

H.E.L.P.: A Needs Assessment

by Jill Ellern and Sharon Kimble

Throughout the twentieth century, the role of a school library professional has evolved and expanded from simply being a school librarian and book manager to being a school library media specialist with a variety of hats to wear. For example, information specialist, teacher, and instructional consultant are listed in *Information Power* as the three main components of the job.¹ Indeed, the current literature is full of debate over what the future holds for this profession. In the *1995 School Library Media Annual*, Marjorie Pappas and Ann Tepe predict that there will be four major areas for the future "information educator": "information manager, curriculum consultant, teacher, and manager of an information center."²

It is apparent to all within the school library media profession that additional training and staff development are necessary if school media personnel are going to continue to assume more and more responsibility for various facets of technology such as OPACs and CD-ROM and on-line resources, while continuing their more traditional work with literature and curriculum. One of the places in North Carolina where such help is being offered is western North Carolina, where some of the staff at Hunter Library at Western Carolina University (WCU) realized that no one in their area was addressing these needs. They began a project to gather information about the changing roles and professional development needs of school media coordinators and to solicit information from them about their staff development requirements. The project was named the Hunter Educational Librarians Project, or HELP, and the information-gathering meeting was the HELP Council. This article describes preliminary preparations, the setup and structure of the meeting, findings from the Council, and the result and conclusions of the project.

Preparations

The leaders of the HELP team met with Dr. Gurney Chambers, Dean of WCU's College of Education and Applied Professions, to discuss the project idea and receive advice on how to proceed. Because of time and resource constraints, the project was to be limited to the school systems in six western North Carolina counties (Jackson, Swain, Graham, Cherokee, Macon, and Clay) and the Cherokee Central schools. Chambers suggested meeting with the board of directors of STEPE (Strengthening Teacher Education through a Partnership of Equals), a group of school superintendents and curriculum and instruction staff from the same six counties, along with administrators from

regional community colleges and WCU. When Project HELP was presented to the STEPE Board, the idea was enthusiastically approved.

Since the HELP team was unfamiliar with school media centers and how they operated, they decided to visit some of the schools in the target region before planning and conducting an information-gathering meeting for media coordinators. Team members contacted school principals and media coordinators and visited eleven of the thirty-five school media centers and several school administrators to learn about the centers and the issues facing school library media personnel. This information was crucial in planning and carrying out the information-gathering meeting and writing the discussion section of the final report.

A date and location for the HELP Council were selected and invitations were sent to school media coordinators, school board administrators, and interested members of the WCU community, along with a brochure developed to publicize and explain the project. A registration form with some preliminary questions concerning the media coordinator's education, duties, school schedule, and past professional development activities gave the participants an idea of the purpose, structure, and scope of the meeting.

The major goal of the council was to come up with a list of professional development topics. It was decided to use a structured approach to gather this information, to guide the thinking processes of the participants, and to have a record of how they arrived at their suggestions. This approach included developing a series of worksheets that could be used in a small group setting. In creating these worksheets, *Learning Connections: Guidelines for Media and Technology Programs* was used as a model for the role of the media coordinator as defined by the state of North Carolina.

Three sets of worksheets were printed:

- Your Library's Strength, Your Library's Weaknesses, Your Duties and Responsibilities, Program Activities and Services, Your Professional Interests and Past Professional Development Activities.
- Your Own Expectations, Expectations of Your Teachers, Expectations of Others, Expectations Fulfilled, and Unfulfilled Expectations.
- Future Training Needs.

The worksheets were reviewed and assessed; the final draft was included in a packet of materials for each council participant.

Setup and Structure of the Meeting

Of the twenty-eight participants in the HELP council, seventeen were media coordinators, one was a county school administrator, and ten were members of the WCU community (six of the ten from Hunter Library). The participants were divided into groups for work sessions where they completed the worksheets and then shared their results with the entire council. Each group's top three professional development topics were presented and prioritized.

Findings from the Council

The study was completed with the project report, which presented several recommendations and suggestions to council participants and county, school, and WCU administrators. The study identified a number of opportunities for WCU's College of Education and Allied Professions and the Division of Continuing Education and Summer School to increase the professional development opportunities for school media coordinators. The following topics of interest are presented in priority order:

- Grant writing and sources of funding for school media centers;
- New technology, e.g., CD-ROMs;
- New materials, print and non-print;
- Training on lesson design for integration of library resources across the curriculum;
- Basic maintenance of equipment/hardware;
- Network maintenance and troubleshooting;
- New teacher computer competencies;
- Internet training in a lab setting;
- Methods of teaching teachers to incorporate technology in their disciplines or grade levels, e.g., how to use multimedia in teaching;
- Methods of presenting media coordinator duties/needs to administrators;
- Information skills/curriculum development;
- Storytelling/booktalking;
- Time management for media coordinators;
- Techniques to improve communication of services to faculty and staff.

The report recommended that workshops, seminars, or activities presented by WCU be offered to the entire western region of the state, not just to the six counties involved in the HELP project. The WCU Office of Rural Education newsletter, which is distributed to the school media centers, could be used to communicate professional development offerings.

The council concluded that cooperation in organizing and providing professional development activities for media coordinators in the western region could economically utilize existing strengths and resources. It made the following recommendations regarding regional support activities:

1. County and school administrators should assure that there are regular countywide meetings of school media coordinators. Even counties with few media coordinators can benefit from sharing expertise, coordinating efforts, pooling resources, helping each other keep pace with changes, and helping to eliminate isolation.
2. Existing regional education consortia should specifically address cooperation for professional development for media coordinators. Regional efforts should focus on encouraging media coordinators to participate in cooperative professional development activities on a par

with those in nearby counties on a regular basis.

3. County and school administrators and WCU should use existing distance learning technology, e-mail, and Internet resources for regional meetings and to provide professional development activities for school media coordinators. Such technology currently provides many opportunities and resources for professional development for teachers, but few are focused on the needs of school media coordinators.
4. WCU could be a resource for the school media coordinators concerning new children's literature, teaching trends, and current technology. Examples of activities include hosting regular events and frequent communications with groups of media coordinators.
5. The study recommended that WCU create an ongoing, self-perpetuating council composed of school media coordinators and WCU faculty and administrators. Quarterly meetings, held at WCU with the participation of faculty members from the College of Education and the Division of Continuing Education/Summer School, would aid the flow of information and ideas about professional development activities for media coordinators.

Results and Conclusions

About 100 copies of the final project report were distributed to principals, county administrators, media coordinators, and faculty and administrators at Western Carolina University. It was well received, particularly by WCU's College of Education, which had recently created a position to support and evaluate technology competencies. The findings of the report prompted discussions at Hunter Library, in the College of Education, and among members of the STEPE Board about possible follow-up activities. Because the purpose of HELP was to provide information about professional development activities for school media coordinators, no further activities are planned.

In addition to the recommendations listed above, the HELP Report also made a number of other suggestions to WCU. Some addressed ways to strengthen teacher education by helping students form partnerships with school media coordinators and librarians at WCU. Another suggestion was that WCU sponsor an annual event similar to a book fair, providing a professional development opportunity for media coordinators and publicity for WCU.

Although some media coordinators may like to see more immediate action on some of the recommendations and suggestions, the project raised awareness about issues involving school media coordinators as well as possibilities for activities in the future. Real action on recommendations of this report will require leadership and team effort on the part of the schools and the media coordinators in the regions.

References

- ¹ *Information Power: Guidelines for School Library Media Programs* (Chicago: American Library Association & Association for Educational Communications and Technology, 1988), 26.
- ² Marjorie L. Pappas and Ann E. Tepe, "Preparing the Information Educator for the Future," *School Library Media Annual 13* (Englewood, CO: Libraries Unlimited, 1995), 37.

Jill Ellern is Systems Librarian at Western Carolina University. Sharon Kimble is Assistant to Vice Chancellor for Academic Affairs at Western Carolina University.