

# LIBRARY ISSUES

## BRIEFINGS FOR FACULTY AND ADMINISTRATORS

Editors: Ann P. Dougherty, *Mountainside Publishing*; Richard M. Dougherty, *University of Michigan, Emeritus*

Contributing Editors: William Miller, *Florida Atlantic University*; Barbara Fister, *Gustavus Adolphus College*;

Mignon Adams, *University of the Sciences in Philadelphia*; Kathleen Miller, *Florida Gulf Coast University*;

Steven J. Bell, *Temple University*; Larry Hardesty, *Winona State University*; Mark Tucker, *Abilene Christian University*

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### Online or Out the Door: Continuous Learning for Academic Librarians in Economic Downturns

by Steven J. Bell

**H**ard times have come to higher education. The cascading consequences of the global economic crisis has hit colleges and universities in many ways, primarily through revenue droughts for state governments, free-falling endowments and declines in enrollment from students who can no longer afford college or who have failed to secure loans.

Two common responses to lost income and dim prospects are the hiring freeze and the travel freeze. These actions compound the problems of library administrators already reeling from anemic or depleted staff development budgets. Little can be done to alleviate the serious challenges of unfilled positions, but for academic librarians the travel freeze need not bring an end to continuing professional development.

In a profession that routinely leverages high-technology to deliver content and services, continuous learning is vital to maintaining an agile, savvy and forward-looking library organization. Even when the coffers are running low, provosts and library deans need to get creative in figuring out how to get their professionals to programs that keep them on the cutting edge and in touch with the latest developments in academic librarianship and higher education.

Fortunately, even in the challenging financial straits in which higher education institutions find themselves, academic administrators can still see to it that their librarians keep on keeping up. The trick is knowing how to get it done on a budget. It comes down to two primary strategies to maintain continuous learning for academic librarians in tight economic times. Either get the librarians to the continuing professional development moun-

tain – or bring the mountain to the librarians. This issue will elaborate on how to do both.

#### Get Away but Keep It Close to Home

Sometimes we focus so much on traveling to faraway conferences that we fail to discover the tremendous opportunities for learning right at home. Academic librarians can find local colleagues with whom they can exchange ideas and compare practices. Local or regional programs, such as an Association of College & Research Libraries (ACRL) chapter meeting, can offer low cost networking. But why wait for an official event.

Academic administrators should support and urge their librarians to get out and visit librarians at other campuses. Put the librarians on a bus and send them off in search of new ideas to fuel innovation. The librarians who may benefit the most are those who rarely get to or shun attending national conferences held by ACRL and the American Library Association.

Opportunities will vary depending on the density of institutions in one's own day-trip traveling radius. East coast states, for example, may offer more options than states with limited populations and institutions. The possibilities expand if we keep open minds. Librarians at large research-oriented universities could visit community college libraries and vice-versa. Learning from a library quite different from one's own often yields the most ideas.

**Coming Soon —**

**Library Buildings 101:  
Designing for Success**

Academic library building tours can open up new possibilities or call attention to pitfalls to avoid. But how does the groundwork for these visits get laid, and how much work does it involve? It depends.

Cross-library visits typically begin with a connection between two counterparts at the different institutions. An initial contact may happen at a conference or on Facebook. It doesn't matter. What's important is that at least two individuals see the value in bringing their staffs together. There's nothing stopping a provost from calling his or her counterpart to suggest a joint library learning experience. Early on it is a good idea to decide if the visit should offer a programmatic theme or simply an opportunity for the staffs to mix. If two or more library staffs are meeting for the first time a program speaker can give everyone something to focus on which can facilitate chats and discussion throughout the day.

Just between two libraries there should be ample staff to help plan the program. The main work is making arrangements for facilities, food and activity. Engaging a speaker adds some complexity but no more than the typical library event. Outside speakers are often the most expensive item.

To cut costs the libraries can enlist staff members to present or seek out faculty members. To share the cost and work, the site of the program can rotate with an agreement that the local host will do the bulk of the work. Program planners should find ways to keep librarians from sticking with their own. After all, it's the mixing of the minds from which new ideas will emerge.

### **Joint Meetings Offer Local Awareness**

A staff road trip is a good, one-off, combination learning experience and morale builder. Another option is an informal but regular professional development commitment with one, and possibly two, other libraries. They jointly agree to hold one or two programs each year to bring together their staffs for learning and information exchange. It guarantees at least one opportunity to connect with colleagues

from another academic library. Two or three libraries work well because any one should have sufficient space to accommodate the collective staffs, and yet provide the critical mass needed for networking and dynamic conversation. Rather than replicate a conference program, the idea is to offer something more personalized.

My own library has an informal arrangement with two others in our city to hold two meetings a year. The initiative is now in its third year. It works well, I believe, because the directors of all three libraries came together to plan the first program. That made a statement to reinforce commitment from the top to support joint professional development; administrative support for all the participating libraries is crucial.

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Since that first meeting subsequent events are planned by assistant directors, although the next stage is to delegate the planning to librarians from the three institutions. Typically, the staff at the host institution does the bulk of the work. We cooperatively agree on the program topics and the delivery format. What the programs share is low overhead. The per staff costs are minimal compared to sending even a few staff to a formal conference. Two or three libraries sharing the cost makes it attractively affordable.

Our experience indicates that any successful half-day program must allow 60 to 90 minutes for networking and staff interaction. Evaluations show that staff members learn from the formal program, but interacting with their peers is the most highly valued part of each program. So we routinely set aside time for roundtable discussions of the program topic. We even

schedule a longer than normal break period in the middle of the program.

For administrators these programs require a small investment but offer a big return in the amount of staff engagement that happens. Despite their busy schedules, library deans and directors should try to participate in the program. It's one thing to advocate for staff professional development, and quite another to actively participate.

### **Online Opportunities Are Expanding Fast**

The biggest growth in continuing professional development for academic library workers is happening online. Our current economic downturn is a contributing factor. Consider the following. At the March 2009 conference of the Association of College & Research Librarians in Seattle, participant attendance was down by a few hundred. However, the number of registrants for the simultaneous virtual conference tripled from the previous one in 2007. The robust virtual conference featured simulcast conference programs, unique sessions delivered by virtual presenters, virtual poster sessions and even vendor presentations. An improved virtual program certainly attracted more participants, but there is no doubt that travel freezes encouraged virtual participation. The savings are considerable. What can administrators do to foster interest in and support for virtual conference participation?

Treating virtual conferencing no differently than physical conferencing is a good start. That means administrators must offer the same learning environment for a one-hour webcast session as for a three-day virtual conference.

Shorter webcast learning opportunities are growing exponentially for academic libraries. ACRL and other library organizations, including local consortia and national groups like OPAL (Online Programming for All Libraries), deliver year-round online programming. Some are offered free, some are highly skill specific and some offer socialization and networking more than anything else. National associations like EDUCAUSE and

even journal publishers are offering short, web-based online presentations. Whatever the source, participants need to act as if they are off to a physical conference. Doors should be shut and the time, from an hour to a day or more, free of interruption. Learning online requires the same distraction-free environment found at remote programs.

What impact can a virtual conference offer in challenging economic times? Scott Walter, Associate University Librarian for Services at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, served as co-chair of the ACRL Virtual Conference (VC). According to Walter his committee "received e-mail throughout the spring that alerted us to the fact that the VC would be a substitute for many to a planned trip to Seattle" for the physical conference. The VC also afforded multiple attendances from individual institutions and Walter found that "many others noted that the group registration option was being used at the "10+" level because few, if any people from a given library were being allowed to travel". Walter was also surprised to learn that many "who had not considered ACRL as an option at all were joining the VC when they heard about how much content (both live and archived) would be available and how reasonable the cost was going to be."

Academic administrators should know that online professional development requires modest technology support. Provide those attending virtual learning programs with USB headsets and webcams; staff can easily share them. These devices enhance participation in virtual professional development events because they allow for greater communication and involvement.

Virtual learning is less engaging when a library worker simply stares at a presenter's slides and listens passively to a program. I advocate that staff attending online conferences and webcasts receive mandatory training on how to get the most out of a virtual learning program. As a veteran webcast and virtual conference presenter I know that attendees with headsets get more out of their learning experi-

ence because they can interact with the speakers and other attendees, much like at a real workshop.

Consider asking those who attend these online learning programs to write up and share notes or present at staff gatherings on their learning experience. All of these methods help administrators know their investment in online professional development is providing the best return possible.

### Other Homegrown Solutions

What about worst case economic scenarios where budgets are so flat or retrenched that funding for even virtual programs or shared library events are out of the question? Academic administrators still have options for leveraging resources to encourage staff to maintain their professional development.

**Be proficient at keeping up.** One approach that costs nothing but time is to encourage library workers to become more proficient at keeping up. There are multiple options for keeping up regimens that range from low to high tech. Administrators can help by creating better opportunities for and methods of keeping up. What matters most is that whatever techniques are adopted they should be easy and convenient for library staff or they will be ignored.

**Share monitoring duties.** Start by making sure all library workers know what resources, formal and informal, are available and how to use them to create a personalized, professional E-regimen for keeping up. Electronic mail publications are a core component of any keeping up strategy. For example, how many of your staff already subscribe to the daily online editions of the *Chronicle of Higher Education* and *Inside HigherEd News*? These are easy to subscribe to and offer a great way to keep up with the latest news and developments in higher education.

Yes, academic librarians should know what's happening in the higher education industry. Identify a librarian willing to monitor these and other publications, and then send out e-mail messages pointing to relevant articles. When multiple workers participate

it shares the work of trying to keep up with so many publications and news sources.

**Provide TOC alerts.** Technology facilitates keeping up by eliminating the need to route many print resources, and instead pulls news and information right into the inbox where it can be easily digested.

Electronic table-of-contents (TOC) are readily available through the library's aggregator database services. Establishing alerts for individual journals or specific subjects involves little more than selecting a publication or search, requesting an alert, and then providing an e-mail address.

A slightly higher-tech version of this can provide a nice package of TOC alerts for a particular set of journal titles.

An article that describes this method was published in the December 2008 issue of *C&RL News* (see <http://www.acrl.org/ala/mgrps/divs/acrl/publications/crlnews/2008/dec/current-awareness.cfm>). Derik Badman and Lianne Hartman explain how to use web technologies to simplify following multiple journals in a discipline. The idea is to funnel TOC alerts from many different journals into one channel to which librarians subscribe. It reduces the leg work of gathering and subscribing to many different TOCs. The article describes how this technology was applied to help faculty improve their keeping-up regimen as well.

**Brown bag sessions.** The other low-cost option is the brown bag sharing session; it's a good complement to keeping-up activities. It's great to have library workers keep up with many different publications and news sources, but the benefits multiply when that information is shared and discussed. Academic libraries have instituted a variety of programs to facilitate this activity. Some assign different librarians to read and report on specific journals or individual articles. Others organize visits from different internal or external speakers who contribute to professional development.

What these programs have in common is being run on a shoestring budget at regular times during the

month. It's an informal, lo-tech and low-budget approach to learning that brings staff together at lunch or other designated times.

**A Web 2.0 series.** Among the challenging areas of academic librarianship to keep up with is the rapid proliferation of web-based technology, the Web 2.0 services. Library workers lack time to read about and understand the applications of the different products, let alone actually try them. Yet failing to learn them affords no thoughtful way to design library services based on their features. At Brigham Young University a librarian decided to do something about this and created a technology professional development series. At each meeting a different librarian introduces a new technology, demonstrates how it works and leads the librarians in a discussion about how it might be applied in their library.

According to Rachel L. Wadham, Education Librarian at the Harold B. Lee Library at Brigham Young University, the Technology Learning Community she organized has two main advantages. First, it is an ideal forum to take time to use new technologies that really don't lend themselves well to full formal training events. Second, they use in-house expertise and knowledge already established or developed specifically for in-house discussions.

Wadham finds the programs have "no real costs since we don't need extra facilities for full training nor do we require outside expertise to come in to do training. The only cost for this we incur is our staff time and this is really not a cost at all since we are building new skills that significantly enhance job performance." Staff members have

a "new sense of empowerment and interest...about new technologies and our expertise is growing in leaps and bounds." Programs like this one offer a high-impact/low-investment opportunity for continuing professional development.

### **Even When the Economy Improves**

When the economic crisis begins to resolve itself, as it is predicted to do in 2010, higher education will bring back travel reimbursement. Academic librarians can look forward to once again having more opportunity to travel to their conferences.

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There really is no replacement for the networking and face-to-face interaction that physical conferences offer librarians. But the economic challenges of higher education institutions may never fully recede. That is one reason why academic administrators should continue to promote and support all forms of continuous learning for academic librarians that achieve high return based on minimal investment. This only works if academic administrators recognize the value of not just supporting, but actively facilitating professional development in the library.

At institutions where librarians are on the tenure track this might mean expanding the definition of

what types of professional activity and continuing education qualify for advancement. In addition to attending traditional face-to-face conferences, both attending and helping to organize virtual conferences should be recognized for tenure purposes. To document personal responsibility for their professional development, as part of their dossier, academic librarians could provide their personalized plan for keeping up that includes the e-resources they follow, the webcasts they attend, the communities they belong to and other actions that contribute to professional development. The next generation of academic librarians is just as likely to attend and benefit from "un-conferences," programs with no formal agenda organized by grassroots organizations. Administrators must support all these professional development activities, and explore how all can qualify for tenure.

Library deans and the provosts to whom they report both know that higher education and academic librarianship are in flux, and that nothing is certain but more change coming at a faster pace. The academic libraries that thrive and prosper are the ones with staff whose skill sets are constantly kept up-to-date and based on the latest developments in the field. When budgets are stretched and funding for professional development is scarce, administrators must explore every possible option and creative alternatives in discovering affordable and convenient solutions. Implementing some of the ideas discussed in this issue is a place to start.

— Steven J. Bell <bells@temple.edu>



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