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Leading Staff Development from the Bottom Up

Penn State Libraries In-Service Days

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When Pennsylvania State University Libraries' administration invited library staff to take leadership in planning an in-service day, what resulted was a rich training experience for both participants and planners, one that has become institutionalized. Now approaching its twelfth year, University Libraries' Discovery Day continues to grow and develop. This author recounts the genesis and growth of the annual event and articulates the valuable outcomes of staff training and development.

On October 5, 2015 at the annual conference of the Pennsylvania Library Association (PaLA), Dean Barbara Dewey accepted, on behalf of University Libraries, the Library Support Staff Recognition Award. The award "is presented to a library that has consistently encouraged and supported participation in career development activities, particularly those of PaLA for the support staff in Pennsylvania libraries." (Pennsylvania Library Association, 2016)

University Libraries was nominated by a member of the staff who elaborated a number of ways in which our staff are supported in their professional development. She focused on one program in particular, writing, "I would like to nominate University Libraries of the Pennsylvania State University as worthy of the Library Support Staff Recognition Award for 2015. On May 29 of this year, we celebrated our 10th year of conducting an annual, all-day staff development program." (S. Roth, personal email September 1, 2015)

Receiving this award marks the culmination of a decade of staff training and development, beginning with the first in-service day and recently included the addition of a User Services Training Coordinator to the staff. Both of these events began as grass roots efforts among the staff and have been supported and encouraged by a library administration able to recognize leadership from below.

Context

During the 2004-2005 academic year, two issues emerged in the departments of Access Services and Public Services that demanded a response: staff felt they were falling behind in their skills or were not able to meet their users on level ground; they did not know or understand the work of other departments and, by the same token, were not themselves understood. Rapport was fading.

Pennsylvania State Libraries has more than 500 employees at University Park, the largest of Penn State's 24 campuses. While work at the University Park branch libraries is performed by staff cross-trained to perform most tasks, work at the Pattee and Paterno Libraries is highly specialized: circulation staff perform circulation duties, reference staff perform service at reference desks, acquisitions staff only perform duties related to the acquisition of library materials. There is minimal cross-training between units. In a configuration such as this designed for high volume workloads, anyone might lose sight of the larger plan or misunderstand their place in the overall scheme.

Genesis

As department heads considered ways to address the deficiencies, someone suggested that the library be closed to the public for a day so that staff could take time to train and visit other departments. Department tours were not a compelling enough reason, however, to close the library. No special time was needed for training on technical applications that are used on a daily basis; that training could occur at any time. Instead, some envisioned a professional-style conference; a day rich with multiple concurrent sessions on a variety of topics that would serve to keep Libraries' personnel current. This conference would be designed, planned and produced by library staff. Interaction with colleagues would allow staff to meet or become reacquainted with each other. Staff and faculty would deliver presentations that would highlight the work of other departments or trends across the profession. Then Dean, Nancy Eaton, agreed to the concept but proposed that In-Service Day (as it was originally called) would occur with the Libraries open for business on a Friday during January intersession when demand for service is typically extremely low.

Figure 1
Learning tips and tricks in the Digital Commons.

Planning

A 14-member planning committee was charged in August 2005 to make the day a reality. The head of Access Services and the head of public services provided administrative sponsorship to ensure balance and support for the committee. A budget was carved out of Public Services allocations. Organizers formed sub-committees to solicit presentations, schedule the program, provide hospitality services, and generate publicity. They labored through the fall semester and introduced the first In-Service Day on January 5, 2006. Minimal personnel staffed Access Services and Public Services, freeing everyone else to attend. The administration encouraged other departments to allow their staff release time to attend the programs. Attendance was not mandatory so those who participated did so willingly; a practice that continues. The day was overwhelmingly successful. Institutionalized in its first year, it has continued annually with approval ratings by participants at 90% and higher each year. Typical evaluation survey comments include, "It boosts morale, shows that the administration is appreciative of all we do during the year" and "I like learning about what we do in the Libraries outside of my unit. And the non-library related classes also provide a nice break from routine."

Figure 2
Making a connection through sharing skills and interests.

Goals

Elaine Jennerich's (2006) list of potential positive outcomes of staff development includes improved group communication skills and increased confidence across the organization. That is exactly what we needed to accomplish with In-Service Day. Our goals were also very similar to those articulated by Oregon State's University Librarian Karyle Butcher regarding their in-service day—"…to learn, to have fun and to develop better relationships" (Hussong-Christian, Kunda, & Gascho Rempel, 2009, p. 397)—but we approached it a bit differently by allowing staff to organize it from the beginning and providing a variety of topics.

Growth

Each In-Service Day has been innovative. In the second year, Dean Eaton agreed to close University Park Libraries for half a day to maximize the potential for staff to attend the sessions. That continued for two years. In subsequent years, in-service days have been held when the University is in session, so the library now remains open with no disruption. In 2008, the planning committee began assessing the program using survey software, affording themselves the opportunity to build a new skill. The committee also added a project manager to prepare for the 2008 event, allowing one member to take a leadership role in keeping the committee on task and on time while giving the sponsors a chance to take a step back. The project manager uses a Gantt chart that provides a time line for issuing save-the-date announcements, the call for proposals, publicity, registration, participation certificates, thank you letters to presenters, and final assessment and debriefing.

Figure 3
Jennifer Norton of the Penn State Press describes the publishing process.

The committee also added a poster session in 2008, which resulted in more opportunities for participation and a greater range of topics. Because staff were unfamiliar with the concept of posters, we drew on Brenda Hazard's (2006) descriptions and A to Z tips to provide some instruction. As the event matured year after year, the committee transitioned to using digital rather than manual tools for registration processes, publicity, and assessment. In 2009, In-Service Day staff polled their peers and renamed the event Discovery Day—a mark of ownership essential to the continuing success of the program.

The planning committee has free reign to recruit presentations and plan the day. Administrators and others may offer suggestions, but the entire process is directed by the committee; we have never been disappointed. There are always suitable professional development offerings such as "Library Storage for Patrons - Carrels vs. Lockers," a nuts and bolts information sharing session; or "The Da Vinci Code: Fact or Fiction? Exploring the History, Art and Scriptures of Religion at the University Libraries", presented the year everyone was reading the novel. There are also some more lighthearted offerings. Vacation travelogues and craft workshops are popular as was "What is Ham Pot Pie and other Pennsylvania Food Terminology" complete with tasting samples.

Figure 4
Media Technology Services provides students with a lot of options.

Tours of campus facilities always fill up fast. "Palmer Art Museum Tour" and an organ recital at the Pasquerilla Spiritual Center both attracted a crowd necessitating a waiting list. Whenever someone from Libraries senior administration presents, the room is packed; it is an opportunity for frontline staff to interact with and hear what administrators have to say.

Figure 5
Docent-led tour of the Palmer Art Museum.

Access Services, the sponsoring department, now budgets annually to support the event. Committees are free to apply the budget as they choose. Some years committees use the budget for speaker fees, but most often they

spend it on morning coffee and snacks throughout the day for participants. The character of the planning committee varies from year to year: some committees are extremely frugal, repurposing folders supplied by a vendor for a previous event for example, while others spend more liberally. No committee has ever overspent their budget.

As Jeffries and Radisaukas (2015) remind us, "Food always makes an event even more enjoyable." A lunch option has been a part of the in-service day since it began, implemented as an opportunity to visit with co-workers and build community. Hoagies, also known as submarine sandwiches, heroes, or grinders in other regions, are very popular in central Pennsylvania. Participants place orders in advance for a sandwich, which they pick up and enjoy with friends. Soft drinks are supplied by the hospitality subcommittee. The University Park Library Employees Association (UPLEA) in collaboration with the Discovery Day planning committee preorders sandwiches as a fundraiser with all profits going to the United Way Fund. The lunch venue is pleasingly decorated with bright table coverings, flowers or balloons, and is packed with coworkers catching up with each other.

Figure 6
Let them eat cake!

Outcomes

As a manager interested in talent management, I view the in-service day as extremely beneficial from many developmental angles. Presenters hone their public speaking skills, learn to fit content to allotted time, and develop a reputation among their peers as people who are knowledgeable, articulate and dependable. Participating staff are exposed to new ideas and trends that are unfolding in the library. Beyond the obvious learning opportunities available in the individual sessions, the planning committee has other opportunities for development through their work with the Libraries' Public Relations and Marketing department, the Human Resources Office, the Business Office, and the Libraries' Information Technology unit to plan and execute the conference. Discovery Day is a big event that unfolds over months of planning. Collaboration is a key component to bringing it about; requiring persuasion, negotiation, compromise, and consensus building. Through teamwork the planning committee members

grow to know and understand each other, developing relationships and gaining insight into operations other than their own. This helps facilitate interaction throughout the rest of the year.

Bottom Up Management

In 2012 the newly hired User Services Training Coordinator became a sponsor of Discovery Day and joined the planning committee as its only permanent member. The training coordinator position was added when The Services Training Committee, charged to align training efforts across multiple service units and develop a common curriculum, requested a training coordinator to manage their efforts to roll out training to more than a dozen public service points. Libraries Administration supported hiring an educational program associate who immediately invested in Discovery Day and introduced new enthusiasm. Adding the coordinator in response to the staff request is another example of accepting leadership from below. The staff advocated for the position persuading the administration of its value. Libraries Administration's responsiveness underscores the reason University Libraries was nominated for the Library Support Staff Recognition Award.

What Comes Next?

As we began the 2016 planning phase, we reached out to Schlow Centre Region Library, our local public library, at the urging of the planning committee. They joined us in planning the event and participated for the first time as attendees and presenters. The invitation was re-issued in 2017. In the interim, the two libraries have developed a collaborative relationship to pilot services for the "town and gown" population we share. Following the 2016 event, several of the more popular sessions were repeated in one-off presentations that were recorded and shared with staff at the other 23 campuses extending the reach of in-service. As we enter our second decade we look forward to strengthening these collaborations and enriching Discovery Day in new ways.

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