

2014

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Recommended Citation

Obasola, Oluwaseun Ireti Mrs.; Alonge, Ayodele J.A.; Oladele, Benedict A.; and Eyers, John (2014) "Building Capacity of Librarians for Knowledge and Skill Development: A Case Study of Nine Institutions of the Consortium for Advanced Research Training in Africa (CARTA)," *Collaborative Librarianship*: Vol. 6 : Iss. 4 , Article 4.

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Building Capacity of Librarians for Knowledge and Skill Development: A Case Study of Nine Institutions of the Consortium for Advanced Research Training in Africa (CARTA)

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Abstract

Librarians have an important part to play in supporting research, training and developing the knowledge economies of nations. The changing roles of librarians and the attendant new skills and knowledge required to play these roles are a major challenge for libraries and librarians in developing countries, especially those in Africa. To meet this challenge, the Consortium for Advanced Research Training in Africa (CARTA) seeks to promote development through advanced research training. In achieving this vision, librarians need to be empowered with knowledge and skills required to support teaching, learning and research in the continent. This is being implemented through the Consortium of CARTA Libraries (CCL), an alliance under CARTA, that aims to strengthen capacity and promote collaboration among librarians and libraries from CARTA institutions.

Keywords: CARTA; Librarians; Capacity building; Africa

An online survey was conducted to assess knowledge and skill gaps of CARTA librarians. The outcome of this survey informed the content of a training session that focused on advocacy for library funding, proactive librarianship and application of social media in academic libraries. The impact of the training was assessed using an instrument with eight questions. Study revealed what knowledge was acquired by librarians during the training and identified additional training needs. The survey showed that participants had a positive disposition for collaboration, for the sharing of knowledge, and also revealed certain challenges in collaboration.

Background

The *Business Dictionary* defines “capacity building” as “planned development of knowledge,

skills and other capabilities of an organization through acquisition, inducements, technology and training.”¹ Capacity building takes place not only at the organizational level, it can also occur at the individual level. Its set of procedures allows individuals, groups, organizations and societies to develop skills that enable them to function effectively and overcome pressing challenges.² Capacity building has also been defined as the acquisition of abilities, skills, understandings, attitudes, principles, associations, practices, incentives, means and conditions that enable individuals, organizations, networks and broader social systems to function and accomplish development objectives over time.³ In UNESCO’s view, it is the ability of individuals and organizations or units to function in a sustainable manner. But capacity building remains one of the major challenges facing Africa. It is an



issue of concern in most international development debates for developing nations. The main thrust of capacity building programs is to increase the ability of groups, organization and societies to deliver quality education for all. From this perspective, information professionals (librarians) and libraries play a central role in capacity building through the delivery of information for quality education.

A growing body of literature examines the importance of capacity building for librarians. Scholars have argued that the labor force needed most today must have appropriate information management skills. Librarians thus have been identified as one of the major target groups for capacity development in developing countries.⁴ It is well-known that librarians are fundamentally associated with education and research as well as the organization of knowledge produced from research.⁵ They also provide access to organized bodies of knowledge that improve teaching, learning and research activities, and this ultimately improves lives and creates human capital fundamental to the development of societies.⁶ Since information is a vital factor in today's world engaged with advanced technology, the providers of information are an indispensable fuel for the engine of development.

Some authors, thankfully, see capacity development for librarians and information professionals as a high priority in Africa. Since librarians and libraries provide individuals and organizations the information vital for sound and informed decisions, they are essential in sustaining development efforts. In Mabawonku's view, training practicing librarians and other information personnel for capacity development should be a life-long activity that enables them to support teaching, learning and research activities and that creates a strong backbone for community development.⁷

The Consortium for Advance Research Training in Africa (CARTA) is an initiative in Africa involving nine universities and four research institutions from West, East, Central, and Southern Africa, and with selected northern universities and training institutes also participating. CARTA's objective is to strengthen research infrastructure as well as to bring about a new strate-

gy for doctoral training through the creation of a collaborative training curriculum in the broad field of public health.⁸ Its aim is to strengthen human resources and the African university systems that are crucial to the survival of the initiative.⁹ Since 2011, CARTA has been holding workshops targeting faculty, librarians and other university administrators.¹⁰

CARTA, through its commitment to development, blazes the trail that promotes advanced research and training throughout Africa. To realize this vision, librarians have been identified as key players, and as such, they have must be empowered through new knowledge and skills sets. This vision, in practical terms, is being implemented through the Consortium of CARTA Libraries (CCL),¹¹ an alliance under the auspices of CARTA that aims to strengthen capacity and promote collaboration among its librarians and libraries.¹²

This paper presents the results of survey following an early training session supported by CARTA for librarians from its partner institutions. It explores the impact of the training session on participants' knowledge and disposition for collaboration, and ascertains how future sessions could be improved. It is anticipated this study of the training session will be useful in developing future training modules for CARTA librarians.

Methodology

Prior to CARTA's 4th workshop for faculty and administrators in Kenya, librarians from nine African universities (CARTA institutions, see Table 1 for details) were polled regarding ten questions using an online survey. The online survey was designed to assess their advocacy and IT skills before the workshop to determine the training needs of CARTA librarians. The survey was intended to inform further training that also involved hands-on experience.

A special training session was held for librarians from CARTA institutions in September 2013, at the Hilton Hotel in Nairobi, Kenya. The librarians' session was aimed at bridging knowledge gaps and improving the skills of CARTA librarians to support advanced research, and to pro-



mote collaboration and knowledge-sharing among partner institutions. As noted, the online survey informed the content of the special training session for CARTA librarians. Participants were exposed to training modules focused on using social media in academic libraries, on advocacy for funding, on mentor-mentee relationships, and on proactive librarianship. A short practical session was also held during one of the modules for hands-on experimentation of what was learnt.

The session was facilitated by librarians from Nigeria and United Kingdom. Following the training session, its impact was assessed using a questionnaire with eight questions.

Results and Discussion

The study of the training session assesses its impact on CARTA’s workshop librarians in terms of knowledge gained and determining needs for future training sessions. The population of the study consisted of both senior librarians and junior librarians from nine African universities. Their roles include: university librarian, deputy university librarian, medical librarian, law librarians, cataloguers, emerging technology librarian and system librarians. Table 1 shows distribution of respondents by institution.

	University	Number of Librarians
1	University of Witwatersrand, Johannesburg, South Africa	2
2	University of Nairobi , Kenya	2
3	University of Daaresalam, Tanzania	2
4	National University of Rwanda	2
5	Makerere University, Uganda	2
6	University of Malawi	2
7	ObafemiAwolowo University, Nigeria	2
8	University of Ibadan, Nigeria	4
9	University of Moi, Kenya	2
	Total	20

Table 1: Distribution of respondents by Institution

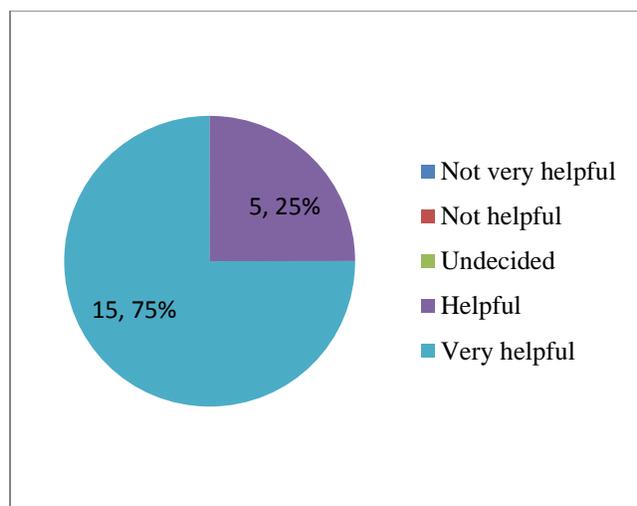


Figure 1: Participants rating of the librarians’ session

All the respondents found the training helpful. Of the participants, 25% indicated, on a scale of 1-5 that the special training session was helpful; the remaining 75% rated the special session as very helpful (See Figure 1 on the previous page.)

As indicated in Table 2, 25% of the respondents had attended a training session about six months earlier, 15% over a year earlier, 20% two years earlier, 35% over two years, and only one participant claimed not to remember attending any training session at all.

Item	Frequency	Percentage
Six months ago	5	25%
A year ago	3	15%
Two years ago	4	25%
Over two years	7	35%
I can't remember	1	5%

Table 2: The last time participants attended training for librarians in their institutions.

Knowledge gained as reported by participants included basic knowledge on application of social media (Twitter, QRcode, Google docs, etc.) to library services, budgeting and advocacy for library funding, proactive librarianship, and information on CARTA Libraries. The session on budgeting and advocacy for funding highlighted the changing nature of academic libraries and its implication. It also provided information on the intricacies involved in budgeting for library services and on products in academic library environment. (See Box 1.)

Box 1: Knowledge gained by participants

- Budgeting & Advocacy for Funding
- Application of Social media to library services
- Information on CARTA Librarians Forum
- Proactive Librarianship

Another popular session as reported by the participants was the session on social media in academic libraries. CARTA librarians acquired knowledge on how to use social media for services in academic and research libraries. Social media was also presented as a platform for professional collaboration

and development. In order to improve capacity of librarians to use dynamic social platforms, there was a brief practical session where participants learned how to use Google Group and Quick Response codes (QR codes). The proactive librarianship module was another important session that underscored the need for a change in behaviour, in services, in the working culture, and in skills of librarians. The least popular session was on mentor-mentee relationships that explored the need to de-emphasize hierarchies for mentor-mentee relationships to be successful. The low popularity of the session may be because this view does not align with typical African culture that stressed the importance of respect to seniors.

A significant proportion (90%) of the participants indicated willingness to collaborate and apply knowledge gained during the workshop. A few (10%) were skeptical about collaborating or sharing knowledge. (See figure 2.)

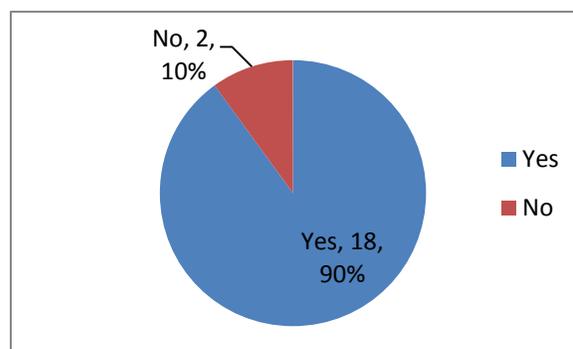


Figure 2: Willingness to apply/share what was learnt from the workshop with others.

Time was indicated as a limiting factor for sharing the knowledge gained. Participants reported that it was usually difficult to allocate time for training because of their busy schedules. In situations where there is ample time, funds to organize training sessions as well as conflicts of interest between the library and institution management were also seen as challenges. Having few people with right skills, experience and will-power was an additional concern indicated by participants that could hinder sharing knowledge gained from workshops. (See Box 2 for details.)



Box 2: Challenges encountered in sharing knowledge gained.

- Busy schedule.
- Funding problem
- Conflict of interest with that of the library or university management
- Lack of resource persons
- Lack of experience and will-power

Participants at the sessions were excited about the training, and requested more training that offered practical sessions. Topics suggested by the participants for future sessions centered on emerging technologies and their implications, on IT tools for research, and on pedagogic skills in information literacy.

In order to enhance learning and improve future training sessions, participants suggested distributing training materials long before the actual workshops, having more workshops for librarians with hands-on training sessions, and encouraging follow-up sessions at the institutional level to improve impact.

Some of the comments from participants are as follows:

- *I thank CARTA. The training was really useful and I hope to implement QR code as soon as I get back to my home institution.*
- *Excellent learning program.*
- *Very informative sessions. We have gained a lot of information, plus contacts. Bravo!*

All participants reported that the session was informative. They also requested more training on IT skills that are relevant in providing library services.

Conclusion

To advance research, learning and development in Africa, empowering librarians is crucial. It was found that success of the capacity building workshop for CARTA Librarians could be sustained through regular needs assessments and continued training and retraining of librarians.

Knowledge gained through the workshops could have an exponential effect if training is followed up at the local level and when 'trickle-down' benefits take effect. In addition, partner institutions are encouraged to increase their collaborations to promote information and knowledge sharing.

The efforts and activities of CARTA libraries in creating a critical mass of "change agents" (librarians) required to support advanced research for development and positive transformation of the continent must be sustained.

Endnotes

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