

Continuing Education—XIX

Continuing Education Investments for Staff Development Benefits

While much has been done to resolve the issue, one can still hear an occasional debate over the distinction between continuing education and staff development. It's important to know there is a difference and to understand what this difference means, but it is somewhat bothersome that more attention is given to the difference than to the potential mutual benefits.

Most people would agree that *continuing education* is the general term with a more specific focus. Learning activities in this category are designed specifically with the individual learner in mind—no matter what library he or she works in. Staff development, on the other hand, is designed with organizational needs in mind, and while the individual does benefit, the basic purpose is to help him or her do a better job. Continuing education and staff development merge at the point where the individual and the organization benefit equally. This is where a focus on mutual benefits can strengthen the general learning climate for all library personnel.

Since libraries are not typically overburdened with resources to launch full-blown staff development programs with their own trainers and training coordinators, careful planning is a must to make the most of educational investments. At the same time, continuing education programers are constantly seeking dependable needs assessment and an ongoing market for their activities. A productive mutual interest can be found in this condition, and it really hasn't yet been plumbed for all of its potential.

If management has a sound planning and communication program in place, supervisory levels should be able to identify educational needs in their departments that can be met externally through continuing education activities planned for the individual learner. To prime the library for an effective use of these external learning opportunities, supervisors should work with staff to identify the training needs that cannot be met internally with current staff development programs. They can also locate a variety of alternatives that will meet their training objectives, determine with all key personnel what the department should get out of the external training investment, plan for dispersing the work load of the individual while he or she is at the learning activity, anticipate integrating the new skills after the learner has returned to the department, and set up a mechanism for sharing the learning with appropriate colleagues as a follow-up to the learning experience.

With this kind of planning, any library can

maximize the organizational utility of sending staff to continuing education activities that have been designed primarily for the benefit of individual learners. For the continuing education developers, a management system that generates these prepared learners will also generate defined training needs that may well be the basis of many other learning activities for their consumers.

Sound planning of this type can also strengthen the management function of training, which is a central focus in any human resource development program. Considering that we spend from 60 percent to 90 percent of our budgets on human resources in this labor-intensive profession; the opportunity to maximize continuing education investments for staff development benefits should become more an issue than pointing out differences.—*Jim Nelson.*

Editor's Note: Jim Nelson is assistant professor of library science in the University of Wisconsin—Extension Communication Programs and in the University of Wisconsin—Madison School of Library Science. ■■

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