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Training Programs in Academic Libraries: Continuous Learning in the Information Age
Frances C. Wilkinson and Linda K. Lewis

“Training is everything.”
~~Mark Twain

In her message to ACRL, Camila A. Alire said that the strategic areas of focus for ACRL for the next 5 years include “...grassroots advocacy,... influencing public policy, information communication technologies, and accrediting agencies; communicating major trends and issues in academic libraries; and strengthening partnerships with other organizations.” She adds that it is crucial to engage our library staff to be involved in the continual changing responsibilities facing academic libraries. 1

How do we best engage our library staff to be involved in these ever-changing responsibilities? The rapid pace of change experienced in today’s libraries creates a critical need for training. The importance of training is highlighted in “Charting our Future: ACRL Strategic Plan 2020” in its Strategic Area: The Profession, Goal Area: Continuous Learning, which states “ACRL provides continuous learning opportunities enabling members to strengthen their effectiveness and achieve recognition as valued contributors to their academic and research communities.” 2

Training opportunities take many forms using various methods of delivery. ALA and its divisions such as ACRL, as well as regional and state library associations, offer a variety of training options for librarians. Most universities have employee training programs with many choices ranging from broad management topics to very specific training on how to perform a pertinent task. Many libraries also bring training sessions to their site and/or offer in-house training. Training can be formal or informal and is available by attending conferences, pre-conferences, mini conferences, workshops, classes, seminars, on-the-job training sessions and so on. Training can be delivered to large groups, small groups or one-on-one and it can be either site-bound or via online formats.

Developing a Training Program

Training opportunities are everywhere. Library staff are faced with so many options it can be time consuming and exhausting just considering them all. Yet continuous learning is critical for librarians to remain informed, relevant and vital to address the ever-changing needs of the customers that they serve. To accomplish this goal, a comprehensive training program for its employees should be a part of every library’s strategic plan. The program should be designed to provide training that supports the library’s mission and strategic goals. It should also provide education, training and career development to library employees to assist them with meeting their personal/career growth goals and plans. Finally, it should offer interest-based training that creates opportunities for innovative staffing options.

Librarians might begin to develop ideas for a training program by reviewing programs at other libraries. Also, much has been written on training to aid libraries in establishing such a program. A search in *Library Literature* using training as a keyword renders

almost ninety articles in the last two years alone. Developing a training program that will be meaningful to your library should include a skills inventory/survey of your staff. The survey should query employees on both their skills and interests to determine training needs. Survey questions might address a range of topics including supervising, management, leadership, dealing with transition and change, giving and receiving constructive feedback, proactive listening, facilitating, conducting productive meetings, trends and developments in the profession, information technology, computer software, basic hardware, as well as specific topics such as the use of “chat” in workgroups and the use of blogs, wikis, rss, et cetera.

Some training may be more theoretical, such as sessions dealing with change or motivation. At times, training may address an immediate need, and be done “just-in-time”. For example, when a new software system that impacts key elements of an employee’s work is being installed, clearly the training must be done as quickly as possible.

Training can be used to establish a common knowledge base for the library’s employees. When all employees are presented with the same information, they begin to share a common language and understanding. In large organizations, multiple sessions may be required in order to allow all individuals to attend. The shared experience can help improve cooperation and increase the communication among employees.

When developing a training program, it is important to remember that learning styles vary. Some people respond better to written instructions, while others need to see something done before they understand it. Training programs must recognize that individuals learn in a variety of methods. Some personnel may enjoy role-playing while others hate it. A good training program will provide a variety of methods that will meet the needs of most people.

Once the library determines the training needs of its employees, it can develop the content of the program aligning this content to meet the libraries strategic priorities. Training options might be divided into external and internal library training.

External Training Options

The library should encourage employees to attend national, regional and/or state conferences that are appropriate to their specialty or area of interest. These conferences enhance the employee’s professional development and also benefit the library. When possible, at least partial funding should be made available to both librarians and paraprofessional staff. Libraries might want to provide some funding contingent on the employee sharing what s/he learned with others in the library. This could be done through informal presentations or through posting conference notes on an intra-library webpage.

In this virtual age, it is not always necessary to travel in order to attend presentations. Virtual conferences are sponsored by a number of groups. Many of these conferences provide the audience with the opportunity to ask questions and respond to the speakers.

This type of presentation allows many employees to attend the same meeting and to hear the concerns from colleagues across the country.

Library vendors may also be sources of training. Many companies that produce databases have trainers who are available to visit libraries in order to teach library employees about the products they offer.

Libraries may also be able to provide training done by their university. Many universities provide training ranging from management skills to computer technology. When new tools, such as a new email system or calendaring system are introduced, hands-on training can help ease some of the stress of the transition. Some organizations now also provide speakers who discuss issues related to health improvement. Additionally, departments within a university may offer speakers to discuss the changing academic environment, or speak about how to deal with change, among other topics of interest.

Internal Training Options

One of the most productive methods of training can be training that is done by peers, by other library employees. Many employees have knowledge that they will be delighted to share with their colleagues in an informal setting. For example, information technology personnel can give introductory sessions on how to maintain your computer or on the newest web browsers. Even in highly technologically-oriented libraries, some employees may not have a great deal of experience with cookies, spy ware and firewalls on their personal computers. Informal “Brown Bags” offered by peers over lunch are not time consuming and may be less stressful than formal training sessions or workshops. The presenters of these informal sessions may find an additional benefit beyond that of helping people learn. These internal presentations may be practice sessions for more formal presentations at conferences or the beginning of an article to be published later.

Most university libraries are large organizations in which it is difficult for personnel to know what their colleagues in other areas of the organization are doing. Training such as information “open houses” can be offered to share information about the activities within units. These sessions can include presentations and tours that highlight the major activities and achievements of the area. Sharing this type of information is not only informative for those staff attending it, but can also be a positive experience for those staff offering it.

Additionally, training for student employees is often overlooked in university libraries but should not be. Student employees at information desks or circulation desks are often the first point of contact for library customers. Customer impressions of a library’s service may be based on these encounters. Yet too often student employees are given only rudimentary on-the-job training regarding how to perform their basic job, such as how to check-out a book. For some students, their job in the library may be the first one that they have ever held. For them, customer service training is essential. Even for more seasoned student employees it can be helpful. The library can develop this training for their student employees by adapting materials from existing university programs, videos,

and other materials on customer service. Supervisors of students may want to tailor this training to better fit their specific units.

Training Support

For this type of program to be successful, library administrators must believe in and support training. They must communicate the importance of training through both words and actions at all levels of the organization – they must “walk the talk”. Funding must be identified and set aside for training. Too often due to shrinking library budgets, training funds are the first to be cut; however, informed, knowledgeable employees are pivotal to the success of the library. Every effort should be taken to avoid funding cuts for library training programs. Further, library administrators should attend some of the training sessions themselves. The importance of active participation in the library’s training offerings cannot be over emphasized. Finally, attending appropriate, relevant training should become part of each employee’s job. Supervisors should work together with employees to develop their annual goals and identify the training needed to ensure high quality performance and customer service. Successful completion of identified training would become part of the employee’s performance evaluation.

Training Evaluation

A Training Program cannot be a static process. Training topics and sessions need to be evaluated for effectiveness, soliciting feedback from participants. Just as libraries are constantly changing, training must be a continual process. The initial survey of training needs should be repeated at intervals -- perhaps annually or biannually -- to determine the library’s changing needs.

Conclusion

Education is a core mission of all libraries. Libraries should make the same commitment to educating their personnel that they have made to educating their users. Training is pivotal in the development of library employees. It enables them to provide better service, to become more skilled employees and to enhance their personal development. Libraries should develop a systematic plan to provide training for all their personnel.

Notes

1. ALA Association of College & Research Libraries. President’s Page “Message from Camila.” <http://www.ala.org/ala/acrl/presidentpage/presidentpageacrl.htm>
2. ALA Association of College & Research Libraries. “Charting our Future: ACRL Strategic Plan 2020.” <http://www.ala.org/ala/acrl/aboutacrl/whatisacrl/acrlstratplan/stratplan.htm>

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