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Developing core competencies for library staff

How University of South Florida Library re-evaluated its workforce

New demands and shrinking budgets have propelled library administrations towards re-examining their resources in light of the services they must provide to future patrons. Increasingly, electronic collections, open access, digital archives management, and data curation are taking the place of past library activities, as more simple or standardized tasks are automated. What results is the need for a workforce that is flexible, forward-moving, and highly skilled. The drive towards developing core competencies descriptions for library staff combines this need with the realization that existing expertise is invaluable to the library's growth.

Like many other libraries, the University of South Florida (USF) was experiencing a shrinking workforce due to retirements and a shrinking budget that restricted it from filling vacated positions. Each remaining member of its valuable workforce was asked to help shoulder the load left behind. At the same time the needs of the library were shifting from physical to electronic materials, ushering in a handful of new and diverse duties that no existing staff member had been trained to do. Not only did the library need to trim the fat from its old processes to alleviate the burden of workload on remaining staff members, it had to develop a strategy for addressing this newly identified skills gap in these same staff members.

In order to best use and care for the staff resource, USF Library administration identified the need for a set of personalized core competencies. To this end the Core Competencies and Skills Assessment Task Force was formed and charged with creating this listing and incorporating it into the current evaluation system.

Process

The charge of the Competencies and Skills Assessment Task Force was to identify skills and competencies required for library staff to successfully fulfill their duties and responsibilities. The group developed a plan to address various levels of expertise and responsibilities in order to recommend training and provide a means of evaluating training success in the entire library. As the task force began this process, it reviewed several competency documents from ALA[1] and Association of Southeastern Research Libraries.[2] Although developed for librarians, these documents provided some understanding of what was needed to develop competencies for library staff.

Upon reviewing the core competencies project at York University,[3] it soon became apparent that a comprehensive and successful adoption of skills and competencies for paraprofessionals should be strongly linked to the staff development process and performance review system already in place at the university. This provided a foundation

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for linking the core competencies with performance indicators used by the USF evaluation system. Tying the skills, competencies, and performance indicators together was necessary to clearly define the performance expectations for the USF Library.

A list of all positions in the library provided a basis for the database development. Then core competencies were identified to expand upon the skills listing. This lead to the development of a document that fully defined goals and standards, or performance indicators, in the annual review process called the Core Competencies and Performance Indicators Document. Because of the document's anticipated impact, this culture change began through administrative endorsement and staff training while the project team continued work on the other tasks.

A Skills Listing incorporated all needed skills for paraprofessionals in the library, and a Skills Training Program used both the skills listing and the information contained in the Performance Indicators document. All products of the task force combined with a new commitment to more frequent staff performance meetings, and greater communication and unity among all managers.

Skills listings

When the task force began identifying core competencies, the members found it difficult to separate a theoretical description of expertise, most often associated with competencies, with a concrete listing of individual skills needed in the library. Two lists were made that together explained the needs of the library staff. One list compiled all required staff skills within each department. This list was eventually categorized into applied knowledge, systems, concepts, and equipment skills with notations on departmental applicability. Departmentally sorted assessment levels added to the listing balanced the need for cumbersome skill detail. The assessment levels allowed supervisors to place a depth of knowledge needed on skills, from unaware to expert; this would allow one general skill to be used in several different areas. The lists

and assessment levels created were imported into a searchable database, which allowed easy updating and produced skills reports and assessment questionnaires for each staff position. Assessment levels for each position and department were subdivided by three levels (new hire, six months, one year) to assist supervisors in developing training plans for new and current staff members.

Core competencies

The York University competency list was used as a starting point for defining the staff's core competencies and creating a good foundation for the skills listing. However, final division of the core competencies into ten strategic areas was based on the USF Employee Evaluation system. Eight areas represented the standard performance indicators in the annual performance review, and two were developed by the task force as performance indicators that should be used in future evaluations. Like many evaluation systems, the main eight indicators were standard categories. "Job Knowledge," "Productivity," and "Quality of Work" focused on quantitative and qualitative work performance. Specific competencies were developed to expand and provide optimal standards for these.

The next categories "Communication," "Standards of Service," and "Teamwork" needed to have competencies that focused on behavior and as such would be more subjective areas. Care was taken to develop clear competencies that illustrated these standards. The last two categories were "Initiative" and "Problem Solving." These areas needed special attention to provide the employees with a way to understand management's expectations.

The additional performance indicators were "adaptability," which should apply to all staff members, and "managing people," which would apply to those staff members who supervise other staff or student assistants. Each strategic area included optimal core competencies reflecting the library's needs and the skills required by a technically competent and productive work force.

These core competencies were developed as standards that would help promote the development of highly professional staff.

Performance indicators

Examples for each rating in the annual performance review form were written to provide guidelines that related to the optimal core competencies. The ratings examples explained in detail what *unsatisfactory, needs improvement, achieves, commendable,* and *exemplary* meant in an employee evaluation. The task force laid the foundation for an environment that encouraged employees to develop, as well as gave them room to improve, by re-establishing the *achieves* rating as one that reflected an employee that fulfilled all position requirements. This meant deflating a long inflated performance review culture.

The goal was to elevate the *exemplary* rating to one that rewarded an employee that constantly worked above and beyond their position, thus paving the way for a nonbiased reward system. The resulting document combined the optimal core competencies with flexible performance indicator guidelines. This document was intended for use as a baseline for fair performance assessment and standardized expectations across all departments.

Skills training program

The task force worked off existing USF Training forms and made recommendations for change in order to create a training program from the core competencies and skills. Skills questionnaires developed from the original skills list aided managers in identifying staff abilities and developing training that filled in the blanks for any one position.

Training reports, based on that same listing, mapped out a course of skill development for new hires so they could achieve the indicated competency levels within the six-month and one-year time frames. The questionnaires and training reports also helped retool existing personnel for new positions and/or duties that reflected new demands on the library.

Result

The task force was able to implement a comprehensive skills assessment and training program for paraprofessionals. Supervisors accessed the database via a Sharepoint site in order to review skills listings and reports. It provided a location for documentation and collaboration surrounding staff development and the annual review process. Formal position reports available on the site could be downloaded for use in training plans for new and current staff members.

The Core Competencies and Performance Indicators final document was submitted to the Library Management Team for review, and was granted approval in late November 2010. Discussions with USF Human Resources facilitated minor updates to the document to add more flexibility for supervisors, and provide clarification to help staff use the document. Several training sessions offered facilitated the introduction of the document and new process. Workshops over eight months covered topics like transitions in the workplace, incorporating the new Performance Indicators into supervisory reviews and performance management meetings, and how to write self-assessments to help staff understand their part in the evaluation process.

After the final document's introduction to staff, managers outlined how it would be used within a new culture of performance management. Supervisors met with their staff at midyear evaluation meetings to discuss how these changes may affect annual reviews. The first reviews written in this new environment required supervisors to fully describe, document, and support their ratings. Each review was then checked by library administration to affirm that it followed the final document's guidelines.

Conclusion

Challenges of shrinking budgets and workforces have often driven organizational innovation and efficiency. The USF Library took advantage of an opportunity to develop mechanisms to retool and re-envision its workforce. Careful attention was paid to how

this process would be implemented and its effect on staff. To this end, special seminars were developed to prepare staff for a major cultural change; additionally, the project was openly discussed with the staff throughout the entire process. A focus on individual skills needed, as well as optimum core competencies, allowed the development of detailed skills listing, and enhanced the employee evaluation system. This focus produced a significant level of collaboration within the library and an increased level of communication between supervisors and staff.

The task force spent significant time speaking with other supervisors who would be evaluating staff personnel. This allowed for gathering input while providing supervisors with an understanding of how these processes would be implemented throughout the library. Success in this program would require buy-in from all departments and supervisors, as well as significant support from the library's leadership team.

A key component of the program was to create more effective communication to staff employees about job performance and skills. By providing a detailed listing of skill requirements and overview of performance expectations, the library has been able to give staff members a clear and concise direction to advance their skills with a sense of equality throughout departments in the library. Standardization of expectations and performance criticism had not consistently been addressed in the library. In addition to the ability to address performance deficiencies, many staff members became more engaged in charting their own performance and skills development. Even reluctant staff members began to see opportunities for learning that they had not wanted to pursue before the project.

During our initial implementation, many staff had concerns about how this process would affect them and their performance evaluations. Creating new standards of performance and tying it to the requirement of the development of new skills was a difficult process for the library. However, the task force and supervisors spent significant time

discussing the goals and necessity of implementing this program. During sessions, staff was encouraged to ask the hard questions. It was important to the task force and other supervisors to provide clear and direct answers. This honest and open discussion allowed the project to have a stronger impact and remove the us vs. them mentality.

Library staff was keenly aware of the changing environment throughout libraries, particularly academic libraries, and as such, ultimately understood the need to enhance skills in order to meet the demands of our users. Resetting the performance bar, when explained as part of the overall support and development of staff personnel, can be and was accepted by the staff as an important part of moving the library into a new culture of highly skilled and professional individuals.

Notes

1. American Library Association, "Core Competencies" (Chicago, IL, 2011), available from www.ala.org /educationcareers/careers/corecomp /corecompetencies (accessed 02/13/2012).

2. Association of Southeastern Research Libraries, "Shaping the future: ASERL's competencies for research librarians, (Durham, NC, 2011), available from www.aserl.org/programs /competencies/ (accessed 02/13/2012).

3. *York University Competency Dictionary* (Toronto, CA: York University, 2001).

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of the course, librarians serving on support teams may offer much or very little in terms of information literacy-related consultation. Because of our expertise, we are able to recognize opportunities and provide suggestions and ideas when they arise.

For example: "What you're talking about sounds like information literacy. Have you considered creating a learning outcome or objective related to this?" or "Since critical thinking is such a priority for you, have you considered developing an assignment or activity related to critical evaluation of different types of information resources relevant to the subject?" Since information literacy is so wide-reaching and is most effectively conveyed when integrated and contextual, opportunities present themselves in all of these disciplines more often than one might assume.

Conclusion

Being involved in IMPACT has brought the libraries to the forefront of campus conversations about the changing nature of undergraduate education. The first cohort of libraries-supported IMPACT courses were taught in fall 2012, and librarians continue to support the redesign new courses through IMPACT. Two new active learning spaces opened in the libraries in fall 2012, and plans for others are underway. Purdue librarians expect other opportunities and new roles to emerge from their efforts in this collaborative, campus-wide initiative.

Notes

1. Christine Susan Bruce, *Informed Learning* (Chicago, IL: American Library Association, 2008).

2. Sheila Webber and Bill Johnston, "Conceptions of Information Literacy: New Perspectives and Implications," *Journal of Information Science* 26, no. 6 (2000): 384.

3. Steven Bell and John Shank, "The Blended Librarian: A Blueprint for Redefining the Teaching and Learning role of Academic Libraries," *C&RL News* 65, no. 7: 373.

4. National Center for Academic Transformation, "Six Models for Course Redesign," www.thencat.org/PlanRes/R2R_ModCrsRed.htm

5. Bell and Shank, "The Blended Librarian," 373.

6. Ibid., 374.

7. Barbara I. Dewey, "The Embedded Librarian," *Resource Sharing & Information Networks* 17: nos. 1-2 (2004): 10. ℤ

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