Big Ideas, Small Libraries

Staff Engagement for Cohesion*

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EGAN LIBRARY IS THE regional library of the University of Alaska Southeast (UAS), a public four-year university serving a diverse student body of approximately 3,000 students on three campuses and online. The main campus in Juneau, the capital city of Alaska, (population 32,406),[1] is set in a temperate rainforest on a lake. Ketchikan and Sitka campuses are smaller island communities, each with individual populations with specific needs. Ketchikan is a former logging community of 8,245[2] and has a campus library serving also as a public library for the community. Sitka, the former Russian Empire capital of Alaska territory, offers vital campus and online programs to a community of 8,900,[3] with an active student learning center and no academic library on site. A librarian from Egan Library in Juneau serves as liaison to the Sitka campus.

Southeast Alaska has many island communities, and transportation to Juneau, Ketchikan, and Sitka is possible only by the Alaska Marine Highway system or by air.[4]

Students at our institution are nontraditional, with an average age of 29; 13 percent are Alaska Natives.[5] UAS has a strong student-centered focus, with student success, teaching and learn-

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ing, community engagement, and research and creative expression among our core themes.[6] Academic programs include Liberal Arts and Sciences, Career Education, Professional Education, and Education. Classes are taught in a variety of delivery modes, including on-campus, online through a course management system, and blended delivery.

The Egan Library building is connected to the main classroom building on campus, and history and culture are showcased by a Northwest Coast Native Art collection throughout the 50,000 square foot facility, with a Learning and Testing Center, Writing Center, computing workstations, and many types of study spaces. Staff include a Director of Regional Library Services, four faculty librarians, and seven paraprofessionals. Jennifer Ward and Bethany Wilkes discuss how UAS librarians have implemented several initiatives for improved staff training, marketing, and communications.

Why is staff engagement a concern for small and rural libraries?

Jennifer Ward: We want our staff to be empowered and develop a cohesive voice about what the library has to offer our university community. This cohesion is especially important in the "small pond" of small and rural library environments since negative *and* positive encounters between our staff and students or administrators have the potential of making a lasting impact on perceptions of the library. For Egan Library, we want to help staff express enthusiasm about the library even at the grocery store or while walking their dog on a local trail.

What barriers to staff engagement have you faced at Egan Library?

Jennifer: As faculty librarians, a barrier we faced was a lack of time to prioritize staff engagement. For years, we had librarians' management meetings weekly, with only occasional all-staff meetings each academic year. Some turnover in librarians and paraprofessionals provided a chance to review how we engage our staff and remove this barrier. So, the barriers were structural.

What role does professional development play in lowering these barriers?

Bethany Wilkes: We were able to prioritize opportunities for focused professional development by creating a Staff Training Advisory Group (STAG), where staff planned, scheduled, and facilitated a series of staff training workshops. Then, we introduced a second committee on marketing and communications, which required heavy staff involvement. Once we removed the structural barriers by establishing these new committees and a formal staff training program, library staff were eager participants. Not only were staff members happy to contribute, they also played defining roles in the committees' successes. Through regularly scheduled committee meetings; creating planning documents with guidelines, goals, and objectives; and by putting forth deadlines with assigned responsibilities, we were able to mitigate the challenges of lack of time to prioritize staff engagement by scheduling it into our work.

Your library also has an active programs and events calendar. What is the staff's role in planning library programs?

Jennifer: Librarians here take the lead and assign staff to take care of many details. For example, our annual Open House for students involves every library employee—from staff greeting everyone who walks in the door or helping students set up their printing access to librarians teaching mini-workshops. We couldn't accomplish this day-long event with only librarians' efforts—we need staff energy and ideas. I should also note that a staff member is responsible for the scheduling of *community* events in our venue—she does an excellent job taking the lead for coordinating programming from local organizations, consulting with librarians and the director as needed.

What has been the impact of your efforts on other campus departments?

Bethany: I think our efforts have had a positive impact on other campus departments. Through our summer staff development series, we connected with several departments on campus, including Residence Life, Career Services, and Academic Exchange and Study

Abroad. We visited their areas, and representatives of the department delivered some excellent presentations and led discussions. As a result of these connections, library staff members are better informed about services that are available for students outside of the library and can more knowledgeably refer students to those specific departments. Additionally, library staff has continued to engage with those departments to promote the library following staff training sessions with those departments. For example, following a suggestion that emerged from a session with UAS's Academic Exchange and Study Abroad, staff created and distributed library-themed welcome bags—including edibles and promotional materials—for new exchange students.

How has the culture of your library changed as a result of your staff engagement efforts?

Jennifer: We have noticed it is a better use of our own time when we entrust staff to take on more campus engagement responsibilities. We witnessed more cross-departmental communication and collaboration, and we observed improved morale, new energy and focus, and better customer service. We didn't set out to assess these cultural changes, though interestingly, they are in alignment with the professional literature.[7]

How should you begin developing a staff engagement plan?

Jennifer: My advice is to start with a large-scale project that requires the full support of all library staff to implement. The library marketing team had to plan for the library's twenty-fifth anniversary celebration and recruit for a Friends Board for our library. This was new territory for all of us, and staff participation in the planning of this event was a springboard for good discussions, cross-departmental connections, and energy that helped with all of the details. As a result of this big (and successful) event, our team found it natural to continue planning for other successes in our library.

Bethany: I agree about taking on a large-scale project. In the case of the STAG, our project was to develop a vision for our staff train-

ing program and then to implement it. It's also important to recognize that, in order to truly be engaged, staff members need to have ownership and accountability related to the outcome.

What are your staff's future plans for the library?

Jennifer: The future holds much potential. Our marketing team continues to meet, and our next event is a reception honoring faculty authors. A recent library reorganization has given the Director of Regional Library Services oversight of the Learning Center, Academic Testing, and the Writing Center. This means our staff has grown, and with it, new opportunities for library programs and expanded staff training!

Notes

1.   United States Census, "State & County Quick Facts: Juneau City and Borough, Alaska," accessed February 28, 2016, http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/02/02110.html.
2.   United States Census, "State & County Quick Facts: Ketchikan (city), Alaska," accessed February 28, 2016, http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/02/0238970.html.
3.   United States Census, "State & County Quick Facts: Sitka City and Borough, Alaska," accessed February 28, 2016, http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/states/02/02220.html.
4.   A nonstop jet flight from Seattle, Washington, to Juneau is about two and a half hours. Flying from Juneau to Sitka is about thirty minutes, and flying to Ketchikan from the capital city takes one hour (or longer on a multistop itinerary).
5.   University of Alaska Southeast, *IPEDS Data Feedback Report 2014* (Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics, 2014), http://www.uas.alaska.edu/provost/ie/docs/2014_IPEDS_Data_Feedback_Report_UAS.pdf.
6.   University of Alaska Southeast, "Core Themes," Strategic and Assessment Plan 2010–2017, 2011, http://www.uas.alaska.edu/UAS_StrategicPlan/core_themes/index.html.
7.   Elaine Jennerich and Lisa Oberg, "Introduction to Staff Development" in *Staff Development: A Practical Guide,* 4th ed., ed. Andrea Stewart, Carlette Washington-Hoagland, and Carol Zsulya (Chicago: American Library Association, 2014).