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## Adventures in Mentoring and Menteeing

Nyssa Walsh

Laura Zeigen  
*Oregon Health & Science University*

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# Adventures in Mentoring and Menteeing

by **Nyssa Walsh**  
MLIS  
[nyssaj@gmail.com](mailto:nyssaj@gmail.com)

and

**Laura Zeigen**  
Liaison Librarian,  
OHSU Library  
[zeigenl@ohsu.edu](mailto:zeigenl@ohsu.edu)



NYSSA WALSH, MLIS, is currently a kick-ass web developer and all around awesome human being gracing the Portland area with her presence. Contact her at: [nyssaj@gmail.com](mailto:nyssaj@gmail.com)



LAURA ZEIGEN, MA, MLIS, MPH, AHIP is a liaison librarian at the OHSU Library. Contact her at: [zeigenl@ohsu.edu](mailto:zeigenl@ohsu.edu)

**Nyssa:** I'd like to introduce you to myself in 2013. I'm two years out of library school, balancing a part time position in an academic library and the odd barista shift, with the dream of being a full-time academic Librarian (with a Capital L). Up to this point I had a decent resume of academic library positions, good connections, but despite applying for any and all positions that I could find, and even getting a few interviews, nothing seemed to click. I was beginning to worry and longed for my "glory days" of library school.

The thing about library school is that it's your best chance for finding work. At no other time are you so surrounded by the library community: local Librarians (Capital L!) teaching your classes, discounts to conferences, practicums, internships, not to mention the other students in your class who are equally passionate about your chosen career. Then, one innocuous autumn day, you graduate and lose all of those opportunities and you're kicking yourself for not joining just one more student club, or trying to get your final paper for your Library History class published in the local library journal. What's a young librarian (lower-case l) to do?

I tried to jump back into the library community with gusto: I volunteered at conferences, and still paid to attend those that didn't need volunteers. I tried to get published, or at least speak at any chance I could (I swear, I could give a Lightning Talk on any subject now.) I worked diligently at my job at the Oregon College of Oriental Medicine to try and distinguish myself in the library community, but I was floundering and starting to feel lost. One by one my classmates were getting amazing positions, and I was beginning to think I should fall back on my barista skills ... when I opened my email to see that the OLA was offering a mentoring program connecting new library employees with Professional Librarians. It was exactly what I needed.



**Laura:** When in 2013 I saw that the Oregon Library Association (OLA) was putting together a formal mentoring program, I was very excited. Although I had informally mentored several people over the years (and been informally mentored myself), I appreciated the work OLA had put into having a formal program. I both wanted to try this out and also wanted to help support their efforts.

The mentor program organizers were extremely clear on the project web site about expectations of both the mentor and mentee. There was only a one year commitment, so if even if things were working out fantastically and we wanted to keep going with the relationship, there was a definite endpoint to my formal responsibilities (very appealing!).

I was matched with Nyssa Walsh, who at the time was working at the Oregon College of Oriental Medicine (OCOM). She had expressed interest in pursuing work in academic libraries, so we focused on what she could do to pursue that goal. One of the requirements of the OLA program was working out logistics of how often and in what way you would communicate with each other. Nyssa and I decided to check in at least once a month over email, possibly more often, and start by getting together in person at least once.

**Nyssa:** I was thrilled when I was matched with Laura Zeigen. I had met Laura at various conferences and other school sponsored events, and had considered her a Real Librarian: working professional position and a big deal in the library world. How could this successful woman be a mentor to me? How did I get this lucky? And once I got to know her I realized just how lucky I was. Despite being incredibly professional and well-connected, Laura is unfailingly encouraging and friendly. We met often to discuss life, Stumptown iced coffee, babies, puppies and oh yes, libraries.

Laura and I were connected in September of 2013, and I believe it is no coincidence that in December 2013 I finally got a promising interview for a full time position at the State of Oregon Law Library. Laura helped me with my cover letter and resume, connected me with a law librarian to prep me for my interview, and even offered suggestions for how to wear my hair (“Whichever way makes you feel the most confident”). She couldn’t have been more supportive ... even when the interview didn’t turn out as well as I’d hoped. They seemed to like me, I was able to answer the questions well enough, and got a call back for a second interview, but I felt uncomfortable. I wondered if I was ready to leave academic libraries for something so different. I wondered if I was willing to leave my current job at OCOM, which, despite being part time, was the best work experience, best coworkers, best boss, and most interesting job I’ve ever had. I convinced myself that I was just afraid of change, and that I had to take chances in order to grow, and that this was my chance to finally be a CAPITAL L Librarian. But I wasn’t the only one who was worried about this job.

Laura told me to think hard about this decision. She reminded me that when you’re applying for a job, you’re interviewing them as much as they’re interviewing you. Was this the kind of place I wanted to work for years? Was the boss someone I could see myself getting along with? She encouraged me to not just take the job because it was Capital L. But I was afraid I wouldn’t get another chance and when they offered me the job I took it. Folks, listen to your mentors. They’ve been doing this longer than you, and they’ve seen it all.

**Laura:** Once Nyssa obtained her full-time position in a library, I knew there might be a few political issues to navigate, as there are in any environment, but that she had the emotional



intelligence to manage these issues and would manage them well. Nyssa admirably took on the organizational and other challenges that arose, but I was helpless to fix her most exacting situations. I could just counsel her that she was, in fact, doing a great job and that from what I could tell she was making her best efforts to operate in a challenging situation. I also tried to connect her to others who could provide other perspectives than my own that might be helpful to her. One of the things I think is important being a mentor is knowing when you are actually not the best person to advise your mentee and when to connect your mentee to other people so they can obtain the best, most informed perspectives on any particular situation.

**Nyssa:** I could discuss all of the problems I had there, but they aren't meaningful, and likely no different from anyone else's experiences in a job they didn't like. I could say that the commute took up too much of my life, or that I missed working with students too much, but all excuses aside, the job wasn't for me, and after six months I quit. I took the first job I could find, a non-library position doing web development, and walked away.

**Laura:** Although I really wanted Nyssa to stay in the library field, I could tell she was extremely stressed and where she was could not be a long-term option. I fully supported her decision to move on to a better, less stressful, more supportive environment. At the same time, I mourned the professional loss of an extremely capable colleague. Nyssa may or may not ever come back to librarianship or academic librarianship in particular—if she wants to, the road back will likely be challenging since competition for such positions is fierce.

I admire how long Nyssa lasted in her position and the courage it took for her to make her decision to leave it. I had to work through my own feelings of frustration about the unnecessary difficulties she experienced and about the experience of others in similar situations.

**Nyssa:** I'd now like to introduce you to 2015 Nyssa. I'm still doing web development and I'm really happy. Sometimes I see library positions that seem to bridge the gap between academia and web design and I wonder if I should jump back in. I admit that I'm afraid, but I'm luckier than most. Despite being out of the library community for over a year, Laura is still the same supportive, encouraging and positive presence in my life. I'm confident that when I'm ready to get back into libraries, she'll be there for me not just as a program-appointed-mentor, but as my friend.

**Laura:** I learned as a mentor that although I can encourage and commiserate and help guide or direct to people or other resources, I cannot fix everything for my mentee. I wanted to help guide Nyssa into a great first full-time professional experience. The best I could do was to help remind her she was a talented, capable professional and to support her moving on with her life.

My experience with the OLA Mentoring Program was extremely positive. The OLA Mentoring Program coordinators were extremely organized and their program was well thought out and very clear about expectations on the part of both mentor and mentee. I would recommend it to anyone who has ever been interested in having a mentor or serving as a mentor.

I am so grateful to have had Nyssa as my mentee. She is a strong, talented, amazing information professional and human being and I hope we are friends for years to come! I learned a great deal working with her and about what I can and cannot do as a mentor. 

