Chapter 11
Professional Development Opportunities for Academic Subject Librarians

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ABSTRACT

Library professionals who specialize in particular disciplines have a deep understanding of the unique needs in their area to support faculty research, enrich student learning, and manage certain collections. Librarians and staff in such positions rely heavily on the expertise of their colleagues who have similar responsibilities, as well as standards developed by library and academic professionals in their respective fields. Therefore, professional networking is a critical practice for academic librarians who manage a particular subject area in their library. This chapter will provide information on subject-specific library conferences and other professional development opportunities that are useful for both conference organizers and librarians who specialize in subject areas and have responsibilities in collection management, instruction, cataloging, and liaison duties.

INTRODUCTION

Subject librarians not only have in-depth knowledge of a particular academic discipline–likely holding advanced or sometimes even terminal degrees besides the library and information science degree–they also play many roles in academic libraries. Some of the more traditional responsibilities include engaging with their assigned academic departments, developing collections, managing budgets, designing and delivering library instruction, and providing reference services. Depending on the subject areas, subject librarians may also be involved in cataloging. More recently, subject librarians have begun collaborating with librarians who work on digital projects by providing content and/or metadata for digital collections, or by encouraging faculty they work with to deposit

their scholarly works in the institutional repository (Feldman, 2006). Because subject librarians have many different types of responsibilities, they require a diversity of development opportunities. This reality is something conference and training planners at the very least need to keep in mind when planning programming, and can even capitalize on by offering sessions that cover a variety of topics.

BACKGROUND

While the duties of subject librarians have either changed or been affected by changes in areas that relate to their work (user behavior, technology, communication, etc.), there is data to support the idea that the broad topics for which they seek professional training remain relatively constant. For example, the Continuing Education Committee of the Association of College & Research Libraries (ACRL) Science & Technology Section conducts a biennial survey of librarians who are subject specialists in technical and scientific fields. The survey's aim is to determine the continuing education needs of that particular constituency of librarians. Among many questions, the survey asks respondents to rate their interest level in specific topics and to indicate their preferred formats for receiving professional development training. In 2001, science and technology librarians were most interested in learning about information literacy, managing electronic resources, designing web tutorials, presentation and teaching skills, electronic reference, and coping with the serials crisis (Desai, 2002). In 2003, they wanted to learn about improving relations with academic faculty, information literacy in the sciences, the effect of electronic resources on library collections and services, subject reference sources, and presentation and teaching skills (Desai, Christianson & Burright, 2003). In 2005, hot topics were information literacy, keeping current, new technologies, institutional repositories and digital archives, scholarly publishing and alternative publishing models, and

marketing and outreach (Spackman, 2006). In 2007, the topics of the greatest interest included collaboration between faculty and the librarian, evaluating existing services and developing new services, future roles for libraries and librarianship, keeping current with technology, and collection development for print and electronic resources (Calzonetti & Crook, 2009). While many of the broader topics–information literacy, collection management, and liaison duties–are indicated as priority development topics in nearly every survey, some newer topics such as alternative publishing models, predicting the future of the profession, and working with technology emerge in later surveys. These survey results indicate that those planning professional development opportunities for subject librarians may want to offer forward-thinking programming like library-as-journal-publisher, assessment, digital projects, active learning using technology, and consortial cataloging arrangements, while still honoring topics that remain central to their roles as selectors, instructors, and liaisons.

Technology has presented librarians with some of the richest rewards and also the greatest challenges the profession has experienced. It has enormously complicated not only the library as a workplace but also how librarians interact with users. Likewise, technology has both opened doors for our users, and it has confused them greatly. Believe it or not, these complications go all the way back to 1960s, when library automation was first being explored, databases like ERIC and Medline were born, MARC records were implemented by the Library of Congress, and OCLC was created. By the 1980s, library users could access electronic public catalogs, but that did not necessarily mean they knew how to use them! Reference librarians–often those with subject responsibilities–had to receive training on not only a new technology but a somewhat new concept, and they had to understand those things well enough to teach library users. Those librarians might have had superior skills as bibliographers, and perhaps they

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