

Chapter 84

Professional Development Opportunities Provided by Consortia: What We Can Learn from this Model

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ABSTRACT

Continuing education for librarians and library staff is a need all libraries must consider for the effective professional development of their human resources and the functioning of their libraries. Similar concerns regarding the needs and barriers to obtaining ongoing continuing education are found across different types of libraries and in different regions of the country. Although studied separately and in different regions of the country, among concerns of library school media specialists documented in studies, results are similar to those revealed in a survey of Inland Northwest Library Council (INCOL) librarians in public, academic, and special libraries. Consortia offering continuing education are not well documented in the literature, but examples that exist reveal a feasible, collaborative, effective resource as a means to provide for these needs in member libraries. The history of these consortia is not only important as a means of documentation of their existence, but more so of their value and usefulness proven over a long time period. INCOL, in the Inland Northwest region of the Pacific Northwest of the United States, is a model of such a consortium that continues to be relevant after more than 30 years of offering ongoing continuing education to its constituency.

INTRODUCTION

The need for continuing education and professional development for librarians and other library staff has existed as long as modern libraries have existed. As technology recasts the dissemination

of knowledge, libraries are being reconceived to meet the changing expectations of ever more digitally native generations. Librarians not only advocate for, and are the creators of the library as it currently exists, but also the library that will exist in the future. Those enormous changes, which take the library from a repository and guardian of knowledge far beyond any library's ability

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to contain the production and consumption of information, stretch those in the profession far beyond their initial training. Continuing education throughout librarians' careers must be available more now than ever to those in the profession.

At the same time as this is occurring resources for continuing education support from libraries is becoming scarcer, and means of attaining continuing education are becoming more expensive. This conundrum requires librarians and library staff to take responsibility for their own professional development and to find feasible means to do so. While there are many more avenues to explore to find professional development than there were in the past, some avenues from the past continue to be viable because they are cost effective, convenient and supported by employers. Consortia are one of the easiest, most well accepted, inexpensive, and time effective providers of continuing education in the library profession today.

There is no typical consortium; each is a unique response to a set of conditions. They differ because they have different types of members, are of different sizes, serve different communities, may be organized in different ways, have matured differently, have different histories and leadership. Most importantly consortia have different program emphases. A review of the literature reveals that continuing education is offered by many types of entities, and that consortia that do offer continuing education do so in diverse ways. However, a common expectation of consortium membership is that each library expects to get something of value out of the time, energy and financial resources it invests in consortium participation. Continuing education programming is a common need of all libraries and can be accomplished better by shared efforts than individual library efforts. For professional development inter-institutional cooperation through a consortium is particularly effective.

One consortium, the Inland Northwest Council of Libraries (INCOL) has fulfilled this continuing education role in a region of the Pacific Northwest for more than three decades and continues to

provide for the librarians and library staff in the region to the satisfaction of its member libraries. Advantages include cooperating in training so that library staffs share knowledge and the sharing of expense of using professional training expertise. The recurrent professional contact afforded by the workshops strengthens the consortium's informal organizational structure as librarians understand the problems and resources of each other's libraries better. A survey of workshop participants underscores the importance of this cooperation and its continuing need. The history of this consortium is a tale of relationships formed and continued by libraries, library directors and communities that persists into the current technological age, bringing libraries closer together in mutual trust. Consortia remain relevant as their focus turns to what they can do best in today's professional world in library and information science.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Bruce E. Massis encourages "organizations recognizing the inherent and long-term benefits of continuing workplace learning, not the least of which is strong engagement on the job and supporting the overall mission of the organization" (2010, p. 247). He goes on to recommend that encouraging staff members to embrace continuing professional education, by attending events that enhance their skills and experience, demonstrates organizational buy-in and support, strengthening the level of engagement and impact on library services (Massis, 2010, p. 248). But having multiple staff members attending events such as conferences involves time away from the library, travel expenses, requires extra staff coverage at the library, and may no longer be sustainable for some libraries' budgets. With an ongoing need for continuing education for library staff, alternative models for professional development may be more viable. Consortia can do many things cooperatively among member libraries that libraries

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