You can build up a list of research topics as ideas come up in your mind. When new ideas came up in my mind, even when I'm in bed, I quickly woke up and add it to the list. Anytime I read the literature, I keep a journal of new things that could be applied to librarianship, that is how to build a reservoir of research topics. Reading wide helps to improve one's research skills and creativity, as you read ideas come up. There is no limit to the type of literature you can read from newspapers to professional newsletters, general interest magazines, business magazines, publications of organizations, library reports and lot more – they are all rich sources of information and ideas that may be useful for research purpose. At a point, Harvard Business Review was my favourite and I have applied some research results in the business journal to library situations, and turned them to articles.

***Remember to Network:*** It is wise to make professional connections and new friends – it is beneficial to professional growth. This can be achieved by attending conferences and professional meetings. You will be able to keep on the latest trends, see old friends, colleagues and meet new people. Don't expect to receive institutional support for conferences all the time. There are occasions I had to sponsor myself. The opportunities to connect with old friends, and discuss issues of interest, and collaborate are always available at annual conferences. I clearly remember a particular occasion that two old and senior colleagues got my attention for over an hour to discuss a research topic and shared experiences which resulted in an interesting paper. When you attend conferences you remain energized and connected to your peers.

I recall the message I received from a professional colleague I never met before, (now a Professor) who read most of my articles. He wished we could meet at any of our professional conferences and we did meet, precisely at the 47th Annual Conference of the Nigerian Library Association that held at Ibadan in 2009. We shared experiences and ideas. Our relationship is intact to date. Nutefall (2010) observes that becoming involved in the community will afford you the opportunity to meet with similar interests. When you are new to an area, meet people and introduce yourself to them, and don't forget to mention your professional interest – they may be useful to you one way or the other. You need the help of people for data collection in a new area, and when you need to have personal interview.

### **Conclusion**

The essence of this article is to encourage academic librarians to embrace mentoring, both formal and informal in their libraries. This is crucial to their success in the ladder of career progression. The article documents the experiences of the author with a view to encouraging new librarians to learn something new. It further provided





the need for those in leadership positions in academic libraries to encourage both formal and informal mentorship in their libraries. Obviously, there would be some challenges in the mentoring process; discouragement would come when there is no appreciable progress or success, particularly in the area of scholarly communication however, challenges will become a thing of the past as time goes on. It is also important to have committed mentors who are eager and willing to see their mentees through and not give up on them. Overall, formal and informal mentoring will strengthen and sharpen the professional life of mentees and leave them better than before.

### **Recommendations**

Six recommendations offered in this section derived from the experiences documented and discussed in this article are as follows:

1. There should be formal mentoring policy in academic libraries to cover all aspects of library work- practice, service and scholarly communication.
2. The policy should lay down procedures to monitor the progress of mentees, in terms of progress, challenges and success.
3. Mentees should be given free hand to choose their mentors.
4. Job assignments to subordinates should be seen and considered as part of mentoring programme, and should be encouraged.
5. Mentees should also be introduced to leadership role by giving them opportunities to supervise subordinates and let them come up with a report thereafter.
6. Every mentee should be encouraged to be a mentor after full mentorship has been accomplished.

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#### **AUTHOR'S PROFILE**



**Mr. Richard Olorunsola** started his career in academic librarianship at the University of Ilorin Library in 1980 as a Library Officer, where he rose to the position of Principal Librarian in 1996 before he moved to Igbinedon University, Okada in 2002 as Deputy University Librarian. He also served as Deputy University Librarian at Redeemers' University for five years before he was appointed University Librarian at Ajayi Crowther University, Oyo in 2011. After his tenure, he became the pioneer University Librarian at Precious Cornerstone University, Ibadan (2018-2019). He is presently the University Librarian, Crown Hill University, Eiyenkorin, Ilorin, Kwara State.