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Building Community: Synergy and Empowerment Through Staff Development and Marketing in a Small Rural Academic Library

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Abstract

This paper presents two collaborative programs at a small academic library that leverage the insights, engagement, and interests of our most important asset: our staff. Two new library committees, the *Staff Training Advisory Group* and the *Marketing Team*, extended planning, accountability, and partnerships to paraprofessional staff members. The onset and associated activities of these two committees yielded not only direct results in terms of staff training programs and marketing initiatives, but also resulted in creating a more collaborative culture and shared purpose in our library. This paper examines how the overlap of these two committees created a convergence that fostered excitement about the library, interest in improving library roles, and furthering library initiatives. By working together, and with our university community, we developed solid, popular programs in addition to cultivating a more intentional, thoughtful, and inclusive approach to our work and, ultimately, to supporting our university community.

Keywords: empowerment, paraprofessional staff, staff development, marketing, committee, university library

Introduction

Paraprofessionals are the face of many small academic libraries. Integral to library operations, they possess a variety of skills applied through multiple roles, and often have close ties to members of the community – both within and external to the University. Not only is it essential for libraries to provide staff with opportunities to advance their skills and interests, but librarians can actively partner with staff in order to provide them with staff development opportunities and to further strategic library goals. This partnership can result in increased engagement of both librarians and staff. This article explores how a collaboratively built staff development program and library marketing team not only achieved goals in the areas of staff development and marketing, but also created enthusiasm and new energy about advancing the library's goals and messages. Ultimately, this effort in expanding staff abilities and increasing collaboration helped both librarians and staff develop their knowledge, hone library messages, and recognize their strengths as a community.

UAS Egan Library

The University of Alaska Southeast (UAS) Egan Library is a small academic library in a semi-remote, rural setting; these attributes affect our staff development and marketing opportunities. Egan Library is the regional library of the University of Alaska Southeast (UAS), a public four-year university serving a diverse student body of approximately 3,000 students, on three campuses and online. The main campus in Juneau, the capital city of Alaska, (population 32,406)[1],

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enjoys a beautiful setting in a temperate rainforest on a lake. Hand carved totem poles from the Eagle (Ch'áak' Kootéeyaa) and Raven (Yéil Kootéyaa) clans of the Aak'w'Kwáan Tlingit "People of the Small Lake" represent the ancient cultures of the land.

The University of Alaska Southeast also includes Ketchikan and Sitka campuses, which are smaller island communities each with individual populations with specific needs. While the Ketchikan campus has its own library, a librarian from Egan Library is the liaison for the Sitka campus. Overall our students are non-traditional, with 29 being the average age. Thirteen percent of students are Alaska Native.[2] UAS has a strong student-centered focus, with student success, teaching and learning, community engagement, and research and creative expression among our core themes.[3] Academics range from the Liberal Arts and Sciences, Career Education, Professional Education, and Teacher Education. Classes are taught in a variety of delivery modes including on campus, online through a course management system, and blended delivery.

During the time period that this article addresses there were four library faculty (librarians) at Egan Library in addition to the Library Director. The primary responsibilities of the librarians were heading the public and technical services departments, outreach, and information literacy. Paraprofessional staff numbered seven; their main areas included administrative support, information technology in the library, and public and technical services. Although librarians and staff have primary work responsibilities, the Library's small staff size necessitates that librarians and staff work in multiple areas. As with many small libraries, if we want to move forward we need to take on changing responsibilities and leverage our collective energies.

Literature Review

Staff Training and Development

In the literature there is a discussion on library paraprofessional development, though not always in the context of small rural academic libraries. An exception is a study that identified the following barriers for academic library staff in isolated places: funding, travel distances, time, staffing, budget cuts, and other barriers such as isolation and perceptions of the profession.[4] While Kendrick, Tritt, and Leaver wrote of the "barriers to training opportunities for academic *librarians* on small or rural campuses"[5] this article focuses on *staff* professional development and community (emphasis added). If librarians in rural academic libraries experience these barriers, we suggest paraprofessionals will experience the barriers even more.

In order to be successful, a staff training program in an academic setting must meet the varied needs of staff.[6] In order to understand what staff needs are and how to respond to them, Oldroyd suggests that "a training needs analysis is a valuable tool."[7] One need discussed in the literature is to address the perception of inequalities between professionals and paraprofessionals. Staff development can serve as "an empowerment tool to help address inequalities, real and perceived, between paraprofessional staff and library professionals within an academic library setting."[8]

There are several ways to offer a training plan. Straatmann categorized three types of programs: competency development, career development, and personal development.[9] Whatever the type of program, there are many benefits. The literature highlights growth in confidence, enhanced abilities, and problem solving: "staff tends to be more self-confident and to exhibit an enhanced ability in dealing with diverse situations and problem solving."[10] A case study looks at developing effective programs to support staff professional growth and improve services.[11] Jennerich

reports how staff training benefitted a large organization; this may be looked at more closely to see how it might offer parallel benefits to staff in a small organization. The benefits included enhanced staff experience, improved customer service – both internal and external, increased expectations, decreased anxiety, and improved group communication skills. The training in this organization also gave staff tools for tackling problems creatively, empowered staff members, made library staff valuable to the campus, invigorated the need for personal improvement, and instilled confidence throughout the organization.[12]

Marketing and Communications

Davis and Lundstrom describe the importance of communication between departments at an academic library and how staff development is a crucial piece to "fulfilling the library's mission statement…and upholding its values".[13] In terms of communication between departments (and between librarians and paraprofessionals) the marketing literature comments on messaging and promotion from *all* library employees. Smith described the development of an ad hoc library marketing committee, and though it was situated within a large academic library, the message may be even more crucial in a small academic library. Marketing and strategic planning go hand in hand; they are processes by which we identify the vision, goals, and defining outcomes for collective focus for the future. "Since the entire library had been vested in the strategic planning process, there was a shared recognition that marketing was an aspect of everyone's daily job duties – that all interactions with our public need to positively reflect upon and promote the library."[14]

Paraprofessional attitudes about their work and about the library are also mentioned in the articles reviewed. A 2011 study explored staff attitudes about marketing from three UK university libraries. The study found it is vital to give staff the opportunity to define what marketing encompasses and that staff need training in marketing techniques and strategy so they can demonstrate the "worth of the library to users and stakeholders."[15]

The American Library Association Office for Library Advocacy provides a guide to creating a communication plan and clearly defining your audience and key messages. The workbook seems to assume that higher level library administration, trustees, and Friends' groups are already involved and then would delegate work as necessary.[16] In other words, this publication assumes paraprofessional staff will not actively participate from the beginning. This is an assumption that smaller libraries cannot mistake to make. Our staff involvement and collaboration is necessary at all levels, from grassroots to implementation.

Shared Planning and Programming for Staff Development at Egan Library

Challenges and Opportunities

Our isolated location impacts us in that we have few local professional development opportunities specific to academic libraries; we are the only academic library in our city. This affects other remote libraries and was identified as a barrier to staff development by Kendrick, Tritt, and Leaver.[17] Furthermore, due to budget constraints combined with the cost of travel outside land-locked Juneau, modest opportunities for travelling to other locations for professional development are limited to library faculty. Of course there are substantial quality online courses and Webinars, but they are often costly and can be scheduled at inconvenient times, both during the semester (e.g. high library-use and instruction times) and during the day (we are four hours behind Eastern Standard Time). Webinars and broader events are generally geared toward larger academic libraries with different needs than ours. While these barriers

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restrict the types of staff training opportunities available, they also create the opportunity for us to think creatively and to capitalize on the expertise of other university and community members and their willingness to work with us and to share that expertise. Leveraging this opportunity is essential, particularly for small libraries, as we progress in enriching staff development.

The librarian responsible for staff training wanted to create a formal program. She identified several elements she wanted to integrate into a well-defined and sustainable staff training program: a statement of purpose explicitly linking the program to the University and Library Mission Statements, general ideas about the areas of development the program would emphasize, and active staff participation in creating and guiding the program. To her, staff partners and staff involvement were the most important aspects for establishing the program, and it was essential that staff be true collaborators in designing a program that fit their professional needs.

Staff Training Advisory Group

Mission and Goals

Our librarian also wanted to create a group that would actively engage with one another and others in the community to build connections, identify training opportunities, and to promote the training program to other Library staff. While she solicited input via an anonymous online survey to staff, ideally surveys would be only one of several mechanisms for staff to contribute to the form and content of the program. She wanted staff to have a more significant role; with this aim she established the *Staff Training Advisory Group* (STAG).

Fortunately, there were three colleagues from different areas who were willing to serve on the group. Having staff from different departments participating in the planning process was valuable since the staff training program spanned across departments, and trainings needed to be relevant to multiple areas of the library. The group "identifies, coordinates, and promotes staff training opportunities. The Staff Training Advisory Group also assists in evaluating the overall staff training program."[18]

An Inclusive Approach to Implement Activities and Achieve Outcomes

The STAG was composed of the librarian who chaired the committee and three paraprofessional staff members. The group's work was fundamental in establishing the staff training program. They aided in creating a mission and direction for the program, which were approved by the Library Director, and in establishing training goals. The paraprofessionals' enthusiasm, knowledge, and experience were key in planning and coordinating the activities plus maintaining the momentum of the group.

Also key was the way in which the STAG worked together to identify activities and coordinate the various learning opportunities. In addition to ongoing communications via email, the STAG had regular meetings, guided by an agenda set by the group, where all members contributed suggestions for staff development topics as well as the logistics involved with the timing and scheduling of the activities. Meetings included collective brainstorming, particularly since the entire structured program was new. Staff determined the optimal time of year to hold the two different series that they launched as well as the themes and titles for both series; they did this through consultation with other colleagues and by taking the academic calendar and events into consideration. One area where the internal collaboration of this group really stands out is in the actual selection and fulfillment of the related activities. Each member brought at least one suggestion for an activity to a meeting or shared it beforehand via email. The

group generally used the majority rule approach when selecting initial topics to put forth to all library colleagues; the process was democratic. While colleagues on the team had various interests, they were able to choose activities that they believed supported the Mission of the program and benefitted the staff, and the Library, as a whole. Fortunately, if there were disagreements in the priority of the topics, the group was able to negotiate those so that the final selections were agreeable to all; some topics were moved to the next round of a series, or incorporated into a broader topic. Through the STAG's communications, members had the opportunity to learn about their colleagues' strengths, passions, and areas that they would like to improve. These were conversations which may not have taken place between the group members external to the group's meetings and email exchanges. The size of the group definitely worked to an advantage, as it was possible to include selections from each member at some point of our training series. This can also extend to being an advantage of working in a small library; there is opportunity to harness and implement ideas that are put forth by many colleagues, not just a few.

The small size of the library also helped in soliciting other colleagues' ideas. The STAG worked with other library staff to collect and include their input through various channels, including informal discussion and online, anonymous surveys. For example, the STAG would collectively select assorted training topics and then ask all staff and librarians to rank their preference of the topics as part of an online survey; then the group would proceed with planning for those topics. As Jaramillo states, "it is useful to have a committee which helps plan programs … and that also talks with its colleagues and brings the resulting ideas back for further examination and prioritization."[19] This is useful not only for the practicality of carrying out programs, but also for cultivating inclusiveness. The staff members who were part of the STAG not only made recommendations for and final selections of unique training opportunities, they also independently coordinated activities as well. They organized and promoted two successful training series two years in a row with workshops ranging from *Google Search Tips* to *Working with Students with Disabilities*. Additionally, they proposed that we hold a "Summer Learning" series which included networking with other University departments to learn about their respective services so that we would be more informed in serving our students. Some of these departments included: Career Services, Admissions and Financial Aid, and Student Exchange and Study abroad. Instead of inviting colleagues from these, and other, departments to come to the Library, we visited their areas. Library administration, faculty, and staff all participated in this series of learning opportunities. This series culminated in the "Summer Fun" activities which were team-building outdoor events held to celebrate the success of the series and to foster interaction amongst library colleagues in a relaxed setting. (See Figure 1.) Library staff on the STAG were given full ownership of the "Summer Fun" activities and were responsible for all aspects of their coordination, including liaising with other departments to secure venues and obtain needed equipment. In total, the STAG organized over 20 training opportunities for their colleagues. These activities were all new for the Library. Participation in the STAG not only helped paraprofessionals to take ownership and direction of their own professional development needs and activities, but it also led to greater connections between library faculty, staff, and other departments of the University community.

Visioning and Meeting Goals Together: Marketing at Egan Library

Challenges and Opportunities

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For years we produced marketing materials on an ad-hoc basis, with a staff member or librarians creating the materials as the events happened. Librarians and staff were not design or copy-writing experts, and there was a general sense of frustration that our images and signage did not effectively convey the value of our services. We wanted our print and web materials to have a more professional appearance, and we did not have in-house expertise in the Library to accomplish this goal. Additionally, there weren't any planned coordination of efforts in marketing, just many disparate efforts. We only have one PR office serving the entire university; the lack of an in-house marketing department that some larger libraries may have the resources for limited our ability to consistently promote the Library and communicate our strengths via polished, professional messaging.

The impetus for the establishment of the Marketing Team included a meeting during which the Provost shared attractive visual marketing materials from other departments of the university and encouraged an improved brochure for the library. Our staff were eager to promote all of the things we do for students, yet there was no systematic way to approach this. It became clear we needed an overall plan for librarians and staff to effectively and strategically market the library to our stakeholders.

Marketing Team

Mission and Goals

It was important to the chair (the Outreach Services Librarian) that we build on staff enthusiasm and interest as part of the planning and implementation process. Similar to the STAG, participation with the Marketing Team was voluntary, and set up intentionally as a "team" with equal, active participation of all members in identifying library events, marketing tools, strategies, and messaging. The team, in addition to the chair, consisted of two paraprofessionals and a second librarian who attended as schedules permitted. The Library Director was kept abreast of activities of the team as we progressed with our work.

The direct charge of the *Marketing Team* was to create a marketing plan for regional library services in alignment with the library strategic plan. As Estall and Stephens' study posits, it is essential to provide staff with the chance to contribute to defining marketing.[20] Keeping this in mind, when we first met to review our charge, we also agreed on our working definitions of *marketing*, *branding*, and *promotional campaigns*, and we discussed what the elements of our plan would entail.

The Marketing Team began meeting after the STAG had already been established. With renewed staff interest and involvement in promoting the library and increasing events involving staff, the librarian responsible created a model similar to STAG for the marketing team. In biweekly meetings we worked by collectively brainstorming the most important elements our plan would cover, how specific our marketing goals should be, and how (and who) would implement the many pieces involved in achieving our marketing and promotional goals.

Collaborative Goal-Setting and Achievements: Activities and Outcomes

The marketing literature suggests you make a plan with measurable goals. The Marketing Team began by brainstorming five ambitious but reachable goals that would make up our plan and correspond to already defined benchmarks in the library strategic plan. Once we were in general agreement about our five major goals, each team member was assigned one of the goals (with the chair taking two) to individually flesh out the specific wording of each, how we would measure our success, and begin brainstorming the activities (e.g. library events or promotional messaging) we could implement that

would support each goal. We then reported back to the marketing team for discussion and democratic decision making.

When we agreed upon the specific wording and measurability of each goal, we created a master planning document to systematically track our efforts and progress in reaching the goals. Under each goal we listed (a) strategies, (b) tactics, (c) dates, (d) notes, (e) measures, (f) budget, and (g) communication modes. The marketing plan was a living document that would be updated continuously over the academic year.

To more easily track the various tactics (or projects) related to each of our goals, we populated a large wall calendar with planned events, in order to have a visual reference of our activities over the year. Results and data were recorded in our master planning document.

As time and circumstances dictated we continuously addressed marketing goals by launching events and honing our messaging surrounding these events, with each team member offering suggestions and direction. For example, one of our goals was to "reach out to new students early and often each semester." In one tactic supportive of this goal, paraprofessionals arranged to help out at First Year Student Move-in Day. We (all team members) joined Student Services staff at our university to carry belongings of newly arrived students to their dorm rooms and offered drinks and snacks, compliments of the Egan Library. Our participation was offered in a spirit of welcoming first year students with friendly help from library staff, and we tracked our involvement in the marketing plan.

In the case of another goal, to "create a friends of the library group," this became a marketing priority because university administration identified a need to create a new funding category for beneficial giving at the library. The Marketing Team decided the creation of a library Friends group could be highlighted alongside of another important event: the 25th anniversary of the groundbreaking for the library facility. We saw an opportunity to celebrate 25 years of history and services with a large catered party in the building. Marketing Team members worked with the Alumni and Friends Office to have a wide and inclusive invitation list of alumni and community friends. The Marketing Team took responsibility for party planning and used many of the marketing modes identified in the document created by the team. Where previously this type of event would have been assigned to the director and faculty librarian leadership, the Marketing Team's energy and expertise carried off the details necessary to throw a party for 200+ people. Largely these efforts fell upon one marketing team member in particular with a facility for details and party planning. Another team member applied their strengths in social media and tracking metrics, inspiring new approaches to using Facebook and Instagram for a more consistent and effective campaign promoting a quarter century of the Library.

Before the Marketing Team existed, there would have been less collectively shared knowledge and intentional action toward the event; the context for staff to take so much ownership and responsibility for such a big event (with team member support) did not exist at our library previously. The Marketing Team reached our very specific goal of a substantial supporting Friends Group with over 30 members. New members signed up at the anniversary party, and the entire event was seen as great publicity for UAS and our historical standing in the Juneau community. The Marketing Team truly worked together, we supported each other and were able to achieve our goals.

Marketing is an ongoing process and our plan is iterative. As we reach goals, new goals will be pursued. Over the first academic year we met, we were tasked by the Library Director with other related projects synergistic to our goals, for example to create a guide to the different

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modes of marketing tools and strategies available to us, so that we could incorporate our marketing strategies more intentionally and consistently. As highlighted in the library marketing literature, we found that participation from all library employees is essential for advancing our message and meeting our goals.

Discussion

Participation in the STAG and Marketing Team is staff development in and of itself. This type of staff development can be seen as competency development and personal development.[21] Team members were responsible for various aspects of planning and promotion and staff had the opportunity to work with one another and librarians in order to develop skills needed to work successfully on a committee and advance specific programs with goals that they helped establish. These are areas of work which they may not otherwise have been exposed to in their positions. They are also areas of work that, as a small library, it is important that all staff have experience with to effectively contribute to new initiatives. In creating the staff training and marketing programs, working as a team with staff, and assessing staff attitudes by sending a questionnaire, the librarians who chaired these committees made the following observations about how these programs made an impact in our small academic library.

Internal and External Communication and Connections

Participation in the committees opened up lines of communication between staff and librarians to discuss aspects of our work. This was apparent in the party planning and marketing efforts. It also opened discussions between librarians and paraprofessionals on social media content marketing approaches that would have been unlikely to have happened if it was only one librarian's responsibility. Not only did these conversations outside of committee meetings connect to the committees' activities, they increased communication between colleagues that may otherwise not connect regularly. This contributes to staff and librarians collaborating in order to further library work in other areas.

Improved external communication and connections were primarily in the areas of meeting with other University Departments to learn more about their work and in honing our messages to communicate library value effectively. Our "Summer Learning" series established connections with other Departments and led to further collaborations. For example, library staff created welcome bags that included souvenirs and goodies in addition to library information specifically for international students following the suggestion put forth in our staff training presentation from Student Exchange. Students directly benefitted from this connection between departments.

An example of improved external communication is the group viewing and discussion of a recorded Webinar about articulating library value and creating an elevator speech that librarians and paraprofessionals participated in as part of the "Summer Learning" series.[22] This joined nicely with the core of our marketing initiatives, particularly with the Egan Library 25th Anniversary event. Following the Webinar, participants worked in groups to write and practice their own elevator speeches; it was a lively and productive time. It was also a way in which participants, including librarians and paraprofessionals were able to work together to improve their external communication skills and then directly apply the skills they learned to marketing the library through confident, well thought-out messages.

Egalitarian Decision Making

It was the intent of the librarians to create a culture of team-based decision making at all position levels involved with planning. While *we* the

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librarians did not notice a problem with perceived inequality in our library, Straatmann notes that staff development is "one of the most effective methods to address"[23] these issues. This could extend to staff participating in the STAG and Marketing Team. Participants stated that their suggestions and contributions to these committees had equal weight and validity as others. One even noted, "as I'm not at the professional librarian more decision maker level, I appreciated having the opportunity to put in my views," and another stated that "it was always a very open discussion."[24]

Empowerment

A significant result of participation in these groups that we recognized was empowerment of staff. Staff members who participated in the committees made decisions on goal-setting and program development. They took responsibility and ownership of planning and implementing important activities and played a significant role in both staff training and marketing programs. One stated that participation in the Marketing Team "really increased my feeling that I impacted the library and also faculty, staff, students, and the community."[25] This was a valuable outcome of staff involvement in these groups. Jennerich also suggests that a training program "gives tools for tackling problems creatively… empowering…staff members."[26]

Renewed Energy and Focus

Librarians referred to this as synergy, and staff noted the new energy too. It is challenging to explain; during the time we were engaged with the STAG and Marketing Team we had many new goals to accomplish requiring serious attention, thought, and collaboration. Oftentimes goals of the committees would overlap and complement one another. Participating in meetings, continued conversations about committee work, and the ability to witness and share in our successes created new energy. This contributed to a feeling of camaraderie and positive productivity in the library work environment.

Conclusion

Staff enthusiasm about the libraries where they work is invaluable; it not only enhances their workplace and performance but can also extend to patrons to foster interest in and use of the library. Evoking, sustaining, harnessing, and directing this enthusiasm plays a large role in both staff development and in marketing library services, and librarians have an opportunity to lead and encourage this environment. We found a synergism has emerged from these two committees and has had a positive impact on other areas of the Egan Library. As Jennerich and Oberg state, "staff development is change. It is not capital C change. It is an amalgam of small changes that take place in the behavior of individual staff members, which in turn can affect the whole team or unit or organization positively."[27] Through leading these committees the librarians have developed a more intentional, thoughtful, and inclusive approach to communicating our strengths in-person and through a marketing campaign.

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Figure 1. Flyer of "Summer Fun" team-building activity held to celebrate the success of the staff development series after its first year. Features librarians and library staff.

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