


9-2015

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Trevor A Dawes

Washington University in St Louis, tad@trevordawes.com

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Recommended Citation

Dawes, Trevor A, "Minnesota Institute for Early Career Librarians from Traditionally Underrepresented Groups" (2015). *University Libraries Publications*. 7.

https://openscholarship.wustl.edu/lib_papers/7

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Minnesota Institute for Early Career Librarians from Traditionally Underrepresented Groups

Trevor A. Dawes

The Minnesota Institute for Early Career Librarians from Traditionally Underrepresented Groups (MNTIEL, or the Minnesota Institute) is offered every two years for librarians with less than five years' professional library experience and is intended to provide an "opportunity to learn about leadership and organizational behavior in institutions of higher education."¹

The program, housed at and sponsored by the University of Minnesota Libraries, is the brainchild of librarians Linda DeBeau-Melting and Peggy Johnson. Both Johnson and DeBeau-Melting worked with various library residents at the University of Minnesota and recognized that the residents, all from underrepresented backgrounds, were generally less connected to the profession than were their peers.² This disconnection was due in part to the demographics of librarians in the United States and the lack of racial and ethnic diversity represented in the profession. In 2006, the American Library Association's *Diversity Counts* study reported that 89 percent of credentialed librarians were white—not representative of the changing demographics in the country, or even the demographics of higher education.³ Although many residency programs existed—and still do—to provide greater employment and development opportunities for librarians from underrepresented groups, the University of Minnesota librarians wanted to provide a targeted opportunity for librarians to develop both leadership and practical library skills.

The weeklong program on the University of Minnesota campus has brought together over 180 librarians since its inception in 1998. Participants' institutions are expected to provide

financial support for the program, and some costs are covered by other support, such as vendors. Between 20–24 participants are accepted for each cohort. The initial participants were predominantly African American, but the institute program planners have actively sought partnerships with the ethnic caucuses of the American Library Association to promote the program, and with some success in that now the participants are from a greater variety of ethnicities.⁴ The earlier cohorts included a mixture of academic and public librarians, but because of some divergent needs of these types of librarians, and the belief that it was more difficult to recruit and retain minority librarians in academic libraries, the focus now is only academic librarians.

MNTIEL Content

The Minnesota Institute is more than a leadership development program; it aims to provide a broad understanding of some critical skills required of librarians. The institute's self-described goals are to

- provide intensive training in leadership, management, and decision-making skills;
- increase self-knowledge and understanding of behavior in complex organizations;
- develop skills in grant development, management, and outcomes and in professional writing and publishing; and
- facilitate the development of a community of peers with whom participants share common experiences and on whom they can rely over time and distance for support and encouragement.⁵

The program accomplishes these goals by inviting leaders in the field to facilitate sessions on particular topics. The principal instructors, however, are seasoned workshop facilitators, knowledgeable in leadership and organizational development.

The program content has been modified slightly over time, but some enduring topics include teamwork and problem solving, decision making, career development, writing for publication, successful grant writing, and assessment. In covering a broad array of topics the program aims to develop the participants' various needed skills for their current or future positions.

Although the facilitators discuss various types of leadership theories during the institute, they employ the skills leadership theory model in the program. This theory assumes a leader can be trained to develop certain skills and abilities. Skills-based theories are an outgrowth of Robert Katz's *Skills of an Effective Administrator*.⁶ In his work, Katz described three types of necessary leadership skills: technical, human, and conceptual.⁷ Katz further states that skills are what leaders can accomplish. Leaders have the ability to use a set of competencies to accomplish a set of goals or objectives.⁸ The Minnesota Institute prepares the participants in each of the three broad areas defined above—technical, human, and conceptual. In doing so, the participants become more self-aware, understanding the leadership roles they play in organizations, whether in a titled leadership position or not.

The program coordinators invite experts in the fields of each of the subject areas (teamwork, problem solving, etc.) to facilitate the discussions. Some of these instructors may be from the University of Minnesota, either from the libraries or from the faculty, and others may be from other universities or libraries. Previous program participants also return to describe their experience in the program and discuss the effect participating in the program has had on their careers.

Over the course of a week participants interact with the instructors, program facilitators, and each other in a fairly structured learning environment. In general, each of the topics is

covered in half-day sessions comprising both lecture and interactive discussion. Participants are required to prepare for the sessions by completing readings on each of the topics and to actively engage in the discussion. Appendix A contains a selection of the readings used in the 2002 Institute. The program also builds in sufficient time for social functions and networking.

Literature Review

To date no one has written specifically about the Minnesota Institute, but as early as 1990, leaders within the Association of Research Libraries (ARL) formed a task force “charged with developing proposals for ARL initiatives in the areas of recruitment, retention, and workplace integration of minorities in professional positions in research libraries.”⁹ Although not specifically addressing leadership development, these conversations recognized the need to increase the representation and overall diversity of the professional staff in large research libraries.

In “Learning to Lead: An Analysis of Current Training Programs for Library Leadership,” Florence M. Mason and Louella Wetherbee described various library leadership development programs. At the time of their writing, ARL’s Leadership and Career Development Program (LCDP), the American Library Association’s Spectrum Scholars Program, and the Minnesota Institute were the only programs geared towards librarians from traditionally underrepresented groups.¹⁰ According to Mason and Wetherbee, library leaders determined a need for leadership development programs as they anticipated a wave of retirements among the existing leadership.

Surveying the Program

With the permission of the program coordinators, an informal survey was conducted of the MNTIEL alumni. Thirty-one alumni from the 1998–2010 cohorts responded to an e-mail

message sent to the alumni listserv with a link to a Survey Monkey instrument. (The 2012 participants are not added to the alumni listserv until the next cohort group has been selected, and therefore were not solicited for survey responses.) From a total of 155 possible respondents, 20 percent responded to the survey. The survey (Appendix B) was open for a two-week period from late March to early April 2013.

There was representation from each of the cohort groups, although a quarter of the respondents were from the 2010 class. Only three respondents had been librarians for more than three years at the time they participated in the program. Eighty percent of those surveyed (25 respondents) had moved on to a different position after completing the program, and of those, 70 percent moved into a position of greater responsibility. All but one of those who had moved into a position of greater responsibility attributed at least some of their success to their participation in the program.

When asked about the aspect of the program from which they benefited most, respondents provided the following statements:

“The portions of the program that helped me to develop career goal-setting and review of goals. Also, I learned a lot about where my strengths are and how to develop them in relation to challenges I have had.”—Respondent 2

“Exposure to other early career librarians of color and all the mentors and instructors in the program provided the chance to build an invaluable professional network early in my career.” —Respondent 5

“I learned a lot about organizational culture, how to use it to your advantage, and about leveraging formal and informal leadership.” —Respondent 11

“Being given the language to understand and discuss the complex culture of a large academic library. Also, the creation of a network of peers who could relate to similar struggles and successes. It was both therapeutic, but encouraged me to hold my course, especially on the tenure track.” —Respondent 16.

“I benefitted from a better understanding of organizational culture, which up until that time I did not understand why I would come in to an organization who chose me over numerous candidates and then once I got to the institution, I felt like there were many barriers to change that I could not identify. This program gave me a better understanding of what an important role I could play in an organization and it gave me a renewed sense of purpose. It also exposed me to other colleagues that I respect and admire for the work they do.” —Respondent 25

The comments provided a clear picture of the program, which in addition to developing the “hard” skills of writing for publication or undertaking assessment projects also helped the participants to understand the various cultures of academic libraries. Further, it built a network of colleagues who tended to rely on each other for advice and support well beyond the end of the program’s formal schedule. Based on the feedback from this sample of respondents, the program appeared to be perceived by participants as meeting its stated goals.

Personal Experience

I participated in the Minnesota Institute leadership program in 2002 and agree with the other participants surveyed with respect to their positive experience. Although I had only recently completed my master's in library science at the time I participated, I had been working in libraries, supervising staff, and managing projects for over 10 years. The program helped to affirm some of the behaviors I learned at my place of employment through mentoring or in-house training and development. One area I found to be particularly helpful was on assessment of library services. More than 10 years later, the profession places emphasis on assessment of library services and demonstrating our value. I find myself reflecting on the information learned during MNTIEL, especially on managing focus groups, as I work on assessment in my current position. Of course, as is the case with any program of this sort, I, like several of the survey respondents, have developed many close professional contacts and friendships as a result of participating in the Minnesota Institute. These relationships have been invaluable, providing a cohort of friends and colleagues on whom I have called with questions, for advice, or just to maintain contact. Having participated in the Minnesota program over 10 years ago, and having participated in other leadership development programs, such as the Frye Institute, it is difficult to say exactly how much this particular program contributed to my current leadership abilities. The program does cover the foundations of leadership, and I do believe that my participation in the program either helped to solidify, or to lay the groundwork for, leadership skills and abilities I learned in other programs.

Future Work

The informal survey of the MNTIEL alumni suggests that the program is perceived as a success in meeting its goals. Several of the respondents have moved into positions of greater

responsibility, and all respondents have very positive comments about their experience in the program. This survey, however, fails to draw any direct correlation between participating in the program and career movement. Nor does it demonstrate any tangible ways in which the skills learned have helped the participants be more effective in their positions. Slightly less than half (47 percent) of the respondents indicate they had gone on to participate in other leadership development programs after participating in MNTIEL.

Future studies may want to more critically examine the effect participating in this program had on the careers of the librarians; this preliminary data suggests a positive relationship. The MNTIEL is a program for new librarians and provides a good overview of leadership competencies in the library context. Because the participants are new to the profession, and perhaps not yet in positional leadership roles, this program provides knowledge and leadership development that is believed to be appropriate for librarians new to the profession. It appears that the program provides participants with the knowledge, skills, and abilities to integrate themselves into the library culture at the institutions they work at or choose to work at later. There have been no formal reunions of program's participants, but some participants gather informally at library or related conferences to maintain the personal bonds they formed during the program. These informal reunions are not limited to any particular cohort as the invitation to join is shared on the listserv for all program alumni. This informal gathering fosters the types of networking and supportive relationships that the program intended, but did not explicitly create or support. Perhaps the program organizers could seize on the opportunity to extend the learning at events where the participants are already attending. Beyond this suggestion, it is difficult to say how the program could be improved, especially since the participants have all had such positive experiences.

Appendix A

Selected Bibliography from 2002 Minnesota Institute

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Appendix B

Survey Questions

1. In what year did you participate in the MNTIEL program?
 - a. 2012
 - b. 2010
 - c. 2008
 - d. 2006
 - e. 2004
 - f. 2002
 - g. 2000
 - h. 1998

2. At the time of your participation in the program, how many years had it been since you graduated from library school?
 - a. 1
 - b. 2
 - c. 3
 - d. 4
 - e. 5
 - f. 6+

3. Have you changed positions since participating in the program?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No

4. If you answered yes to the above question, is your current position one with greater responsibilities than the position you held at the time you participated?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No
 - c. Lateral move to different institution
 - d. N/A

5. If in your current position you have greater responsibilities than you did at the time, do you attribute any of this success to your participation in the program?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No
 - c. N/A

6. From what **specific** aspects of the program do you believe you benefitted the most? [Open ended question]

7. Have you subsequently participated in any other professional development programs?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No

8. Are you of Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin?
 - a. Yes
 - b. No

9. What is your race? Please choose one or more.
 - a. American Indian or Alaska Native
 - b. Asian
 - c. Black or African American

- d. Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander
- e. White
- f. Some Other Race

Notes

¹ University of Minnesota, Minnesota Institute for Early Career Librarians.

² Library residents are recent graduates of library and information science graduate programs who spend one or two years gaining practical experience in the library.

³ American Library Association, *Diversity Counts*.

⁴ Vilankulu, "Bright Stars."

⁵ University of Minnesota, Minnesota Institute for Early Career Librarians.

⁶ Katz, *Skills of an Effective Administrator*.

⁷ *Ibid.*, 48–54.

⁸ Northouse, *Leadership*.

⁹ Dewey, "The Imperative for Diversity."

¹⁰ Mason and Wetherbee, "Learning to Lead."

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