Setting Yourself Up for a Successful Post-Residency Career: Maximizing the Impact of Your Residency Experiences and Opportunities

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## Introduction

In 2003, when I decided to accept a position as a resident librarian over a tenure-track position, even I did not know the impact of that decision on my future success as an academic librarian. I had only a broad idea of what the residency position would entail, and truthfully, only a broad sense of what a tenure-track position would entail. However, in the process of making my decision, I recognized my own insecurities in terms of being a tenure-track faculty member and the residency position beckoned me with promises of support, training, and mentoring that assuaged many of the fears I had for my first professional librarian position. Fifteen years after completing the residency program, I am able to look back on my decision and journey with fresh eyes and no regrets – it was the right decision for me. But I also now recognize that there were things I wish I had known about residency programs before I began the position – not because I would have turned down the position, but rather, so that I could have prepared myself for life after residency.

## Academic Library Residency Programs

No two residency programs are identical, but many share fairly common characteristics.[[1]](#footnote-1) They typically last two years, but some may be one or three years in length.[[2]](#footnote-2) Most residents will have the opportunity to rotate through different departments in the library and complete projects in those departments.[[3]](#footnote-3) For multi-year programs, residents may have a full year to gain experience in one specific department. Mentoring is provided, usually with at least one mentor, though some residents may have the opportunity to work with multiple mentors.[[4]](#footnote-4) Professional development or support for professional development is also a staple for most residency programs, as residents are offered the opportunity to gain additional skills in leadership, instruction, research, and other areas.[[5]](#footnote-5)

Based on the structure of residency programs and what they can offer, participating in a librarian residency program is often seen as one of the best ways to gain on-the-job experience as an academic librarian,[[6]](#footnote-6) without the pressures that a first, full-time librarian position can often hold. Residency opportunities are often coveted for the benefits that they offer new librarians of color, and those who are able to land these positions are often envied by other new librarians. This envy may be deserved, as the benefits offered by some residency programs (monetary, professional, and social) are often at a level that is unattainable for most academic librarian positions. From additional funding for participation in conferences and professional development opportunities,[[7]](#footnote-7) to structured mentoring support and networking opportunities;[[8]](#footnote-8) Well-structured residency programs often create an unrealistic bubble of safety for participants.

But what happens once the residency program ends? Whether the participant stays at their residency institution or moves on to a new institution, the transition from resident to librarian can sometimes be harsh and overwhelming. The funding that may have been offered so readily before is not likely to be available at the same or even similar levels. The mentoring offered may need to transfer over to new residents or may not be offered at a new institution. And networking opportunities may be harder to identify or participate in. With this in mind, the question may be whether residency programs, in their efforts to offer new librarians work experience in a supportive, structured environment, are actually doing a disservice to those librarians by not preparing them to exist in “real” library environments.

This chapter explores this question and also offers suggestions for how residents can better prepare themselves during their residency programs to adapt to the reality of librarianship without the residency program’s safety net. Based on the experiences and hindsight of a former resident, this chapter aims to help those lucky enough to find a residency program make the most of their experiences, while taking the initiative to prepare themselves for life after the program. Because, while the transition can be tricky, it need not be any more difficult than starting any new position. The goal is for residents to bank on the experiences they gain from their programs, rather than feeling as if they are starting from scratch.

## Rotations and Special Projects

My residency program was structured as a two-year experience, with the first year designed to offer experience in multiple library departments. I was allowed to select the departments I was most interested in (not all programs have this level of flexibility)[[9]](#footnote-9), which gave me a chance to try out areas I may not have initially considered. For example, my program had a multimedia studio that attracted my attention due to the technology and resources offered to the university community. I wanted to understand more about the work they did and how it fit within the teaching and learning mission of the institution.

Within each rotation, there was a period of learning as I adjusted to the new department and they determined what best to do with my limited time. This limited time usually led to short-term projects that only required about three to four months to complete.[[10]](#footnote-10) The value of this was that I could easily transition out of the department at the end of the rotation without having any unfinished work. For the department, however, it usually meant that I was unlikely to engage in any work that would require more time – which in some departments was the norm.

### Capitalizing on Special Projects

Taking on short-term projects during a rotation often felt like busy work, mostly because it was harder to engage in larger projects when you knew you were leaving the department or unit within a few months. Departments also had to think about their immediate needs, and an incomplete project wouldn’t benefit anyone. But this does not mean that special projects had to be busy work or that, as a resident, I couldn’t benefit from those projects.

For me, the most important thing about completing a short-term project was gaining project management skills.[[11]](#footnote-11) When you are working on a short timeline, it is essential to both set and meet deadlines. Being able to think through the project, map out the objectives and timeline, and then work towards meeting those objectives within the given timeline are skills I still apply to my work today. Relatedly, these short-term projects also offered opportunities for leadership development, as I was given the responsibility of not only completing the project, but also recruiting others and guiding their work. Both of these skills have been identified as valuable for those looking for positions in academic libraries.[[12]](#footnote-12)

Short-term projects can also be viewed as possible pilots for larger projects that may be undertaken by others. For example, a project I completed while working in my rotation in Digital Initiatives was used as the precursor for an online database used by a large consortium in the United States. While I was not able to work on the project in its expanded form, the work I completed during my rotation was still seen as vital and useful for the successful completion of the future project.

## Support for Professional Development

Most academic librarian positions include support for professional development, which could include conference attendance, training programs, or other professional activities.[[13]](#footnote-13) The amount given to each librarian varies from institution to institution, and often year to year, and is based on a number of factors, including librarian status, availability of budget, type of activity, or even level of activity.[[14]](#footnote-14) For example, The Ohio State University Libraries allocate $2,500 a year for tenured faculty and $3,000 for untenured faculty.[[15]](#footnote-15) This would be seen as substantial for most libraries.[[16]](#footnote-16)

I estimate that in my first year, my travel and training cost over $10,000 and in my second year, over $7,000. When I began my first full-time position in the same library, I learned that I was now allocated to receive $1,500 a year for travel. Any funding at all was welcomed, but for someone coming off two years as a resident who had a seemingly endless budget for professional development, the set amount was almost paltry. I had gone from being encouraged to attend any conferences of interest, being allowed to request single hotel rooms, having all meals covered, and applying for costly leadership programs, to working with a budget that was barely equal to one previous trip.

Having professional development funding drop from a high of $10,000 to a maximum of $1,500 could have been a shock if I had not already been privy to the amount given to the other librarians at the institution. The amount was not unexpected. But even knowing about the reduced funding, it was necessary for me to view my professional development strategically.

### Planning for Professional Development

Even if you are offered additional funding above and beyond what other librarians at the institution are receiving, it is essential for residents to think about their professional development strategically. Programs may encourage you to attend a conference, even if you are not presenting or otherwise participating, simply for the experience. But to fully maximize professional development, residents should look for ways to contribute while at the conference. Poster sessions are often great ways to present initial ideas for work in progress and offer an avenue into the conference program. Some conferences also offer pre- and post-conference workshops that are often good learning opportunities for topics relevant to future career success.

Conferences can also be used as networking opportunities. Residents looking for regional or national service and leadership opportunities should consider sitting in on business meetings for any committees or groups of interest. Most groups hold open meetings and invite interested parties to attend. This is a great way to get a feel for the group to see if they are doing work that interests you, while also offering networking opportunities with other conference attendees, committee members, and group leadership. This process is how I became involved in the American Library Association (ALA) Library Instruction Round Table (LIRT), which led to my chairing a committee and then serving as President-Elect.

### Sharing the Wealth

If, as a resident, you are allotted additional funds due to your involvement in the program, be aware that your new colleagues will still have the same amount that they’ve always used to attend their conferences. They will likely be very adept at stretching their funds throughout the year and you can take lessons from them. But you can also share your wealth with your colleagues. One way to do this would be to share your hotel room. While I was not required to share a room, I often chose to share with non-resident colleagues since I still had funding available. Most hotel rooms are the same cost single/double, so choosing a double and offering the additional space to a colleague is a great goodwill gesture. Similarly, if attending a local conference and planning to drive, offer rides to other colleagues. You may be more likely to receive reimbursement for mileage and gas as opposed to your colleagues.

## Mentoring and Building Relationships

One of the most impactful aspects of my residency program was the mentoring support I received. The importance of mentoring for new librarians, especially librarians of color, has been well-documented in the literature.[[17]](#footnote-17) Within my program, I had both formal and informal mentors, meaning I was assigned a senior faculty member as a mentor and also benefited from the support of others who were not obligated to serve in that capacity. My assigned mentor was my usual go-to for all information about the organization and the institution. I took advantage of their institutional knowledge. My informal mentors were also able to provide this knowledge but were also the primary providers of non-published information.

While institutions do their best to match residents with a mentor that will be compatible, this is not always possible, depending on the size of the institution and also the interest of the mentor. My program had three residents, meaning there was a need for three senior faculty members to serve as a mentor. Not all institutions will have this. I consider myself lucky that my mentor and I were compatible and got along very well. If a resident finds themselves in an opposite situation and possibly unable to find a replacement mentor in the library, it is important to consider developing a mentor relationship outside of the library.

Mentorship for me was about more than just the library – it was about having someone who was interested in my success and willing to provide me with the information I needed to be successful. If that meant going outside of the department I was assigned to, outside of the library, or even outside of the institution, then that was what I chose to do. Sometimes the best mentors are those who have gone through a similar program at another institution. Other times, a staff or faculty member who works somewhere else on campus but has extensive institutional memory, or who shares a similar personal background, may be the best person to turn to.

### Benefiting from Mentoring Relationships

If you only work with the mentor that is assigned to you by your program, you may find yourself missing out on a number of opportunities. Residents should take it upon themselves to seek out additional mentors and build relationships with others beyond their assigned mentors. The benefits of doing this can be three-fold:

1. These relationships often lead to lucrative writing, research, and/or project collaborations.
2. These relationships tend to be friendships as well, which offer opportunities to interact outside of the workplace.
3. These relationships help prepare a resident to become a mentor in the future for other new librarians.

**Future Collaborations.** The number of collaborations for writing, research, and projects that developed out of the informal mentoring relationships I developed cannot be counted. My informal mentors would often offer me the opportunity to collaborate, but sometimes I would suggest my own involvement based on listening to my mentors talk about their work. One project developed because of my knowledge of technology and my mentor’s need to apply that technology to their work. Another project developed from conversations over lunch at a conference, where a common interest in understanding factors that impacted the retention of librarians of color led to the creation of a national survey and two conference presentations. All of these collaborations were made possible due to the relationships I had developed with informal mentors, who also gave their time to support my growth and development.

**From Mentor to Friend.** We often discount the importance of time away from work, and I can admit that I was a self-described workaholic as a resident. My desire to prove myself and to be successful often led to working 60 to 80 hours a week. This schedule cannot be maintained--not mentally nor physically. But it was two of my mentors who helped me to understand the importance of stepping away from work and focusing on myself. One of my mentors would make sure I was leaving work at a decent time, either calling, e-mailing, or physically stopping by my office to check in on me. Another mentor would make a point of inviting me out to do fun things outside of work, ranging from dinner to karaoke singing. At the time, I did not fully understand or appreciate the importance of their efforts. Years later, I can look back on their actions and see just how important they were to helping me avoid librarian burnout, an issue I was unaware of at the time.[[18]](#footnote-18)

**Becoming a Mentor.** I was lucky enough to remain at my residency program institution for two years following my completion of the program. The program continued and I had the honor to work with and interact with the next round of residents. I found myself serving as an informal mentor to the new residents and, due to my development as someone engaged in the field, as an informal mentor to other residents at other institutions. Before the program, I would not have had an inkling of what a mentor needed to do. But because of the support I received and the role models that I had, I felt confident enough to take on the informal mentor role for others. I would actually argue that part of being a resident librarian is the need to pay it forward for others. Serving as a mentor, whether formally or informally, is an opportunity to do just that.

## Building on the Final Year

As mentioned, many residency programs are multi-year and offer an extended work experience in one specific department or unit. This is often the area of most interest to the resident for future career goals, and where they will spend the majority of their time. I knew almost immediately that I wanted to work in public services, specifically reference and instruction services. For me, the final year was essential for gaining experience both at the reference desk and in the classroom, as I had no prior teaching experience. Whether you are hoping to remain at your residency institution or move on, that final year of experience, especially when it is focused in one area, is essential for transitioning from resident to full-time librarian.

Having an entire year in the Reference Department meant increased opportunities for engagement with colleagues both inside and outside of the library. I was assigned to serve as a liaison to the Library Science program, my first experience with the liaison role in an academic library. In this role, I was asked to hold instruction sessions for classes, create research guides, and perform collection development activities. Additionally, I collaborated with others in the department to teach information literacy sessions for a large series of Communication Studies courses. Given my interest in learning more about information literacy and library instruction, this final year of the program offered me a chance to gain experience that I would never have picked up otherwise, and that I would have needed in order to apply for any instructional services position in an academic library.

Everything you do during your program, especially in your final year – all the activities, projects, and work you engage in - will be what you highlight when you apply for your next job. When do you start thinking about that next job? At the beginning of that final year of your residency (or if it’s only one year, as soon as you start your residency program). You should always remember that residency programs are short-term, and while some programs are able to hire their residents at the completion of the program, this is not guaranteed. And in some cases, even if the host institution is able to offer a position, you will likely still need to apply for the position.

### Accentuating What You’ve Learned

Whether you’re striving to stay at your institution or move on to another one, your resume and cover letter will offer you an opportunity to showcase exactly what you learned during your residency. Every rotation, every project, all the effort you put into learning the ins and outs of being an academic librarian will equate to lines on your resume. Each rotation (if you have them) is an aspect of your job description that you can emphasize. Each project can be identified based on the skills that you applied to complete the work. And everything adds up to give you that 1 to 2 years of experience that many academic library positions require.

One of the best things to do during your residency is carefully keep track of all your work. This means updating your resume every time you complete your work. It’s often easy to remember to record poster sessions, presentations, and any publications you may have. But we tend to overlook things like gaining hands-on experience with a large-scale collection management project or teaching 30 information literacy sessions in one semester. Everything that you do during your residency counts. And this practice will serve you well when you do begin your first long-term academic library position. These positions, especially if they are tenure-track, will require you to keep track of all your efforts in order to support your promotion or awarding of tenure.

## Conclusion

I did not purposefully set out to participate in a residency program when I first started looking for a position during graduate school. I count myself lucky that a new residency program began the year I was completing my degree. My decision to select a residency program over a tenure-track program would prove to be lucrative. The experience I gained not only propelled me into my future academic librarianship positions, but also helped me to form a strong network that has remained with me throughout my career. But the benefits of my program were not just given to me. It was imperative that I recognized during my program how to maximize what was offered and take advantage of every opportunity.

This chapter set out to offer suggestions for current and future residents in order to help them make the most of their residencies. Everything I learned during my two-year residency was directly applicable to every position I held following my residency. Everything from the classroom experience that launched my career as an instructional services librarian, to my attendance at the Minnesota Institute for Early Career Librarians that helped prepare me to become a department head, was made possible by my residency program. Residencies are lucrative opportunities – these suggestions will hopefully allow others to realize the same benefits that I did, without the learning curve and 20/20 hindsight.

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9. Boyd, Blue, and Im, “Evaluation of Academic Library Residency Programs,” 486. Most programs appear to predetermine where the resident will spend time, so having the option of selecting a department was a luxury that I did not realize I had been afforded. [↑](#footnote-ref-9)
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