

Building Partnerships by Infusing Kindness: A Social Worker and Librarian's Shared Journey to Meaningful Cross Discipline Collaboration

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Abstract: In this column, the authors will examine an innovative approach to library employee training, as well as reflect on their shared experience through the planning, implementing, and revising process. They will articulate the steps taken in development of a training model that uses a social work simulation lab to provide library employees the opportunity to practice de-escalation techniques with actors demonstrating a spectrum of authentic patron interactions, and experienced professionals, spanning librarianship and social work, providing immediate constructive feedback. To this end, the authors will contribute contemplative best practices for application of techniques relevant across the library discipline, as well as offering evidence of the strategies informing progressive modifications to library-specific safety policies and procedures. The authors will also integrate suggested next steps, including complementary training opportunities based on mental health awareness and self-care.

Keywords: *cross-discipline collaboration, library, social work, training, simulation*



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The similarities between the profession of social work and librarianship are unparalleled; they could even be considered “sister professions” (Zettervall & Nienow, 2019). Over the course of the last four years, the East Central University (ECU) Social Work Program and Lincheid Library have explored the depths of their connected professions by engaging in cross-disciplinary collaboration to improve outcomes for each discipline. This interdisciplinary collaboration was developed through a natural progression from the Instructional Services (IS) Librarian’s introductory liaisonship efforts to embed information literacy in the Social Work Program. As mutual respect and rapport developed between the two programs, more robust innovation to benefit both parties was made possible.

Through the Linscheid Library’s liaison program, the IS Librarian partnered with the Social Work Program for several years to teach information literacy concepts in social work specific classes, conduct one-on-one research consultations, and maintain the social work library collection. In addition, upon request by social work faculty, the IS Librarian writes a bi-annual column for the department newsletter and records instruction videos to be embedded throughout the program.

To further this cross disciplinary collaboration, the IS Librarian approached the Social Work Program (SWP) Director to partner in the production of an innovative training model that teaches library employees to develop strategies derived from the social work profession, such as altering body language, listening actively, setting clear boundaries, and debriefing. The goal of the training rests in improvement of outcomes with challenging library patrons as well as enhancement of the overall patron experience.

Problem

The IS Librarian discovered a safety concern when conducting a one-time survey that was created and deployed to obtain information related to training needs. The survey was created to gather feedback on the preparedness of Peer Reference Assistants (PRAs) who staff the library help desks. The PRAs are strategically recruited and trained undergraduate and graduate students who answer advanced research

inquiries by library patrons. The PRAs' responses revealed a desire to increase the knowledge and skills necessary to effectively handle patrons in crisis or under stress. Taking into account this survey data, along with observations by the IS Librarian and IS Assistant, it was concluded that patrons in crisis were frequently utilizing the library help desks and all reference personnel needed to be equipped with the knowledge, skills, and values to not only work with these patrons in crisis, but also to ensure they were able to process the stress of such interactions. A patron in crisis can take many forms and be in a current crisis or develop a crisis while seeking assistance from the library staff. It is a common occurrence for front-line library employees to regularly interact with patrons from vulnerable populations, such as patrons who are suffering from chronic and persistent mental illness, homelessness, and those impacted by domestic violence, child maltreatment, or elder abuse (Moxley & Abbas, 2016).

Further investigation revealed that library policies lacked an emphasis on staff emotional/mental health follow-ups after incidents, and safety procedures were neither staff nor patron centered. The policies were chain-of-command driven, decision-tree heavy, and punitive in nature. The policy focused primarily on who to call to remove the patron from a crisis situation, as opposed to identifying appropriate remedial services needed to help the patron. In addition, they were not written from a holistic perspective. For example, every safety procedure requires or results in some sort of punitive action regarding the patron, such as a threat to call campus police or an actual phone call to the campus police. In addition, the procedures lacked any sort of required wellbeing check for staff or student assistants involved.

Proposed Solution

Having already collaborated with the social work faculty in various capacities, the IS Librarian approached the SWP Director to brainstorm possible training opportunities to improve the overall experience for patrons and staff involved in crisis situations, as well as review safety procedures and recommend revisions. The SWP Director recommended de-escalation techniques be implemented for all

front-line library employees. This resulted in the development of two types of de-escalation training. The first was a basic overview with in-class role-play, and the second was a simulation lab experience.

Simulation labs are used as a hands-on learning tool in various helping professions, such as social work, nursing, and counseling (Gaba, 2004). The overall proposed solution was to embed these trainings into the library system for all new employees, as well as continuous training opportunities for current employees, with the broad goal to improve staff and patron interactions and outcomes.

Steps Taken

The process of developing the training modules occurred in two phases. The first of which focused on student employees. The second involved full-time employees only. Within each phase the trainers took the following planning and implementation steps in coordination as detailed below.

Planning

The first phase of the planning process concentrated on student participants only and involved creating specific objectives for the training: the ability to effectively calm tense interactions, make appropriate referrals, and recognize the importance of self-care after a crisis situation. The goal was to teach the basic steps of de-escalation, provide opportunity to practice these steps, and de-brief with participants. Carrying out phase one required coordination with the library's Media Services department to record the training sessions. An improv actor was recruited from the local community theater to portray the role of a patron in crisis.

For phase two, the participants included all full-time library staff who worked directly with patrons, and the objectives for the training were the same as in phase one. Upon reflection of phase one's procedures, specific modifications were made, specifically senior social work students were recruited to portray the roles of a patron in crisis and a patron observing the crisis. This modification was twofold: it was

advantageous for social work students as it allowed future social workers to build on empathetic understanding for those in crisis and it filled the gap left by lack of access to theater talent caused by pandemic safety concerns. The IS Librarian created three case scenarios based on past library incident reports that had been stripped of all confidential information. The SWP Director met with the students before the training date to refresh their knowledge of de-escalation techniques and review scenarios.

Implementing

Implementation for phase one began with a presentation by the SWP Director for all library student assistants on the basic techniques of de-escalation with brief role-play to practice techniques. Through the rest of the semester, the PRAs, after being broken into teams, were presented with various patron crisis scenarios that required each team to meet, discuss, and submit a proposed action plan based on de-escalation techniques. At the end of the semester, all current PRAs participated in a simulation lab with a de-escalation technique refresher at the beginning. Then each PRA individually had to go through the lab with an improv actor playing a patron in crisis, while the other PRAs watched from another room, the SWP Director watched from an observation booth, and the IS Librarian waited behind a partition. Once the PRA calmed the patron down sufficiently, meaning the patron was in a more relaxed state, and the PRA was able to comfortably step away from the situation, they would obtain assistance from the IS Librarian, who demonstrated concluding the patron interaction with appropriate further referrals. The simulation lab experienced ended with the SWP Director, IS Librarian, and actor providing feedback to the individual participant, and a de-briefing session was conducted for all participants.

Phase two implementation required all participants (librarians and full-time staff) to engage in an asynchronous basic de-escalation training and then follow up with a simulation lab experience in person. Due to COVID restrictions, the participants had to sign-up for a 15-minute slot to go through the simulation lab, and all participants, trainers, and actors were required to follow CDC guidelines. At the beginning of the

interaction, the IS Librarian would escort the participant to the simulation lab and provide a briefing on the patron situation they were responsible to de-escalate. Throughout the interaction between the participant and actors, the SWP Director and IS Librarian watched from the observation booth, and the interaction would end at the discretion of the SWP Director. For example, if the participant had sufficiently calmed the patron using recommended de-escalation techniques or the interaction was clearly unable to be de-escalated, the SWP Director would end the interaction, and both trainers would model an appropriate conclusion with the actor portraying the patron in crisis. The trainers, as well as the actors, would then provide individualized feedback and offer a de-briefing session.

Contemplative Best Practices

Upon completion of the training modules the trainers intentionally created space for collaborative reflection. During which the trainers identified elements of success and opportunities for improvement. These encounters produced the following procedural solutions and limitations.

Solutions

The following changes were applied as a result of noted procedural deficiencies. First, the use of actors was expanded to include upper-level social work students who would already have gained experience with both simulation lab and de-escalation techniques. For all actors recruited, minimal compensation was provided. Second, a range of realistic scenarios were created and presented to the actors to prepare before the simulation lab was conducted. Third, based upon feedback from participants, future participants will repeat the simulation lab twice with performance-based feedback provided by the trainers after the initial scenario is completed. Fourth, preceding each simulation lab experience, participants engaged in a refresher of de-escalation techniques, including role-play and the creation of action plans for provided crisis situations. Lastly, a self-reflection survey was collected from all participants.

Limitations

Several limitations should be noted. First, the trainers did not initially conceive of the training experience becoming a full research study, therefore Institutional Review Board (IRB) approval was not sought. In addition, the trainers did not engage in systematic data collection from participants. For example, there were no pre- and post-measures for either of the phases. However, an informal post-survey was created, and minimal data was collected after phase two. Due to the lack of systematic data collection, including initial and follow-up learning and application assessments, the efficacy of the training is currently unknown and may be challenging to measure.

Next Steps

From the inception of this project, the goal was internal sustainability and external replicability. To achieve this goal, the following steps have been identified and whenever possible have been conducted or are currently in progress.

Publishing and Research

The next step in the process is to apply for IRB approval, and after formalized approval is received, the expectation is that a study will be conducted over a one-year period. This study will include a mixed methods research design and research question as to the efficacy of the simulation lab training experience, as well as formalized quantitative pre- and post- measures, qualitative data collection and an expansion of the pool of participants. Publication will then be sought, and the findings will be available for any other institutions that desire to replicate the study. Concurrent to seeking IRB approval, a training manual will be

created based on developed best practices to encourage any institution that wishes to embed the training to do so.

Additional Training Opportunities

In coordination with the de-escalation simulation labs, Linscheid Library has implemented complementary training modules on self-care and mental health awareness for all levels of employees. These training modules were administered by the IS Librarian in consultation with social work and counseling faculty. The self-care training included an in-person basic introduction of the concept, a group discussion session, and online monthly individual reflection activities. The mental health awareness modules were split between group suicide prevention training, self-paced asynchronous crisis scenario roleplaying, and synchronous reflection discussion sessions. These training opportunities are now embedded in Linscheid Library's training plan for all new employees and will continue to be offered on an on-going basis.

Conclusion

In closing, the development of this innovative approach to library training was only made possible through a strong collaborative relationship between the SWP Director and IS Librarian. The unique qualities of the training model include the use of cross-discipline feedback, realistic scenarios, and a simulation lab, which allowed participants to transfer the theory of de-escalation into replicable action. By including intentional post-training reflection for the trainers, actors, and participants, best practices, policies, and procedures were created to allow for adaptation for various institutions, as well as sustainability within Linscheid Library. The hope is that this framework will be further shared through the publication of a research study and training manual, which inspires other institutions to develop similar training or replicate the training design.

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