

Library as Learning Organization

Reimagining Our Committee Structure

This article, the first of a two-part series, explores the efforts of a mid-size academic library to reinvigorate and expand upon our committee structure to transition to a more flexible, employee-driven learning organization. Part two is scheduled to be published in summer 2025.

By strengthening our committees and defining new ways of working together, including creating communities of practice (CoPs) and action teams, we sought to empower everyone in the organization to contribute to important shared work and enable employees to grow as leaders, facilitators, and project managers. We believe that as a learning organization we are able to advance work that is more collaborative, timely, and impactful.

Prior Committee Structure and Challenges

Within the past five years, the Northern Kentucky University Steely Library has had different committee models, depending on the leadership at the time. As recently as FY23, the library had three standing committees: Inclusive Excellence, focused on cultivating diversity, equity, and inclusion; Library Appreciation, focused on supporting a positive organizational culture; and Training and Engagement, focused on identifying employee learning opportunities. In this model, one representative from each department served on each committee, as identified by department heads.

One of the biggest impediments to a sustainable committee structure was persistent personnel turnover. In 2023, the dean of the library accepted a new position, with an interim dean of the library stepping into this role mid-year. Spurred by the university's fiscal deficit, a faculty retirement incentive was offered, leading to several concurrent retirements in 2023 and the need to fill these positions in spring 2024. Outside the library, leadership changes also took place at the university level, with a new president appointed in 2023 (followed shortly by a new provost in 2024).

During FY24, library leadership focused on addressing stressors that strained the organizational culture. Strategies included hosting monthly informal colleague check-ins and offering individual listening sessions with the interim dean. Clear and continuous communication was a priority, along with empowering employees to move forward on ideas they had. One such idea came from the Library Appreciation Committee, whose chair suggested a reading group. The interim dean had recently heard about the book *The Art of Gathering* by Priya Parker, and they chose to move forward with this selection. Interested employees met four

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times during the academic year to discuss the book and recommend improvements to the library's meetings. Later, the successful engagement and impact of the reading group proved to be an exciting model for what could be, inspiring us to apply the same creativity to our broader committee structure.

Beyond the reading group, with library employees stretched so thin, committee work was deprioritized. One committee (Training and Engagement) was intentionally disbanded during this time, with the remaining two admirably pursuing their work with reduced membership.

Collaboratively Creating Our New Structure

By summer 2024, the library was fully staffed and eager to move forward, ready for the collaborative work needed to make change happen. The opportunity to envision a new structure in this reenergized environment was a unique benefit. We could tap into a multitude of perspectives, from employees with deep experience at the organization and those who had recently participated in different committee structures elsewhere. Two of our newest hires were department heads, who joined the library's Leadership Team. This group, consisting of the interim dean, interim associate dean, and department heads, was well-aware that we needed to establish a sustainable structure. Realistically, we would not gain approval for additional positions, so we needed to determine new ways of working and learning together across departments. There were several key considerations that we grappled with as leaders and managers.

- **Strategy for supporting cross-unit projects:** We were increasingly aware of the types of work that our library needed to be positioned to address—and currently was not. One priority was cross-units projects, some of which were overdue to be addressed (an updated strategy for our digital repository) and others that had a particular time sensitivity (a forthcoming migration to a new discovery layer). We lacked a mechanism to pull groups together or shared language to refer to these groups. Task Forces? Working Groups? Action Teams? All those terms had been used, somewhat interchangeably, in recent years at our organization, and we lacked a common terminology and shared understanding.
- **Structure for nurturing new skillsets:** Library personnel at every level of the organization had recognized new and evolving skillsets that we needed to develop. Ultimately, we landed on three CoP topics, proposed by library employees who would serve as facilitators: artificial intelligence (AI), the data visualization platform PowerBI, and the pedagogy of teaching and learning. AI was a hot topic at the national and institutional level, and our library also felt an urgent need to jump into developing our AI knowledge, skills, and strategies. PowerBI was a new-to-us tool that we used during electronic resource cancellations in spring 2024, sparking an interest in advancing our ability to organize information and convey stories about library impact. We also had an influx of new librarian educators who would hold various teaching responsibilities, including teaching information literacy and cultivating maker literacy in our makerspace, as well as those without formal teaching responsibilities who wanted to develop skills to further their career aspirations, leading to the desire for a teaching-focused CoP.
- **Shared approach to library service opportunities:** As managers, it was our responsibility to provide meaningful service opportunities upon which employees are evaluated

during annual performance reviews. We grappled with how to establish a standard engagement expectation, especially recognizing that many employees have campus-level service commitments. Our lean staffing meant that each person’s active involvement was crucial to the successful functioning of library groups. Without equitable engagement, staff and faculty who are more involved would carry the brunt of the work, leading to burnout and unsustainable conditions. We strove to create shared expectations that could be applied equitably but flexibly, allowing the individual and their manager to work together to balance their interest and capacity.

FY25 was almost underway, and it was clear that re-envisioning our committee structure needed to be a priority for the Leadership Team to complete prior to August 2024, when the fall semester would begin. We had discussed as an organization, largely informally, that this work would be taking place, so we did not expect our colleagues to be surprised. Many were awaiting guidance on committee membership, as some had remained on the same committee for the past two years given the lack of process the prior year.

We knew we needed a multi-stream plan of gathering questions and suggestions that would inform the structure. We developed a scaffolded information gathering approach to learn what was going well and what could be improved upon, including soliciting feedback from current committees and department-level conversations. The entire library remained involved through emails and verbal updates shared by the interim dean, inviting feedback every step of the way, on both the content of the structure as well as the change process itself. Once the new committee structure was solidified, a preference survey allowed employees to rank their interest in the available committees and CoPs. The Leadership Team reviewed the preference survey and finalized group membership, with all employees joining one of their top selections. Overall, the active work of developing and implementing the structure took place over a three-month timeline (see table 1).

Table 1. Timeline

| Timing | Action |
|-----------------|--|
| Early June 2024 | Leadership Team meets to discuss summer priorities and decides to update our committee and group structure. |
| Throughout June | Departmental conversations on past committee structure, using shared guiding questions across units. |
| Mid-June | Prospective CoP facilitators complete a template describing their vision and plan for the group. |
| End of June | Interim Dean meets with all committee chairs to gather feedback and share preliminary plans for new structure. |
| End of June | Interim Dean shares new structure during library-wide meeting, inviting feedback and discussion. |
| Mid-July | CoP topics are finalized for upcoming year. |
| Early August | Leadership Team creates preference survey for committees and CoPs. |
| Early August | Action Teams are formally charged, and work is initiated. |
| Mid-August | Interim Dean distributes preference survey, with employees indicating group preferences for the upcoming year. |
| End of August | Leadership Team finalizes FY25 group membership, using survey preferences. |
| Early September | Committee and CoP leaders convene kickoff meetings, and the work begins! |

Our Reimagined Committee Structure

The Leadership Team prioritized creating documentation that would support organizational alignment, including an overview that included committee and group definitions, purposes, guidelines, and an annual timeline. This allowed us to clearly delineate between the different types of work that groups would take on, signaling which ones were continuous and which were time-bound. We landed on the following definitions for five different group types:

- **Committees** are continuous groups that recur from year-to-year, with annual outcomes and anticipated deliverables. Members have two-year appointments, ideally with staggered membership so not all members roll off in the same year. Committees identify a chair and vice chair with staggered appointment terms for continuity.
- **Communities of Practice (CoP)** are learning communities led by library employees and focused on topics of interest to the library. CoP proposals are solicited each spring with a limited number selected for the upcoming academic year (either for fall semester, spring semester, or both). CoPs allow participants to learn new skills they can apply to their role and generate a concrete deliverable that will benefit the entire library.
- **Action Teams** are time-bound groups with role-based membership. Action teams have a charge and anticipated deliverables. Participation counts toward job performance rather than service in the context of annual performance reviews.
- **Workgroups** are continuous groups with role-based membership. They have yearly outcomes and anticipated deliverables. Participation counts toward job performance rather than service in the context of annual performance reviews.
- **Reading Groups** collectively read and discuss a book on a topic relevant to academic libraries and/or higher education. Participants collaborate to identify how to apply lessons learned from the book into our library context.

We currently only have one workgroup (focused on student supervisors) and opted to skip the reading group this year, given the overwhelming interest in exploring CoPs. Thus, here was our list of groups for FY25:

- Inclusive Excellence Committee
- Library Appreciation Committee
- Teaching and Learning CoP
- Artificial Intelligence CoP
- Assessment with PowerBI CoP
- Digital Repository Action Team
- EBSCO Migration Action Team

Within the overview document mentioned above, we provided clear rules of engagement and directly mapped this work to annual performance reviews:

Employees will likely engage in a mix of groups. Everyone should serve on at least one library committee, community of practice, or reading group. All employees should plan to actively engage and contribute to groups they are members of. During annual performance reviews, employees should document their committee, CoP, or reading group role and impact as a service opportunity (workgroups and action teams should be counted as part of job performance).

To keep this information and our various groups organized, we created a new Microsoft 360 Teams space. This space contained all documentation on any library committee or group. Each committee or group received their own channel where they could talk amongst one another and store all their documentation in one place. This also allowed our library to retain knowledge and past work as employees cycled off groups or left the organization. We created templates to ensure sustainable and consistent documentation of committees and groups year after year.

What's Next

Our FY25 committees, CoPs, and action teams are now underway, and each group provides updates at our monthly library-wide meetings. We look forward to discovering how their work spurs new ideas for next year's committee cycle and to continuing to refine our overall model so that it remains effective.

Part two of this article, scheduled for publication in summer 2025, will delve more deeply into the work of our three CoPs. Our CoP facilitators will join us as co-authors to describe the impact of the CoPs on our organization and strategies for other libraries seeking to implement an employee-led CoP structure. ❧