

Minerva's First Born: My Experiences as UNCG's First Diversity Resident Librarian

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Abstract

The author documents experiences as the first Post-MLS Diversity Resident Librarian at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. Opinions are shared on UNCG's implementation of its new program and reflections are made on this kind of opportunity for new librarians to gain some much-needed practical experience. The author offers this information for the benefit of potential residents who want to know what to look for in a residency experience, and library faculty looking to establish or improve residency programs at their own institutions.

In the spring of 2006, I applied to the School of Library and Information Studies at North Carolina Central University (NCCU) based in large part on a leap of faith. That decision worked out unbelievably well; I was quickly accepted, then awarded a full scholarship through the school's Institute of Museum and Library Services-funded Diversity Scholars program.

Nearly two years later, I found myself in need of another blessing as I sought to put my degree to work. Having previously worked as a newspaper reporter, I had no actual experience in libraries aside from a three-month internship I completed at H. Leslie Perry Memorial Library in Henderson, North Carolina. Meanwhile, job ad after job ad for librarians requested two years of practical library experience, and most of my student peers at NCCU and other institutions (aka my competition) appeared to already have years of practical library experience. For many other students, getting a library degree meant advancing their already-established library careers, not entering the library field. This led me to question the effectiveness of scholarships such as mine, which in theory are supposed to help recruit students into library schools who otherwise might not consider librarianship as a career choice. After all, if such people enroll in library schools and earn degrees without gaining experience, how can they then be expected to compete with degree-earning paraprofessionals for professional jobs requiring experience?

Fortunately, I found a truly "entry-level" position: the Post-MLS Diversity Resident Librarian position at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro (UNCG). I began serving as UNCG's first diversity resident on July 15, 2008. Now that my appointment with UNCG has drawn to a close, I felt

it appropriate to document some of my experiences, share some opinions on UNCG's implementation of its new program, and thank UNCG for giving me the opportunity to gain some much-needed practical experience. I offer this information for the benefit of potential residents who want to know what to look for in a residency experience, and library faculty looking to establish or improve residency programs at their own institutions.

Background

The faculty and staff at UNCG's Jackson Library began pursuing the establishment of a diversity residency position shortly after the Joint Librarians of Color Conference of 2006. The position was created in 2007, and advertisement of and recruitment for UNCG's first diversity resident librarian began in the late fall of 2007. Review of applications and interviewing occurred throughout the spring of 2008, and I was chosen for the position in May 2008.

UNCG's residency program was modeled after similar programs at other universities. An ad hoc planning committee – chaired by library diversity coordinator, Gerald Holmes – solicited feedback from former residents and residency coordinators at other academic libraries and reviewed web pages of other residency programs when modeling the UNCG program. Several members of the ad hoc committee had worked at institutions with residency programs before coming to UNCG and brought their previous experiences to the planning process as well.

Ultimately, the committee decided to create a two-year residency program in which the resident would rotate throughout three departments of the library in the first year, spending four months in each department.

The departments chosen would be based on the resident's interests and the library's needs; in my case, the three departments originally chosen were Reference & Instruction, Technical Services, and Special Collections & University Archives. For the second year, the resident would be able to choose a department in which to gain a specialized skill set; I chose cataloging, and decided I wanted to specialize in special collections cataloging.

Furthermore, the ad hoc committee determined that the resident's role within Jackson Library would include a variety of special diversity-related functions in addition to departmental work. The resident would act as a liaison to UNCG's Multicultural Resources Center (MRC), an on-campus resource center with a small collection of circulating materials. The resident would share dialog with and make recommendations for UNCG's Library and Information Studies Department, particularly on diversity issues. The resident would also serve on the library's diversity committee, assist with maintenance of the library's diversity website, represent the library at conferences and other outreach opportunities, and continually evaluate and assess the residency program.¹

Thoughts on the first year rotations

As UNCG's first diversity resident librarian, I expected that there would be modifications made to the original plans for the residency as we all tried to learn which aspects of the program did and did not work. The first change to the initial game plan actually took place a few days before the residency started. During my interview, I was asked which departments I would like to work in during my rotations. Reference & Instruction was an expected part of residency service, and

I additionally chose Special Collections & University Archives and Access Services as my other rotations. However, Holmes called me a few days before the residency began to suggest that I include a Technical Services rotation in order to be exposed to cataloging and acquisitions. As an entry level librarian with no perspective of what experience would be most useful to me in academic libraries, I heeded Holmes' advice.

This proved to be a good advice. I previously struggled with cataloging class in library school, which left me with no interest in practicing cataloging afterward. But once I was forced to try my hand at cataloging, I discovered to my surprise that it differed sharply from the often confusing classroom exercises I endured in school. Herein lies a potential problem in having the resident pick two of their first three rotations: those new librarians with limited library backgrounds may lack perspective on the range of experience offered by various library departments. So instead of just leaving two rotations up to the blind choice of an entry level candidate, it may be better for a library with a residency program to recommend three departments for the resident's first year rotations. Residents with paraprofessional or other experience who knew for sure what type of librarianship they wished to specialize in could still be given flexibility to choose their final two rotations. Furthermore, in today's library world, there are certain core skills that certain departments can teach that are beneficial in a wide range of library work. For example, even if I do not choose to ultimately specialize in cataloging, becoming familiar with MARC records through a residency rotation in cataloging will be beneficial no matter what type of librarianship I eventually practice. I believe the three recommended first year rotations should be in the departments that teach these core skills: Reference & Instruction, Technical Services, and Electronic Research & Information Technologies (ERIT).

I began my residency with a rotation in the Reference & Instruction department. In this rotation, I provided service at the reference desk, led library tours for first-year students, and served as a liaison to a small academic department. After completing this rotation, I determined that reference and instruction departments working with resident librarians should devise guides, checklists, or other aids to ensure that work time spent away from the

reference desk and the classroom is being used to obtain the knowledge and skills that are the most useful in providing reference service at that particular institution. The resident will likely not know what inquiries are most likely to come up at the reference desk, but veteran reference librarians will know, and should suggest things that the resident should try to master when the time is available. Depending on the institution, this could include suggesting that the resident learn proper citation with the various citation styles used at the institution, university-specific software applications, and searching techniques for the university's most popular databases. Having a resident review what services and programs are offered on campus, and in what buildings such services and programs are housed, may also be helpful. Optimally, this will prevent the resident from spending too much time trying to master things that he or she will not utilize often while on the reference desk.

I also recommend that if a resident is to act as a library liaison to an academic department during the reference rotation, the library should try to assign the resident a department that works frequently with the library. Some residency coordinators may be tempted to assign the resident to a department that traditionally has low interaction with the library in order to keep the resident's workload under control. However, assigning residents to departments with little to no interaction with the library may prevent the resident from getting much practical experience as a department liaison.

If there is a reference internship program for graduate students at the institution, and training sessions are conducted with the interns, allowing the resident to participate may be helpful. However, as I will discuss later, there should be a concerted effort to separate residents who are full-time librarians from interns who are part-time and student-level workers. A resident's job duties should be more complex and varied than those of an intern.

The Technical Services rotation, consisting of acquisitions and cataloging, was well-planned and executed. During this rotation, I met regularly with the head of acquisitions and assisted her with some basic functions. I also met with her staff and observed them perform some of their duties. There were not many opportunities for hands-on work within

acquisitions. Within cataloging, I started out cataloging new books under the direction of a faculty cataloger. Once I got a foundation in new book cataloging, I was allowed to catalog materials for special collections, the Multicultural Resources Center (MRC), and UNCG's Interior Architecture library. After this rotation, I determined that the cataloging approach in particular at UNCG may be appropriate for other programs: start a resident out with basic new book cataloging and gradually assign them more complex cataloging tasks. Additionally, residents should be taught proper usage of available cataloging tools (examples may include Cataloger's Desktop, Classification Web, and printed Library of Congress cataloging schedules).

UNCG's Special Collections & University Archives department was undergoing staffing and other changes during my rotation. Additionally, by this point, I had decided to focus on cataloging for my second year. As such, I spent most of my rotation assisting the manuscripts curator with updating finding aids and converting existing finding aids into Encoded Archival Description (EAD). A cataloging head from another institution stressed to me that many schools now want their catalogers to be proficient with EAD. It would not be appropriate for me to offer suggestions on what a special collections or university archives rotation for a residency program should include. This is due to the transitions UNCG's department was going through during my time there, and the specific niche focus I filled in the department as a result.

In addition to offering recommendations for residency programs based on what I experienced in my three rotations, I would also recommend that coordinators of this and other residencies devise ways to expose residents to functions within library information technology and library administration. The ad hoc planning committee recommended in its planning report that a four-month rotation in library administration eventually be offered. Since many of the current academic library vacancies are administrative or deal with scholarly communication (which is handled in the administrative wing at Jackson Library), I agree that UNCG and other residency-hosting institutions should begin offering an administration rotation.

Residency work outside of departmental rotations

Outside of the three first-year rotations and the second year cataloging stint, I also participated in a variety of other library functions. Surprisingly, the most beneficial task I performed outside of my rotations was my service on the search committee for Jackson Library's new first year instruction coordinator. I gained a lot by reviewing applications and learning from fellow search committee members what was and was not good practice when applying for positions in academic libraries. I strongly recommend that all resident librarians serve on a search committee if possible, as they will soon be looking for permanent jobs.

I also served as a library liaison and collection consultant to the Multicultural Resources Center (MRC). This service was a well-intentioned partnership between Jackson Library and UNCG's Office of Multicultural Affairs (OMA), intended to improve the limited library service offered to the MRC. After completing work related to this partnership, I concluded that while using the residency program to establish partnerships between Jackson Library and other campus entities was a good idea, the library faculty should always have the final say in what duties the resident takes on in such partnerships. Typically, other librarians are most knowledgeable of what skill set a rookie librarian needs to develop to be successful, and librarians assisting with a residency program should ensure that the resident's activities are directed towards continual development of that skill set.

Finally, I was fortunate enough to work with faculty from Jackson Library and UNCG's Department of Library and Information Studies to help implement UNCG's new ACE Scholars grant. The ACE Scholars program is similar to North Carolina Central University's Diversity Scholars program; it is an Institute of Museum and Library Services-funded scholarship initiative intended to increase diversity in American libraries. UNCG was awarded the grant before my residency began, but the faculty working on this grant initiative had not done anything similar before. I was asked to assist with implementation because, as a recent graduate of a similar program, I was able to advise the faculty on what concerns the scholars may have and help them prepare for these concerns. I have also remained in

frequent contact with the scholars since their orientation in the summer of 2009, and advised them on issues and experiences that they may face as ethnic minority library school students and librarians. Contributing to ACE was probably the most rewarding part of my residency.

The "Intern" Factor

The Association for Library and Information Science Education (ALISE) defines a residency as, "The post degree work experience designed as an entry level program for professionals who have recently received the MLS degree from a program accredited by the American Library Association." This means, of course, that those who serve as resident librarians are not actually "interns", at least in the sense of what capacity interns serve in regard to libraries. It is, after all, impossible to be both an "intern" and a "professional" at the same time in this profession.²

Yet, in my residency experience, I was referred to as an "intern" by coworkers on occasion. This was not a phenomenon unique to UNCG by any means. A residency workshop during the 2008 National Diversity in Libraries Conference in Louisville, Kentucky revealed that this misnomer had been applied to resident librarians at many institutions while on the job. Everyone has to start somewhere, and resident librarians need to be recognized as actual librarians, but librarians who are "entry-level" or just starting out. There are entry-level positions in virtually any professional field, and entry-level practitioners elsewhere are not typically regarded as "interns." Other residency programs, such as one at University of Tennessee - Knoxville, have indicated in their literature that their residents are "entry-level librarians" with faculty rank and are provided with, "a thorough grounding in research, project management, and committee service." Such benefits are not typically provided to academic library interns.³

Alas, for the sake of both respecting a resident as a professional and holding a resident accountable as a professional, the individual in the residency program should be referred to as a "resident." But a school should also seek to provide the resident with experiences and knowledge that an intern would not normally receive. UNCG accomplished this by inviting me to serve on some of the library's committees, encouraging me to publish and deliver presentations at conferences,

supporting my work with the Black Caucus of the American Library Association, and allowing me to serve in a pseudo-mentor role for the ACE Scholars, among other things.

Final thoughts and thanks

In closing, I must say that Jackson Library did very well with its first attempt at a residency program. The faculty and staff should be especially commended for creating a very friendly and welcoming environment for me. After speaking with other residents during the National Diversity in Libraries Conference of 2008, I realized my faculty and staff were very progressive and embraced the residency concept particularly well. Minority residency programs were once described in *College and Research Library News* as being, "(S)hort-term and quota-driven to raise affirmative action statistics and are often in response to accreditation threats. They take newly graduated students, insert them into often hostile environments, and expect them to address all the problems of diversity that continue to simmer and stew among faculty." I never felt that was the case at Jackson Library. I have made suggestions for what can be done to improve the residency program in the future, but those suggestions involve changes in practice, not changes in attitude. I believe that as long as Jackson's faculty are overall supportive of the residency program, they will have no problem improving it with each cycle. I was honored to be UNCG's first diversity resident librarian, and I am forever grateful to Jackson Library for providing me with this great opportunity.⁴

References

- ¹ University Libraries of the University of North Carolina at Greensboro. Post MLS Diversity Residency Planning Committee. *Post MLS Diversity Residency Planning Report*. December 21, 2007.
- ² Perez, Megan Z. "From New Graduate to Competent Practitioner: Rethinking the Architecture of Post-MLS Residency Programs in ARL Libraries." MLS thesis, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, 2007, p. 47.
- ³ Mack, Thura, and Jill Keally. "Seeding the Vision: Designing a Minority Librarian Residency Program," *The Southeastern Librarian* 52, no. 1 (Spring 2004): p. 5.
- ⁴ Hankins, Rebecca, Michele Saunders, and Ping Situ. "Diversity Initiatives vs. Residency Programs: Agents of Change?" *College and Research Library News* 64, no. 5 (May 2003), p. 309.