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Peers Don't Let Peers Perish: Encouraging Research and Scholarship Among Junior Library Faculty

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Abstract

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Abstract

Traditional mentoring has many benefits, but peer mentoring can also offer a valuable support structure along the road to tenure. The Junior Faculty Research Roundtable (JFRR) is a peer-mentoring group for junior library faculty at the colleges and graduate schools of the City University of New York (CUNY). Created to encourage junior library faculty in their scholarly endeavors, JFRR organizes professional development events and facilitates in-person and online conversations on research, writing, and publishing. Now three years old, the group has transformed a large number of scattered junior library faculty into a supportive community of scholars.

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Introduction

For many new academic librarians, the transition from a graduate library science program or other non-tenure-track job to a first tenure-track position in a college or university library can be challenging. Tenure-track appointments in academic libraries typically require scholarly research, presentations, and publications, and as Mitchell and Morton point out in their article on the acculturation process for academic librarians, "the M.L.S. program is not designed to produce researchers. . . . Therefore, academic librarians usually lack socialization to research that other faculty gained in graduate school."¹

Mentorship is one strategy often used to smooth the transition of junior library faculty into their new positions. While traditional mentoring relationships have been shown to have many benefits, peer mentoring can also provide junior library faculty with support and advice along the road to tenure. However, it can be difficult to create a peer-mentoring group without a sufficient num-

ber of junior library faculty, a critical mass that is often not present in smaller academic libraries.

This article describes the origins, establishment, and ongoing evolution of the Junior Faculty Research Roundtable (JFRR), a peer-mentoring group for junior library faculty at the City University of New York (CUNY), the largest urban public university in the United States. Dispersed throughout New York City's five densely populated boroughs and enrolling over 480,000 students, CUNY comprises 23 diverse institutions, including two- and four-year colleges as well as master's, doctoral, and professional programs.² CUNY includes 20 libraries of varying sizes and with varying numbers of library faculty.

Developed as a part of the Library Association of CUNY (LACUNY), the Junior Faculty Research Roundtable provides mentoring, support, and advice for junior library faculty at CUNY's many schools. Now at the end of its third year, JFRR has been largely successful in achieving its goals and sup-



porting its members, and could provide a model for other junior library faculty interested in creating a peer-mentoring group of their own.

Models of Peer Mentoring

Across all disciplines, the literature on mentorship primarily addresses traditional mentoring relationships between experienced mentors and novice mentees. The benefits of a traditional mentoring relationship are also well attested in the literature of academic librarianship—see, for example, the literature reviews in “Establishing a Pre-Tenure Review Program in an Academic Library” by Crump, Drum, and Seale; “Peer Mentoring: One Institution’s Approach to Mentoring Academic Librarians” by Level and Mach; “Academic Libraries and the Pursuit of Tenure: The Support Group as a Strategy for Success” by Miller and Benefiel; and especially the very thorough bibliography in “Revitalizing a Mentoring Program for Academic Librarians” by Farmer, Stockham, and Trussell.³ Tenured librarian mentors have years of employment experience, and their knowledge of the research process as well as the nuances of the local institutional climate can be extremely valuable to junior colleagues.

An alternative model for mentoring takes advantage of the relationship among librarians at a similar point in their careers: as peers on tenure track. While traditional mentoring and peer mentoring have similar goals—to support and encourage junior faculty librarians as they progress toward tenure—they differ in a number of ways. Mentoring among peers can be much less formal, which may be more comfortable for librarians who are still adjusting to their new positions and the expectations of academic research. Also, peer mentoring is by nature a reciprocal relationship, which may make it easier to solicit advice and assistance with research, manuscript drafts, and other scholarly tasks.

Certain features of peer mentoring can be particularly valuable for academic librarians

negotiating new leadership roles and rapidly evolving technology. Mavrinac argues that academic libraries must “adopt a learning culture . . . in order to meet the challenges of [today’s] fluid and rapidly changing environment.”⁴ She suggests that the non-hierarchical structure of peer mentoring lends itself well to facilitating a learning culture in which librarians of all ranks and levels of experience can learn from each other. Murphy believes that the more equitable nature of peer-mentoring relationships especially benefits untenured academic librarians in the many new positions that have been created in the past decade.⁵

Just as there is no single best way to run a library, there is no single best way to run a peer-mentoring group. What is best for a library depends on that library’s (and institution’s) atmosphere, hierarchy, and research requirements. The scholarly literature describes the range of possible strategies for peer mentorship in college and university libraries. At one end of the spectrum is Stony Brook University, where untenured librarians organize an annual retreat in which they present the results of their research projects and discuss library issues of relevance.⁶ Stony Brook’s model is rare: most peer-mentoring groups meet much more than once a year, usually once a month or once every other month. But even among groups that meet more frequently, there is considerable variability in structure and activities.

Some peer-mentoring groups focus on the act of writing. For example, junior library faculty at the University of Buffalo created the Academic Writing Group, a group that discusses many aspects of academia but concentrates on writing. Members of the Academic Writing Group encourage, read, and critique each other’s work, and one of the group’s stated goals is to help each member publish a peer-reviewed article or book.⁷ Not all junior faculty writing groups are created and run by junior faculty, though. The junior faculty writing group at the University of Memphis Libraries was founded by the chair of the tenure and pro-

motion committee because “administrators and supervisors must facilitate an optimal environment for [successful writing],” which “does not spontaneously generate itself.”⁸

Other peer-mentoring groups are primarily support groups, often informal chat groups that provide time and space for members to share professional experiences of all kinds. One such group is Oakland University’s Untenured Librarians Club (Un-TLC), in which members “encourage and congratulate, advise, and empathize when things go awry.”⁹ The Un-TLC is led by the library’s associate dean, but its monthly meetings are nevertheless casual, friendly, and off the record. Another support group for untenured librarians is the Tenure Support Group at Texas A&M University. Unlike the Un-TLC, the Tenure Support Group was started by untenured librarians, but its monthly meetings are open to all librarians and often include a presentation by a senior librarian.¹⁰ Both the Un-TLC and the Tenure Support Group understand that sustained moral support can boost achievement; as Miller and Benefiel from Texas A&M note, “[t]he atmosphere of caring and sharing that results from a support group can remove one more hurdle in the tenure process and increase the productivity and success of each member.”¹¹

Unsurprisingly, most peer-mentoring groups are not strictly writing groups or support groups. Most—including the groups that explicitly call themselves writing groups or support groups—offer a variety of forms of support, education, and assistance. For example, Northwestern State University’s Professional Advancement Group is a collection of tenured and untenured librarians who share experiences, bounce around ideas, and sometimes read each other’s work.¹² Similarly, Colorado State University Libraries’ “juniors” group, which supplements the Libraries’ traditional mentoring program, offers many forms of support—including moral support, opportunities for collaboration, and feedback on writing.¹³

Goals for the Junior Faculty Research Roundtable

One of our main goals for JFRR is to provide support to junior library faculty. We want members to feel they have a “safe place” to share their experiences, opinions, and concerns about the road to tenure. Since it is inspiring to watch fellow members succeed, we make sure to celebrate our research and publishing successes, too.

Our other focus is professional development specifically related to research and publishing. Educational activities include formal programs featuring speakers from outside the group and outside the university. We also facilitate informal, peer-led discussions on a wide range of scholarly research and publishing topics; these too have been valuable and professionally useful.

However, CUNY is a university unlike any other, and JFRR differs from other peer-mentoring groups in several significant ways. Because CUNY’s many schools have different tenure requirements, we do not engage in detailed discussion about specific schools’ tenure requirements or procedures. Additionally, since there are other groups in LACUNY, the university, and New York City that offer professional development programming for librarians and tenure-track faculty members, we strive to keep our educational activities tightly focused on the topics most relevant to early career academic librarians.

While many library faculty members have been hired at CUNY in the past five years, most of the individual schools have only a few untenured librarians, which means that most junior librarians have only a few peers at their own libraries. Therefore, we also envisioned JFRR as a resource for meeting peers, developing relationships with colleagues, and finding collaborators across the university.



Getting Started

Despite the differences among CUNY schools, one feature is common to all: librarians are faculty and undergo rigorous tenure and promotion reviews. Therefore, library faculty must be professionally active in all the ways that other faculty are, including publishing. Tenure-track library faculty are required to have an additional degree, but most opt for a second master's rather than a Ph.D., so library faculty are often less prepared for scholarly research and writing than other faculty, who are groomed in doctoral programs for these activities.¹⁴

One day in April 2008, the authors had a cathartic conversation about the challenges of the tenure track. We began by chatting about our individual research projects, but before long we found ourselves talking about the research process and commenting on how reassuring and valuable this conversation was. We resolved to find a way to talk about research more often and with more people. We considered the idea of gathering together a small group of friends and acquaintances for this purpose, but we immediately saw that this was not the right model because it would not expose us to a wide variety of people or ideas, and it could be difficult to fit meetings into our schedules after work.

Rather, we decided to aim big—big as in “inclusive” and big as in “official.” A larger group would provide CUNY's scattered junior library faculty with many more peers than they have at their home libraries, thus expanding dialogue and broadening the scope of ideas that could be addressed. Also, becoming an official entity would identify us as a serious group with meetings important enough to be held on work time. We agreed that the best way to achieve these big goals was to ally ourselves with LACUNY, noted earlier as the professional organization for library faculty and staff at CUNY.

We worried that it might be hard for the two of us to sell our idea without any evidence of broader interest, so we enlisted a couple

of colleagues before going public. With their support, we could pitch the idea as a working group rather than as a couple of friends with a big idea. Together, the four of us sent an email to the CUNY libraries email list inviting all junior faculty to meet and explore the idea of creating a research group.

In June 2008, 19 junior library faculty from across CUNY met, explored ideas for a research group, and agreed that allying the group with LACUNY was both desirable and strategic. To make sure that everyone's voice could be heard, we also distributed a poll asking what the group should address, how it should be structured, and how often it should meet. By the group's second meeting, in August 2008, it had become clear what we were, who we were, and why we had formed.

Making It Official

In order to become an official LACUNY entity, we needed to write a mission statement and seek a vote of approval at a LACUNY Executive Council meeting. We spent considerable time and effort crafting the statement and defining who exactly would be the main constituents of the group. While many junior library faculty are assistant professors on tenure track or instructors who will become tenure-track once they have completed a second master's degree, there are other untenured faculty in CUNY libraries, including adjuncts, lecturers, and untenured associate and full professors. Ultimately we decided that while all untenured faculty would be welcome, JFRR would be primarily geared toward those untenured faculty who are least familiar and most concerned with research and publishing: assistant professors and instructors.

The mission statement adopted by JFRR reads: “The Junior Faculty Research Roundtable is a forum for untenured CUNY library faculty to discuss their research ideas, concerns, and experiences. The Roundtable will hold regular meetings, maintain its own email list, and encourage exchange among colleagues with similar interests and/or



complementary skills. Membership is open to all untenured CUNY library faculty."¹⁵ After receiving approval from the LACUNY Executive Council in September 2008, JFRR officially elected the authors as co-chairs.

How JFRR Works: Communication and Support

JFRR operates both online and in person, and invites members to select the means of participation that work best for them. Before the Roundtable was official, we established an online discussion group (using Yahoo! Groups) to facilitate communication. The group's email list now boasts over 60 subscribers, and nearly all JFRR members have opted to join the list. The list serves as a place for members to post research-related questions, announcements, requests for readers, calls for papers, suggested readings, and congratulations. Because CUNY's campuses are geographically distributed, it is valuable to have a central, online space that JFRR members can use to communicate anytime.

JFRR also holds in-person meetings every other month—more frequently than most other LACUNY committees and roundtables, which tend to meet once or twice per semester. Of course, JFRR members are not required to attend every meeting. Members can attend the meetings that interest them and work with their schedules, and missing a few meetings is not as isolating as it would be if the group met less frequently. We use the online polling website Doodle to select meeting dates and times that work for as many members as possible, and to optimize convenience for everyone we always meet at one of the CUNY schools in Manhattan.

Each of our meetings includes at least one of the following kinds of discussion:

1. **Invited Speakers:** Sometimes we invite speakers from outside the group to share their experiences or make us aware of opportunities. Speakers have included tenured library faculty members, CUNY's Executive Director for Re-

search Conduct, and a representative from a library science publisher. They have spoken about types of leave time at CUNY, oral histories, book reviews, quantitative methodologies, human subjects research and Institutional Review Board approval, and submitting articles to peer-reviewed journals.

2. **Structured Discussions:** Other meetings include a focused discussion on a specific research-related topic. Some of these discussions feature a Roundtable member with relevant experience, and some are conversations facilitated by the co-chairs. Discussion topics have included copyright issues, collaboration across CUNY, tactics for jumpstarting research and writing, and publishing in subject-specific library journals and non-library journals.
3. **Informal Conversations about Scholarship:** Because JFRR is a peer-mentoring group, we do not want to pack its calendar with formal programming. Therefore, we regularly leave time for easy, open conversations about members' research projects and problems. For these informal conversations we do not plan ahead but rather simply discuss whatever attendees want to discuss. The group never fails to generate a lively and supportive conversation.

After each meeting, we write detailed minutes for the benefit of members who were unable to attend. We are especially careful to record invited speakers' advice, which might also help future JFRR members. To keep JFRR a "safe space," we omit from the minutes sensitive, personal, or potentially inflammatory comments. Minutes are archived on both the LACUNY website and the online discussion group.

In addition to the email list and face-to-face meetings, JFRR offers several other forms of support. There have been many discussions about how the group should function, and we ran short polls in July 2008 and July 2009 to gauge member interest in possible fea-



tures of the group and forms of support. Ideas that emerged from these polls and discussions include:

1. **Research Pacts:** At one of our earliest meetings we discussed the idea of research partners — pairs of junior library faculty who keep track of and encourage each other's scholarly work. Initially, the authors played matchmaker and paired up members interested in keeping a pact; we no longer play matchmaker but periodically remind members that they can email the group if they would like a research partner.
2. **Readings and Resources for Research and Scholarship:** JFRR members email links to research resources, including websites that list publication and speaking opportunities, and compile these links on the online discussion group and wiki (see below). We have also compiled a list of books and articles with advice and guidelines for academic writing and publishing.
3. **Subject-specific Subgroups:** When JFRR formed, we were surprised by the number of members the group attracted. While it is wonderful to have so many members, the size of JFRR makes it difficult to take on some of the roles that other peer-mentoring groups serve. For example, it is not feasible for the full membership of JFRR to function as a writing group. In order to offer some of the features of smaller research groups, JFRR members decided to create subgroups centered on various subjects, including libraries, arts and humanities, sciences, and education. The co-chairs created a wiki with a page for each subgroup in order to facilitate subgroup organization and interaction.

Gauging Our Success: What Has Worked

We have periodically polled our members to assess the way the group functions, asking members what's working, what's not, and what ideas they have for the future of JFRR. As our time as co-chairs was drawing to a close, we decided to run one final survey of our members (see Appendix for the full set of survey questions). Twenty-two of our members elected to take the survey in March 2010. (As co-chairs, we did not participate in the survey.)

All indications confirm the success of JFRR. Our email list grew from 22 subscribers in August 2008 to 60 subscribers in May 2010. Group membership has both persisted and grown during the group's existence: 55% of members who took the survey joined in JFRR's first year. Meeting attendance fluctuates: some programs have drawn up to 25 attendees, though typical attendance is 13 to 15. However, there is much evidence from the survey that communication via the email list and conversations at meetings are working well for members. Nearly all survey respondents reported that they attend meetings and read messages on the email list (96% for each); 41% also post messages on the email list.

Members who took the survey also responded positively to the question that asked them to indicate which aspects of JFRR they find personally valuable. Respondents could choose as many answers as they felt applied to them, and a majority indicated that they value the opportunity to network with other junior library faculty in CUNY, the discussions about research and writing, and JFRR's programming (Figure 1). One member enjoyed "hearing about what other junior faculty are working on, researching, etc." There was only one somewhat negative response to this question; one member has not found anything of value yet but stays a member with the hope that there will be something of interest in the future.

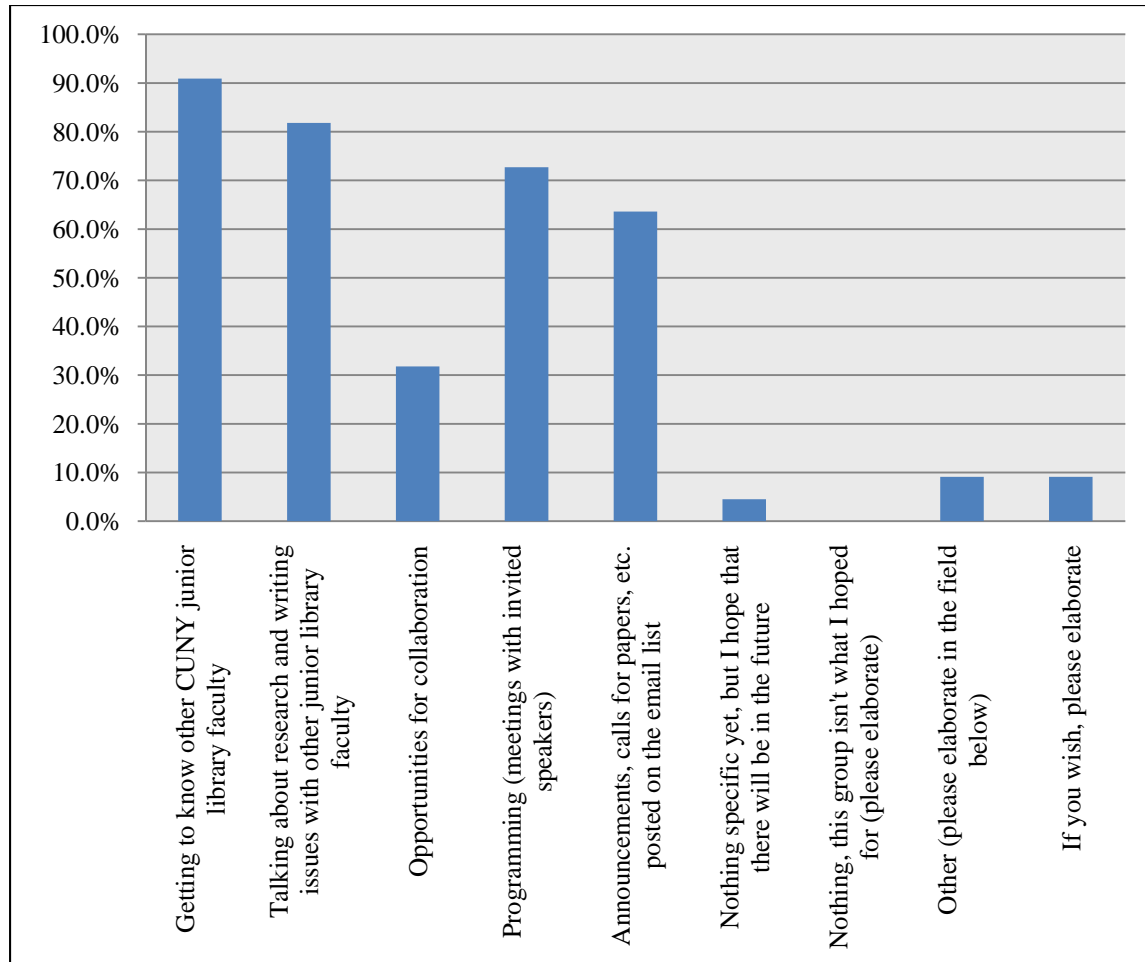


Figure 1: "What if anything do you find valuable about the JFRR?"

Since one of JFRR's goals is to provide a peer-mentoring opportunity for those who may not have many junior library faculty colleagues at their libraries, we were pleased to learn that a majority of members who took the survey (71%) indicated that JFRR offers them support that they do not find elsewhere. Some members added comments in response to this question:

- "The discussions are particularly useful because we are all junior library faculty. This is different than meeting with other junior faculty across disciplines – or with tenured colleagues."
- "A feeling of camaraderie with my peers, and also a chance to reflect on professional goals."

- "Creative ideas for research and publishing."
- "The group makes me feel less alone."

A strong majority of JFRR members who participated in the survey found JFRR useful and are pleased that the group was formed (Figure 2). Eighty-one percent felt that membership in JFRR has helped them toward their own goals for tenure and promotion, and 96% thought it a worthwhile organization regardless of what they personally have gotten from it. One member commented: "Having the opportunity to share ideas and exchange information with colleagues is always beneficial. Especially for someone who is relatively new to academic librarianship."

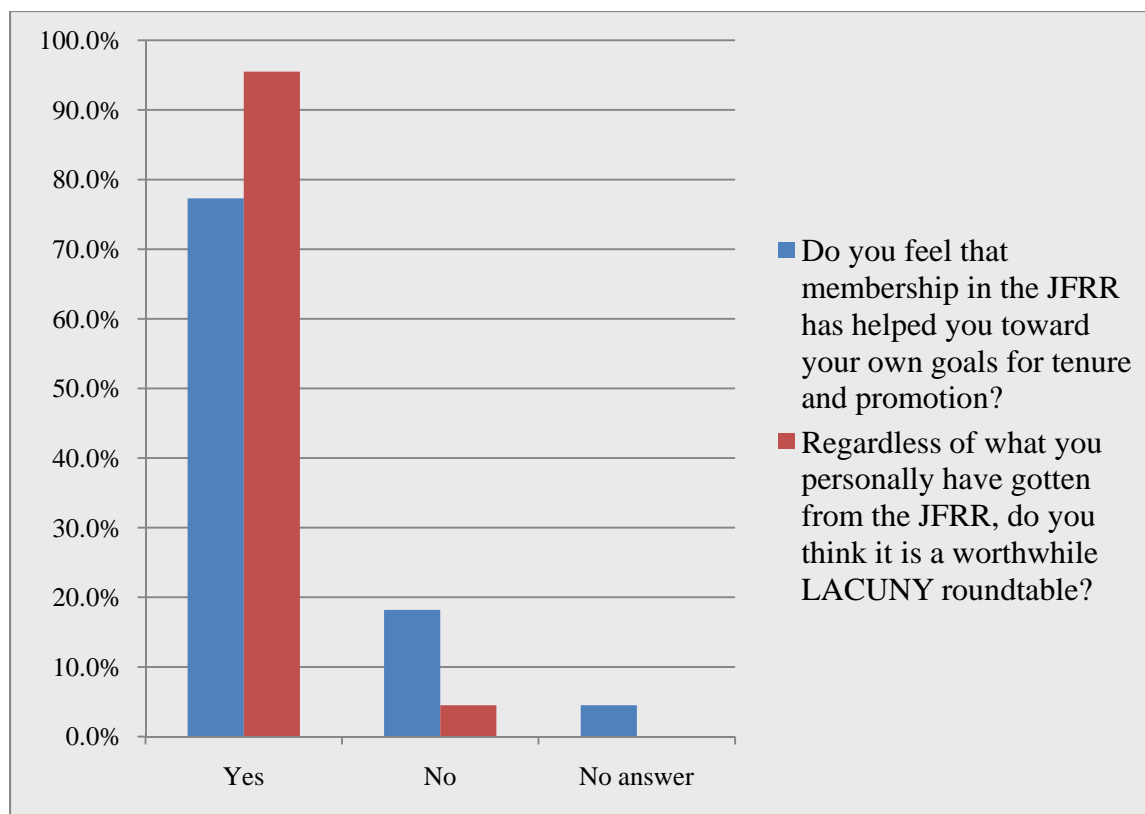


Figure 2: JFRR Members' Opinions of the Group

JFRR has also received some outside validation. First, several library department chairs actively encourage their junior faculty to attend JFRR meetings. We are delighted that these administrators view participation in JFRR as valuable. Second, a collection of library faculty of all ranks has created the LACUNY Library Faculty Mentoring Roundtable, a group that will provide junior library faculty with traditional mentoring from senior library faculty. That Roundtable bills itself as a complement to JFRR, an acknowledgment that there is room for and value in both traditional mentoring and peer mentoring.

Lessons Learned: What Has Not Worked

While we are delighted that so many JFRR members value the group and its offerings, we are aware that there is one thing everybody craves that we cannot deliver: concrete, campus-specific advice about tenure. Because all JFRR members are untenured and because different campuses have differ-

ent expectations and procedures, we cannot speak authoritatively, from experience, about what tenure-seekers should and should not do. Therefore, we must steer clear of such discussions, which would necessarily be speculative and unreliable, even if doing so disappoints members, who are understandably hungry for tenure advice.

Not only do the authors recognize that JFRR fails to offer something that members desire, we also recognize that some JFRR offerings have not been popular. For example, despite the early enthusiasm for research pacts, only three pacts were formed, and only one has lasted. The sole survivor is the authors' own pact with each other, in which we use a shared online spreadsheet to set goals, record progress, confess failings, offer suggestions, and cheer achievements. We consider our pact an unqualified success, but the same clearly cannot be said of the research pact program as a whole. Still, the success of our research pact has convinced us of the value of the program and brings

hope that more pacts will form in the future, perhaps after some strong testimonials.

Subgroups were another initially popular idea that did not flourish. We created a wiki page for each subgroup and invited members to use them as workspaces, but no one has. However, the lists of subgroup members on the wiki may prompt some off-wiki collaboration. In fact, two survey respondents said that they have used the wiki for collaboration and one requested advice from a subgroup.

Although the wiki never came alive as a subgroup workspace, it has been used as a place to post links to professional development sites of ongoing interest. So, while not the dynamic resource we had hoped for, it is not entirely abandoned, and there is no cost or harm in keeping it—and it may spring to life sometime in the future. Perhaps one reason it has not yet flourished is that it is but another web resource that requires a login and password. One member commented on the survey that “it is hard to wrangle all the electronic subscriptions/wiki/etc.” but conceded that “this is true of any collaborative working group.”

Survey respondents offered a couple of other critical comments, but only one respondent answered “no” to the question, “Regardless of what you personally have gotten from the JFRR, do you think it is a worthwhile LACUNY roundtable?” We are disappointed that this participant has not found value in JFRR, but we suspect that it is impossible to satisfy all of our many members, each of whom has unique research and writing needs. And while we hope the group will become ever more useful and relevant to its members, we are heartened to know that respondents think we have struck a good balance overall.

Conclusions and Broader Applicability

In May 2010, the authors stepped down as co-chairs of JFRR, and we feel that the Roundtable has been and will continue to be a resounding success. JFRR has an active

membership, a firm footing in LACUNY, and plenty of momentum. We have every faith that it will continue to flourish under its current co-chairs—two creative and energetic junior faculty members from the CUNY Graduate Center.

As we have described, some offerings have been less popular than others and some members have been less satisfied than others, but we and many JFRR members feel that, on the whole, the group offers significant benefits. JFRR has transformed a large number of otherwise scattered junior library faculty into a community of scholars—a community that counteracts the solitude of writing, helps members maintain focus on their research projects, and provides opportunities for networking, learning, and collaboration.

Based on our successes and lessons learned, we encourage other junior librarians who do not have many peers in their own libraries to draw on the insights offered here and try something similar. We can imagine JFRR-like groups thriving at other multi-campus universities, at single-campus universities with many libraries, in regional college consortia, and even among libraries of unaffiliated institutions.

Endnotes

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¹⁰ Miller and Benefiel, "Academic Libraries and the Pursuit of Tenure" (see note 3 above).

¹¹ Ibid.

¹² Linda Newman Cox, Abbie Landry, and Gail Stern Kwak, "Less Terror in Tenure: The Professional Advancement Group," *LLA Bulletin* 61, no. 4 (1999): 233-238.

¹³ Level and Mach, "Peer Mentoring: One Institution's Approach" (see note 3 above).

¹⁴ See note 1 above. Also, in "Library School Programs and the Successful Training of Academic Librarians to Meet Promotion and Tenure Requirements in the Academy," Best and Kneip show that academic librarians who graduated from certain library schools publish more peer-reviewed articles in *College & Research Libraries* and *Journal of Academic Librarianship*, both top library science journals, than those who graduated from other schools. Further research into the connection between library school and publication rate is required, but perhaps some library schools better prepare librarians to be researchers and writers. Rickey D. Best and Jason Kneip, "Library School Programs and the Successful Training of Academic Librarians to Meet Promotion and Tenure Requirements in the Academy," *College & Research Libraries* 71, no. 2 (2010): 97-114.

¹⁵ Library Association of the City University of New York, "Junior Faculty Research Roundtable," <http://www.lacuny.org/committees-and-roundtables/roundtables/junior-faculty-research>.

Appendix

LACUNY Junior Faculty Research Roundtable Survey, Spring 2010

The purpose of this survey is to determine whether the JFRR is meeting its members' needs and to identify areas for improvement. The results of the survey will be analyzed and shared with all JFRR members, and can help shape the JFRR in the future.

1. When did you become a member of the LACUNY Junior Faculty Research Roundtable?
 - Summer 2008
 - Fall 2008
 - Spring 2009
 - Summer 2009
 - Fall 2009
 - Spring 2010
 - I don't remember

2. In which ways do you participate in the group? (Choose all that apply.)
 - Attend in-person meetings/events
 - Read messages on email list
 - Post messages to email list
 - Use the wiki for information gathering
 - Use the wiki for collaboration
 - Participate in a research pact partnership
 - Other, please describe:

3. What if anything do you find valuable about the JFRR? (Choose all that apply.)
 - Getting to know other CUNY junior library faculty
 - Talking about research and writing issues relevant to me with a critical mass of other junior library faculty
 - Opportunities for collaboration
 - Programming (meetings with invited speakers on topics related to writing or research)
 - Announcements, calls for papers, etc. posted on the email list
 - Nothing specific yet, but I stay a member in the hope that there will be in the future
 - Nothing, this group isn't what I hoped for (please elaborate in the field below)
 - Other (please elaborate in the field below)
 - If you wish, please elaborate:

4. Is there anything the group does not currently offer that you would like to see offered?
 - No, current offerings are good for me.
 - Yes, there are additional things I'd like to see offered:

5. Aside from additional offerings, is there anything you would change about the JFRR?
 - No, I like the group the way it is.
 - Yes, I would like to see some changes:

6. Do you feel that membership in the JFRR has helped you toward your own goals for tenure and promotion?

- Yes
 - No
 - If you wish, please elaborate:
7. Is there anything you get from the group that you don't get anywhere else?
- No
 - Yes, please describe:
8. Regardless of what you personally have gotten from the JFRR, do you think it is a worthwhile LACUNY roundtable?
- Yes
 - No
9. Do you have any other comments or feedback?