

MLA Podcast 006—Career and Leadership Development for Librarians

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SUMMARY KEYWORDS

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SPEAKERS

Emily Hurst, Amy Lyons

Emily Hurst 00:12

All right. Thanks for joining us today for this episode of the MLA Press Play Connect podcast. My name is Emily Hurst and I currently serve as the interim director and associate dean at VCU Library's Health Sciences Library, located in Richmond, Virginia. I'm excited to be joined today by Amy Lyons, from the University of Buffalo Libraries. We plan to talk more about her experiences in leadership and, specifically, with the MLA Rising Stars program. Welcome, Amy. [AL: Thank you. Nice to be here today.] Great. Thanks, Amy. Do you want to tell us a little bit about your role at the University of Buffalo Libraries?

Amy Lyons 00:51

I am at the University of Buffalo Libraries. I have been a faculty member at the Health Sciences Library for many years. And for many of those years I've served and held numerous administrative and leadership positions. Currently, I am serving as the liaison to the School of Nursing.

Emily Hurst 01:19

Great. Thank you, Amy. I wanted to ask a little bit about how you are coping at your library—or personally, if you would like to share—with COVID-19. I know that it's been almost a year since we have gone into the COVID-19 pandemic. You mentioned earlier that I believe you're working from your home.

Amy Lyons 01:38

Initially, in March 2020, the University of Buffalo had been trying to identify ways to cope with the impact of the Coronavirus. Initially, the entire campus was shut down and committees of administrators, faculty and staff met to discuss how to address the campus needs. Plans and decisions were continuously evolving as the disastrous nature of the COVID-19 kind of evolved. Decisions about how to conduct the fall 2020 semester were based upon the needs of academic programming, including

keeping labs and clinical operations open. The libraries reopened with strict limitations and guidelines for staff, faculty and employed students. But, for the most part, those engaged in access services, which was really keeping the doors open - in collection, management, purchasing, processing - those were the people who were on campus or working in libraries. And those of us whose responsibilities were more public service oriented, were told to stay away from campus and work from home. This brought with it its own challenges. Email became primary modes of communication, reference questions were addressed by email or phone as needed. Zoom became the virtual connect for meetings, teaching and consultations. Databases and information resources occasionally posed some challenges in terms of connections, but most of those we were able to resolve with a little bit of working with the university and the libraries' IT. Being home really has not made it more difficult for persons to contact me. They know where I am, they know my email information, they even have my home, you know, phone numbers and cell phone numbers often. I've set up a home office equipped with all or most of the tools that I need. And I also use the university's VPN to access my desktop computer files now, in my office, so I can have connection to, you know, all the tools that I need to help anybody else.

Emily Hurst 04:24

Yeah, thanks for sharing that, Amy. I think you and I had chatted previously as well. It's just kind of, it's kind of difficult. We do miss interacting with our faculty, with our staff, with our employees. And this really makes it difficult to do that. But we found new ways to try to connect with them.

Amy Lyons 04:42

Exactly, exactly. It's a challenge! And it continues to be a challenge. But I think that we're all managing, you know, we're all managing. You know, in relation to all of us, it became, you know, really important for us to all be more patient and understanding of the stress and strain that everybody was under, not only us as librarians, but even the people that we are dealing with, as well. Often times, they are the frontline providers who are coming to us and asking for their services. So, you know, we really had to find new ways to address old problems, or new problems as they arose. And, you know, we had to adjust to a new normal. I think that actually in relation to leadership, with our changing profession, and this kind of segues or leads us into opportunities that perhaps we will face in the future in terms of how library and information services will be delivered and offered as we as we move forward. So I think that they forced academic libraries to examine, you know, these kinds of operations more critically, be more open and be more flexible. So I think from that point of view, you know, that the opportunity for leadership and future development has been something that will result from our experiences with COVID as well.

Emily Hurst 06:32

So, Amy, you're a longstanding member of the Medical Library Association. Can you tell me a little bit about your early involvement with MLA?

Amy Lyons 06:42

Well, it seems like I've been a member of MLA forever. And it started with.... actually, you know... almost as soon as I entered into the profession. I had an initial director, when I had just entered librarianship, who encouraged me to join. You know, his feeling was at MLA was the premier organization for health sciences libraries, and that MLA set the tone that, you know, for what was

happening in the future, as far as the professions' work. Regional chapter membership was a steppingstone, in a way, for librarians to become active in MLA. And during my early years in librarianship, there were many, many more active libraries and librarians in the areas of hospitals and corporations, even in academics. Finances for travel were more available. And, consequently, both regional and national MLA meetings experienced greater attendance and wider membership. I, too, began my service at the regional level, assuming positions on the Executive Board and the Chapter Council - multiple positions over the years, including the President, Vice President, Chair-Elect, Treasurer. I think I had every position, almost, that was within the chapter. But that led the way for me to kind of answer the call for MLA positions. You know, as I began the service journey, my appointments at MLA mostly began on grants and awards type of committees. I think those were, those seemed to be good forays into MLA. The first year, I served as a member of the committee and then the following year, I often served as the chair of the committee. But I believe that those early experiences really helped me to become more informed about the workings of organization, MLA, and to gain greater exposure on what the organization, or how the organization, really worked. And then, as I become became more comfortable, it, you know, just enabled me to seek more and greater opportunities for service within the organization. So it was a progressive kind of learning experience.

Emily Hurst 09:27

I think that rings true for me as well: having a director or a leader who really encouraged involvement in the organization. And then you're completely right, that there are opportunities at every level, and that even members who are new to the Medical Library Association can find ways to be involved and then move into leadership as chairs, and on juries, etc. So there are many different avenues for involvement. You are right. Alright. So, in 2019, you were awarded with the Fellow of the Medical Library Association. One of the criteria for becoming a fellow is demonstrating outstanding achievement. Can you speak a little bit about your proudest achievements during the course of your work as a health sciences librarian?

Amy Lyons 10:17

You know, I thought about this one for a little while. And I'm so profession- and person-oriented, that I really thought that amongst my proudest achievements during my time and tenure in the profession is the numbers of librarians in the profession who I have mentored, guided, and helped along to be able to achieve their own personal goals and where they wanted to be in the profession. All the librarians that I've mentored, I can say that they've successfully achieved tenure, and have easily been able to meet the rigor of being university faculty members. In relation to MLA, many of those health sciences librarians have gone on to serve as library directors, department heads, and have become extremely progressive and productive colleagues, and have just become leaders in their own right in MLA. So you know that becomes one of the most important elements for me, working in the profession.

Emily Hurst 11:39

Thank you, Amy. Yes, you've touched so many different lives and different career paths for so many librarians. I think you've really inspired and mentored, as you said, librarians into very successful careers. With that in mind, I know that you were also a member of the MLA Emerging Leaders Task Force, from 2009 to 2013. And you were involved in the Rising Stars program, from 2012 until 2020. Why is your involvement in the Rising Stars program and with Emerging Leaders so important to you?

And, also, could you speak a little bit about your work within the profession, cultivating leaders for the health sciences profession?

Amy Lyons 12:21

You know, becoming a member of the Emerging Leaders Task Force, and later involvement in the Rising Stars, has really probably been my most rewarding MLA activity of my career. And, you know, that has been of great interest to me. You know, I mentioned that people are the most valuable resource within any organization. And I, you know, I firmly believe that that is the case. And I think it's absolutely true for MLA. MLA is a volunteer organization. And in order for MLA to exist, it needs, it needs people to be part of it. MLA, you know, needs to develop, encourage, you know, and provide opportunities for its members to take on these leadership roles. And, you know, in my view, Rising Stars is one of the ways that they encourage people to do that. I, you know, I firmly believe that leadership is not synonymous with a title. Anybody can hold the position and demonstrate leadership kinds of qualities in any kind of activity or position that they hold. So even if they sit on a committee, they can demonstrate leadership kinds of qualities. In their own everyday kinds of work, they can demonstrate leadership kinds of qualities. But I do think the Rising Stars program is an avenue that enables early career librarians interested in leadership and other opportunities to understand and develop these kinds of interests. And MLA needs to cultivate these junior people to take on these roles.

Emily Hurst 14:26

Thank you, Amy. I know it was great experience working with you. I feel like we weren't officially in a mentor relationship. But working with you on the Rising Stars program really helped me understand more about the value of Rising Stars for the organization. Obviously, I was a former Rising Star, in the first class. So I'm really proud to have worked with you and to continue that tradition of helping cultivate our leadership within MLA. And as you spoke about leadership at all levels, so, even as a new member, learning more about the organization is so valuable, so that you can become more involved and effective as a leader in MLA and, also, potentially, in your career going forward. [AL: Absolutely.] Great to work with you. [AL: Thank you. The same with you.] I did want to ask you a little bit more about this importance of mentorship within the profession. Are there any things that you want to share about being a mentor yourself, or things that you experienced, as a person being mentored, that really motivated you into the importance of mentorship and motivated you to continue being a mentor with other librarians?

Amy Lyons 15:37

You know, I do think that it goes back to, you know, my very first entry into the profession. I have to say that I did have mentors early on, but I also believe it's the responsibility of those who come before to pay it forward. And, actually, that's kind of where I am at this stage. I'm probably more of a senior member than those, you know, junior members entering into profession. And I think that, as senior members, you know, if we don't mentor, if we don't prepare, or if we don't change with the time and encourage junior members into the profession, then we really will no longer have a profession, you know. We are in a profession where the information world is filled with individuals and organizations who certainly want to step into that realm of providing information and tools. And those are, you know, areas that we, as librarians, consider part of librarianship. And if we don't prepare ourselves to compete in those kinds of environments, and with those kinds of people, our profession is going to suffer. So,

you know, we must, you know, meet these challenges really head on, and we must be prepared to just, you know, compete with others in this world, and in this environment, as well. And our organization and the areas that we are engaged in have expanded so much. Information is such an important commodity that, you know, those who think that the librarian careers and librarians no longer matter: Look out, because we are, we do, and we are! And, you know, it's important for that. But, you know, certainly, you know, as time as time went on, there were times in my career when I didn't feel well mentored. And I think that it was detrimental and, actually, I think there was a sadness on my part, for not having those kinds of people. I had to kind of seek others. But I was determined that I was not going to let that happen to other junior librarians as well. So I think that's one of the reasons that it became such an important element for who I am and what I think we need to do as a profession.

Emily Hurst 18:35

Yeah, that's such an important point that, you know, when you do feel that you're not getting the mentorship or the direction that you could use to try to seek that out, and to have that motivation to look within the professional organization or your colleagues to find someone to really help you through that time in your career. Because, you're right, that sometimes those opportunities don't exist or those individuals don't exist. But seeking them out can really help. And on the other side of that, as we look at people that are in leadership roles, being open to becoming a mentor and seeing other new members of our organization as in need of mentorship or open to mentorship allows us to continue to grow the profession. So very, very well said, Amy. I wanted to ask you about any recommendations that you would have for any new members of the Medical Library Association or individuals starting out their career in health sciences librarianship. What would you recommend that they do to get started, to find a mentor or to look for resources to help them with their career trajectory?

Amy Lyons 19:42

Oh, probably I, you know, I think that they need to start with talking to your colleagues. I think for the most part, librarians are very collegial. You know, it's a profession where people are anxious and willing to share. People aren't necessarily proprietary and hold back, they are very happy to share with others. So I think, you know, it's advantageous to talk with colleagues, talk with those who are already members of MLA, you know, kind of ask them: why they joined the organization, in what ways have they been able to benefit by being a member of the MLA, how has it helped their own career development, and, you know, how has it assisted them in thinking about what they do, and where they want to go and what they want to contribute to the profession? And I think that people need to network, and network at regional and national meetings. I think that that's really important, to become part of MLA, to join the committees, to join the caucuses, to be willing to volunteer in those caucuses. They're always looking for people to take on roles in those areas, to be part of those areas, to be part of projects in those areas, to be part of conversations, and webinars, and education kinds of opportunities, and things like that. So, you know, just let people know that you're interested. And you know, even in, in your local environment, let people know that you're interested in, you're willing to participate, and you're willing to become active in, you know, the organization. And, you know, as far as I believe mentors don't have to be a single individual, you can identify as many mentors or colleagues as you feel comfortable doing. And, you know, each one of those individuals can offer you something different. Now, some may be a mentor in publications, some may be a mentor in service, some may just be a personal booster for you. So, you know, I think that, you know, widen your perspective, be open and

willing to kind of absorb all that is around and available. And make your feelings known. Don't be shy. Don't be shy.

Emily Hurst 22:38

Thank you, Amy. All good recommendations for individuals looking to become more involved. And looking out for mentors at all levels. Are there any resources that you would recommend for librarians looking to hone their skills and become more resonant leaders?

Amy Lyons 22:54

Well, one, of course, is the Rising Stars. And, you know, actually, and one of the things that I think, and this is kind of off the cuff that I am saying, to even administrators and MLA, is that I think it's great that we have the Rising Stars program. But I would also support the notion that those who are mid-level professionals need to meet, we need to focus on them as well. We cannot forget that just because they've been in the profession or at MLA for a little while, that they automatically are not in need of these kinds of support and opportunities, because I really do think that we need to continue, and maybe it's something that we need to continue, that one needs to continue throughout their career because we are a lifelong learning profession. As far as some specifics other than MLA, the Harvard Leadership Institute, was a really nice course that was offered to provide individuals with skills and knowledge. And actually, kind of tooting my own horn here because I think I was the first person in the health sciences librarianship to attend the Harvard program. And then, you know, that kind of paved the way for both the program itself, the people in the Harvard Leadership Program, to seek individuals from health sciences librarians to be involved in that program that they offer as well, because I think before that, they were pretty much academic oriented. I think that they've really enjoyed the perspective of the health sciences librarians entering and being part of that program. And since I think we've had quite a few people who have attended that. There's other leadership organizations or programs that are in organizations. ARL has, ACRL has their leadership program. A lot of them are inclusive of mostly academic oriented kinds of things. But I think leadership is a concept that crosses most or many different professions and specialties in librarianship. So, I think, that by attending these kinds of sessions, one would still get quite a bit out of them and be able to contribute to them as well and offer the Health Sciences perspective. I know that these days, especially, there's the online courses and webinars every day, you go online and see something else that is offered up for people to attend. And I have spoken to people who said that because they're online, it's given them the opportunity to attend more diversified kinds of conferences, meetings, and things that they would not necessarily have been able to attend in person. So perhaps maybe that's one of the positive ends of our current environment. And I know that, even in my own organization, sometimes they have leadership types of offerings for faculty for staff, and, you know, HR often will offer some of those. And, you know, there may be something there that is useful and relevant as well. So I think people need to keep their eyes open and be willing to try, just try some new things on it, because you can always pick up, you know, a few things here and there.

Emily Hurst 27:00

Yeah, it's great to hear that you were a trailblazer for us in the Harvard Leadership Institute. I've had my eye on that for quite a while, but then unable to participate. I hope to in the future. Really great to hear. And, I know, as you mentioned, other librarians in the health sciences have been through that program

and benefited from it, speak highly of that as another opportunity for leadership development. I also want to thank you for visiting the middle-career, mid-career librarians. As someone who I feel like is fast approaching that time, I am always on the lookout for what's available in that area. And I would have to agree with you, we need to look for some opportunities for development in those areas. So that, as you say, and as MLA says, lifelong learning is so important, and there are steps along that path that having the proper development around is so important to creating our strong future leadership. So, Amy, how is the Medical Library Association provided an outlet for additional support in the area of leadership development? Are there any examples of resources directly from MLA that you'd like to speak about?

Amy Lyons 28:07

I think chairing and serving on committees and MLA, you know, provided an outlet for me for developing and honing my leadership skills. You know, as I said, for me, serving on the Rising Stars committee enabled me not only to provide opportunity for junior members to learn, but I found that I, too, found it as an opportunity for me to learn from others, both participants of the program and faculty contributors. So I think that we have to be open to the notion of learning, you know, learning from both ends, you learn from those above you, and you learn from those below you, you know, those of your junior. But, you know, I'm I really do believe that in some sense MLA hopefully levels the playing field, so that one can do that, you know, by attending conferences, by attending seminars, by attending some of their meetings, and listening to, as well, the presentations that people make. You don't stop and say, is that a senior member or is that a junior member? You see, when you look to attend those kinds of things, you say, huh, does that have application for me in what I'm doing both in my job, and, you know, individually, and something that I'm that I'm interested in or that I want to learn about, because I don't know anything about it? So I think you have to be open to those kinds of adventures and opportunities.

Emily Hurst 29:42

I like that. Adventures and opportunities and leadership and mentorship and development along the way. I really like that concept. Amy, can you tell me what being a member of MLA means to you? And how have you benefited from being part of the Medical Library Association?

Amy Lyons 30:00

Without having really a long drawn out, you know, answer to this... You know, MLA really has become a part of my professional life. It is the main organization that I that I turn to. It is the people that I turn to. I mean, I've networked, I've learned, I've interacted, I've served on committees, I've met incredible people over the course of, spanning the time that I have been a member in MLA. And those people have become more than professional colleagues. I am pleased to say that many of those people have become really close and dear friends. And I think that that, in and of itself, to me, makes the organization feel more comfortable, and not as overwhelming. It's a place where one can be and feel that they belong. And I think that that's what MLA provides people the opportunity to have.

Emily Hurst 31:15

Thank you, Amy. I think that's a great way to close out our discussion today - that MLA is your community, it's your home, and that it goes beyond just the profession. They do become people in MLA, MLA becomes your, your friends, your colleagues. So I think that's really important as we close

out our discussion today about leadership and the importance of, and value of, the Medical Library Association.

Amy Lyons 31:39

You know, I think that this is, and it was, a nice opportunity for me to think about MLA. Also, and what over the time MLA has meant to me, you know. Too often we can take some, you know, some of these things for granted by just going through the regularity of it and the motions of things and we don't necessarily stop to take a real close look at the whys and wherefores. This has afforded me the opportunity to think about some of those things more closely, the things about MLA that have impacted my profession, impacted me as an individual. And as a librarian.

Emily Hurst 32:35

Thank you, Amy. This is really special to have a chance to talk with you. I've really enjoyed learning from you throughout my career and I hope that others get the chance to work with you in MLA and beyond. And thank you for joining us today. I am Emily Hurst and I am MLA. [AL: I am Amy Lyons and I am MLA.]