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Peers Amidst a Pandemic: Fostering Remote Relationships and Collaborative Mentoring in an Academic Library

Wendy Guerra

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Claire Du Laney, Wendy Guerra, Monica Maher, Lacey Rogers

UNO Libraries

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University of Nebraska Omaha

Hello all and thank you for joining our NLA panel titled "Peers Amidst a Pandemic: Fostering Remote Relationships and Collaborative Mentoring in an Academic Library." We are delighted to be here, sharing our experience over the past in creating a workplace peer group during the pandemic. All four presenters work at Criss Library at the University of Nebraska at Omaha. The university is located on the ancestral and contemporary lands of the Omaha Nation and the Sioux Nation. These and other Nations' sovereignty, governance, and treaty lands existed long before the state of Nebraska. Next slide please.

Presenters
(Left to Right)

Claire Du Laney, Wendy Guerra, Monica Maher, Lacey Rogers

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Over the past year we four pre-tenured librarians and archivists from the UNO Criss Library have met as community of practice in order to build and strengthen professional relationships and attempted to overcome knowledge gaps and confusion created by our institutions Reappointment, Promotion, and Tenure process. Add in the uncertainty of a pandemic, and you have us: "the Pre-Tenured Library Faculty Peer" group. In this session, we will be sharing about the creation of our Community of Practice, the pros and cons, and how we see this group moving forward in the next year. I'm going to talk a little bit more about the presentation road map but first we'd like to introduce ourselves. My name is Claire Du Laney, I use she, her pronouns, I'm the Outreach Archivist in the Archives and Special Collections department and I've been at the University of Nebraska at Omaha for just over two years.

My name is: Wendy Guerra and I use she/her pronouns. I've been the Digital Initiatives Archivist at UNO for a year and 3 months.

My name is: Monica Maher, I use she/her pronouns, and I'm the Online Learning and Education Librarian in the Research and Instruction Services department. I've been in this role for almost 3 years.

My name is: Lacey Rogers, I use she/her pronouns, and I am the Access Services Librarian in Patron Services. I've been at UNO for about 1.5 years.

For this presentation, we decided to keep things in the spirit of the community of practice- a little casual, a little free-flowing and quite chatty. All four presenters are currently online and available to answer questions in the chat.

Description of the group:
Claire- We will each go into more detail about what we hoped this group would do for us, what we accomplished, and where the community of practice fell a bit short, but I just wanted to briefly share what this group is and how it originated.

This group, like many of our coping mechanisms over the last 18 months, came from a need to connect with the people we would normally see on a day to day basis.

The genesis for the community of practice came about after a conversation between Wendy and I, and conversations that each of us had with our department director. I wanted a shared space where people at the same level of tenure progress (in this case untenured) could talk about research ideas, get feedback or collaborate on conference proposals, ask each other for advice or clarification about or institution's Reappointment, Promotion and Tenure or RPT process, and in all honestly block out some time to get to know each other. When talking about this with my director, she mentioned that Wendy and she had had a similar conversation, so I went and talked with Wendy, and then gauged the interest of Monica and Lacey. We had our first meeting on October 27th and met roughly every 2 weeks. Our organization was using the platform Basecamp at this time and I organized the meetings so that people could either be on Zoom or chat through Basecamp's instant messenger function. There was no attendance policy but I did keep track of attendance because at our institution if you attend a certain number of Community of Practice sessions you receive money towards professional development funds.

We rarely had an agenda – sometimes things came up during those two weeks that we talked about and one session Wendy organized a speaker to join us, but otherwise it was pretty casual. I know for a fact that there were a few sessions where we had distinct talking points, but agendas were created and shared on the platform Basecamp, which we no longer use and are lost, though I think the records exist somewhere on our server. This informal organization had pros and cons, which we will talk about during the session.

To that end, we organized this presentation as follows:

Why We Created This Library Faculty Peer Group

How Our Peer Group Served Us

How Our Peer Group Did NOT Serve Us

Our Vision for the Future

Thoughts on Applying this Model to other groups and Organizations. For this last one, we would love to know if your organization or institution has done something like this or is contemplating a similar type of peer group. Please let us know in the chat what worked, what didn't, and any thoughts you have for going forward. This group is only one year old and we definitely don't have all the answers. But we look forward to sharing our experiences and learning from yours. Next slide

We each came to this group with our own reasons and needs.

Claire: Our institution provides new faculty members with some similar to our Library Peer-Group. The Pre-Tenure Faculty Leadership forum is a cross campus group for new faculty members at UNO. It provides monthly meetings on topics such as grants, the union, library resources, and how to negotiate challenges that new faculty face. This group was really useful as an orientation to UNO faculty culture as well as meeting people across disciplines that I normally would not get to meet. I've made two good friends, both personally and professionally, through this group. However, there were some drawbacks to having so a broad group. New cohort members are added every year, so there is a risk of topics being covered annually. While these can be good refreshers, it can also become redundant and cause poor retention within the group, so this doesn't really build long term relationships or support networks. It can be intimidating to join a group where you don't know anyone, so while once you're established in the group its easy to make connections and friends, starting off on your own can be a challenge. Finally, from the librarian's perspective, the academic content of the group tends to focus on grants for labs, major funding, syllabus creation. For the librarians at our institution, those things are only tangentially related. We write grants, but not for the types of projects of from

the types of institutions that others in the STEM field would. We don't need major grants for labs or research projects. Librarians as a rule do not teach classes that require course registration- we are much more likely to conduct one-shots or be incorporated into an existing assignment. Therefore, our syllabus work is much more focused on integrating library research SLOs or measurable objectives into the teaching faculty's syllabus. Finally, librarians at our institution present at conferences- a lot of conferences. That is our main avenue for sharing scholarship. This was not reflected in the Pre-Tenure Faculty Leadership Forum where conferences and service were dismissed as an occasionally necessary nuisance. There is another group hosted here in the Library called Shut Up and Write, which was created by a former library colleague Heidi Blackburn and is currently co-led by librarian Tammi Owens and Laura Alexander, assistant professor in Religious studies. This group gather people from all colleges and disciplines to come together, sit together, and write. Its an accountability and encouragement group. It is wonderful. But I wanted something where active discussion and collaboration was more front and center. Shut Up and Write is silent comradery focusing on current scholarship. I wanted a peer group that more focused on the backend of things: paperwork, proposals, and navigating areas of confusion as best we could. I would just like to point out here that our department directors are very good about answering RPT questions. We are by no means left without resources for this. But sometimes its nice to talk to people in the same boat about a roadblock. Just wanted to put that out there.

Additionally, we had some new hires during the pandemic and I thought that this might be a useful group. When I first arrived at UNO, I would often chat with colleagues, leaning on their office doors. I saw this as a virtual placeholder for door-leaning.

Wendy: I was hired in March 2020 and started the job in June. I moved from Mpls to Omaha and started working while campus was basically shut down to all but essential employees. This meant that my onboarding occurred only over Zoom during a high-stress time when everyone around me was maxed to their capacity. I've never felt more isolated than when people around me were canceling meetings to combat Zoom fatigue, while I perhaps had 1-3 meetings a week outside of my digital collections work and really looked forward to those small connection times. When the opportunity arose to join a peer group that promoted the idea of decompress and connect time, I jumped for it.
I hoped the group would provide some connections with people who worked in other areas of the library, while also providing a roadmap of sorts on how to navigate faculty status at an academic library. I found it mystifying how we were supposed to get started on the research, service, and librarianship aspects of RPT, and how we were supposed to record our progress in our tracking platform. I joined this group to not only connect with my peers during a lonely transition into a new role, but to also

seek help navigating my new work environment.

Monica: Since we are all pre-tenured and collaboration is an important piece of the culture at our library, creating this group for me seemed like a wonderful way to create and support that cross-departmental collaboration, whether it be working together on scholarship such as presentations or articles, other committees or sub-committees, or just offering ideas or discussion surrounding work related topics. I think that a lot of these communications don't need to be super formal, and I have appreciated having this time blocked out on my calendar for work and scholarship, but also comradery. Like Wendy said, especially during the last year and a half with so much work moving online and being isolated at home, I found it very valuable to have a space where the idea was that I could get support and encouragement from my peers and also hear how their lives have been going.

Lacey: Like Wendy, I started at UNO during the pandemic. Campus shut down fully at the end of March and I officially started April 1; my first day was from my then home three hours away in Kearney. I was also excited for an opportunity to get to know more of my colleagues. When asked by Claire if I was interested in joining, my main reason for accepting was the idea of having a ready-made group of peers to collaborate with on projects. As a group, we represent three different departments. UNO Libraries does an great job of fostering cross-departmental relationships, and I see this group as a way to continue those relationships, gain better knowledge of other departments, and possibly to collaborate on some rad projects that may have otherwise been missed.

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How Our Peer Group Served Us

- Conversations about requirements for Reappointment, Promotion, and Tenure (RPT) requirements
- Space to decompress and chat with people without an agenda
- Some project collaborations did occur
- Ability to get to know colleagues better

Claire: It was really nice to have an hour block twice a month on my calendar that was focused on chatting and decompressing with co workers. I found it nice to chat with people who are at the same level in number of publications, conferences, etc. The library is already a very safe space for project ideation, but this felt even more secure. I wasn't worried about anything, even and especially if my idea was a little silly. The group also helped me become better acquainted with colleagues in departments with which I don't directly collaborate. While I work with Wendy and Monica for projects and instruction, I really don't interact with Patron Services, Lacey's department, and thereby didn't have a lot of avenues to get to know Lacey while in this remote environment. This peer group provided that avenue. One meeting it was just Lacey and me in the zoom room. It was so nice to have this space to just chat without an agenda, get to know Lacey, and meet her dogs.

In this group, we also talked a little bit about service, something that is not covered in the Pre-Tenure faculty. For the RPT process in the Library, service plays a more prominent role than it does across the rest of the campus. Maybe the Library just takes service more seriously. But through this group, we were able to chat about the various type of service and levels of committee commitment. This group also served as a place to share victories big and small. Monica and I, along with another campus

colleague, had a book chapter accepted, and this group was very supportive and happy for us. I also shared with this group my teaching victory of not having a coughing fit during an in-person instruction session. Watch this space to see if I can make it through a virtual session without coughing! For me, this peer group is a safe space to share silly and not so silly things that affect our daily working life.

Lacey: As the only faculty member in Patron Services, I need something like this as an inroads to being comfortable enough to approach someone from another department to collaborate. I can collaborate with staff members, but it is, frankly, easier to find funds to pay for faculty participation in conferences and whatnot. Our two newest faculty members have been on campus more than Wendy and I were when we started, and I think that adding them to the group would give us an even broader range for collaboration. If we were to turn this group into more of a new faculty happy hour, we all have pets we could bond over. Wendy and I both have dachshunds that I'm sure would love to torment each other. Claire, how would your cat react to a dog park meet-up?

Monica: I agree with what Lacey and Claire said as well. I'm happy that I had this space for multiple reasons over the past year. For example, I do think that this group has helped me with some of my specific scholarship projects. As Claire said, we got a book chapter accepted this past spring. We also decided to put this presentation together. What really meant a lot to me and my process for embarking on new research and scholarship ideas was just that collaboration and comradery that this group offered. I can be a huge procrastinator too, so I think that having this space for me to see my colleagues and hear what they were doing really helped me to be more proactive and thoughtful about ways that I could collaborate with them. For example, I had seen the call for proposals for the book chapter that Claire and I did in an email, and then shortly after that we had some conversation over message boards about what we were going to discuss in our group. So even though I was isolated at home, I saw communication from Claire and I thought, Oh, I'd love to collaborate with Claire on that chapter! That would be so great! So it really helped me to continue that collaboration that I love about our culture so much. It was great to hear what every one was working on as well. I met with my department weekly over Zoom during the pandemic, but scheduled faculty meetings only take place once a month during fall and spring, and we don't have them during the summer, so I think this group helped me to feel connected with those from other departments during the isolated summer months.

How Our Peer Group Did NOT Serve Us

- Lack of structure stalled activities
- Max emotional and mental capacity for Zoom
- Grant writing, reflections and evaluations to ensure useful group meetings
- Not meeting during the summer was a mistake- should have held in-person event

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Despite this, there were some definite challenges in this group.

Claire: The informal and unstructured meetings definitely stalled usefulness. I felt like I had to have an agenda and I rarely did, there was a lot of pressure on me (pressure created by me) to make these meetings meaningful and useful. If I didn't have talking points to get us going, I felt like I was wasting everyone's time. I think going forward have a theme or a focus would be helpful. I still like the space for decompression and chat but I also want to be very aware of not scheduling useless meetings. I think that is were Wendy and I missed communication-wise she really needed more Zoom because she was new but I was concerned about overwhelming people with meetings. I also regret that we didn't continue this group through the summer. I think that hindered us a bit in that we lost momentum and the bit of community that we had established. I know that I was worried about Zoom fatigue for the group since I was experiencing a lot of personal digital burnout, but I probably should have kept something going during the summer to help Wendy and Lacey feel connected.

I think I was overly ambitious about what this group could become in 1 year. I think if we had spent this past year coming up with topics and themes for moving forward, there would have been more momentum and a feeling of greater purpose. We did

make strides in establishing peer-to-peer comfort and academic vulnerability, but we need to think more carefully about the peer-mentorship aspect. Monica has been at UNO the longest and I was initially worried that it would fall on her to provide answers for all our questions.

Wendy: Like Claire indicated, our connections paused over the summer. Many of us in the library returned to onsite work at least a few days each week early in the spring, with us being fully onsite since August. But despite this return to in-person work when the fall semester started, our group continued to meet remotely. If relationships can be established and thrive over 60 minutes Zoom meetings twice a month, I have yet to see it happen. This could simply be my personal experience though. I've found it very difficult to form relationships over Zoom, especially while participants are emotionally and mentally maxed out due to an ongoing pandemic. One activity we did as a group was receive a demonstration from our Digital Learning department on how to use our platform for RPT progress tracking. I was hopeful that this exercise would help me understand my faculty role much better, but in reality the lack of library-specific instruction and guidance resulted in me completing my annual review work incorrectly.
Outside of that structed activity, there were certainly times when meeting as a relatively unstructured group was very nice because it allowed for some low-key connection. We were able to chat about our individual projects and also cover things like house hunting, pets, and restaurants with good take out—all good things for a newcomer like me! It is entirely possible and likely that I simply don't have the personality that makes virtual connections successful, but I'm hoping that with some additional structure in the upcoming year and possibly in-person meetings, we can find the common ground that often allows people to naturally establish and grow relationships.

Lacey: We do collaborate- we're in this presentation now and I think in the future there will be even more opportunities. But since we are such a new cohort, and we took a summer break, it's hard to gauge our success in getting to know each other. Hopefully we can find a space to meet in-person in the coming months, but with the pandemic still rolling on it's hard to say that we are even fully comfortable meeting in person. I am excited about the future of this group, and hope that in 3-5 years we'll all be collectively celebrating our tenure.

Monica: Since this is a super new group and our meetings have pretty much all been virtual at this point, I think that the nature of that is making it take a bit longer to get organized. I think it takes longer to accomplish most things over Zoom for whatever reason, whether that's planning an event, teaching a lesson plan, or starting up this group, I think it is taking us longer to get into a groove than it would have had we all

been on campus and created this same type of peer group. One thing I was really looking forward to discussing was tenure requirements, and our online system Digital Measures which we use to track our librarianship, scholarship and service achievements. Digital Measures is super confusing to use, and I think that part of that comes from the fact that it is designed for traditional faculty who teach credit bearing courses, however, I think it is probably still confusing for them as well... so that tells you what kind of user experience most people have when they use it. It is not intuitive at all and it is a requirement that we need to fill it out. So we pretty quickly realize we were all having some questions regarding it, and we were able to get someone who works with new faculty to agree to come speak with us about Digital Measures during our meeting time. Unfortunately, that meeting didn't serve me, or really any of us. We got a tour of Digital Measures but I think the presentation was more geared toward traditional faculty again and when we asked questions the answers that we got weren't super meaningful in my opinion. Another way that this group hasn't served me, or maybe I should say, hasn't served me YET, we have generated few ideas of things we could do to improve the group and make it great, but so far we haven't been consistent in implementing those ideas. So I think as we all get back into the groove of being back on campus and attending meetings for this group, we can make improvements there.

Stakeholders that also weren't served…

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Claire- my cat had crippling zoom fatigue and ennui before the first peer group meeting. He was not interested in cross departmental collaboration.

Lacey: To follow up on Claire's comment- Zoom meetings do not serve my dogs whatsoever. They know there's a person on the other screen that has the ability to pet them, but there are no pets to be had. Here's Oliver patiently waiting for cuddle time and Cali not-so-patiently waiting for dinner.

Monica- Those are my two dogs. In this photo, Rita (the black dog), was letting me know that she doesn't appreciate me muting the mic when she's trying to make her voice heard in meetings.

Wendy: That is my mini dachshund Fritzi, who didn't understand why I was paying more attention to my computer screen than her; she was not pleased to not be the center of attention.

Vision for the Future at UNO

- Extend invitation to new library faculty

- Prevent creating a self-serving case study

- Professional development camaraderie?

- Balance structure and social?

- Peer group versus affinity group?
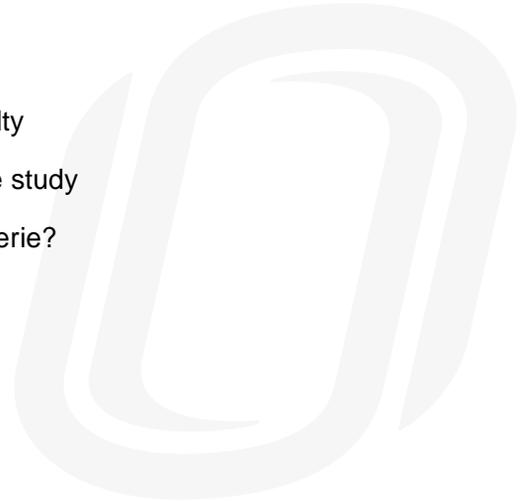
Sharing shortcomings is always a little uncomfortable, so now we move on to our vision for the future of this peer group.

Claire: I think we have the opportunity to make this group really useful and enjoyable - if we decide that is has the possibility to continue serving us. We are certainly going give it a try this year, and re-evaluate in the spring. So far we have invited our three new faculty members to the group.

We have already discussed as a group how we want to ensure that this doesn't just become a self-serving case study for future conferences. If we have something important to share we should but I don't want this to become "we did these 3 things so lets present on it" -respect the group and the conference world. This group, at its core, is about building professional friendships and academic sounding boards. To present on that too many times becomes to meta and possibly even naval-gazing.

One thing we have discussed is how it might be fun to find webinars and professional development opportunities and do them together, make the learning and conference watching process less lonely. Also allows for better retention of information and sharing in following meetings. We could reserve a conference room, grab lunch, a

coffee or responsible beverage of choice, and attend the webinars together. If we selected a theme for the year, something like accessibility in various library platforms, that would lead to some internal institutional work that would make materials more accessible, discoverable, and less intimidating to patrons.

Even though our work is vastly varied, I think that we all have projects that have overlapping elements- things like workflow, integrating standards from our respective professional development organizations (SAA, ALA, ACRL, RBMS, etcs), creating Libguides. Could we use this space to workshop our own ideas with input from others for clarity, efficiency, concision?

I also wonder what the "cohort" looks like going forward. Is this group useful for 1-2 year and then a new team takes over? Does it become more socially-oriented? Will the need for this group, as an established community of practice, diminish once we are secure in the new normal- less pandemic world? These are things to think about.

What I hope this group looks like in the future is more moments of mutual silliness. While working on this presentation and going over how the format would be a more chatty style between the four of us, I made a joke about how it would be a "Get Ready with Me" style vlog- which is a very popular YouTube genre where youtubers will do a skincare routine or put their make up on and talk to their viewers. This then became a joke about how funny it would be if we four created a youtube channel where we got ready while talking about library and archives topics. It was a funny moment that represented what I really hoped this group would turn into- a place for us to make professional friendships, wildly ideate some funny things, and also create a comfortable space for us to be intellectually vulnerable about new projects and ideas.

Lacey: I like to think that this group could become a space for brainstorming and to bounce ideas off others with different experiences. This is my first faculty position after being staff personnel for nearly a decade. I work mainly with staff personnel, and while I love my staff and have collaborative projects with them as well, I want other faculty member opinions on projects. Is something actually a good idea? Is it worth pursuing? I think having a theme and a dedicated yearly goal is a good start to bringing focus to the group. We don't have to go to a conference or write an article every year. I think having a year to focus on DEAI training and possibly having an in-house workshop would be an appropriate theme. We learn, we teach, it's what we do anyway.

Wendy: The future of this group might be a little bit of trial and error as we determine what meets our needs best. One thing I do know now is that it certainly serves a different purpose than the various affinity groups on campus. I'm involved in UNO's Latinx affinity group and I have no expectation that that group will help me

understand my library RPT process and professional development, or partner with me on library specific goals. I do expect that I'll connect with people from all areas across campus, identify common interests and possible areas for collaborative projects that reach beyond the library. Clarifying how this peer group is different than other types of groups across campus may help us solidify our vision and goals for future years.

Monica: I agree, more organized, more goal-driven, possibly more social, depending on COVID. I think I am the furthest along on the tenure track, so I guess I should probably set the example for when faculty members exit the group, as Claire mentioned above. It feels like this is kind of a transitional year since we are all newly back on campus. I'm hopeful once we get the new pre-tenured folks in the group, they'll bring their own ideas for what will serve them as well, and we can then perhaps create rough outlines or meeting agendas for the Spring 2022 semester. It will be interesting to see if the group wants to continue collaborating on new projects among the peers in the group, such as this presentation, or if it will begin to function more as a space for communication, sharing goals and achievements, and it could perhaps turn into a space where one can bring in outside scholarship projects in order to get peer feedback from the group. I can see this group changing a lot over the years, depending on who is in it and what their needs are. I think this group can be great for meeting new faculty where they are at and then letting them make decisions for how it is going to grow and change as they work within it.

Creating Your Own Peer Group

- Cross-college mentorship

- Public library branches across a system

- Reflect on your organization and what will serve the group's needs

- Potential welcome committee for new staff beyond basic training

- Specific groups for projects

If you've had experience with creating peer groups at your institution, we would love to hear about it in the chat. Let us know what went well, what didn't, and where you hope you can take your group in the future.

Claire: Our institution is looking to create cross-college mentorship a reality which would be great. But I do wonder if that will have similar "problems" that the Pre-Tenured Faculty Leadership Forum has- that the contours of library work won't be understood and accounted for. I'm not trying to minimized the good work that our institution is doing towards mentorship, but I do wonder if we will end up running a parallel program for librarians and archivists, similar to our group right here.

- Applying this model for other organizations
  - Our institution is looking at ways to increase inter-college and cross campus mentoring programs. We see our group as a smaller, more informal version of this. It was easy to create and can be applied to other groups.

I don't think we've done anything radical here, in created a peer group within a larger

organization. But I do think our groups is special in how we tried to balance work related collaboration and a space for social decompression. I think the inter-department part of this was an important element because it provided an opportunity for us to be aware of the work the others were doing. I think the bones of the group was a good idea, I think like many things the application was a bit rough in this first year.

Wendy: I can see this model being employed by librarians at different branches of one system; it could help them build community and support across physical distance. That said, I wasn't a librarian when I worked in the public library, so I could be wrong! I can also see it being useful for library staff of various different types/levels at a research or special library. Hard to know what will work for some and not others...

Lacey: I've been in public and academic libraries, and I can see this kind of group as helpful to new staff in public libraries as well. Something beyond the one-shot, "hey, what's your job here?" meetings help all staff get to know their colleagues and better understand the roles performed. A similar group may be a bridge between part- and full-time staff, or frontline and behind the scenes folks. The group is cross departmental for us, and it is a great way to understand what is happening within the library as a whole. A peer group with the intention of professional staff mentoring incoming pages/clerks could be used for professional development and teaching opportunities in a less stuffy setting. A peer group for brainstorming display ideas, booklists, or tech committees that include more than professional staff seem like a positive step.

Monica: I agree with what everyone has said! When we were talking about our vision for this group in our university on the last slide, I think I like those ideas of it being a group that meets members where they are at and can be changed depending on who is in the group and what their needs are. So maybe even in a different setting, like a public or a special or a school library, this group would look different year to year. I really appreciate the reflection that this group has allowed me to do about myself and my goals for this year and for my pre-tenure career in general, and I think that we've been able to carry that reflective attitude over and apply it to this group. I like that this is a group for us and that it does matter whether or not it serves each of us. I think this type of thinking can be beneficial to different libraries, the same way mentorship can. So I think that by determining what type of mentoring format you'd like for a group, whether it is peer mentoring or more traditional, and then determining what the aim of the group is, how it can serve you, you can then create a group that will work to benefit you, your colleagues, and the service that your library is able to provide as a whole.

Thank you all so much for attending our presentation. We are still online and available to chat so please share if you have any final questions. Enjoy the rest of the conference.