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Nurturing Resilience: Cultivating Interdisciplinary Connections in Library Pre-Tenure Cohorts

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Abstract

In an era marked by continual shifts and uncertainties in academia, the significance of resilience among library faculty navigating the tenure-track journey cannot be overstated. Drawing on the accomplishments and lessons learned from the inception of our Interdisciplinary Pre-Tenure Cohort in response to the challenges posed by the Covid-19 pandemic, we propose a 2024 follow-up session dedicated to delving deeper into resilient practices and fostering interdisciplinary connections amidst uncertainty.

The Pre-Tenure Faculty Cohort emerged organically as a beacon of support amidst the upheaval of post-lockdown academia, providing a nurturing environment for new library faculty at the University of Kansas to navigate the uncharted waters of the tenure-track journey. Over the past year, our cohort has witnessed both the addition of new members and the celebration of colleagues achieving tenure milestones. This session serves as a platform to reflect on our collective journey, emphasizing the pivotal role of interdisciplinary connections in fostering resilience.

Keywords

Professional development, Peer mentorship, Community of Practice, Collaboration, Shared Governance, Tenure-track Librarianship

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INTRODUCTION

In an era marked by continual shifts and uncertainties in academia, the significance of resilience among library faculty navigating the tenure-track journey cannot be overstated. Drawing on the accomplishments and lessons learned from the inception of our Interdisciplinary Pre-Tenure Cohort in response to the challenges posed by the Covid-19 pandemic, we provided a 2024 follow-up session dedicated to delving deeper into resilient practices and fostering interdisciplinary connections amidst uncertainty.

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This paper asserts that the grassroots, self-governed nature of the pre-tenure librarian cohort not only fosters a supportive, non-hierarchical environment but also plays a critical role in advancing both individual career success and broader community building. While this is one example, we suggest that similar cohort initiatives across institutions can cultivate stronger professional networks and collaborative opportunities.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The importance of pre-tenure cohort support in academic libraries, particularly for academic librarians, is a multifaceted issue that intersects with mentorship, diversity, and institutional support vis-à-vis pre-tenure cohorts. Tenure-track librarians often face unique challenges that necessitate robust support systems to enhance their professional development and ensure their success within academic institutions.

Research indicates that tenure-support mechanisms are crucial for the professional growth of tenure-track librarians. For instance, Stephens et al. highlight that tenure support mechanisms, such as mentorship and peer support, significantly contribute to the research engagement of librarians, which is essential for their tenure applications (Stephens et al., 2011).

Similarly, Lorenzetti & Powelson's scoping review emphasizes the role of mentoring programs in aligning academic library positions with other faculty roles, thereby addressing both internal and external pressures for meaningful library impact (Lorenzetti & Powelson, 2015). This alignment is particularly vital for minority librarians, who may face additional barriers in navigating the tenure

process due to systemic biases within academic institutions (Blessinger & Costello, 2011).

Moreover, the economic context significantly influences the support available to tenure-track librarians. Blessinger & Costello found that during economic downturns, many libraries reported reductions in budgetary support for tenure-related activities, which adversely affected the workload and professional development opportunities for tenure-track librarians (Blessinger & Costello, 2011).

This situation is exacerbated for minority librarians, who may already be underrepresented in tenure-track positions and thus face compounded challenges in securing necessary resources and support (Hartnett & Arant-Kaspar, 2019). The lack of institutional support can lead to feelings of isolation and hinder the career progression of these librarians, making it essential for libraries to implement structured mentorship and support systems that are inclusive and equitable (Goldman, 2011).

Mentoring programs specifically designed for novice tenure-track librarians have been shown to be effective in easing their transition into academia. Goodsett and Walsh (2015) provide evidence that such programs can significantly enhance the confidence and research productivity of new librarians, thereby facilitating their journey through the tenure process. Furthermore, Herman's study underscores the significant value found in mentoring programs, which help novice librarians navigate the complexities of academic culture and expectations (Herman, 2016). These programs are especially beneficial for minority librarians, who may require additional guidance and support to overcome institutional barriers and achieve tenure (Gerke, 2023).

In short, the importance of tenure track cohort support in academic libraries cannot be overstated. It is essential for fostering an inclusive environment that promotes the professional development of all librarians, particularly those from minority backgrounds. By investing in mentorship and support systems, academic libraries can enhance the success of their tenure-track librarians, ultimately contributing to a more diverse and equitable academic landscape. The following section serves as a platform to reflect on our collective journey, emphasizing the pivotal role of interdisciplinary connections in fostering resilience.

HOW IT STARTED

The University of Kansas Pre-Tenure Cohort was established with the intention of fostering informal, monthly meetings outside the library, initially held at a campus café. Over the past year, these meetings have transitioned to a designated room in the student union, outside of the library. This shift was purposefully made to create a setting distinct from our daily work environment, thereby ensuring a comfortable atmosphere for all members. Initially, the meetings were unstructured, lacking

specific topics. Instead, we occasionally invited speakers to provide insights, facilitated discussions to address questions and explore the needs of pre-tenured faculty, and generated ideas. Additionally, end-of-semester socialization was a feature of our early gatherings. This initial phase, characterized by flexibility, proved to be highly informative.

Our cohort functions as a “community of practice” (Power & Ha, 2023). The flexible nature of these meetings and discussions has been instrumental in identifying our collective needs. We seek to cultivate a supportive environment where tenure-track librarians can share their practices, concerns, and seek both support and information. We have established that the cohort should remain informal, casual, flexible, and non-hierarchical. As a self-governed group, we aim to avoid rigid leadership structures while maintaining a focus on being informative and supportive. The balance achieved by our two organizers has been commendable, and our cohort has experienced significant growth over the past two years.

In the past year, one member achieved tenure while another underwent a third-year review. We also welcomed five new faculty members, increasing our active membership to twelve. Recent developments include the formation of subgroups and a new system allowing members to voluntarily sign up to lead discussions on specific topics each month. Additionally, we plan to implement leadership changes for the upcoming academic year. These modifications are intended to enhance member involvement and inclusivity, ensuring that the space remains genuinely accommodating for everyone.

In summary, the University of Kansas Pre-Tenure cohort began with the intention of providing peer mentoring with the previously mentioned overall goals. As the group evolves, incorporating different member's concerns, the group will continue to uphold the democratic and non-hierarchical framework that is embedded in our origins.

SHARED LEADERSHIP & LIBRARY GOVERNANCE

As our pre-tenure group is organized around non-hierarchical, democratic, community-minded practices, we have found that the shared leadership model provides the best support for the growth and sustainability of our group.

Though recent writing about this leadership model in libraries has focused on administrative functions, and outside of libraries, research has focused on virtual work groups and IT (Bunjak, et. al., 2022; Krier, 2022; Nordback, 2019; Robert, et. al., 2018; Xu, et al., 2024) this leadership model developed organically in our pre-tenure group.

Shared leadership, also described as “collective, participative or distributed,” and as Krier notes, values “the idea that organizations can be more effective, more innovative, more flexible, and more responsive” when everyone plays a role in

decision making processes (Krier, 2022). In this model, the role of leadership and guidance can change from person to person depending on projects or can be filled consistently by the same people whose opinions are balanced and leveraged amongst the rest of the individuals in the group. Our pre-tenure cohort follows the latter model with two co-convenor roles. Krier defines these kinds of roles as “task-based” and “relationship-based” and notes that “both roles are critical to team commitment, cohesion, and satisfaction, and both may have impacts on team performance” (Krier, 2022). In our cohort, one person takes on communications and administration, which includes: scheduling meetings, emailing updates, booking our meeting room. The other person supports bringing to fruition the bigger picture ideas and needs of the group by gathering feedback, encouraging discussion, and supporting programming that includes hosted speakers, a research round table, writing groups, and other support that the group decides is needed.

Over the past two years, from 2022 to 2024, has been led by the same two individuals. This consistent leadership helped to establish and foster our pre-tenure cohort with the group’s overarching goals in mind. At the beginning of the Fall 2024 semester both leadership roles will be filled by different members of the group. This decision is in effort to move away from the expectation that only certain individuals should maintain formal and hierarchical leadership roles. As with the shared leadership model, leadership style, facilitation, and communication will change and grow, allowing for new voices to represent the pre-tenure group.

Our pre-tenure group has also discussed at length the virtues of maintaining its informal structure, instead of seeking to formalize it. The pre-tenure group has mostly considered formalization to be construed in a variety of ways at the university library level, for instance, through formal recognition by library administration and faculty governance, but also by deciding not to appear as a formal group during faculty hiring processes, or through published acknowledgment of the group on the libraries website, or through status updates to the broader library community during meetings. The pre-tenure group continues to vote as a group to stay informal. The intention is to keep discussions private, personal, supportive, and safe. These efforts are meant to build camaraderie and keep fellowship a central principle of the cohort.

Our Libraries Dean Carol Smith joined the University of Kansas in 2023 and since then the pre-tenure group has seen increased recognition as an ingroup from administration and our faculty colleagues. Dean Smith spoke with the pre-tenure group to share her thoughts on the role of faculty librarians, to offer support and to ask the group if it had any needs that she could support. Dean Smith offered to be a continuous point of contact for the group, without request or advice to formalize in any manner. This gesture from the Dean helped to give the cohort perspective while maintaining that its viability and sustainability is made only through terms that the group has decided upon.

Part of this informal recognition comes with this understanding that our pre-tenure group, though informal itself, makes up a cohesive body with voting power that contains the collective voice and vision of many of KU Libraries' new faculty members. Members of this group play dualistic roles as both members of faculty governance with service requirements and those with a somewhat anonymous collective voice. Owing to that notion, the pre-group has organized special meetings with other librarians to discuss key governance issues, because as part of our individual, formal service requirements we vote on these governance issues. The pre-tenure group also discusses any Libraries' matters that are raised by members. There is a fine line between the pre-tenure group's informality and our relationship to formal university governance.

COMMON GROUND SUPPORT AND BREAKING DOWN BOUNDARIES

Understanding efforts and desired outcomes has helped forge our vision for the community's future. Librarian participants in our PTC have reflected on their experiences over the past year in what was summarized as a general sense of support with the common ground being the tenured nature of our positions. The process of promotion and tenure can be daunting for those new to academic librarianship. Individuals responsible for the creation of our group recognized a need for support and community to prepare librarians for this undertaking.

The formation of the PTC was a direct result of our institution witnessing a sea change after the pandemic that resulted in an influx of new faculty librarians. The University of Kansas Libraries employed 50 faculty librarians in 2017, which is the maximum quantity that KU Libraries has employed in several years. This total number of faculty librarians slowly declined, with the lowest point, having 38 library faculty in 2022. Since this point, the numbers of faculty librarians have been growing each year. The shift that was prompted by the COVID pandemic created an imbalance, with our university libraries relying on the tenured librarians to support this new wave of professionals on the tenure track. It was out of this understanding and identified need for support, this community of practice came into existence.

While our common ground was tenure, the essence of this cohort is building community and a system of support for one another as librarians. The common ground for other libraries could be as simple as being new to the institution or having a desire to build a positive and nurturing work environment. As Jaena Alibi et al (2012) emphasized, "librarians who are new to the profession, new to teaching, or new to an institution may find the experience especially valuable" (p. 172). While supportive groups such as these can benefit anyone at any point in their profession, they can be particularly beneficial to folks who are new to an institution.

These communities of practice can also be formed to support any initiative or idea, and the concept should not be limited to those navigating the tenure process.

CONCLUSION

If you see this model as something that could be of use in your institution, you can start by examining some of the following questions. What areas of support are lacking in your system? What are some values or ideals that you feel link you with others in your network? What are some barriers to creating a sense of community or support? The process of creating a community of practice starts with identifying areas that need attention. Addressing these gaps to create positive change and growth are the first steps toward community.

As a supportive, non-hierarchical community that emphasizes shared leadership methods, our pre-tenure librarian group performs an important function in developing and nurturing a new cohort of tenure-track faculty librarians. In doing so, the group shares in the process of building and strengthening community across the university. And while there are many ways in which a pre-tenure librarian group can form and grow, we have found that the methods that our particular group has employed has afforded us the ability to expand our work and energy through collaborative opportunities, while supporting and growing a strong professional network.

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