# Professional Development of Academic Librarians: An Overview

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## Abstract

Professional development (PD) is a lifetime learning process, which is both universal and individualized. It is a universal requirement of all librarians in order to keep up with the rapid changes in the library field and maintain professionalism. At the same time, it is an individualized experience that varies with the needs of specific work duties as well as resources available around one's working, social, and academic environment. This article overview on the needs (i.e., expansion and diversification of one's functionality) and resources for PD. Administrative support, a very important PD related topic, is also discussed.

**KEYWORDS:** Professional Development, College Library, Librarians, Job Satisfaction, ALA, CALA and Academic Librarians.

## INTRODUCTION

Professional development for academic librarians fulfills a need for the continuing acquisition of knowledge and competencies that has not been met by either formal education or on-the-job-training. This need is driven by both the "technological imperative" (the rapid technological change that characterizes contemporary academic libraries), and by the element that librarians share with other professionals, that they are compensated for what they know as well as for what they do. One essential component of the academic librarian's knowledge base is the world of scholarship. The library and information sciences degree does a competent job of preparing librarians for the role of service provider in assisting patrons with the process of completing their scholarship tasks. As individuals, however, librarians may be less well served by formal training for the scholarship demands of their own research and publication, particularly in faculty status settings. Professional development programs work well to foster both specific skill-sets and the more diffuse aspects of process.

While professional development is frequently practice, or task-oriented, it is an equally effective forum for imparting discipline-specific theory, and institutional culture and goals. The core of professional development consists of two elements: the process, and what is achieved via the process, the knowledge and skills pertaining to a given profession. The professional development literature reflects this dual nature, focusing primarily on delivery (process) or content. Professional development benefits both the individual and the institution. For the individual, the ongoing process of acquiring new information and skills promotes job competencies for performance upgrades and promotion. On the psychological level, heightened competency may reduce job-related stress and increase interest, promoting job satisfaction (Block, 2001). Due to its persistent and lasting nature, professional development is known also as "life-long learning." An active professional development program offers the institution a corporate strategy for dealing with change (Shaughnessy, 1992). Employee competency and satisfaction underwrite the improvement of library services.

This article addresses professional development for academic librarians, with a focus on three issues: needs, resources, and administrative support. Although libraries may vary significantly in their organizational structure, administration, and resources, the general implications and effects of programs on library staff bear great similarity across institutions. The discussion draws examples from practice in some academic libraries.

## 1.    NEEDS FOR PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

The perceived needs for professional development may arise in a wide range of situations. For a new librarian, occupational training begins from the moment he/she steps into the profession. Formal classroom instruction covers primarily generalized knowledge about the fundamental concepts and theories of library systems and operations. Each individual library, however, exhibits its own unique identity composed of organizational structure, types and arrangement of information resources, clientele characteristics and needs, and international relations that all form the work place culture. New hires, whether fresh from school with a recent curriculum, or with the advantage of years of practical experience, face the need of becoming familiar with the new institutional identity. Professional development opportunities can help the new librarian put theoretical knowledge into practice, apply generalized concepts to specific responsibilities, and become familiar with given job situations. Academic librarians are evaluated for their performance in scholarship as well as librarianship, and the requirements of the individual institution and the publishing industry may prompt no small measure of anxiety for new librarians (Sapon-White, 2004). Programs designed to familiarize librarians with institutional expectations and to de-mystify the writing and submission process can have a positive impact on institutional morale and individual achievement.

By virtue of being in the business of supplying information organization and retrieval services, academic libraries are intimately tied to the constant and rapid technological changes characterizing the information age. This technological imperative penetrates all aspects of the academic library's operations, and drastically influences the information behavior of librarians and patrons alike. The "push" factor for establishing an active professional development program is the institution's commitment to and emphasis on the quality and improvement of library services (Shaughnessy, 1992). The push factor for the individual librarian is the expectation and mandate that he or she both maintain expert knowledge of new products and services and at the same time participate in publishing and professional growth activities (Flatley & Weber, 2004).

Library and Information Science (LIS) is so closely related to Information Communication Technology (ICT) that the traditional definitions no longer accurately reflect the discipline without incorporating the conceptual element of information technology. Starting from the 1970s and 1980s, the impact of technological advancements have been increasing, changing the reader's habits in accessing and retrieving information. In order to provide better client services, accommodations to and acquisition of new technology have been made in all library transaction models (operations, service, and communication). The application of new technologies extends to acquisition, cataloging, collection development, circulation (including information sharing), reference (especially virtual reference), information literacy education, information retrieval, library services promotion, institutional internal communication,

and so on. Thus, all LIS professionals, regardless of departmental affiliation, face an imperative to upgrade their knowledge, improve their skills, and to adapt and broaden service models. They have no other option if they wish to maintain a role both in the profession and, by extension, in the vitality of the library as an institution.

## 2.    RESOURCES FOR PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Providers and delivery models for professional development resources are as diverse as the potential range of desired content. They run the gamut from formal programs with a big price tag, to informal "free" sessions sponsored by one's own department. The primary providers, familiar in the working life of most librarians, are the

professional associations [e.g. ALA, CALA (Chinese American Librarians Association)], educational institutions, and private vendors of library products and systems. These are supplemented by the offerings of private firms and consultants that generally focus on specialized short courses (e.g. Synergy Development & Training, LCC for leadership training).

- Professional Associations

The conferences and meetings sponsored by professional associations provide a forum not only for learning, but also for professional exchange. Presentations, posters, panel sessions, exhibits-- all bring people in the profession together, keeping them abreast of current trends, problems, and solutions. Associations also sponsor single-subject sessions and courses (e.g. ALA's Copyright Seminar, or ACRL's Institute for Information Literacy Immersion).

- College and University Resources

Academic libraries, being already housed in educational institutions are exceptionally rich in educational resources. Many grant partial or full tuition waivers for employees to pursue coursework and degree programs. A number of others take occasional coursework for subject content, but not related to a degree program. Post (library) degree education of this sort primarily addresses acquisition of knowledge in a subject field. More specific proficiencies are generally acquired through staff development programs and on-the-job training. A two-phase study of ARL librarians (Powell, 1988) found that while library school programs and on-the-job training accounted for the bulk of professional knowledge, participants indicated that they would prefer more access to staff development and continuing education programs.

Additional on-campus resources include training programs sponsored by various divisions such as human resources, instructional technology, grants, and faculty development. A short, representative list of topics available includes:

- ❖ Dealing with employee performance challenges
- ❖ Developing employee commitment and engagement
- ❖ Effective evaluation and performance review
- ❖ Supportive professional grant writing seminar
- ❖ The first-year college experience

In addition to taking advantage of the many formal opportunities for continuous learning, academic libraries can forge their own professional development programs, either internally, or in affiliation with neighboring and consortial libraries. These alternatives offer a great deal of flexibility in meeting unique organizational and staffing needs, and in a period of decreasing budgets, are attractive for their lower costs.

- Library Resources

Affiliations for the purpose of staff development and continuing education may be as large as the project described by Grumling and Sheehy (1993), involving a series of seminars for new, younger librarians at three major libraries in Chicago, or as relatively informal as bringing in a staff member from the law library across the street to present a session on legal reference. Cross-library visits between institutions in the same neighborhood are easy to initiate and sustain (Bell, 2009).

Academic libraries will find a rich mine of resources for professional development within their own doors. Being generally divided into departments or units based on operational functions (public services, cataloging and acquisitions, etc.), expertise can be transmitted through mechanisms such as cross-training. Northern Illinois University Libraries uses this approach to collaborative learning. The program is coordinated by a library committee of volunteer librarians. Any librarian may request to be trained during working hours in almost any of the library's units, and arrange the training program and schedule in conjunction with the participating department head.

By utilizing the library's own technical resources and personnel, cross-training confers the additional benefits of staying in-house (no travel costs), and easy coordination between trainer and trainee, with minimal disruption of normal work schedules. Cross-training is advantageous for both the individual--improving competencies with input for evaluation and promotion and for the library, which acquires more familiarity with operations on the part of more personnel.

Turning from skill-based proficiencies to the acquisition of corporate culture, particularly as it relates to such matters as publication, evaluation and tenure, involves the establishment of mechanisms to facilitate interpersonal communication. Mentorship is an excellent solution, pairing older with newer librarians. A more diffuse form of mentorship may be effected through in-house presentations by established faculty on topics of benefit to younger librarians as they work to establish their publication and service records. Peer coaching is another means to provide opportunities for staff to learn from each other. Peer coaching, in which librarians interact as equals, "is a confidential formative process that can aid librarians in fostering skills they choose to examine" (Levene & Frank, 1993, p.35). A less formal type of peer coaching is engaged in by most librarians in that quick meeting in the hallway or in someone's office to discuss hints for the use of a new database, or the successful trial of a new teaching exercise.

In communication terms, mentorship and peer coaching support dialogue between individuals, and presentations direct an information flow to group participants. Professional development groups provide a third model that encourages the exchange of information and interaction in a group setting. Many libraries hold general Faculty Forums for the discussion of ongoing events, and these can be co-opted, much like the more informal "brown bag" meetings, to address specific topics in personal scholarship. Online forums greatly expand opportunities for delivery of training modules, and for provision of virtual meeting spaces, such as the "open classroom" calendar at Kapi'olani Community College in Honolulu, through which faculty can connect with mentors, teleconferences, and an online coaching database (Hiser, 2008).

## 4. ADMINISTRATIVE SUPPORT

Academic librarians need information on an ongoing basis that has not been, or cannot easily be provided by their formal education or on-the-job training. Professional

development is the catch-phrase for a variety of avenues through which this need may be met. It provides an immediate benefit to individual staff, improving their proficiency.

Administrative support is an obvious and essential element in the professional development process. Library administration provides funding, release time, and the bestowal of positive evaluation for achievement, but the real and necessary contribution of administration is that it confers structure to the entire enterprise. Needs are recognized, objectives defined, and opportunities provided. Havener and Stolt (1994) report from their survey results that "a supportive organizational climate has a major positive impact on librarians' professional development activities".

Access to funding and release time for research and professional development are also an integral element of faculty status conditions for academic librarians (Cary, 2001). From a managerial point of view, professional development works for success in two camps: human resources and institutional success. On the human resources front, individual librarians' subjective awareness of the importance of persistent learning and dynamic motivation, equally important in guaranteeing success in continuing education, are stimulated, maintained, and promoted by administrative means. As demonstrated, the means and delivery of content are diverse and flexible. As university and library budgets dwindle, administrators may support more local, internal, and distance-education applications, but their primary contribution remains the provision of opportunities that encourage and reward the acquisition and performance of new knowledge and proficiencies. The benefits resulting from this commitment accrue to individual librarians, the parent institution, and the library profession (White, 2001).

## 5. CONCLUSION

LIS is an interdisciplinary field. The library's clientele is a diverse one, including students and faculty, community members, and scholars and researchers from every discipline. In order to provide quality services to that population, librarians need to commit themselves to continuous learning. The saying, "Knowledge is boundless" describes a universal realm of knowledge seeking. Knowledge and scholarship provide the common ground on which the members of the academic community meet. The great flexibility of professional development initiatives -- formal or informal, large or small, virtual or real -- ensures that library professionals will be well versed in the skills essential to promoting the advancement of both their patrons and themselves. What is most important is that those professional development opportunities be provided.

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