

## **The Cafeteria Approach to Mentoring**

**by Larry Griffin**

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Why should a retiree write an article on mentoring? Probably the best answer is that the person is beyond jeopardy in the sense that whatever he says is unlikely to be taken seriously. Moreover, he is able to say with a degree of impunity what others may be thinking but not saying. The comments on mentoring that follow reflect the opinions of an outdated, old curmudgeon who has enjoyed thirty-two years of librarianship as a member of the "IUL family," and has been mentored by every member of the family using the cafeteria approach: take what you like and leave the rest. What follows is a rambling essay of highly opinionated and unorthodox comments on my experience with promotion and tenure and mentoring.

My approach to mentoring in the mid-seventies was not one consciously set about based on any idea, current trend or theory. I decided to look at individuals who appeared to be successful within IUL, discover the qualities that seemed to make them successful and imitate those qualities. I also tried to learn from their errors, which is always better than learning from one's own. I was able to maintain my own goals, direction and personality, taking the best from the best and incorporating it into my professional and personal life. I remain unconvinced that a formal mentoring process provides much help to one seeking tenure or promotion other than to add to one's bewilderment and frustration.

First of all, untenured librarians are inundated with advice regarding how to achieve promotion and tenure. They are given the written documentation. They have a supervisor to advise them. They work with colleagues all over the state who informally advise them. In the past the library's personnel librarian advised them, although this may have changed over the years. The promotion and tenure committee conducts workshops on the topic. And there is the mentoring program. The result is an overload of advice, and if it is conflicting, leads to confusion and frustration.

IU librarians are individuals, each specifically given responsibility for meeting the criteria for promotion and tenure at Indiana University, with a broad range of options for professional development and service. Until--and I would hope that day never arrives--IU librarians are given specific promotion and tenure requirements (e.g., one article per year, one book at the end of five years, x number of web sites, presentations at x number of conferences), there will always be as many opinions as librarians. Furthermore, trying to guess what a supervisor, a peer review committee, a dean, a promotion and tenure committee, a campus promotion and tenure committee and a host of administrators will be seeking in a dossier in any given year is like trying to nail jelly to a wall. The persistent refrain that I heard from librarians returning from workshops, meetings with supervisors, phone conversations with mentors, talking to colleagues is "I'm confused; x says I should do this; y says I should do that; my mentor suggests something totally different." I think, therefore, that the mentoring program should be scrapped, and librarians should seek out mentors using the cafeteria approach. One of the best dossiers I saw came from a librarian who said she simply followed the written guidelines, policies and

procedures, seeking no advice. Too much advice results in the enormous dossiers seen by promotion and tenure committees. Confusion over conflicting advice, often leads to the when-in-doubt-throw-it-in approach to compiling a dossier. Perhaps the most useful advice given recently has been making available model, successful dossiers. Several untenured colleagues told me this was more useful than mentoring.

Secondly, mentors chosen using the dating-agency approach are likely to be as successful as any match-making effort. A librarian should get to know his colleagues (and what better way than involvement in InULA?) and find his own match, or better yet, matches. For example, I learned how to work a conference and network to my advantage and the advantage of IUL from several successful IU librarians. I learned the art of manipulating truths and untruths from others. I learned technospeak, eduspeak, and bureaucratese from other colleagues who were masters at it. I am a composite of thirty-two years worth of IUL librarians, yet remain myself. I am not a copy of another successful librarian. Perhaps as an undergraduate I overdosed on Whitman, Emerson and Thoreau. It appears to me that mentors may attempt to create copies of themselves. I still maintain that the strength of an organization is its diversity of personalities, approaches, modes of thinking and living.

A good mentor is hard to find. The mentor must have the ability to understand the mentee's personality, ferret out the strong points and qualities that fit the promotion and tenure criteria as stated, and finally offer specific advice as to how the person can maximize his strengths and minimize his weaknesses. The good mentor must be in touch with the supervisor as well; otherwise, conflicting advice creates tension that leads to frustration for the mentee. The mentor must have an understanding of the unwritten interpretations and opinions of promotion and tenure committees. They DO exist although few will admit it. Having served on an early committee and a later one, I did not find that these unwritten interpretations changed. For example, even though it was repeatedly stated over my thirty-two years that one does not have to publish to be granted tenure, publication remains the most objective test in a dossier, and a significant list of publications almost always moved a tenure dossier forward more quickly than one based on other activities. Any mentor who tells the mentee that he does not have to publish to get tenure must be certain to provide really good advice on the other options that can be successful. My one regret is that I did not publish regularly. Also, it is an unwritten interpretation that those going for full rank should not do so prematurely. A good mentor needs to know this; otherwise, he could lead a mentee into putting forth a case much sooner than a peer committee wants to see it!

Getting out of an uncomfortable or unsatisfying mentor-mentee relationship is dicey. At one point when I was considering a dossier for promotion to full rank, I asked to be matched with a mentor. After two conversations it was clear that the mentor was trying to make me a carbon copy by suggesting my career take the same direction as the mentor's. This was not a direction that fit my professional interests, personality or commitment. While it is true that the approach worked well for my mentor, it was not one that would work for me, a completely different personality with different professional goals. The match-making did not work in this instance. For untenured librarians it can be even more stressful since they have no idea whether or not the mentor they want to pull away from could turn up being a future supervisor or on a future

promotion and tenure committee. Such situations do occur. Over the years I have encountered several matches gone awry.

Finally, it is unclear to me whether the issue of mentoring arose as a result of a problem that needed fixing or if it was merely something everyone else was doing. I suspect it was a result of trying to get around supervisors who were not advising promotion and tenure candidates as well as they should. It may have been an attempt of supervisors to abdicate their responsibility as mentors. It may have been an attempt to help those in less-than-quality supervisory situations. At any rate it seems that it only added more confusion and anxiety for the untenured librarian. As the mentoring program continues perhaps some empirical research will come forth that indicates whether or not it is a successful approach.

Having written enough provocative comments, I close by stating my belief that any librarian who is granted tenure in the IUL system should be perceptive enough to read the documentation regarding promotion and tenure and seek out one's colleagues for advice in putting together the dossier. If one is not capable of doing this, then more advice is likely to confuse and frustrate the individual. As I mentioned above, the key is to get to know as many members of your IUL family from around the state as one can, early in one's career, and what better place to do this than active involvement in InULA?