Interview

Mentoring for Librarianship and Beyond: An Interview with Ali Versluis from ALIMB

Introduction

Ali Versluis is the open education resources librarian at the University of Guelph and a FIMS alumnus. She is also the creator of the Archives, Library, and Information Mentor Base (ALIMB), an online directory that connects early career LIS professionals with mentors in their field. From special librarians and archivists to experienced information professionals who are dedicated to critical librarianship and social justice, ALIMB mentors—some of whom were once mentees themselves—are volunteers who dedicate their time and expertise to responding to questions and concerns of early career LIS professionals and students who reach out. Whether you are researching an unfamiliar position during your job hunt, in need of a resume critique, or seeking general advice on work, life, and everything in between, ALIMB has the contacts that emerging professionals need

Ali, you've been working as an academic librarian for four and a half years since graduating from FIMS. How do you think your perspective on librarianship has changed since then?

Doing mentoring work, both informally and formally, has made me cognizant of how working professionals can better support that transition from coursework to the workplace. I've become more aware of issues related to labour and workload, and

working in higher education in general. The advice I provide for students now is much more nuanced than the advice I provided when I was in my first library job.

Why do you think mentors are important?

It's important to know people who can provide support whether physically or virtually -- when navigating those tricky workplace situations, and give you encouragement when you're struggling. Impostor syndrome is real! I still have it, four and a half years in. So, it's important to have a community you can draw on to boost you up, and potentially for providing professional opportunities as well. I always tell people it's great to have mentors who are at the same stage as you because you *can* mentor laterally; it doesn't have to be a top-down thing.

Mentors are the cornerstone of the Archives, Libraries and Information Mentor Base (ALIMB). Can you tell me more about this project?

ALIMB is a directory of people willing to serve in mentorship capacities across various sectors of libraries, archives, and information science. Its purpose is to connect students, early career folks, or anyone who's looking for a mentorship with people who have volunteered to provide support in some way.

How do you think ALIMB ties in to your interests as an Open Education librarian?

I would say it's the idea that information shouldn't be secret. So much of mentorship involves meeting people at conferences but there are people who are not plugged in to those spaces.

And conferences are expensive.

Conferences are super expensive! Mentorship opportunities shouldn't be something that's only available to people who have money to access it. Because anyone is able to sign up and become a mentor, there are also voices that don't usually get attention or space. Academic libraries tend to be quite white. And so [with ALIMB] it's not just the big names in librarianship saying "I will be your mentor"; it's also people who are lesser known but who have important insights to share.

I think it can be empowering to volunteer as a mentor and say, "I can be a role model to someone else."

Exactly. I think mentorship benefits both parties.

How does ALIMB work for people interested in finding a mentor?

Just go to the site: alimb.ca. On the side, you can pick the area of librarianship that you're interested in: liaison, government, archives, etc. Each link brings you to a list of folks who have identified that area as one of their specializations. [The list will] give you more information about who they are, where they work, and what they feel like they can provide support with: mock interviews, pep talks, things like that.

And it lists their contact information as well.

Yes, so it is relying on the student to reach out to that person and explain "I saw your name on ALIMB. I'd love to chat with you."

How did this project start?

Together with my colleague, Juliene McLaughlin, we had created an event called the New Librarians Symposium. It's an in-person meeting that happens in Toronto every

year and it was created with the idea that early career graduates benefit from having a space where they can build connections and learn. Throughout the 2017 iteration, everyone was saying "I'm happy to provide support, just reach out to me." As I was on the GO bus on the way home, I thought: we always say that we're here for support, but there's nothing that collects these names together in a way that people will remember what that person is all about. And so I tweeted out – as I am wont to do when I get my half-baked ideas – asking if people would be interested in a Google Doc where professionals could list their names as mentors to help out with job applications, mock interviews, etc. There was a lot of interest so I created a Google Doc, but then people would share it, and then it would get mentioned at conferences, and it became super populated. That was exciting but caused the Google Doc to become a bit unwieldy because of its sheer size.

So, I reached out to my friend Lillian and she was like, "My friend Matt Barry who works at Western is interested". I reached out to him and he said, "I can put up a Wordpress site". And then my friend Gillian Byrne who works at TPL offered to pitch in some money to host it. That's kind of how it all started, just in a tweet.

How have you been promoting ALIMB to students and other people in search of mentorship?

I do a lot of mentorship work. When I'm volunteering for things like the OLA Career Centre, I spread the word about ALIMB's existence in those spaces. In terms of letting students know, I guess I've relied a lot on word-of-mouth. This is a volunteer project and it's a labour of love. I want it to live and I'm sure Matt does too, but it also takes time to [manage this project].

What do you think is the best thing that has come out of this project?

Honestly, every time I get a tweet or an email where someone tells me, "A student reached out to me today", that is the coolest thing! Some people who have used it have gotten a job and are now mentors, so to see it come full circle is really heartening.

Did you ever imagine that ALIMB would become this successful?

No! And it's awesome because it really is a grassroots project; it's an idea that people collaborated on, made possible by the generosity of the community. It shows how impactful projects don't need to have a lot of money behind them; people are already doing this work anyway, so why can't we make it so that more people can access it?

What is one thing that you think established librarians can do to better support early career librarians?

Making the time and putting in effort. You can support someone in a more meaningful way if you get to know people for who they are. I think that a lot of established librarians have good intentions and will say "let me know how I can support you", but it makes an impact when someone takes the initiative to book a chat or reach out with opportunities to get involved.

If you had to give early career LIS professionals a piece of advice, what would it be?

The most important thing is to reach out and connect. Even if you don't need a specific thing, just talking to people can be immensely valuable. We're a helping profession and librarians are super willing to give their time and expertise. ALIMB is a great example of me being like "I have this Google Doc and I want to make it into something, but I have no idea how to do that!" and I tweeted about it and asked for help. I assure early career

people, even if you came to library school right out of your undergrad, you still have interesting ideas to draw on. Be confident in your own voice and perspectives.

To learn more, visit the ALIMB website at alimb.ca.

Anne He and Ali Versluis

He, A., & Versluis, A. (2019). Mentoring for librarianship and beyond: an interview with Ali Versluis from ALIMB. *Emerging Library & Information Perspectives*, 2, 159-164. <https://doi.org/10.5206/elip.v2i1.6202>