

Amanda Scull

Creating community, learning together

Designing and delivering a program for staff professional development

This article is an expansion of a paper originally presented at the Medical Library Association Annual Meeting 2020

Library staff development was a popular topic in the literature of the early 2000s, particularly as the professional duties of library staff shifted into the digital realm, but it seems to have been superseded in its popularity by other topics more recently (the most recent ALA data available on staff development funding is from 2001). My anecdotal experience and observation include many libraries in which professional development for librarians has been supported, funded, and encouraged, but where opportunities for nonlibrarian staff have been fewer and rarely required or expected. The subject of this article is a staff development program that was developed at the Dartmouth College Biomedical Libraries to encourage professional development for all staff and to respond to a period of intense change by bringing staff together within a supportive learning community.

Staff development at the Dartmouth College Biomedical Libraries

The Dartmouth College Biomedical Libraries has two locations: Dana Biomedical Library (Dana) is located on the Dartmouth College campus, and Matthews-Fuller Health Sciences Library (MF-HSL) is located at the Dartmouth-Hitchcock Medical Center. The Libraries have 15 staff members: five in Information Services, four librarians, three administrative/management, two in interlibrary loan, and one technology coordinator.

In April 2019, the Libraries implemented a significant change in the existing research services model. The system of scheduling librarians to be on call had become unsustainable and was discontinued, with librarians instead setting up appointment availability for consults in LibCal. Information services staff working the desks at each location would be expected to triage information requests, handling basic reference on their own and referring questions to librarians via email or appointment as required. An instance of LibAnswers (which also encompasses LibChat and RefAnalytics) was set up and all staff engaged in a monthlong training program, which focused on how to use the system, setting up policies and procedures, and preparing staff to take on more basic research questions at point of need. The training program consisted of ten sessions total, most of which included active learning and trying out the system in pairs.

While conducting and assessing the LibAnswers training, a few things became clear:

- The opportunity to gather regularly and to learn together in pairs and small groups had facilitated camaraderie and provided an opportunity for staff bonding. This was especially important given that about half the staff had joined the Libraries within the past year.
- The amount of training that staff had previously received varied, largely dependent upon

Amanda Scull is head of Education and Information Services at Dartmouth College Biomedical Libraries, email: amanda.r.scull@dartmouth.edu

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when they had been hired. There appeared to have been a focus on training as part of onboarding with only sporadic professional development after that as systems, resources, and user needs changed.

- While facilitating a major change came with challenges, overall the staff was excited to learn new skills and provide user services they had not previously been entrusted to provide.

These observations led to the proposal and design of an ongoing program for staff development in the Biomedical Libraries. The program has been in place for nearly two years at the time of this writing and consists of several initiatives founded on a few core principles. The first is to *value expertise*, recognizing that every staff member—not just librarians—has unique skills and knowledge that they can share with their colleagues. The second is to *create a learning community* where all staff are empowered to participate, ask questions, and create space in their workday for learning. The third is to *develop competencies*, not just skills that will serve staff members in different facets of their diverse work and in the next steps of their careers.

Ready Reference Round Up

In the previous research model, many questions that were referred to librarians fell into the “ready reference” category—which we defined as “any question that is resource or reference related but can be answered relatively easily and quickly by looking something up”—and could have been answered by appropriately trained staff. The objectives of the Ready Reference Round Up training were to increase staff knowledge and comfort with the answers to common ready reference questions, and to identify the point at which a ready reference interaction should be referred to a librarian. Staff worked in pairs to practice scenarios such as:

- Can you help me find books about pediatric hematology?
 - I got this citation from another article I was reading, can you help me get a copy of the article?
 - Do we have AccessMedicine or other resources for electronic textbooks?

After each scenario, we walked through the possible answers and steps for finding the answers. At the end of the session time was allotted for staff to share questions they had received and perhaps struggled to answer in the past and receive feedback from the group on how they might answer those questions

if they receive them again. This training provided a great opportunity for staff to learn together and draw on their own experiences, and a version of it is run regularly to keep these skills fresh.

Consumer health training

Another training that contributed to our creation of a learning community was a consumer health training workshop. Working in a health sciences library, particularly one with a location in a medical center, requires a basic knowledge of consumer health research practices, since patients are the most likely user group to come to the desk with a point-of-need question and be unwilling or unable to schedule a librarian appointment. A training session was developed to enhance staff skills and confidence in this area so that they would have the knowledge and comfort level necessary to answer questions from patients.

The staff consumer health training consisted of two parts. The first was on the resources themselves: what resources to use for which types of questions and how to access and search them. The Dartmouth “Biomedical Libraries Consumer Health Guide” was the main access point for this portion of the session.¹ The second part of the training prepared staff with language they could use when talking with patients to ensure that providing consumer health research assistance did not cross the line into the provision of medical advice. Staff practiced these interactions with language such as “That would be a great question for you to bring to your next appointment with your doctor,” and “Since I’m not a medical professional I can’t advise about that, but let’s gather all the information you’ll need to have a conversation with your doctor about it.”

Monthly Lunch and Learns

The objectives of the monthly Lunch and Learn series are to facilitate a continuing culture of community learning and staff development and to value and leverage the varied expertise of all staff in various topics. These meetings are held for one hour at either 12:00 or 1:00 p.m., and staff are not actually expected to use the time as their lunch break. All staff are encouraged to take their break either before or after the meeting, though they are welcome to bring their lunch if they wish. To date, session topics have included data management, cultural competence,

productivity tools and tricks, and transgender health resources, as well as several others. Sessions have been led by librarians, nonlibrarian staff, and guest speakers from other departments on campus.²

Competency-based training for information access assistants

In the midst of the research services transition and the creation of the staff development program, there were some staffing changes in Information Services. One staff member retired, another long-time staff member moved from MFHSL to Dana, and two new information access assistants (IAA) were hired. We identified a need to ensure that all IAAs have the same training and levels of competency to ensure continuity of services between the two locations, as well as to facilitate staff growth. In consultation with the two Information Services supervisors, a training was developed and set up as modules in Canvas. The training was based on OCLC's Competency Index for the Library Field (2014), and all current and newly hired IAAs were required to complete the training.³

The four competency areas and their specific components that were determined crucial to the position are listed in Table 1, and a complete outline of the content of the training is available online.⁴ The competencies are a mixture of skills related to the functions of the job—the integrated library system and other technology, for example—and broader thinking around issues like cultural competence. The training includes readings, attendance at workshops provided by Dartmouth College Human Resources, videos, activities, scenario discussions with supervisors, and participation in the other trainings that are part of the Biomedical Libraries staff development program. Staff are able to work through the training at their

own pace, setting goals and benchmarks with their supervisors, but are generally expected to complete the training over the course of three-to-six months. The focus on competencies rather than just skills gives staff the space to apply what they learn in a variety of ways, to think more broadly about their work and its value to the library and its users, and gives them important tools to draw upon in their current job and when they move to a new phase of their careers.

The last section of the training requires the creation of a personal professional development plan, wherein each IAA will document what else they want to learn, what skills they need to keep updated, and how they will continue to engage in development opportunities after finishing the course.

This piece of the training is crucial to the community of learning that we are cultivating in which every staff member recognizes the importance of ongoing professional development and feels em-

Professional and Interpersonal Competencies	Professional and Interpersonal Competencies Information and Research Competencies
Collaboration	Library policies and procedures
Adaptability	Research services
Customer service	
Technology Competencies	Learning and Innovation Competencies
Hardware	Project management
Software (LibApps, Microsoft Office, Google Suite)	Critical thinking
Library systems	Professional development

Table 1: Information Access Assistant competencies.

powered to continue learning and growing.

Assessment and reflections

Investing in staff development is a critical way to ensure that excellent user services are being provided by whomever happens to be at the desk when a user has a question, while also supporting morale and work satisfaction by demonstrating commitment to and trust in all staff. Our aim was to create a cohesive team in which everyone's expertise is recognized and valued, and we have been successful in these efforts. Attendance at staff development workshops is high, with all or nearly all staff present at each one, and our RefAnalytics data has demonstrated an increase in staff skill. For example, providing ready reference training at the end of August 2019 decreased the number of basic reference questions being answered by librarians, from 42% during the period of July

1–August 27, 2019, to 26% during the period of September 1–October 31, 2019.

The successful implementation of a staff development program requires buy-in and support from leadership. Staff, particularly those who are nonexempt, cannot be expected to engage in professional development activities during unpaid time (lunch break or before/after regular shift), so engagement in these events must be supported as part of regular work time and expectations. One way to demonstrate leadership commitment to the program is to incorporate staff development activities into annual performance evaluation and goal setting. In our case, each staff member was encouraged to include a list of the sessions they attended with their performance evaluations, and two nonlibrarian staff members had the development and presentation of a Lunch and Learn as one of their goals for 2020.

The existence of this program allowed us to be very adaptable when the Libraries closed in March 2020 due to the COVID-19 pandemic and all staff moved to remote work. Lunch and Learns and other trainings have continued on Zoom, and we have expanded to include topics and trainings related to use of Zoom, ready reference for virtual interactions, and digital projects.

In the library community there are an abundance of opportunities for one-off professional development

in the form of conferences, webinars, and online courses. These are invaluable and important opportunities to encourage staff to take advantage of and attend. However, they should not be the only form of professional development that a library staff relies upon. Designing and implementing a structured program of staff development that incorporates the expertise of all staff, encourages social learning as a group, and adopts a variety of learning styles has proven a great way to develop a culture of learning, sharing, and professional growth.

Notes

1. https://researchguides.dartmouth.edu/consumer_health.
2. Materials from Lunch and Learn sessions that I have led are available in the Materials Folder linked in the notes.
3. OCLC WebJunction and IMLS, “Competency Index for the Library Field” (2014), https://www.webjunction.org/documents/webjunction/Competency_Index_for_the_Library_Field.html.
4. PowerPoint presentations and other staff development program materials can be accessed at dartgo.org/staffdevelopment. All materials carry a Creative Commons Attribution-NonCommercial 4.0 International License. ♪

(“Transforming theory into practice,” continued from page 116)

understanding of the theories and ideas of the Framework and what they mean for our students. As a result, the Framework has become more of a presence and touchstone in our instruction program, even as we recognize its limitations. While a project such as the one we completed will certainly be easier and more manageable for small teams of librarians, we believe its value was significant enough to warrant adaptation to other settings. Larger groups may consider conducting the process through a think-pair-share model, or in subject area teams, where the focus is applying the Framework to specific disciplinary approaches and needs.

Notes

1. Amy Mars, Kim Pittman, and Trent Brager, “23 Framework Things,” accessed July 29, 2020, <https://23frameworkthings.wordpress.com/>.

2. Beth Hoppe, “Sphere of Discourse,” uploaded February 18, 2020, <https://www.projectcora.org/assignment/sphere-discourse>.

3. Cathy Meals, “What Makes a Source ‘Good,’” uploaded July 28, 2020, <https://www.projectcora.org/assignment/what-makes-source-good>.

4. Superfight is an Apples to Apples-style card game where participants create fighters from two sets of cards—characters and attributes—and then argue why their character would win in a fight.

5. UDC Library, “How to Solve the Goldilocks Research Problem,” uploaded February 18, 2020, YouTube video, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=t1LXD2jo5-o>.

6. University of the District of Columbia, “The Equity Imperative,” accessed July 29, 2020, <https://www.udc.edu/strategic-plan/>. ♪