

Higher ed is changing fast right now, and so is librarianship. Traditional in-person library and information science (LIS) education provided students with a robust network of peers for support. Over the last couple of decades, however, trends in higher education have reduced that automatic peer group—not only asynchronous online courses but also “unbundling,” in which students take classes at their own pace and from a variety of institutions. Postgraduate professional development opportunities, ranging from one-day conferences to workshops to certificate programs, were already more isolated, and these, too, have felt the further distancing impact of the digital shift. In addition, the proliferation of new competencies in librarianship can mean that a given librarian’s coworkers may have few if any points of overlap with what they do every day or need to learn—especially if they’re the sole representative on staff of a new library function.

Fortunately, there’s a movement afoot offering learners increased peer support without forgoing the benefits of self-directed and distance learning. Back in 2004, in a *College Quarterly* article titled “Cohort Based Learning: Application to Learning Organizations and Student Academic Success,” Kristine Fenning defined the term, noting that a paradigm shift toward learning communities, particularly those supported by a cohort-based framework, was under way. The cohort model has gained significant traction in higher ed. Cohorts are also growing in popularity across the LIS field, creating new venues for professional development and project management at multiple points in career paths, from MLS graduates just starting out to seasoned library leaders.

How it works

A cohort is a group of learners who share common learning experiences in order to build a stable, ongoing professional community. A cohort-based model, Fenning writes, results in a positive feeling toward the subject matter and learning becomes more meaningful. The social environment of a cohort is “the key to preventing isolation [on] the learning journey.”

Michelle A. Maher, assistant professor of higher education and student affairs at the University of South Carolina (USC), cites a 1998 *Journal of Continuing Higher Education* article in which Katherine C. Reynolds and F. Ted Hebert note that strong emotional ties and “an increased sense of emotional support” are linked to “positive student outcomes including reduced attrition.” Allen Owen Guidry, in a 2012 report on implementing academic advising cohorts at a university, states that he observed a significant statistical increase in retention for students after the cohort program went into effect.

Early career cohorts

Recent MLIS graduates are particularly likely to benefit from cohort programs as they look for ways to start their careers. One such offering is the National Digital Stewardship Residency (NDSR), created by the Library of Congress (LC) in conjunction with the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS). Graduates from relevant master’s and doctoral programs are grouped into cohorts centered on shared professional interests; they work full-time and receive a stipend to

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BETTER

The cohort model of professional development initiates a network that provides emotional support and feedback
By April Witteveen

support living expenses. In addition to the Washington, DC, NDSR, there are residencies in Boston and New York. According to the NYC NSDR site, cohort members “will first complete an intensive digital stewardship immersion workshop. The cohort will attend a series of lectures, workshops, and special events. Residents will also present their projects at national and regional professional conferences.” Hosting institutions, including public and academic libraries, government offices, arts organizations, and a variety of special collections, mentor the residents throughout their term.

Former NDSR resident Vicky Steves wrote about the program for LC’s digital preservation blog, the Signal. In addition to the benefits for participants of gaining knowledge, skills, and experience, she notes that “for host institutions, the ability to bring in additional, knowledgeable staff at little or no cost is transformative.” Julia Blase, a member of this class, shared with Steves another aspect: it introduces participants to “entry-level positions in the field, particularly those that would provide practical, complex experience...and train me for the next step.”

Learning for new hires—and hirers

The cohort model can also serve as an effective framework for new permanent hires. In 2014, an increased budget allowed the National Library of Medicine (NLM) to do large-scale hiring. NLM appointed 17 recent MLS grads using the Pathways for Graduates to Federal Careers Program, created by President Obama to guide new professionals into federal service. Kathel Dunn, program coordinator for the Associate Fellows Program, and Joyce Backus, associate director for library operations, spoke with *LJ* about NLM’s approach to onboarding the new hires. Instead of individualizing each new hire,



CONVENING A COHORT (l.-r.) A subset of the cohort at the National Library of Medicine (NLM) hired through the Pathways program; San Francisco Public Library's internal cohort, Gen PL. The mission and recent membership (below) of the National Digital Stewardship Residency

TOGETHER

brary (SFPL) launched its Gen PL initiative: “An innovative, multiyear internal leadership training program.” Luis Herrera, city librarian for SFPL and a 2012 *LJ* Mover & Shaker, coordinated the project along with a training officer, SFPL’s management team, and library consultant and past American Library Association (ALA) president Maureen Sullivan. Gen PL focuses on cross-departmental development; Herrera tells *LJ* that the cohorts include everyone from custodial and security personnel to engineers, financial departments, professional librarians, and

employees were put into a cohort that crossed departmental lines within NLM. The Pathways program supports new hires for one year, giving NLM time to integrate the cohort members into the organization.

Some 275 applications came in for the 17 open positions. This meant that NLM needed an all-hands-on-deck approach among supervisory staff, some of whom had never been involved in a hiring process, to filter the applications for the best possible cohort candidates and then conduct interviews. For the first time, Dunn says, the “20-plus hiring supervisors worked together, looking for a good institutional fit” as opposed to traditional methods of hiring strictly “per position.” Bringing this group of hiring staff together from diverse departments helped “mitigate implicit biases,” Backus tells *LJ*, since supervisors from academic, public, and medical backgrounds were working together.

As Dunn and Backus described in an article for the Association of Research Libraries, when the cohort group members started their employment at NLM, their training was scaffolded on existing workforce and professional development initiatives. The cohort also received mentorship from experienced NLM staff who expanded their own roles to offer this support.

Dunn and Backus described cohort member Alvin Stockdale, hired into the Technical Services Division at NLM, who had applied for a position with a different organization through the Pathways program. He noticed that “they didn’t have a plan in place for the new hire. They didn’t even know about the [requirement for] 40 hours of training. It felt like I was going to be on my own figuring out the program there.” He goes on to talk about the value of the cohort: “I am learning a lot about different departments that may have taken me years to do without the training.”

Growing your own leaders

Libraries are also using internal cohorts to develop leadership within current ranks. In 2008, the San Francisco Public Li-

brary (SFPL) launched its Gen PL initiative: “An innovative, multiyear internal leadership training program.” Luis Herrera, city librarian for SFPL and a 2012 *LJ* Mover & Shaker, coordinated the project along with a training officer, SFPL’s management team, and library consultant and past American Library Association (ALA) president Maureen Sullivan. Gen PL focuses on cross-departmental development; Herrera tells *LJ* that the cohorts include everyone from custodial and security personnel to engineers, financial departments, professional librarians, and support staff. All departments “need to be part of the ultimate service we deliver and also own the mission of the library. This was a very strategic and ultimately successful approach.”

Each cohort runs for four months. The curriculum for Gen PL includes four full-day sessions “devoted to exploring and practicing effective leadership,” access to the city librarian and other city leaders through regular coffee chats and other informal meetings, participation in team projects, and additional workshop opportunities on topics such as project management and community engagement. Initially, the 30-member cohort was selected through a simple application process; in some subsequent iterations Gen PL management appointed up to 50 percent of the participants. Herrera says that the application process was more successful as it ensured the commitment level from employees.

“[Employees] see the tremendous commitment and work, so the reality is it’s not a good fit for everyone,” notes Herrera. “Leadership can’t be forced or imposed; it takes mutual responsibility to make this work.”

The impact of these leadership cohorts has been felt throughout SFPL. “Our organizational culture is much more inclusive; it’s now the expectation that people want to get involved with problem-solving. This is the best possible outcome.”

The Innovation Leadership Program (ILP), launched by the Los Angeles Public Library in 2013, uses a hybrid residency and current employee cohort model to take “a new approach to cultivating the next generation of library leaders,” according to the program’s press release, “by teaming ‘residents’ who are recent library school graduates with ‘fellows’ who are mid-career librarians” to develop new library programs. Two Fellows and two residents make up the two-year cohort program. The goal for the residents was to find full-time library employment within six months of completing the ILP. City Librarian John Szabo notes, “In the process, Fellows and residents will gain the unique experience and perspective necessary to become creative and effective library leaders.”



Learning across library types

Professional development cohorts can also be skills-based; the Design for Learning project was developed by a partnership of public, academic, and special libraries in New York State, along with the School of Information Studies at Syracuse University, to create an online learning cohort that will “enable librarian-trainer participants to transfer their in-person teaching skills/pedagogy to the online environment, enable librarian-trainers to evaluate and gain experience with various delivery platforms, and teach library workers to learn effectively in the online environment.” Interested participants applied for two separate sessions of the three-year continuing education program; the final selection includes “participants from all types of libraries, subject specializations, and library experience levels.”

Project coordinator Diane Kovacs tells *LJ* that the staggered cohort model is the best way to accommodate the 120 learners “and organize them into a class size that would allow for real intralearner communications.” The phased approach also allows for a period of evaluation before the second cohort begins. “Cohort 1 are our penguins getting pushed off the iceberg first,” says Kovacs. The cohorts are further organized into “Learning Circles of between 15 and 18 learners for peer-reviewing and discussion forums so they aren’t overwhelmed by the required interactions.” An initial introductory period, the Orientation Module, allows for the full cohort to share details about themselves and then the majority of communications will occur in these Learning Circles. The first cohort began their work on September 1.

Creating a cohort community

A cohort project can evolve and change in future iterations; Herrera notes that each Gen PL cohort “was slightly different” in both group interaction and overall success. He found it very important to build on lessons learned from prior sessions rather than keeping the same expectations and goals for each group.

Staff members who are not part of a cohort may express concern or resentment about the “golden child status” of project participants. To combat this, Gen PL leaders sent a strong message “that there would be future opportunities [for cohort participation],” according to Herrera. Backus recalls that some NLM staff felt jealous about the opportunities given to the Pathways cohort hires, so she worked with Dunn to ensure that all staff had access to the same resources and experiences.

USC’s Maher includes recommendations to cohort instructors in her paper: make sure that applicants understand the cohort format so they “can make a fully informed choice” about participation; hold regular debriefings with cohort leaders to help identify and address any problems; and decide in advance how to include cohort members in decision-making in order to be better prepared to address student concerns. Finally, Maher recommends finding time to facilitate relationships within the cohort outside the standard meeting times, whether in-person or virtually.

Libraries looking for a new model for professional development can find exciting examples in the cohort model; collaborative learning could be the key to unlocking the potential within your organization and across the field.

Cohorts move the field forward

Not every cohort exists within a single institution. Several cohorts connect high-level leaders from many libraries to accomplish progress for the field as a whole. After issuing its *Rising to the Challenge: Re-Envisioning Public Libraries* report in 2014, the Aspen Institute convened a cohort of 23 public libraries that would work on the Action Guide for Re-Envisioning Your Public Library ten-month pilot project and give feedback for the final version scheduled to launch in early winter 2015. Libraries in the cohort choose either to use the Action Guide through a structured process or “a self-paced initiative.”

The Lilead Project is an IMLS-funded program that connects school library supervisors through an online network. The Lilead Fellows Program is a formalized 18-month cohort with the goal of enabling school library supervisors to “look toward the future, explore new ways to solve challenging problems, and strengthen the profession.” INELI, the International Network of Emerging Library Innovators, gives public library leaders an opportunity to work within a cohort to explore further the opportunities and challenges that face public libraries around the world. Funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, INELI connects innovators from 23 different countries in order to address “global library is-

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sues that have the potential to stimulate, expand, or improve public library service.” INELI participants find support from five mentors who have extensive library experience, and each also has a sponsor from their home country who serves as “an advisor and coach.”

ALA itself also ran a professional development and leadership group, Libraries Transforming Communities (LTC) Public Innovators Cohort, in 2014–15. Participating libraries trained with the Harwood Institute for Public Innovation educators over 18 months and apply the training to challenges in their own localities, developing community engagement action plans rooted in Harwood’s “turning outward” approach, with the aim to “create new partnerships, facilitate community conversations, and hopefully spark increased energy and commitment to overcoming community challenges,” according to the organization’s website.

The Red Hook, NY, library was chosen to participate in both the Aspen Institute pilot cohort and the LTC Public Innovators Cohorts. Library Director Erica Freudenberg tells *LJ* that the personal connections created and fostered within the two leadership cohorts, “encourage us to continue and remind us of why we’re doing this.... Being part of a cohort has given us time and space to deepen our personal relationships, and sustain us in the work we are doing.” ■

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