

**Effectiveness of Support Staff Training and Development in Selected Academic
Libraries in Kansas and Oklahoma**

**Amigos Fellowship Final Report
February 2004**

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**Final Report on the Amigos Fellowship Research Project, 2000:
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Selected Academic Libraries in Kansas and Oklahoma**

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November 2003

Abstract

Advanced technology, budgetary restraints, and organizational restructuring have transferred many library duties to be performed by support staff in academic libraries in the past years. To maintain quality of library services in the rapidly changing information environment, effective training and development programs for support staff become vital. This study uses a questionnaire to assess and identify areas of training and development of support staff. The questionnaire includes the items under these broad categories: training topics on computer skills, interpersonal skills, and supervision/management skills; library/organizational support; preferred training delivery methods and training sources; and demographic information. The researcher summarizes the findings of the study and recommends in-depth qualitative studies on the topic.

Introduction

Higher education today is facing unprecedented challenges. Continual decline in funding, greater accountability requirements, rapid advancement of technology, and ever increasing demands from constituencies are some examples of the challenges. Academic libraries have experienced greater impact than any other unit on campus from the advanced information technology and telecommunications. Kenerson (1997) stated, "academic libraries and librarianship are experiencing a profound change as a result of automation of its holdings as well as its

networking capabilities to the world of information resources” (p.1). Indeed, technology is the primary driving force behind this rapid rate of transformation. The catch phrase, “do more with less,” has forced library managers to re-examine how they can maintain and improve staff morale and productivity. These and other compelling reasons require academic libraries to place a higher priority on the continual growth and development of their staff. Notwithstanding the importance of collections and services, the staff remains the library’s most important and expensive resource.

Support staff in academic libraries has always played an important role in academic libraries. In many academic libraries, a large portion of total employees is comprised of support staff (Mort, 1982). Kao (1998) estimated that library technicians (an interchangeable term with “support staff”) comprise two-thirds of the total staff in academic libraries and many of them hold essential responsibilities in the library’s day-to-day operation. Furthermore, in recent years, as a cost-saving measure, libraries have tended to increase their reliance on library support staff. “They have, in many cases, replaced librarians, particularly in assigning graduate and undergraduate students” (Kao, p.1).

There is an increased attention on the issues related to support staff in recent years. For example, the third Congress on Professional Education: Focus on Library Support Staff (COPE III), held in May 2003 in Glen Ellyn, Illinois, focused on three main issues: support staff’s career ladders, compensation not appropriate to the level of education, experience, and responsibilities, and lack of access to continuing education and training opportunities. Furthermore, Maurice J. Freedman, immediate Past-President of American Library Association, included both librarians and support staff/paraprofessionals in his

presidential initiative on “Better Salaries and Pay Equity” for all library workers. The researcher undertook this project funded by the Amigos Fellowship that studied support staff training and development needs.

Staff training is vital to any organizations. In a survey by Philadelphia-based Right Management Consultants, it indicates that 76 percent of respondents put ongoing training on the top of the list when they were asked “What do you want in your next job?” In 1999, only 41 percent of the respondents agreed with that statement (Time, p.88). Then, what does it comprise of training for support staff? In Kao’s study (1998), the author defined training for library’s support staff as

a short term, systematic, process such as on-the-job training, learning from co-workers; taking continuing education courses, seminars and workshop locally sponsored by library systems or professional organizations through which library technicians learn specific skills and special knowledge (p.30).

In addition, staff training program should also include “soft skills.” In a study published in Workforce Economy (2001), it was discovered that more than 90 percent of companies also provided a range of management, leadership and communication training to employees. The range included training topics on time management, problem solving and decision making, public speaking and presentation skills, managing change, and strategic planning (p.7).

Summary of methodology and findings

The population of this study includes support staff at selected academic libraries in Kansas and Oklahoma. These individuals do not hold professional positions and are not non-MLS specialists at the library

such as human resource manager, system specialists, media specialists, etc. To understand the importance of training topics that support staff perceive and their preferences of delivery methods and training sources, the following research questions for this study were raised:

1. What are the training topics on computer skills, interpersonal skills, and supervision/management skills that support staff perceive as important to their job?
2. What are the library/organizational supports that encourage support staff to participate in training and development programs?
3. What are the delivery methods that support staff prefer for their training?
4. What are the training sources that support staff prefer to receive training?

The support staff at the these selected university libraries were sent a questionnaire that asked their opinions on the importance of the training topics on computer skills, interpersonal skills, and supervision /management skills that they perceive as important to their job; the importance of library/organizational supports that encourage them to participate in training and development programs; the delivery methods that they prefer for their training, and the training sources that they perceive as helpful to receive training.

The following charts list the order of ranks of responses from the support staff who completed the questionnaire:

(Continued on next page)

(Figure 1)

Rank	Importance of the training topics on computer skills
1	Web browsers (e.g., Internet Explorer, Netscape)
2	MS Office Suites (e.g., word processing, spreadsheet, etc.)
3	E-mail management
4	Database creation (e.g., MS Access)
5	Scanning techniques
6	Presentation software (e.g., PowerPoint, etc.)
7	Web page creation
8	Metadata standards (e.g., Dublin Core, EAD, GIS, TEI, MARC, XML, etc.)
9	Desktop publishing

(Figure 2)

Rank	Importance of training topics on interpersonal skills
1	Oral/written communication skills
2	Working with difficult people
3	Managing priorities
4	Stress management skills
5	Managing change
6	Team building skills
7	Presentation skills

(Continued on next page)

(Figure 3)

Rank	Importance of the training topics on supervisions/management skills
1	Training new employees
2	Supervising student employees
3	Workflow design
4	Project management
5	Coaching/mentoring
6	Departmental coordination
7	Interviewing skills
8	Staff appraisal/evaluation
9	Conducting effective meetings

(Figure 4)

Rank	The importance of library/organizational support that affect the support staff to attend training
1	Link my training to a pay increase
2	Acknowledge my training on my evaluation
3	Provide me with release time for training
4	Allocate funding for my training goals
5	Supply me with appropriate software
6	Provide me with training materials
7	Provided me with technical support
8	Enable me to practice new skills learned from training
9	Offer in-house expertise when I need it
9	Arrange training sessions in convenient locations
10	Suggest relevant training topics to me

(Figure 5)

Rank	The preferred delivery methods that will help staff's training
1	Classroom with a teacher
2	Interactive classroom discussions
3	Self-paced hands-on courses
4	Online learning tutorial
5	Self-paced online courses
6	E-mail correspondance
7	Videoconferences

(Figure 6)

Rank	The preferred training sources from which support staff would like to receive training
1	From your supervisors
2	From your co-workers
3	From in-house trainers
4	From your campus workshop
5	From library vendors
6	From regional networks
7	From nearby library schools
8	From state conferences

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Evaluation and conclusion

From the responses to the questionnaire, the researcher observed the following points:

1. Support staff highly rated such computer skills web browsers, MS Office Suites (e.g., word processing, spreadsheet, etc.), and e-mail management that helps their job as displayed in figure 1.

2. “Oral/written communication,” “Working with difficult people,” and “Managing priorities” were considered the important training topics/sessions on interpersonal skills that support staff would like to attend as shown in figure 2.

3. Support staff considered the training topics of “Training new employees,” “Supervising student employees,” “Workflow design,” and “Project management” important for their supervision/management skills as displayed in figure 3.

4. Support staff consistently responded to the importance of the library/organizational support that would affect their decision to attend training programs as shown in figure 4.

5. Regarding the delivery methods that would be helpful for support staff’s training in figure 5, they considered “Classroom with a teacher,” “Interactive classroom discussions,” “Self-paced hands-on courses,” and “Online learning tutorial” more helpful than “Self-paced online courses,” “E-mail correspondence,” and “Videoconferences,” though the latter has been used on training increasingly.

6. It is obvious that “From your supervisors,” “From your co-workers,” “From in-house trainers,” and “From your campus workshop” were the preferred training sources that support staff would like to receive their training in figure 6.

The library literature on support staff’s training issues is very limited. Therefore, it has presented certain challenges to the researcher to look into literature in other fields such as human resource development and private sectors’ training for additional resources to construct the questionnaire. It took a longer time than the researcher had originally planned in the research design. The questionnaire went well based on responses from support staff who completed it and it helped collect needed data for this study. While a survey is the most inexpensive way to obtain needed information on the topic, the researcher recommends an in-depth qualitative study on the topic to gain additional information on these issues which are not possible to obtain through a questionnaire.

The researcher wishes to express her sincere thanks for the Amigos Fellowship Research Grant that made this project possible.

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