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Making Our Own Canvas: How We Did a Comprehensive Review of Our Information Literacy Program

Anne Behler and John J. Meier

In Fall 2011, the Penn State University Libraries administration established a leadership development program. The goal of the program is to "create learning opportunities and experiences for faculty who aspire to leadership positions within and beyond the Libraries" (Penn State, 2011). The authors were two of the four members of the inaugural class who were selected to participate in the program. Since a leadership program had not been undertaken before at the University Libraries, the agenda for this first cohort was fairly flexible, but did include several key components as a framework. During the course of 2012-13, the first library leader cohort participated in regular meetings with library and university administrators who were invited to discuss their leadership paths and roles. We all read and discussed *Reframing Academic Leadership* (Bolman & Gallos, 2011).

Each member of the cohort also applied for and participated in a national leadership institute—some focused on higher education or libraries/IT, others focused on leadership writ large. As the program developed, the cohort expanded their activities to include attendance at select high-level administrative meetings at the University level; visits to Penn State's branch campuses; and meetings with visiting high-profile scholars (for example, Elliott Shore, Executive Director of the Association for Research Libraries). At the close of 2012, the library administrators charged the cohort to serve as consultants to the library regarding the organizational structure for library instruction programs. The rest of this presentation will focus on that experience—how the group was charged; how leadership roles were negotiated; how the task was carried out; what the report consisted of, and why it didn't work.

Context

The Penn State University Libraries has 23 campuses and all libraries report to Dean Barbara Dewey. We face many challenges acting as "one university, geographically dispersed", particularly around Instructional Services and responsibility for Information Literacy. Take the two authors of this article as an example. John currently works in the Physical and Mathematical Sciences Library in the Reference, Collections, and Research department reporting to one Associate Dean, while Anne works in the Library Learning Services department reporting to a different Associate Dean. The Commonwealth Campus Libraries can vary in size from small campus locations with two librarians to larger campuses with their own archivists and subject specialists. The key point is that all campus locations have librarians doing some level of teaching.

Figure 1: The Penn State University Libraries Organizational Chart

Consultative Study

The original charge asked us to perform as consultants to the Administrative Team, which includes the Dean, three Associate Deans, a Senior Director, and the Manager of Human Resources. We were to examine the current tactical plans of all units responsible for library instruction in order to develop a consistent learning track for all Penn State students. We were also

asked to develop recommendations for increasing access to library instruction, how to more efficiently deliver instruction, and propose a program for assessment of student learning outcomes. We were also asked to submit a draft implementation plan for any changes based on our recommendations. When we met with library administrators, we were hesitant to recommend an implementation plan since we had no authority. They offered to let us act "as them" with respect to changes that we would recommend. This would have put us in either the uncomfortable position of changing units of which we were not members and, perhaps worse, some of us would be changing our own department rather than the current department head. Rather than accept this project as proposed, we had a somewhat novel response: We submitted a counter-proposal.

Our group, which had already been meeting together regularly for over a year, felt comfortable enough with each other to revise the proposal. In addition to the concern about drafting an implementation plan, we also wanted to look outward at what the University Libraries *could* be doing rather than only what we currently were doing. Our revised proposal focused on four areas, which aligned with the personal interests and strengths of our four members. First, we would benchmark peer academic research libraries for their instructional programs and organization. Then we would assess technology for potential efficiencies and possibilities for collaboration and online education. Not only are we spread geographically across the state of Pennsylvania, we have a fast growing World Campus online program. We retained the assessment component for the original proposal and also focused on the professional development necessary to improve our teaching practice. Professional development was also an important aspect for us to examine.

SCOPE

We wanted to control the scope of the proposal to what we could reasonably accomplish in the timeline provided. In the original charge we were asked to draft a policy and recommend procedure, but within the University Libraries there are groups responsible for some of that already. For example, the Libraries Faculty Organization (LFO) has a Curricular and Instructional Affairs (CIA) committee. We certainly did not want to act as the libraries administration, which could mean changes in department roles or even individual librarian job responsibilities. Certainly we did not have the financial resources available to the administration.

In order to involve the most important stakeholders, we also included a line in the proposal to involve the most important stakeholders which reads, "This effort will align with LFO-CIA, Library Learning Services, and other instructional services across University Libraries". We suggested the head of our Library Learning Services instruction department as a fifth member of our core group. The Libraries Administrative Team accepted our counterproposal and we began work immediately.

DEVELOPMENT OF THE REPORT

We kept an aggressive timeline from the first proposal (October 2011) to our counter proposal (November 2011) and wanted to be finished before May 2012 as two of our members would be away on leave after that point. As mentioned before, our proposal naturally followed our individual interests so it was easy to divide up the sections of the study and work independently. We had established meetings through FaceTime and Skype so we could involve the one group member not from the main campus. Occasionally a few of us met in person to discuss our work throughout the process. By March of 2012 we were ready to collect our individual work into a single document, using Google Docs to comment and edit each other's work. Finally after a final meeting, one of us drafted an executive summary and put the document into a consultant report format entitled "Moving Forward: Envisioning Instructional Services for the Future" (Behler, Cahoy, Meier, & Shank, 2013). Beyond submitting this to the Libraries Administrative Team it was also published on the Libraries assessment website and promoted via Twitter.

BENCHMARK METHODOLOGY

Ellysa Stern Cahoy looked at 46 ARL libraries. She found that most libraries did not have dedicated instruction departments, although 61% did have someone dedicated to organizing the Information Literacy program. She found all libraries still offered in-person instruction and it wasn't being diminished by online teaching (89% of libraries offered online tutorials or modules). Our other group member, John Shank, found a number of new practices and methodologies around technology for library instruction and blended learning. Overall he indicated a need for the University Libraries to integrate educational technology into our instruction services.

John Meier used the ACRL Characteristics of Programs of Information Literacy that Illustrate Best Practices (ACRL 2011) to assess the current policies and documentation of the University Libraries as well as our current delivery methods. He found high levels of variation across the Libraries and no overall mission or definition of Information Literacy. Anne examined the literature and investigated examples of Communities of Practice for instruction librarians, in particular the University of Michigan's Instructor

College Cafe (University of Michigan, 2012). She found it was important to have leadership that crosses departmental lines and also financial support for professional development and training.

STUDY FINDINGS

The study confirmed current practices in the Penn State University Libraries instructional programs, but suggested areas of change for the future in organizational structure and inter-departmental collaboration. Productivity and a breadth of instructional offerings do not appear to depend on having a dedicated instruction department. Many ARL libraries involve their liaison librarians in all levels of instruction including first level instruction, and an instruction coordinator works directly with those librarians. The Penn State libraries should map out learning objectives and outcomes at all educational levels. A coordinator should be appointed to work with all public services librarians at the main campus to embed instruction both online and in the classroom.

Priorities (from Behler, et.al. 2013):

1. Identify institutional stakeholders outside of the Libraries and partner with them in developing a definition of information literacy and articulating a program University-wide.
2. Establish and financially support library instruction community of practice to provide training and development across all campuses with ongoing collaboration
3. Select a leader to assume central responsibility for information literacy for the entire University Libraries and ensure they have resources, staff, and authority to lead the program widely, across the University.
4. Establish library-wide assessment practices, policies, and tools, and administer these centrally. (p. 2)

LESSONS LEARNED

Few of our recommendations have been implemented since the cohort presented the report to the administrative group. Despite the fact that the report presented outside of the box ideas for reimagining the library infrastructure in order to support teaching, nothing went forward, with the exception of the community of practice. What went "wrong?" What were the fail points along the way that contributed to the creation of a large, detailed, yet ultimately ineffective document?

First, although each member of the leadership cohort was involved in some way in library instruction and definitely had a strong stake in the outcome of the report, the group was fairly isolated from the library's formal structures for leadership of teaching and learning services. In essence, we were working in a vacuum, creating great stuff that was sealed off from what was happening in other places, including a simultaneous related study by our faculty organization (LFO-CIA).

Throughout the process, struggles with the charge continued to plague us. Although we came up with a plan that we were happy with, we had created something that was not executable. Contributing to this was the fact that originally the library administrative team gave us a charge that they were prepared to back. We counter-offered something that they could support, but were not necessarily committed to put resources and time behind. In hindsight, a better approach from our standpoint may have been to work within the given charge to propose the outcomes we desired. This still may have suffered from the isolation problem, but could have retained more administrative team buy-in.

The fact that none of us have administrative authority over the areas in question and that the charge did not originate from the people working in them created a situation in which a lot of what we proposed was pretty much dead on arrival. There was not enough flow of information to and from the people who would have to implement our ideas. What we ultimately proposed required substantial alterations such as job and title changes, budget shifts, extensive buy-in, and authority to carry out the plan. None of that was part of the original charge and none of that was easily achievable following the report.

POSITIVE OUTCOMES

Despite the challenges that worked against much of what we proposed, two notable successes emerged from our work. Anne, John (Meier), Ellysa, and a few other instruction librarians formed a leadership group to establish a library instruction community of practice (COP). This grassroots effort now includes an active listserv, regular topical discussions and programs, and a developing blog (Penn State University Libraries, 2014). Contributing to the COP's early and quick success is the fact that it is an extremely low-cost initiative, and it could be executed without funds or changes to job assignments. Another noteworthy success is the group's planning a library-wide instruction workshop to feature a "mover and shaker" librarian from outside our institution, which is being funded by the library administration.

Drawing on our own project experience, we also made recommendations for changes to the future library leader cohort structure. It was important to us to allow more participant input into projects that they might undertake. In addition, those projects are not necessarily group endeavors but more dependent on the work that each person is already doing (or would do with more resources and support). Finally, each cohort member in new classes will be assigned to a library administrator who will serve as that person's leadership/program mentor, allowing for both individual and group conversations and enhancing the likelihood of action and success.

CONCLUSION

Overall our report was developed much more quickly than is typical in an academic library environment. It also resulted in at least one significant new professional development program, an active Community of Practice. One open question for the future is the problem of isolation and lack of follow through endemic to the consultation approach? The project did give the library leader cohort a greater understanding of the internal structure and operation of our organization. This has informed the way we approach future initiatives and leadership opportunities.

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Images for Tables and Figures (Editor will put in body of the text later)

Figure 1