Staff Development in North Carolina's Public Libraries: Needs, Opportunities, and Commitment

Duncan Smith

Staff development is neither a reward for a job well-done, nor a break from the library's daily routine; it is a necessary and essential part of any well managed public library. This statement is based on two facts: 1. The employee turnover rate for public library employees is very low[1] and 2. Due to career plateau, forty-eight percent of all library employees will remain in their present jobs, thirty-two percent against their wishes.[2] These facts mean that public library directors will not have the luxury of replacing existing staff to obtain gains in performance or prepare the library for the twenty-first century. These gains and journeys will have to be done largely with the staff members currently employed.

In order to determine the present state of staff development in North Carolina's public libraries, public library directors responded to a survey that was designed to identify how these individuals perceived staff development and their library's staff development programs.[3] This survey used an adaptation of an instrument designed by Barbara Conroy.[4] Several aspects of staff development were examined in this survey including the reasons for staff development programs, staff development needs in North Carolina's public libraries, and staff development strategies.

This survey also identified several problem areas, including commitment to staff development. The initial question asked about the priority given to staff development. Respndents were able to choose one of three responses: high, medium, or low. Twenty-two (forty-eight percent) assigned staff development a high priority in their libraries, twenty-two (forty-eight percent) a medium priority, and only two (four percent) assigned staff development a low priority. A re-phrased version of this question appearing near the end of the questionnaire, however, resulted in

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drastically different responses. This article attempts, therefore, not only to discuss the results of the survey but to identify the reasons why the responses to these equivalent questions are so different.

Reasons for Staff Development

The vast majority of North Carolina public library directors (ninety-eight percent) indicated that they encouraged and supported staff development in their libraries. A smaller majority indicated that support for staff development existed throughout the staff. For example, thirty-six (seventy-eight percent) indicated that middle managers supported staff development, twenty-nine (sixty-three percent) that public services librarians and twenty-seven (fifty-nine percent) that clerical/support staffs supported staff development.

This encouragement and support of staff development is based on the anticipated benefits that staff development has for the libraries that provide it. Very low staff turnover and absence of opportunities for promotion are important, but they are not the only reasons for providing staff development. The main reasons staff development is provided in North Carolina's public libraries are to: 1. improve library efficiency, 2. utilize full capacity of staff, 3. keep-up-to-date, and 4. build long-range staff capability (see Table 1). The least selected reason for providing staff development was to change library direction; only twelve (twenty-six percent) of respondents indicated this reason. Since respondents could select more than one response to this question, and several did, it is difficult to generalize about these findings.

Needs

This survey provided respondents with an opportunity to identify critical areas of staff development need. Two questions were designed

to gather this information, and both questions asked respondents to provide specific examples. The responses to both questions were very similar. Four major staff development needs were identified: 1. reference, 2. new technology/library automation, 3. patron relations, and 4. communication. Human relations and interactions skills clearly dominate. This is demonstrated by the fact that reference, patron relations, and communication skills were identified so frequently. The only group of librarians, identified by public library directors, as having a greater need for new technology/library automation skills than human relation skills was technical services librarians. Of particular note was the strength of need for staff development in patron relations. This need was most clearly identified in a section that asked respondents to identify staff development needs in the area of attitudes. Twenty-four (fifty-two percent) of library directors felt that the staff had a critical need in this area. These respondents provided twenty-five specific examples of need in the attitude area. Of these twenty-five examples, twenty-two (eighty-eight percent) were in the area of patron relations. No other topic or example dominated a single topic area as much as patron relations.

The needs identified in this survey closely correspond with the needs identified in other studies. This is especially true in the human relations and new technology/library automation areas. In her 1974 report on continuing library and information science education. Elizabeth W. Stone identifies human relations skills as being the top and automation as being the third continuing library education need in three to five years.[5] Closer to home, in a 1982 study, Joan Wright and Douglas Zweizig identified continuing education in the area of reference as the major need for public librarians in the use and interpretation of the collection category.[6] It is also interesting to note that in this same study, use and

interpretation of the collection was the broad topic area in which public librarians expressed interest in three or more aspects of the topic. It was rare for more than twenty precent of the respondents from any type of library, in the Wright and Zweizig study, to be interested in more than two aspects of a topic.[7]

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Responsibilities

Who has responsibility in the area of staff development, and what is the nature of those responsibilities? In the opening paragraphs of this article, it was pointed out that staff development is encouraged by all levels of staff in the majority of North Carolina's public libraries. The act of encouraging staff development is just one area of responsibility in the provision of staff development programs. Other areas include initiating, planning, participating, and motivating individuals to participate in staff development activities. Respondents indicated that the library, through both its administration and staff share these responsibilities. North Carolina's public library directors feel that it is the library's responsibility to motivate staff to be involved (eighty percent), to provide staff development when it is needed, (eighty percent), and to initiate staff development (seventy-eight percent). They feel that library staff members have a responsibility for participating in staff development (ninety-one percent), and to seek out staff development programs and activities (seventy-two percent).

The most commonly offered incentives for participation in staff development programs are

TABLE 1.
Reasons for the provision of staff development

Rank	Reason	# selecting	% selecting
1	Improve library efficiency	40	87%
2	Utilize full capacity of staff	38	83%
3	Keep up to date	37	80%
4	Build long-range staff capability	34	74%
5	Cope with existing library changes	31	67%
5	Prepare for library changes	31	67%
6	Build long-range library capability	29	63%
6	Change attitudes	29	63%
7	Immediate problem solving	26	56%
8	Change behavior	25	54%
9	Change library direction	12	26%

TABLE 2.
Incentives offered to encourage participation in staff development

Rank	Incentives	# selecting	% selecting
1	Esteem and praise	39	85%
2	"Credit" in performance review	30	65%
3	Personnel record of participation	25	54%
4	Opportunities for promotion and reassignment	18	39%
5	Salary increase	6	13%
6	Nothing	3	7%

esteem and praise and "credit" in performance review (see Table 2). Two of the least likely incentives to be offered in North Carolina's libraries are opportunities for promotion and reassignment and salary increases. Only eighteen of this study's respondents indicated that they used promotion or reassignment as an incentive for participation in staff development and only six indicated that participation in staff development affected salary increases. The absence of these tangible incentives, however, does not indicate an unwillingness to provide such incentives. It more likely reflects the realities of employment in the public sector. This study did not explore this aspect of the incentives question.

These tangible incentives, however, are not the ones most frequently mentioned by library staff participating in the programs offered by the North Carolina Library Staff Development Program. During the Fall 1988 semester, participants in the North Carolina Library Staff Development Program's workshops completed a Participation Reasons Scale, a scale providing participants with thirty potential reasons for attending a staff development activity. Based on an analysis of 365 participants, most of whom were public librarians, three of the least important reasons for participating in staff development activities were: 1. To increase the likelihood of personal financial gain; 2. To increase the likelihood of benefits for family and friends; and 3. To enhance my individual security in my present library position.[8] The most frequently listed reasons for participating in staff development programs were: 1. To help me become more competent in my library work; 2. To develop new professional knowledge and skills; 3. To help me be more productive in my professional role; 4. To further match my knowledge or skills with the demands of my library activities; 5. To develop proficiencies necessary to maintain quality performance; and 6. To maintain the quality of my library service.[9] This means that library directors who wish to motivate their staffs to participate in staff development must offer activities that assist staff members in performing well in their present jobs. This also means that library administrations involved in planning staff development programs must ensure that the activities they plan are directly relevant to employees' needs. The fact that library employees are more motivated by the need to increase their competence than by tangible rewards increases the importance of a thorough needs assessment before staff development activities are offered.

Strategies

Public libraries in North Carolina use a variety of strategies in meeting the staff development needs of their employees. This study sought to identify some of these strategies. It sought to identify whether libraries provide in-house training, whether libraries make use of outside training, who decides to attend what activity, what types of activities are available, and what is done with what is learned.

The overwhelming majority of the libraries in this study used a combination of in-house and outside activities to meet their staff's staff development needs. A total of ninety-one percent of library directors indicated that their libraries combined these two resources. Only two (four percent) library directors indicated that they depended solely on outside activities to address their staff's staff development needs. In general all levels of staff have both in-house and outside

TABLE 3.
Reasons for using outside sources for staff development

Rank	Reason	# selecting	% selecting
1	Greater skill and expertise	38	83%
2	Save the time of developing an activity inside	28	61%
3	Expediency	22	48%
4	Advantage of "outside" credibility	18	39%

TABLE 4.

Factors used to determine staff participation in staff development

Rank	Factor	# selecting	% selecting
1	Interest and potential of the learner	40	87%
2	Expression of need by the potential learner	38	83%
3	Need as determined by supervisor	36	78%
4	Feasibility as determined by supervisor	34	74%

staff development activities available to them. It is interesting to note, however, that administrators were more likely to use outside training activities than in-house training. Only sixty-one percent of the directors responding to this study stated that they and their supervisors had access to in-house learning activities, while ninety-six percent indicated that they had access to outside learning activities. This makes sense since the number of administrative staff in most of North Carolina's public libraries is small and, in most of these libraries, top administration consists of a majority of one.

Two main questions in the study addressed the use of outside training activities by public libraries for staff development purposes. These questions sought to identify the reasons libraries used outside resources and which resources they used. A vast majority of public library directors said they used outside training to obtain greater skill and expertise (see Table 3). The other three reasons for using outside sources of training were to save the time of developing an activity inside, expediency, and the advantage of "outside" credibility. Public libraries make use of a wide variety of outside sources for their staff development activities, including county personnel offices, local community colleges, private trainers and consultants, professional associations, the state library, and the state's library education programs.

The library director is ultimately responsible for who participates in staff development and must decide if library resources are going to be devoted to the development of in-house activities. Library directors were provided with four factors that are commonly used to determine whether or not an individual should be allowed to participate in a staff development activity. These factors were: 1. interest and potential of the learner; 2. expression of need by the potential learner; 3. need as determined by supervisor; and 4. feasibility as determined by supervisor (see Table 4). The fact that interest of the potential learner and expression of need of potential learner are two main factors for determining participation in staff development is appropriate. This style of decision-making blends nicely with the factors that motivate participation in staff development activities.

Public library staff members have access to a variety of potential staff development activities. Respondents were asked to provide information on the type of staff development activities that were available to their staffs. Respondents were provided seventeen different types of activities. The three activities that were most frequently identified as being available to library staffs were workshops, on-the-job training, and conferences and conventions (see Table 5). The workshop is a favored form of staff development activity in the

TABLE 5.
Type of staff development activities available to staff

Rank	Type of Activity	# selecting	% selecting
1	Workshops	45	98%
2	On-the-job training	42	91%
3	Conference and conventions	40	87%
4	Lectures, presentations, colloquia	26	57%
5	Classes/courses, including correspondence	24	52%
6	Coaching	23	50%
7	Committees, task forces	22	49%
7	Seminars	22	49%
8	Discussion groups	20	43%
9	Job rotation, staff exchanges	19	41%
10	Audiovisual materials	18	40%
11	Demonstrations and exhibits	11	24%
12	Self-instructional materials	10	22%
13	All other activities	12	26%

TABLE 6.
Methods used for documenting participation in staff development

Rank	Method	# selecting	% selecting
1	Note in individual's personnel record	23	50%
2	No documentation	16	35%
3	Noted in "progress reports"	11	24%
4	Written report of experience	10	22%
5	Written report and assessment of the participant's use of learnings	3	7%
6	Other	3	7%

library profession. (This preference is corroborated by a study conducted by John A. McCrossan on the opinions of public library administrators in the area of continuing education activities. In that study of Florida public library directors, McCrossan found that ninety percent of the directors polled viewed attending workshops, courses, and seminars as an important continuing education activity.[10])

What happens after the workshop or staff development activity takes place? What types of follow-up activities are used by public libraries in North Carolina to ensure that new knowledge or skills are not lost? Respondents were asked to provide information on a variety of follow-up activities. These activities included whether or not an individual participating in staff development had to provide a written/oral report or provide a staff meeting briefing. This question also provided respondents with an "other" category that allowed them to identify additional means of reinforcing and following-up staff development programs. Of the strategies mentioned above, the preferred means of reinforcing the learning that takes place in a staff development program is through briefings at staff meetings. A total of thirty-four (seventy-four percent) respondents indicated using this strategy in their libraries. Only twenty (forty-four percent) indicated requiring a written or oral report and only six (thirteen percent) indicated another strategy for following-up and reinforcing the learning that takes place in a staff development program. Some of the alternative strategies that were mentioned include: 1. informal briefing with the supervisor after the workshop; 2. sharing training experiences with other staff members; 3. presenting a workshop for fellow staff members based on an experience at an out-of-library workshop; and 4. writing an article for the staff newsletter.

Another aspect of the follow-up question included examining how libraries document participation in staff development. The response rate to this question was remarkably low. In this study, a vast majority of the questions have had

responses whose lower range ended above the fifty percent mark. In the case of this question, the upper range was fifty percent, with twenty-three (fifty percent) of respondents indicating that a note was placed in the individual's personnel record to document participation in staff development (see Table 6). Other strategies used to document staff development participation included notations in "progress reports," written report of experience, and "other."

Follow-up and reinforcement of the learning that takes place in staff development is a weak link in staff development programs in the state. This finding is reinforced by the fact that only seven percent of study respondents indicated that they document staff development through a written report and assessment of the participant's use of learnings, and thirty-five percent indicated that no documentation of participation in staff development is kept in their libraries.

This should be an area of concern for those individuals involved in the creation of staff development programs because studies indicate that without reinforcement a significant amount of the learning that occurs in staff development programs will be lost. An excellent review article on the topic of transfer of training and the necessity of reinforcement has been written by Carver.[11] An article that demonstrates the valuable, positive impact that follow-up can have is Stephan, Gers, Seward, Bolin and Partridge's article on the state of Maryland's reference training program.[12] This article discusses how a reference training program resulted in an increase of reference accuracy from fifty-five percent to seventy-seven percent. This is remarkable. Even more remarkable, however, is the fact that in two locations where trainees received intensive peer coaching and supervisory support, reference accuracy increased to an average of ninety-five percent! This finding is especially relevant to North Carolina where only twenty-three (fifty percent) of study respondents indicated that coaching was a strategy used in their libraries.

For individuals interested in learning more

about the peer coaching concept, an article by Becky Schreiber provides an excellent overview on the use of coaching in a library setting.[13]

Opportunities: Needs Assessment and Evaluation

Reinforcement is just one area where the state's public library staff development programs have an opportunity to improve. Two others are needs assessment and program evaluation. Only thirty-three percent of respondents indicated that their programs had clear objectives. Only sixteen (thirty-four percent) of respondents indicated that their programs had a plan of action. Likewise, sixteen respondents indicated that they had policies that guided the use and development of staff development. Seventeen (thirty-seven percent) respondents indicated that their policies in this area were sketchy. Finally, twelve (twenty-six percent) respondents said that policies in this area were non-existent.

In the area of needs assessment respondents were provided with seven different strategies for conducting a needs assessment. These seven strategies were: 1. informal feedback; 2. needs assessment survey; 3. employee performance appraisal; 4. observation of individuals/groups performing on the job; 5. career planning with individuals; 6. measures of performance before and after training; and 7. testing (see Table 7). Of these seven strategies, ninety-three percent indicated that they assessed needs through informal feedback. The second most popular needs assessment strategy was observation of individuals/-groups performing on the job. The least popular strategies were testing, measures of performance before and after training, and needs assessment survey. This over-reliance on informal needs assessment strategies could result in public libraries providing staff development programs that are not directly applicable to their staffs. It is particularly troubling to see the relatively low number of libraries who employ needs assessment surveys. The needs assessment survey is the preferred strategy for ensuring that accurate infor-

mation is gathered on a staff's training needs. Individuals interested in a good introduction and discussion of the needs assessment process, sample instruments, and sources relating to this topic should consult Charles Kratz.[14]

The second area where public libraries have an opportunity to develop their staff development programs is in the area of evaluation. Respondents were provided with six strategies for evaluating staff development programs. These strategies were: 1. observation by supervisors; 2. observation by peers; 3. measures on the basis of library unit goals or objectives; 4. informal feedback; 5. measures based on the application of skill; and 6. measures based on before/after performance

TABLE 7.
Needs assessment strategies used by NC public libraries

Rank	Strategy	# selecting	% selecting
1	Informal feedback	43	93%
2	Observation of individuals/groups performing on the job	41	89%
3	Employee performance appraisal process	28	61%
4	Career planning with individuals	12	26%
5	Needs assessment survey	8	17%
6	Measures of performance before and after training	1	2%
6	Testing	1	2%

TABLE 8.
Strategies for evaluating the impact of staff development programs

Rank	Reason	# selecting	% selecting
1	Informal feedback	40	87%
2	Observation by supervisor(s)	29	63
3	Measures based on application of skill	12	26%
4	Measures based on before/after performance	9	20%
5	Measures on the basis of library unit goals or objectives	6	13%
5	Observation by peer(s)	6	13%

(see Table 8). The most frequently selected strategy was informal feedback. The next most frequently used evaluation strategy was observation by supervisors. The remaining strategies used in North Carolina's public libraries were measures based on the application of skill, measures based on before/after performance, observation by peers, and measures on the basis of library unit goals or objectives. These results relate to how a library evaluates the impact of staff development on the performance of staff members.

A separate question asked how libraries evaluated specific staff development activities. This question provided respondents with seven strategies for evaluating staff development activities. These strategies were: 1. post-activity reaction sheet; 2. immediate application of learnings; 3. plans to apply learnings; 4. if it was enjoyed; 5. opinions of those who produced it; 6. staff development committee/officer; and 7. outside evaluator (see Table 9). The most frequently identified strategy for evaluation of specific staff development activities was if it was enjoyed. The next most frequently selected responses were immediate application of learnings and plans to apply learnings. On the surface the appearance of these strategies in the second and third positions is encouraging. One must wonder, however, how these strategies are being implemented since few libraries require written/oral reports of their staff members regarding participation in staff development and only three (seven percent) respondents develop written reports or assessments of their staffs' use of the learnings obtained in staff development activities.

The area of evaluation, both of the impact of staff development on an individual's performance and an activity's success in meeting its objectives, are areas in which the public libraries of North Carolina have an opportunity to improve their staff development programs. Kitty Smith provides a good framework for thinking about the evaluation of staff development and should be consulted.[15] Two other sources that should be considered for individuals interested in either increasing their involvement in staff development or improving their existing programs are a classic on this subject by Barbara Conroy[16] and Sheila Creth's work on on-the-job training.[17]

Commitment

As stated earlier, this study contained two questions regarding library commitment to staff development (see Table 10). These two questions were in fact equivalent. The first question was "What priority do you assign staff development efforts in your library?" Twenty-two directors indicated that staff development had a high priority in their libraries, twenty-two indicated it had a medium priority, and two indicated it had a low priority. Question number thirty-two asked "What is the present priority of staff development?" This time, however, only five indicated that staff development had a high priority in their libraries, while twenty-two indicated it had a medium priority, and eighteen indicated it had a low priority. This is a significant shift!

There are three possible explanations. First of all, it is possible that respondents were incon-

TABLE 9.
Strategies for evaluating staff development activities

Rank	Strategy	# selecting	% selecting
1	If it was enjoyed	30	65%
2	Immediate application of learnings	26	57%
3	Plans to apply learnings	23	50%
4	Post activity reaction sheet	13	28%
5	Opinions of those who produced it	10	22%
6	Staff development committee/officer	5	11%
7	Outside evaluator	0	0%

TABLE 10.
Commitment

Question	High	Medium	Low (#/%)
What priority do you assign staff development efforts in your library?	22/48%	22/48%	2/4%
What is the present priority of staff development?	5/11%	22/48%	18/39%

sistent in their responses to these two questions. This seems unlikely, however, given the consistency of responses to other questions. Responses in the areas of staff development needs, planning, needs assessment, and evaluation were very consistent. While responses in the areas of needs assessment and evaluation may not have been the ones this author hoped for, they consistently pointed toward the less formal, more informal strategies.

Follow-up and reinforcement of the learning that takes place in staff development is a weak link in staff development programs in the state.

A second possibility could be that respondents are genuinely ambivalent on the subject of staff development. Here again, the consistency of responses elsewhere in this study does not indicate a great deal of ambivalence.

The third possibility is that as a result of completing this survey, respondents were exposed to a more formal, structured approach to staff development. This would explain the shift between questions one and thirty-two. At the beginning of filling out the questionnaire, directors whose libraries provide access to outside workshops and close the library for staff development days could have felt that staff development had a high priority in their libraries. Examination of the questionnaire in and of itself, however, makes it clear that there is more to staff development than this.

The premise of this survey is that staff development is a process that involves a needs assessment, the establishing of objectives, the development of a plan of action, a commitment of time and resources, the implementation of that plan, and the evaluation of the plan and its outcomes. It is quite possible that directors completing this study, therefore, could as they drew to its close, feel that staff development did not have as high a priority in their library as they originally thought. This shift should not be viewed in any way as being negative. It merely shows that public library directors clearly have a commitment to the con-

cept of staff development and that they have opportunities to expand this present commitment.

Conclusion

The intent of this article was to identify the present state of staff development in North Carolina's libraries. The decision to commit—and the commitment of—time and resources to staff development is one of the most important decisions a library administration can make. This is especially true of the public library, because the public library is in the human resource development business. The staff can contribute no more to the meeting of patron needs than has been contributed to them. Staff development programs are the first line of defense against libraries that do not respond adequately to the needs of library users. Through more carefully planned and targeted staff development programs, public library directors can ensure that their libraries will continue to grow and develop staff members prepared for the close of this century and the opening of the next.

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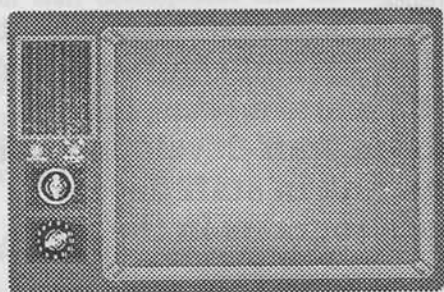
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