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# Professional Development in Libraries: One Size Does Not Fit All

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## Abstract

With the constantly changing landscape in 21st-century libraries, it would seem that professional development would be more important than ever. However, research indicates that few libraries have formal professional development programs, and there are mixed messages from library leaders regarding the necessity and importance of professional development. It is no secret that libraries always seem to be facing budget cuts, and funding for professional development is often seen as a low priority. We were curious to understand how professional development is viewed and executed in other academic libraries.

Professional development means different things to different people. To some, professional development means giving (or receiving) money each year to be used in a manner determined by the employee. For others, it means attending an ALA or other library-specific conference or participating in external training or conference within or outside the realm of librarianship. It may also include participation in online offerings, such as webinars, MOOCs, academic classes, and/or in-person trainings and workshops focused on specific skill development such as leadership.

In the session, the facilitators shared current research findings about how libraries define professional development in order to find out how participants defined professional development and the challenges they faced at their institutions. In addition, online polling software and the *15% solution* and *1-2-4-All* facilitations from the book *The Surprising Power of Liberating Structures: Simple Rules to Unleash a Culture of Innovation* (Lipmanowicz & McCandless, 2013) were used to get the group to define workable solutions to their professional development dilemmas that they could take back to their workplaces. At the end of the session, participants wrote their *takeaway solutions* on a postcard so that the session facilitators could mail the solutions to the participants after 30 days as a way of following up on the exercise.

## Introduction

A brief review of the literature reveals what a library professional might suspect, that there is no universal definition of professional development for librarians. Although considered professionals, librarians do not have licensure or accreditation unlike other professionals such as physicians and attorneys. In addition to the absence of an accrediting body, there is no agency that determines what professional development looks like for academic librarians or sets standards for what professional development requirements need to be. In its Code of Ethics, the American Library Association (ALA) includes this statement: "We strive for excellence in the profession by maintaining and enhancing our own knowledge and skills, by encouraging the professional development of co-workers, and by fostering the aspirations of potential members of the profession" (American Library Association, 2017, n.p.).

While ALA encourages professional development, there is nothing in the statement on how that

professional development should be conducted; nothing about frequency, quality, and what happens if a librarian opts not to participate. These are important omissions, as many of the roles and responsibilities that librarians currently have (or are expected to have) may not be what are considered *traditional* librarian roles. In addition, the changing higher education landscape has opened up opportunities for librarians to develop expertise in areas such as instructional design, project management, supply chain management, and vendor negotiation, in addition to management and leadership development for those librarians that have or seek supervisory responsibilities. These specialty areas are generally not taught in MLS programs, so where and how do librarians acquire the knowledge and skills needed for these responsibilities?

The objective of the session was to allow participants to develop practical, workable solutions they could take back to their workplace, in spite of the various obstacles for professional development

opportunities that currently exist within their organizations. Hopefully, those solutions could be shared with others in the organization. Since this session was a Lively Lunch session, we wanted most of the talking to be done by the participants and for them to consider other participants as resources. The authors wanted to explore how participants viewed professional development, as well as identify challenges they were facing at their institutions, and allow the group to develop specific solutions to those challenges.

### **What Is Professional Development for Librarians?**

The answer you get will depend on the person answering the question. Conference attendance (such as the Charleston Conference) is viewed by many as professional development, and conference attendance is a popular way to increase one's knowledge about trends within the profession and learn about new methods being utilized in other libraries. It is also way to meet other professionals and gather with others doing similar work at their respective institutions. What is not clear is if conference attendance allows for the acquisition of new skills and behaviors. Another consideration is the number of people that are able to attend a professional conference, which pales in comparison to the actual numbers of working library professionals. We recognized that there are several concerns that library professionals have about professional development, and we wanted the session to be a conversation about how to begin to answer some of the questions that surround this issue.

### **Lively Lunch Session Methodology/Description**

We opened the session with a brief discussion of professional development and talked about some of the issues we had faced during our career in librarianship. We then introduced the online polling software that we would use during the session. Using the software allowed participants to contribute anonymously, but we were also able to get real-time numerical information about the responses from the audience. We posed these questions to the participants:

- Who is responsible for professional development in libraries?
- How is the quality of professional development assessed?

- Who should have access to professional development?
- What can be done if professional development is not available in your library?
- Should librarians go outside of librarianship to get professional development?

Questions were all multiple choice, but all questions had the option of *Other* if the choices presented did not provide an appropriate selection for the question. Participants were asked to record their responses using a mobile device and the results were tabulated. After each question, we asked the group to share their responses and also comment on the responses to each question as a way of eliciting additional insights.

Using the *15% Solution* and *1-2-4-All* exercises (Lipmanowicz & McCandless, 2013), each person was asked to think of a professional development idea for their libraries. Then two people were asked to sit together and develop solutions to the professional development concerns they thought about and were experiencing at their institutions. Participants were instructed not to focus on the obstacles hindering professional development opportunities for their libraries, but to focus on what could be accomplished with the existing resources. They also were asked to share solutions that were currently in place at their own institutions with members of their groups. After several minutes, each pair moved to work with another pair, and the group of four discussed the solutions each pair had determined. The quartet then came up with additional solutions.

During the session, five groups emerged and came up with solutions including:

- Work with peers and utilize internal (on-campus) resources as sources of training and development.
- Create internal reading groups to focus on new topics of interest.
- Survey employees to determine what types of training they are seeking.
- Establish a periodic forum for library employees to present how their job(s) impact other areas of the library; make sure nonlibrarian staff is included in these presentation opportunities.

- Reach out to employees to request that they share their skills, talents, and expertise within the library.
- Encourage people to participate in electronic forums (offered through various ALA divisions) that are free of charge and then ensure appropriate follow-up to the sessions are scheduled to ensure information is being disseminated within the group(s).

For the closing portion of the session, we distributed postcards to participants and asked that they write at least one idea they planned to implement at their library. The completed cards were given to the facilitators and the cards will be mailed to the participants 30 days after the session as a way to reinforce what was discussed in the session.

The most significant takeaway from the session was the almost universal acknowledgment by the participants that professional development for librarians rests in the hands of each individual librarian. They need to be their own advocates for their professional development instead of depending on their supervisors and library management to recognize and deliver relevant opportunities to them.

## The Role of Stakeholders

Professional development has many stakeholders beyond the individual employee; colleagues, students, faculty, supervisory personnel, and patrons all benefit from librarian professional development. The value (and priority) to each stakeholder varies and immediate return on investment may not be apparent. So, how should professional development be valued (and measured) in terms of importance to the profession? ACRL (2000) says that professional development is important but indicates that continued learning is the responsibility of the individual. While it would be impossible to write guidelines directed at specific individuals or institutions, these guidelines (which have not been updated since 2000) provide little guidance on the type of professional development that may be needed for a specific job or responsibility, nor is there any mention of competency(ies) that may be appropriate for academic librarians to be successful in their work.

While there is agreement that professional development is needed by members of the profession and our professional organizations including the ALA and ACRL, there is no consensus as to

what professional development should look like and there is no universal definition. In addition, the impact of budgetary constraints on professional development is a huge obstacle. Librarians employed by larger institutions with corresponding larger budgets may have opportunities for professional development that librarians from smaller libraries do not have. Lack of financial ability to pay for professional development does not mean that the need for quality professional development does not exist. Learning opportunities are now available via other modalities other than face-to-face instruction; online course offerings come in a variety of types, such as webinars, Twitter chats, MOOCs, and so on. However, just as there are many types of offerings of development opportunities, they all come with advantages and disadvantages. While paying a high price for something is not a guarantee of high quality, low or no-cost development opportunities may not be the bargain they seem.

Leaving the choice of where to engage in continued learning opportunities with little formal direction from the largest library professional associations means that employers may not see the value in continued professional development. According to the Ithaka S+R Library Survey 2016 (Wolff-Eisenberg, 2017), which examines strategy and leadership issues from the perspective of academic library deans and directors, a majority of library deans and directors are not willing to invest in creating formalized professional development programs. From this same survey, deans and directors lament that they do not have the right talent for positions in the library and are having trouble retaining top talent in their libraries. Clearly, there is a disconnect between what is being said and what is being done.

It is well documented that successful organizational change must be led from the top of the organization and that buy-in from employees is crucial. If librarians feel that library administrators do not view professional development as an integral part of the work they do, librarians face not being able to deliver the services that their stakeholders demand. Almost all academic libraries have strategic plans that (hopefully) integrate with the strategic plan of the college or university, but how many of those plans specifically include the continued education and professional development of their employees? The Executive Summary of the Association of Research Libraries Spec Kit on Talent Management (Taylor & Lee, 2014) cited several concerns about employee development that were also mentioned in the Ithaka

S+R Library Survey 2016 (Wolff-Eisenberg, 2017), including problems with recruiting employees with the necessary skill sets for the job. While professional development opportunities were available to employees, the most common source cited was funding support, usually travel funding for conference attendance. It is not clear that conference attendance translates to skill development that is utilized on the job. Another area of concern: if library directors are having difficulty finding the talent they need, this certainly sets the tone for further study of this issue. A problem exists, but possible solutions aren't being applied.

## Conclusions

The consensus from all directions seems to be that professional development for librarians is a necessity, but there is little, if any, structure or enforcement of that charge. Interestingly, academic librarians are

tasked with spending an increasing amount of time developing and assessing programs for users, yet they are not spending equal time assessing their own professional development needs. As libraries and librarianship become more complex, the need for 21st-century skill development becomes more essential, as noted in the Ithaca S+R Library Survey 2016 (Wolff-Eisenberg, 2017). However, there is little research that identifies a set of universal skills and knowledge needed to support contemporary academic libraries. While professional development is not a one-size-fits-all proposition, there is room to identify an essential set of skills and knowledge as a guideline within the profession. In addition, questions still exist regarding how we measure and assess the quality of professional development opportunities available to us as librarians and how librarians might prepare themselves for new career options without access to more robust professional development opportunities.

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