

Journey to Mecca and Home Again: A Library Intern's Pursuit of Her Career; A Mentor's Renewal to Her Profession

Melanie Elizabeth Hughes and Selena McCracken

Abstract: An academic librarian and her summer intern reflect on working in the profession of librarianship, mentoring, serving their local communities as helping professionals, and fulfilling their personal needs for cognition and lifelong learning. Together they journey to the librarian's alma mater and the intern's desired graduate school to explore the possibilities of being and becoming a professional librarian. The mentor's (Melanie's) comments are interwoven with the student's (Selena's) thoughts from her internship journal (in italics).

Keywords: academic librarian, interns, mentoring

Melanie

In addition to helping my students and community patrons over nearly two decades as a librarian, I have had the pleasure of mentoring a number of young people interested in our profession. Sometimes my mentees start as work-study students at the circulation desk or downstairs with me in materials processing, where I work as coordinator of technical services. Sometimes my interns or volunteers are high school students interested in the library space. Even as library collections are rapidly moving towards electronic access, there is still something compelling that draws people to the library. It's not home or work, but an essential third place to find peace, relax, learn, do schoolwork, and to dream (Oldenburg and Brissett, 1982).

Selena McCracken was a mentee in the summer of 2015. She was a non-traditional student at thirty years old, completing a double major in English literature and writing. She became a work-study student at the library's circulation desk. I started chatting with her during my shift on the reference desk and learned that she aspired to become a librarian. She explained that she intended to apply to Indiana University Bloomington, my alma mater for both my undergraduate and master's degrees, so I suggested that we do an internship together. We went to the Career Development Center, and they set up a zero-credit unpaid internship that shows on her transcript.

Selena

When I first met Melanie, I could tell immediately that she was inherently motivated to help students rise to their potential. I noticed she was always going above and beyond with her patrons, and when she started chatting with me about my own professional development, I was overjoyed by my stroke of luck. Previously, I had zero guidance in my ambition. I was actually the only person in my family to graduate high school, go to college, or aspire to attain a master's degree. She made it so easy to follow along and learn the steps I would need to take to pursue my dream of becoming a librarian, as well as to understand the challenges and rewards of the profession. For four hours on Mondays and four hours on Thursdays, she shared the vast wealth of knowledge and experience she has acquired throughout her graduate school and professional

experiences. The future was uncertain, I would learn, not only for me, but also for the profession. At least with the internship opportunity, I could feel like something was working out right.

Melanie

I didn't try to hide the fact that the future of libraries is uncertain. Budget cuts and the changing technological environment constantly obscure the value and importance of libraries as community spaces of empowerment, and librarians as expert guides along the new information superhighway. Also, I informed her that finding a job might be difficult and may require moving across the country, away from friends, family, and all of the things we both love about living in "Kentuckiana," the region of Louisville's metropolitan area and a number of Southern Indiana counties.

So that she would believe in herself and her mission, I shared how my path to becoming a librarian was circuitous. During my undergraduate work at Purdue University, I wanted to become a UPS airline pilot. However, I eventually recognized that I wanted to help people in a more direct way. For my junior year, I transferred to the university where I am now employed, Indiana University Southeast in New Albany. My first job in the new location was as a library assistant at the Sons of the American Revolution Genealogy and American History Library in Louisville, KY. It was then that I began to have ideas about becoming a librarian. The librarians there began to mentor and encourage me, but I was not immediately convinced to become a librarian.

I was encouraged also to pursue graduate school by my literature professor, Dr. Carol Bishop, who called me a Renaissance woman. She saw the potential of my talents more than I could at the time. When she suggested that I pursue a PhD in comparative literature, I transferred to Indiana University Bloomington and completed an English literature major as well as a Jewish studies major and an assistantship to the program's advisor. I was mentored on being an academic, learning how to transcribe interviews, and I was promoting our program to other potential majors of Jewish studies. I wanted to share that special encouragement that I experienced with other young people in a public helping role. Fortunately, I was secure in that role when I met Selena.

I encouraged Selena to talk to lots of different kinds of librarians to hear their stories on why and how they chose their professional path. She completed informational interviews with each of our campus librarians and many of our staff members in order to learn about the academic library setting. She also met with public librarians in our community to see what their lives were like helping children, teenagers, and adults.

Selena

During my internship experience at the campus library, I learned about the organization of the library staff and faculty librarians. I learned about their undergraduate experiences all the way through their long-held positions in the library's administration. Next to Melanie, I was most

excited to learn about the path the director took, because I would love to become a Director one day. He was enthusiastic about the transformations libraries are taking on in the digital age, and stated that two more recently hired librarians proved that technical research has been their biggest and most rewarding priority.

Eventually, I was working on the real daily operations of Technical Services: processing new books, withdrawing old books, and keeping the stacks free of errors both on the shelves and in the catalog. The opportunity and responsibility of maintaining the integrity of the catalog and receiving new books was nothing short of exhilarating. Every day during my internship, I was reassured that librarianship was a career that I would enjoy.

I secretly harbored a more intense desire to learn how public libraries work, because, ironically, the academic library environment was a bit too quiet. In concurrence with this intuition, the adventure Melanie sent me on was a revelation. I was supposed to interview a public librarian in Louisville, but she informed me that she would be presenting some information to a class at the University of Louisville and suggested I attend. As she explained to future social workers what her self-made department does for immigrants and refugees in the region, I was moved several times by the possibility that I could make such a significant impact in the community I would serve. She introduced me to the trend of "conversation clubs" in public libraries in which volunteers and patrons with a wide variety of primary languages come together to teach each other through real conversations. Melanie also sent me to interview the branch manager at the main branch in Louisville. He has a big job, but it wasn't quite as exciting as directing the library or at least, being a librarian.

Melanie

When our time was drawing to an end, just before the frenetic pace of a new semester would consume our lives, it dawned on me that the best way to provide Selena with the necessary exposure to and education about different possibilities in the field would be to take her on a field trip to my alma mater where I completed my undergraduate and master's degrees. She was highly enthusiastic because a personal long-time goal had been to attend Indiana University Bloomington, and more recently, library school. I suggested that we explore both the public and academic libraries there, and I told her that she would learn more about what it takes to be accepted into the program. Because of Selena's advocacy for environmental causes, I also wanted her to see the School of Public and Environmental Affairs and Business School library and learn about dual master's programs.

Selena

Finally, she personally spent a day guiding me on a tour of Indiana University libraries. I never expected to be so fortunate as to receive such a specialized introduction to the place I wish to attend more than I wish for anything else in the world. Even walking the gorgeous, verdant, red-brick paths throughout the campus satisfied my rosy imagination of what it's like to attend there.

I learned at the School of Public and Environmental Affairs that it would be necessary for me to attain a degree from there as well in order to coordinate public and environmental affairs as much as I hope in my career. Melanie knew that I had been an ardent environmentalist throughout my entire life, and a degree from SPEA would help me become responsible for my next biggest goal after empowering patrons with knowledge and resources, which is to research and facilitate sustainability projects in the community I will serve. I also learned that a dual degree from the SPEA would help me understand public budgets and provide significant management training.

At the Department of Information & Library Science, now a part of the School of Informatics, but previously known as "the library school," Melanie took me directly to the director of admissions, who was overwhelmingly encouraging and supportive. In a matter of minutes, the director helped me to imagine a plethora of ideas about library jobs that exist and even offered a couple suggestions that could lead me to my dream destination—Canada! She motivated me to focus on creative solutions at all times, even financially speaking.

Melanie

At our regional teaching-focused campus, we only have one library, and we do not maintain copies of books, as they do at a research-based campus. So, taking Selena to experience the Wells Library, the main library at the Bloomington campus, was one of the destination stops for the day. Because Bloomington is primarily a residential campus, there is also a lot more daily traffic than we experience on our mostly commuter campus at Southeast.

Selena

The Wells library, the main campus library, was breathtaking. I had only read about "Learning Commons" areas and found it true that they have transformed libraries. I was apprehensive about loud, open, technology-driven spaces, but when I saw the hustle and bustle of the library entrance, I knew it was good for libraries. Research for some of my English classes taught me about the challenges libraries face in the digital age, but I saw that this state-of-the-art library managed to facilitate the best of the old and new worlds. There were plenty of places in the library that have a long and well-preserved history. Even though the entrance resembled Grand-Central Station a lot more than a typical library, I could still pick up a copy of today's newspaper. The place was buzzing with up-to-the-minute information, and at the same time, there were so many collections that I even saw a collection dedicated to library science. I had never been aware that "library" was a subject catalogued by the Library of Congress, that's how little of a working knowledge I had of what library school would be like.

Melanie located a recently graduated library science student working at the desk in the Learning Commons. She was working the last summer of her assistantship and was happy to share news of her job offer in a Seattle children's library. She explained that there would most likely still be a freeze on assistantships by the time I was accepted to the program. It was again emphasized that I would most likely find an offer outside of my home region, but that prospect is far more exciting than intimidating, considering I have always hoped academia would lead me to see new

places in the world. Leaving the Wells library, I was assured that libraries have already persevered through their so-called crisis, and I was fortified in my determination to participate. We also stopped by the art school gallery and bookstore, which I was thoroughly impressed with and enthused to visit again.

Melanie

Because of Selena's uncertainty of whether or not to pursue academic or public librarianship, I wanted to be sure that we had time to spend at one of the best public libraries in Indiana, the Monroe County Public Library (MCPL). Two of my graduate school friends worked at the MCPL during our library school experience, and their work helped them land jobs as professional librarians after graduation. Kris Bell, now a school librarian in California, went on to work for the Indianapolis Public Library and work as the supervisor for the children's department of the Carmel-Clay Public Library, the wealthiest suburb in Indiana. Eric Bodwell is the head school librarian in a Chicago suburb. My own work and volunteer experiences were at New Albany High School, the Indiana University Journalism Library, Education Library, and the IU Digital Libraries Program. I wanted Selena to know that working at the public library could also be an option that might greatly impact her career while she pursued her master's degree.

Selena

Finally, we went to the Monroe County Public Library. My experience there solidified my decision to pursue public librarianship. The Wells library is an exceptional academic library; however, my choice to pursue public versus academic librarianship was purely a personal preference to engage with all ages and walks of life in the community; people who are of different educational aptitudes and an unpredictable plethora of personal goals, such as I observed at Monroe County Public in Bloomington, IN.

First, we noticed the teen section. Neither of us had ever seen anything like it. They have café booth tables with Apple TV's, the kids were using borrowed laptops, and there was even a small pantry for them. A very nice librarian gave us a tour, and he explained that the kids are free to eat their dinner in there, and there were a bunch of kids playing video games on widescreen TV's. I imagine a traditionalist librarian or patron would have grimaced at the transformation of modern libraries, but I was touched by the realistic way that kids were not only in a safe place, but also constantly learning from interfaces many people don't believe can be educational. Again, there were plenty of kids who chose to sit and read, or participate in other learning experiences available to them: mentoring programs; craft tables; Dungeons and Dragons games; state-of-the-art video and audio recording and editing equipment and software; a large green screen; and the list goes on. The librarian explained that their funding came from a combination of city and state development plans and grants, which gave me a foundational understanding of how I could achieve those goals within the community I will serve. I also noticed that a "conversation club" had recently been picking up steam there, too.

Melanie

From our field trip experience, Selena was correct to be so preoccupied about the future of libraries in the digital age. Libraries have been in such a transition since I began my career in 2000. When I first started at the university, we only owned two DVDs. Since that time, we've gotten rid of all of the VHS players on campus and all of the cassettes. Streaming media will probably result in our removal of the DVDs in the near future. Our library's budget to purchase print monographs has shrunk tremendously, while the cost and the demand for electronic resources continues to increase. Even though more books are being published in print than any other time in history, there is less money available to purchase them, which can be disheartening. However, as students start to study remotely, or only partly on campus via hybrid classes, online books and journals are more useful to meet their research needs despite their distance. Throughout our experiences and conversations regarding the transformation from print to digital resources, I witnessed my intern's anxiety turn into enthusiasm about a time also referred to as the information age, which helped to reassure some of my own frustrations. We resolved together to own the digital age as information experts in the center of the community.

As we weeded books, scanned barcodes, and discussed her plan to complete admission requirements for grad school, we had many lovely occasions for talking together. Although initially I didn't want to burden my intern with my own personal professional struggle, I eventually shared what was happening in my life. My summer was emotionally tumultuous because I had just applied to become the director of our local public library. I wasn't sure I wanted to leave academia (and tenure) where I was impacting and mentoring many first-generation college students, but I also wanted to expand my impact on people of all ages as a servant to the public. I missed working with children and teenagers like I did when I was a school library media specialist, and I was attracted to the idea of pursuing my keen interest in local history and economic redevelopment of our downtown.

My intern witnessed the process of my endeavor to transition as I waited for an in-person interview and then got a job offer which didn't work out. She couldn't believe I had doubts about a public Director position because it was her dream, but I was thinking a lot about who I was and why I was doing what I'm doing. I shared my disappointment about shrinking budgets that limited how many books I could buy, and my reluctance to part with books that probably needed to be weeded. However, she also witnessed my consistent enthusiasm for helping students find what they needed to be successful on their assignments when they came to the reference desk and for the research that I was doing on the fixed versus growth mindset (Dweck, 2006). We agreed that encouraging others to learn and keep growing would make the world a better place, and that takes all kinds of librarians.

Before the internship ended, I also wanted to help her have a practical plan in place for covering the financial cost of her dreams. Since talking to the director of admissions at IU, she was open to creative solutions. I explained to her that the reciprocal tuition between Indiana and Kentucky, at the border of the Ohio River, was restricted to our local campus, so she would be responsible for out-of-state tuition to IU Bloomington. I suggested that she move back to her home state of Indiana and become a resident in order to save over sixteen thousand dollars.

Selena

I took Melanie's advice and did just that. I am currently a resident of Indiana again, awaiting a reply from my application for the Indiana University library school in Bloomington, IN. The knowledge that I gained in my internship experience allowed me to write a personal statement that is sure to impress. Because of my internship experience with Melanie, I know precisely what I want to do and how I have to do it in order satisfy both myself and the university. I've already saved so much money by living in-state, and the university is already guiding me toward other financial resources to help finance my master's degree.

She also emphasized the importance of using this gap year to continue to develop my professional resume, which I do at every possible opportunity. So far, I have volunteered at a youth development (and detention) center in Vincennes, IN and discovered that those institutions have librarians! One more meaningful way I could potentially impact youth as positively as Melanie has impacted me. I'm very fortunate that her own struggle with ambiguity about being an academic or public librarian helped to illuminate my own preference more than anything else possibly could have. This experience, despite being zero-credit and unpaid, was the most valuable advantage I have ever received.

Melanie

From reading her responses to her internship, I love that seeds were planted for Selena. She is thinking about where she wants to volunteer, explore, and maybe work if she moves to Bloomington to attend library school. I believe that the public library is a major social safety net for a community, as is implied by my near transition back to a public position.

Retracing the steps I took through my old alma mater allowed me to contextualize my path and current position with a refreshing positivity and gratitude for the security and freedom which tenure provides. I came away from our experience renewed in my commitment to academia, where I try to create new knowledge and share what I learn from and with others.

For her, the internship, and our journey to her Mecca of Indiana University Bloomington, allowed Selena to whole-heartedly know that she wanted to pursue librarianship as a career. For me, being a mentor allowed me to reexamine why I do what I do, why what I do is valuable and helpful to my entire community, and how I hope to grow so that I can have an even stronger impact in the future.

References

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About the Authors: Melanie Elizabeth Hughes, M.L.S., M.B.A, is Associate Librarian, Coordinator of Automation and Technical Services and Library Liaison to the School of

Education at Indiana University Southeast (812-941-2145; mehughes@ius.edu); Selena McCracken is Library Assistant, Indiana University Southeast.