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“That’s not my job”

Developing a cross-training process in an academic library

Academic libraries are traditionally broken down into individual departments, focusing almost exclusively on discrete duties. Technical services, access services, reference, instruction, and administration are all examples of these self-contained units. Librarians become specialists in their fields and are able to work independent of other departments. In this situation, there may be strong resistance to learn other departments’ procedures, and even stronger resistance to take on and share responsibilities between departments. A cataloger asked to provide reference may respond: “That’s not my job.”

Asking an instruction librarian to learn interlibrary loan procedures may be met with the same response. However, with ever-changing library landscapes, increased use of technology, and reduction of library budgets and positions, cross-training is a necessity rather than an option. Libraries of all sizes can benefit from embracing and adopting the practice of cross-training.

In small libraries, cross-training is regularly a necessity, and “That’s not my job” is simply not an option. Most libraries would appreciate more employees, but in a time of budget cuts and fiscal volatility, many have to work with the limited funding they have. In a recent issue of *Information Today*, Shirley Kennedy states frankly, “If you don’t have all the staff you need, then you must have a high level of redundancy, skillwise, among the staff that you have.”¹

Cross-training has become a growing trend in academic libraries: *Library Journal’s* Placements and Salaries 2014 survey cited respondents describing their positions as multidisciplinary, and that they are “expected to be able to transition among roles as needed.”² More and more, libraries are transitioning to models that make cross-training essential.

As patron needs change and rely less on print collections and more on library services, many libraries are changing their service model to be more “outward-facing”—focusing on patrons rather than collections. More often, reference desks, circulation desks, and IT computer help are combining into one front-end service point. This model requires the professionals at the combined service point to be able to answer a variety of questions and provide a variety of services. Basic cross-training in many areas provides employees with the knowledge to efficiently assist patrons, while reducing the need to send the patron to another location.

SUNY-Canton is a small College of Technology within the large State University of New York system. Due to unexpected retirements and other unforeseen staffing circumstances, the college’s Southworth Library Learning Commons (SLLC) has con-

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sisted of as few as one librarian and two professional staff in the recent past. Currently, with an increased but relatively small crew of five librarians and one support staff person, each department consists of only one member thoroughly trained in specific tasks and processes related to their department. In addition, the role of interlibrary loan specialist at SUNY-Canton is a shared position with another nearby state institution's library. These conditions provide a prime opportunity for cross-training, and steps to cross-train between individual departments have recently begun. As described in this article, SUNY-Canton's approach to cross training can be used as a model for academic libraries looking to establish their own cross-training program.

First steps

The first step in developing a cross-training program is to assess whether there is a need or opportunity for such a program. Consider where gaps in knowledge exist, and which departments and tasks lend naturally to cross-training or logically overlap, such as collection development and technical services. Also consider worst-case scenarios and how prepared your organization would be to respond. Imagine if almost everyone contracted a debilitating illness simultaneously. Would the few remaining staff members be able to handle all day-to-day functions of the library? Would the temporary absence of certain individuals result in some library operations coming to a grinding halt?

The best place to start cross-training is with the library's mission-critical tasks, making sure there is a trained professional to cover for each department's major responsibilities. At SLLC, the most obvious place to initiate cross-training was with the Interlibrary Loan Department, which consists of a full-time professional shared half-time with another institution. While much of the department's work is able to be completed remotely from either location, the shared nature of the position requires the professional to physically move between campuses, creating the need for a backup person cross-trained

in the basic policies and procedures of interlibrary loan. The most obvious department to cross-train in interlibrary loan is circulation, as many of the tasks between these departments naturally overlap.

Because the interlibrary loan specialist at SLLC is both the expert, and the only employee, in his department, the job of training another staff member fell exclusively to him. Training began with scheduled sessions during which the trainee learned the processes for borrowing and lending interlibrary loan items. Each step of every process was explained thoroughly, and examples were used to illustrate each action. Following a few of these scheduled sessions, the interlibrary loan specialist would then have impromptu training as opportunities arose, allowing the trainee to complete the process with oversight.

This progressive training approach allowed the trainee to work through increasingly challenging steps while the specialist was on hand for consultation, ultimately leading to the trainee working independently on ILL tasks. Since completion of the training, the trainee is able to step in and cover at times when the interlibrary loan specialist is away, resulting in less disruption of the interlibrary loan workflow.

Be prepared

Before considering cross-training in your library, each department head should develop a manual of his or her department's duties, if one does not already exist. Creating a manual allows each department to visually assess and evaluate their workload and workflows and creates a more thorough and organized understanding of the department's tasks.³

Often, workers will not realize the number and scope of their responsibilities until they have written them out in manual form. Manuals are a valuable resource when cross-training personnel and can be used as reference both by the trainer (possibly the manual creator) and trainee. Creating manuals online permits greater access and editability. Staff can create an access-controlled manual repos-

itory using cloud software such as Google Drive or an intranet-based Wiki, or use an existing content management system, such as Springshare's LibGuides. In the event of an unexpected or prolonged absence of one or more employees, the manuals will be invaluable to directors and colleagues. Established manuals are also vital resources if a position becomes vacant and there is the need to hire and train a new librarian.

Providing high-quality services to students is at the forefront of SLLC's mission. This includes providing information literacy instruction to thousands of students through the library instruction program. Although there are two librarians who share this responsibility, it is such a critical service that cross-training additional staff in the procedure was justified.

As part of an effort to provide consistent, thorough instruction, the instruction librarians first developed a shared lesson plan for courses that most frequently receive library instruction, particularly the college's First Year Experience Program (FYEP). With dozens of sections of FYEP all receiving similar introductory instruction, librarians were able to develop a basic course outline that could be tailored to specific faculty requests, but serve as a foundation for all information literacy instruction. The lesson was also used as a basis for cross-training colleagues. Developing the lesson plan and cross-training others proved beneficial when a librarian with a scheduled course had a last-minute emergency. Another librarian who was previously cross-trained with the lesson plan was able to step in and provide instruction immediately, with no appreciable disruption for the students being served.

Supervisors must plan and set aside time for training. Although in many shoestring-staffed libraries it seems there is no available time, allotting specific time for cross-training during a slower period—such as between academic semesters—often results in a more efficient workflow throughout the academic year.

Practical applications

Employees sometimes need to take a short leave (such as maternity or paternity leave), and it may not be fiscally possible to hire a replacement for their temporary absence. Temporarily covering essential tasks with a cross-trained worker allows for less workflow disruption and seamless service to patrons, while keeping departmental budgets in check. Directors and administrators will need to ensure work requirements meet union or other contractual guidelines, but if temporary coverage by a colleague is feasible, it can ultimately save considerable money. Because staff have already gone through cross-training and have a manual to reference, short-term coverage can sometimes be achieved without hiring temporary personnel.

Cross-training is not only essential for mission-critical tasks. It can be applied to secondary and nonessential library operations, have a positive influence on morale, and can create positive working relationships where there was previously exclusivity. Workloads in libraries are dynamic, and one staff member can become overwhelmed if their responsibilities suddenly increase due to the cycle of duties throughout the year. Cross-trained co-workers are able to step in to help out with an increased workload as their time allows. Willingness to learn about and help with a colleague's tasks is typically well-received when one feels overwhelmed with work, and can increase collegiality within a team.

A recent project that used cross-trained employees in a secondary-level operation was a collection-wide weeding completed over three academic semesters at SLLC. The Technical Services Department at SLLC consists of one librarian, also responsible for electronic resource management, as well as collection development for specific liaison areas. Removing more than 10,000 titles required an enormous number of work hours, and could not possibly have been completed by the sole technical services librarian. Cross-training of, and receiving support from, other staff was necessary for completing a project

of such large scale. The librarian leading the project trained additional staff members, as well as student circulation workers, in various steps of the procedure, including withdrawing the titles from the catalog and processing the weeded books. Cross-training—as it applied to this project—allowed staff members to work collaboratively and provide wide-ranging feedback throughout the process, while efficiently completing a task that would have proven monumental for one department.

Cross-training encourages communication between departments, and training colleagues about one's particular specialty creates a sense of ownership and leadership among peers. During a research university library's restructuring involving interdepartmental cross-training, staff members cited "a sense of shared responsibility for the outcome" and teamwork among staff members.⁴ Furthermore, when employees understand the duties and processes of another department more thoroughly, they can work together more cohesively toward the library's overall goals and mission.

A 1988 cross-training experiment at the University at Albany cited feelings of isolation among certain staff members, particularly those whose responsibilities led to them working independently in an individual department.⁵ After interdepartmental cross-training, they saw lessened feelings of isolation and noted an increase in professional confidence.

Creating a cross-trained workforce can be essential in an era of dynamically changing libraries. With a major shift from print to electronic resources, and the prevalence of a learning commons model, flexibility among staff is paramount. By forming collaborative teams to see initiatives through from start to finish, cross-training partners different co-workers with each other in varied teams, which can be created and reformed ad hoc to suit the library's needs.

Sarah C. Michalak, university librarian and associate provost for university libraries at the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill,

who has written extensively about academic libraries, would agree, noting that, "Staff jobs change as the library changes, with new duties bringing together new work teams that will almost certainly change again in the future."⁶

While providing many benefits to the library, cross-training is also extremely valuable to the individual cross-trained employee. In an age when multitasking is practically a prerequisite, being able to speak from experience in multiple library departments may set a job-seeker apart from the rest of the applicant pool. Understanding the processes involved in multiple departments helps a recently hired staff member better understand their new library. Experience with reference and instruction can be immediately applied in interactions with patrons, no matter what an employee's assigned position is.

Adopting cross-training in an academic library should not be seen as a solution to understaffing, but as a temporary support when the situation demands additional trained personnel. Librarians are—and should be—experts in specific fields and disciplines, and a briefly trained co-worker is not going to replace the expertise and experience of a veteran employee in complex tasks and procedures, but can serve as backup and support when needed.

Conclusion

While time and budget constraints may make cross-training seem like an unattainable goal, they are also the reasons cross-training is a necessary endeavor. Developing a cross-training program forces library leaders to assess current workflows and gaps, and preparing for a program requires individual departments to develop workflows and training manuals that are unquestionably beneficial for successors and colleagues.

Cross-training saves money while helping employees build their skill sets, and creates cohesion and collaboration between otherwise separate departments. In an outward-facing library, it is often necessary for the front end of operations to perform a

variety of services, and knowledge of most library procedures can be instrumental in providing positive customer service at such service points. A well-executed cross-training program creates new teams among old colleagues working toward a common goal and opens new lines of communication between departments, sparking discussion of shared problems and potential resolutions.

Notes

1. Shirley Duglin Kennedy, "Give the people what they want, but," *Information Today*, (2015): 8.
2. Stephanie L. Maata, "Renaissance librarians: traditional roles are increasingly

incorporated into broadly defined responsibilities that call for flexible skill sets," *Library Journal* 139, no. 17 (2014): 26-34.

3. Holly Flynn, "Creating Manuals for Job Duties," in *Library Management Tips That Work*, ed. Carol Smallwood (Chicago: American Library Association, 2011).
4. Sarah C. Michalak, "This Changes Everything: Transforming the Academic Library," *Journal of Library Administration* 52:5 (2012): 411-423.
5. Eleanor Gossen and Frances Reynolds, "Forging new communication links in an academic library: A.," *Journal of Academic Librarianship* 16, no. 1 (1990): 18.
6. Michalak, 415. *zz*

("Employing field research...", continues from page 333)

5. Zara Wilkinson and Julie Skill, "The use of librarians as occupational study populations in social science research," *Library Review* 63 (2014): 2-14. Doi: 10.1108/LR-07-2013-0092.

6. ACRL Instruction Section ILBP Committee, "Information Literacy Best Practices: Exemplary Programs," www.ala.org/acrl/aboutacrl/directoryofleadership/sections/is/iswebsite/projpubs/bestpractices-exemplary. *zz*

("Be Here," continues from page 340)

The goal was to truly create something that is useful for all library employees, and it impacts each team differently. Foundationally UVU library believes that every employee always represents the library, whether they regularly see patrons or not. That is why this process included many stakeholders in order to create something useful for all.

For example, the technical services librarian suggested the principle "Remember the Goal"—something his team was already using. For a group like Technical Services, which is often separated from the public, "Remember the Goal" reminds them that work, seen and unseen, impacts the experiences and opportunities of faculty and students. Each of the principles is adaptable and can be used differently, depending on the needs of a particular department or team.

Conclusion

"Be Here" is UVU library's principle-based customer service solution that asks employees to be present, flexible, and innovative. It is UVU library's best attempt to put patrons first by focusing on what the library can do, rather than what it cannot.

Notes

1. Ronald Block and Julie P. McNeil, "Get to yes: Branding public library customer service," *Public Libraries Online: A Publication of the Public Library Association*, retrieved from <http://publiclibrariesonline.org/2015/02/get-to-yes-branding-public-library-customer-service/>.
2. To see the training videos please visit <https://sites.google.com/site/behereuvulibrary/home>. *zz*