

Staff-based policy building

By Kathryn J. Deiss

Collaboration for effective service support

How does policy get developed and set in your library? How often are paraprofessionals, particularly those working in service areas, tapped when a new policy needs developing or when an old policy needs updating? It seems to me that it is not often, if at all, that paraprofessionals work on this fundamental activity.

I came face to face with this when I discovered that the Northwestern University (NU) Library Interlibrary Loan (ILL) Department did not have a current written interlibrary loan borrowing policy. When staff made judgment calls they had no thought-out and written policy on which to base their decisions, and “corporate memory” transmitted practice and procedure from employee to employee.

Policy at NU is generally set by department head-level staff and above. A long-standing, painstakingly updated and maintained *Policies and Procedures Manual* for the library exists. Under normal circumstances, the head of interlibrary loan would write a draft policy that would be circulated to the Administrative Committee (composed of the assistant university librarians and the university librarian) for editing and approval before finally being enacted.

A policy on which to base borrowing practices is necessary and it is just as necessary that it be developed and written with the full participation of not only the half-time professional, but of the paraprofessional staff—the staff that actually do most of the borrowing work. Though these staff members have not previously been involved in articulating and formulating policy, it makes sense to tap their opinions and experience since they are the ones

who will understand, interpret, and apply the policy. Staff buying into the policy at the outset is also helpful. Involving the staff early guarantees not only that their opinions are heard, but that the resulting document is as fully informed as possible.

We began by having meetings of the borrowing staff to discuss the purpose of a policy. This involved discussions of public documents vs. in-house documents. Agreement was sought on broad categories that needed the support of policy. No doubt, this method of “educating” while “producing” was more time-consuming than it might have been had the group been involved in this type of activity before, but it was infinitely interesting and rewarding.

After the second and third meetings with the staff, the first draft of the policy provided a skeleton for the whole group to work with. Editing ensued and draft 2 was drawn up. This time the group met with the assistant university librarian for public services to review it. Aside from getting the draft policy to the next step, it was also the first time that the ILL staff had ever sat down and *worked* with the AUL directly responsible for their department. The free exchange of ideas at this meeting also helped the AUL better understand the actual ILL operation with its attendant challenges.

Include them in, too

As we reached draft 3 and discussion revolved around some quite fine details, the group realized the need to communicate with many other groups about issues that might have an impact on them. Divisions such as collection management and departments such as reference, preservation, and our Africana Library would be affected by the policy that ILL was developing. It was of great interest to ILL staff members that their work is so intimately con-

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