

# Supporting the Best: Professional Development in Academic Libraries

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**Abstract:** The field of academic librarianship is constantly shifting and librarians need to make sure they are prepared for these changes. The goal of this article is to describe the importance of professional development (PD), explain the crucial role library administrators' serve in supporting PD, present characteristics of PD best practices, and offer examples of PD models that incorporate best practices. Given the documented benefits of PD, library administrators need to actively support and encourage librarians to engage in these activities.

**Keywords:** *professional development, academic libraries, mentoring programs*



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Academic librarianship is a field that is constantly changing. Librarians often find it difficult to remain up to date on the skills required to provide the quality services and resources library users need. Given the evolving nature of the library profession, it is imperative for academic librarians to seek professional development (PD) opportunities to learn new skills and adapt to additional job responsibilities. The goal of this article is to describe ways library administrators can support PD, present characteristics of PD best practices, and offer some examples of PD models that incorporate those best practices.

### **Importance of Professional Development**

Professional development is defined as “activities and efforts whether formal or informal that are employed by an individual to upgrade his/her knowledge, abilities and competencies in order to become a more effective professional in exercise of his/her professional duties throughout his/her working life” (Rafiq, Jabeen, & Arif, 2017, p. 25). Professional development is so vital to the library profession it is listed as one of the eight guiding statements in the “Code of Ethics of the American Library Association”. The Professional Ethics (2017) code states, “We strive for excellence in the profession by maintaining and enhancing our own knowledge and skills, by encouraging the professional development of co-workers, and by fostering the aspirations of potential members of the profession” (para. 6). This statement emphasizes that each librarian is responsible for their own PD as well as for promoting their colleagues and those who may be considering a library career. Implied in this statement is that library administrators are responsible for providing PD opportunities.

Participation in PD opportunities is crucial for academic librarians to remain knowledgeable and competent as the job responsibilities for academic librarians are in a constant state of flux. In an ACRL essay titled "Changing Roles of Academic and Research Libraries" (2018) it states, “the business

of libraries can now be understood as one component of a rapidly evolving, almost wholly transformed environment in which information is proliferating at heretofore unimagined rates and in which the ability of academic libraries to deliver authenticated and reliable information is continuously challenged by new technologies” (para. 4). In order to assist administrators, librarians need to document their expertise as well as identify the skills they would like to add to their repertoire. If administrators have a clear map of their employee’s skills, they are better able to plan for any deficiencies (Johannessen, 2018, p. 13). It is important for librarians and administrators to work together to identify PD opportunities.

### **Benefits of Professional Development**

According to the scholarly literature PD has an impact on librarians and the users they serve. Deodhar and Powdwal (2017) reported from their study that PD helps librarians keep pace with technology, acquire subject knowledge, and increase their efficiency and productivity (p. 128). Professional development activities such as leadership development programs have been found to increase librarians’ publication rate, further career advancement, and expand networking opportunities. In a study of the Association of Research Libraries (ARL) Leadership Career Development program, Cawthorne and Neely (2015) reported participants of the program either retained employment or moved into leadership positions (p. 117).

Research has also shown that long-term and engaging PD activities are beneficial to a librarian’s personal growth. Attebury (2017) noted in her qualitative study that librarians benefited from PD experiences because they could “remedy gaps in knowledge resulting from limited or dated library school degree programs” (p. 240). According to Tomaszewski and MacDonald (2009), when librarians participate in PD, it benefits library users once they apply what was learned to professional

practices such as library instruction or collection development. Even informal PD activities, such as discussion groups and journal clubs, can have an impact on library user experience. Fitzgibbons et al. (2017) determined that these PD programs strengthen research skills and yield new initiatives for librarians to implement for library users.

Professional development programs have been shown to be beneficial to the institution where a librarian belongs. Professional development activities can create “positive changes in a library as a whole” and allow librarians “to avail themselves of learning opportunities related to areas of librarianship outside of their normal job duties [which] can spur ‘out-of-the-box’ thinking that benefits the entire organization” (Attebury, 2018, p. 426). Eichenlaub, Grover and Thomas (2019) noted that international library job exchange programs benefit librarians and the libraries they serve. Eichenlaub et al. (2019) found librarians who participated in the PD program returned to their library with a “fresh perspective” and an enriched “understanding of research and scholarship across cultures” (pp. 23-24). The librarians were able to use their experiences to share innovative ideas for making useful organizational and service changes (Eichenlaub et al., 2019).

### **Administrative Support for Professional Development**

Administrative support of PD offerings and participation is crucial as administrators determine if librarians can use their work time, whether any expenses are paid for by the institution, and if PD is valued in promotion and tenure decisions. In a survey of incentives to professional development for academic librarians who work in small and rural libraries, Kendrick, Leaver, and Tritt (2013) found, “more funding (27%) was identified as the primary motivator for seeking CPD (continuing professional development) opportunities” (p. 61). Following this model, incentives can be offered for librarians to share their PD experiences with colleagues (Attebury, 2018, p. 409). At some institutions, librarians

receive overload compensation to offer PD workshops in their areas of expertise. In addition to incentivizing PD participation by offering release time and possibly compensation, administrators can make it easy to market PD opportunities. One marketing tool is to gather information on PD resources in a libguide that is accessible on the library's website and can be frequently updated.

The report on the state of professional development in higher education found that an increasing number of administrators say that PD is of strategic importance to their institution, yet 70% of managers' report that they have no PD written plans (Mrig et al, 2016, p. 9). A written plan, as well as monetary support, is important as it confirms the institution's commitment to PD. In addition to a written policy, the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) adds that best practices for PD include a commitment from administrators to coordinate PD activities for the library (Varleis, 2016, p. 69). It helps make the case that PD is valued if administrators engage in continuous learning and share their own PD experiences at staff meetings or in more formal presentations.

### **Best Practices of Professional Development for Academic Librarians**

The International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (IFLA) Guidelines for Continuing Professional Development: Principles and Best Practices outlines the best practice features of PD (Varleis, 2016). Some of the guidelines and best practices for PD highlighted in IFLA include regular assessment, accessible learning opportunities, allocated funding, and administrative commitment to allow staff time to focus on PD (Varleis, 2016, pp. 8-10). The IFLA guidelines propose that PD programs need to be designed "to support the employing organization's goals for excellent service" as well as the employee's goal to learn new skills and ultimately contribute to the library professions growth and improvement (Varleis, 2016, p. 9).

Librarians need to ensure their PD efforts are focused on areas that benefit their work responsibilities, their career goals, and the institution they serve. On-going assessment of PD activities are crucial because it guarantees the programs are meeting the needs of the participants and the institutions where they work. Assessment also offers an opportunity to provide feedback on what is working and what may need to be revised. In addition to formal assessment, librarians may choose to keep their own journal to reflect on their PD participation.

Studies have shown that librarians are more likely to participate in PD programs they view as useful to their career goals. For example, various models of PD are offered at Central Michigan University and surveys are used to gather feedback on the most effective programs. The results of the surveys showed the PD programs that focused on technology applications were reported by the largest number of participants as being “very useful” and “most likely” to be attended (Guo, 2014, p. 550). Based on the assessment of the challenges of the PD program, i.e. scheduling conflicts, an e-newsletter was created. The e-newsletter was used to publicize PD opportunities, provide follow up, and feature invited speakers (Guo, 2014, p. 549).

The Library at Wake Forest University has a collaborative mentoring model of PD that includes panel presentations, advice on committee participation, and journal reading groups (Keener, Johnson & Collins, 2012). In addition to participants in the program sharing their expertise, the library administrators also speak to the group and share their professional knowledge (Keener et al., 2012, p. 134). This model, in keeping with IFLA best practices for continuing PD, demonstrates administrative commitment on the part of the library administration who participate and share their skills.

In a study conducted on the value of academic librarians’ engaging in journal clubs, Fitzgibbons et al. (2017) identified several best practices from the participants involved in the eighteen

different journal clubs. These included obtaining administrative support, designating leaders, defining goals, and learning applicable work skills (Fitzgibbons et al., 2017, p. 782). As in other PD models, the participants found it difficult to devote time to the activity as well as focus on implementing the ideas that emerged from the journal club (Fitzgibbons et al., 2017, p. 782).

Another example of a PD program that includes IFLA's PD best practices is Towson University's "Teach Around" program. This internal PD program uses a peer learning model. Librarians are invited to present a thirty-minute session on a topic they believe would be useful to their colleagues. The benefits of this program are that it builds collegiality, facilitates the acquisition of new skills, and helps the participating librarians learn about one another's area of expertise (Tomlinson, 2014).

The reflective peer mentoring program, created by the Canadian Association of Research Librarians (CARL), also demonstrates some of the best practices outlined by IFLA, such as periodic assessment. The librarians who participated in reflective peer mentoring program critiqued the recorded library instruction sessions of their peers. Each librarian involved in the program records their class presentation and at a later date, a group of the librarian's peers meet and reflect on the recorded session. The goal as stated by Goosney, Smith and Gordon (2014) is "to facilitate high quality teaching and to provide the opportunity for librarians to strengthen their instructional practice through observation, supportive dialogue, and reflection" (p. 3).

At California State University San Marcos, librarians tried a team-teaching form of PD to improve their skills in presenting the library component of the first-year experience course (Matlin & Carr, 2014). A challenge of this collaborative form of PD is that it requires a lot of time and effort but participants noted many benefits. Participants found they became more "intentional" about their teaching when given the opportunity to reflect with a colleague on what worked and what did not work

(Matlin & Carr, 2014, p. 65). The team-teaching activity was assessed by the participants via a personal narrative. It was reported that the collaboration “allowed (participants) to gain both practical skills ... and cultural knowledge specific to my institution and department” (Matlin & Carr, 2014, p. 64). In keeping with IFLA’s best practices, there was an assessment component and opportunities for participants to improve their skills.

### **Conclusion**

Engaging in professional development is important for academic librarians as it impacts their ability to effectively address the needs of students, keeps them abreast of changes in the profession, and influences their career advancement opportunities. It is crucial for library administrators to strongly support librarian’s efforts with release time, budgetary support, modelling, etc. In order to optimize impact, PD programs should include the best practices outlined in IFLA’s guidelines for continuing professional development (Varleis, 2016). Given the documented benefits of PD, administrators need to actively promote and encourage PD activities for the betterment of their institution, their clientele, their staff, and their profession.



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