Technology, Collaboration, and Learning: Perceptions and Preferences of US Public Library Staff Professional Development

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Abstract

The primary purpose of this study was to investigate the preferences and perceptions of professional development (PD) activities for public library staff. The survey instrument was distributed to public librarians and paraprofessionals throughout the United States. Beyond the challenges of time and money, a picture emerged from the data of what might best serve the needs of librarians and paraprofessionals for PD. Staff want to feel encouraged and supported about learning for their jobs. The chance to network and meet in groups is preferred by most respondents with short webinars and online learning filling in the gaps, especially if content goes beyond the usual introductory level. From these findings, it is possible to suggest three "action plans" for improving PD for public library professionals and paraprofessionals. These plans include: developing structured and supported PD programs as part of public library administration, promoting a culture of learning throughout the institution, and participating in and contributing to state and regional opportunities for PD of public library staff.

Introduction

Traditionally public librarians and other library staff have pursued learning opportunities for professional development (PD) via various channels, such as: reading library and information science (LIS) literature, attending in-service learning days and conferences, watching videocassettes of workshops, and auditing LIS classes. This has been the norm for almost as long as there have been reference desks to staff. But by the late 1990s, webinars, text-based online courses and other digital learning opportunities entered the library learning landscape and flourished.

Today, 21st century LIS professionals and library staff must consider and prepare for the new roles they will assume with emerging technologies and in online spaces. The landscape of how library staff learn has also drastically changed. Previously, similar studies and surveys have been done with very small respondent samples. This study expands upon those findings by surveying a national audience of librarians and paraprofessionals. Findings provide insights for public library administrators and training personnel; identify the challenges and potential for PD offerings; suggest potential opportunities for PD across library systems, consortia and associations; and allow institutions to maximize their staff development funds. Understanding how public library staff want to learn and engage around new service concepts and trends will provide insights into how to best deliver PD training for the public library of the future.

Background and Literature

The following review of the literature provides some contextual framework for the purpose and necessity of this study. Like other professions, LIS is continually changing and morphing, so it places a great deal of emphasis on the continuing education (CE) of its staff. In order to keep pace with emerging technologies, user demands, and management trends, staff need to acquire information and develop practical skillsets that will ultimately benefit users. Along with daily responsibilities, it is the duty of all library staff to continuously learn and improve. The American Library Association's (ALA) Code of Ethics (2008) prompts

professionals in Statement #8 to "[maintain] and [enhance their] own knowledge and skills, by encouraging the professional development of co-workers, and by fostering the aspirations of potential members of the profession."

This is not the only document where the importance of professional education is mentioned. The ALA (2004) "Core Values of Librarianship" statement also serves as a reminder that libraries advocate education and lifelong learning to the communities they serve. State library associations also place a value on PD. For example, the strategic vision of the New York Library Association (NYLA), under the action NYLA advances excellence in New York libraries, includes the call to "deliver top-quality professional development via a variety of formats."

Most of the literature concerning staff PD needs has centered on academic and special library staff, including an overview of library staff PD at Indiana University in the 1970s. Other research done in this area finds some common themes such as staff preferences for content delivery methods; desire for relevant, practical content/topics offered; challenges such as inadequate time to complete PD and associated costs; and finally, an emphasis on collaborative efforts between organizations to deliver PD to staff to help alleviate some of the aforementioned challenges.

Early PD

One of the first published overviews and assessments of professional staff development focused on the process of implementing PD needs-assessment in a large academic library at Indiana University, through the use of a task force, staff questionnaires, and evaluation of responses (Snyder & Sanders, 1978). Snyder and Sanders first pointed out that "staff development" and "continuing education" are actually two different business terms; the former refers to skills that help organizational growth as a whole, and the latter refers to individuals' professional growth on an independent level. The authors note that the implementation of "new technologies" (i.e., computerized systems, which would have been relatively new at that time) necessitated the demand for increased PD opportunities (Snyder & Sanders, 1978). Two of the objectives which the authors designated as the most important were the expansion of the staff development program (to include in-service training, short classes and workshops) and financial resources for the staff training and development, in order to facilitate the implementation of professional development throughout the whole year (Snyder & Sanders, 1978).

Content Delivery

When it comes to professional development (PD) opportunities, previous research has shown that library staff have a clear preference for training that occurs primarily face to face (F2F) (Hahn & Lester, 2012; Haley, C., 2008; Lynn, Bose, & Boehmer, 2010). This may be because adult learners "learn best through interaction with peers within a nurturing environment" (Brown, Dotson, & Yontz, 2011). While online collaboration is something current technology enables, it may not necessarily be the most conducive, nurturing type of environment in which adults easily learn.

Despite the convenience of "anywhere, anytime" learning, which is often touted as a benefit of online instruction, the literature reveals that library staff and library school faculty consistently prefer F2F training over an online modality. In a study about librarians' preferences for PD content delivery methods Lynn, Bose, and Boehmer (2010) found that members among three professional organizations (the American Library Association (ALA), Special Libraries Association (SLA), and the Medical Library Association (MLA)) all preferred F2F PD

opportunities over virtual ones. Indeed, in researching librarians' preferences for online PD training, Haley (2008) discovered that 87% of survey respondents felt online training was less effective than in-person training sessions, therefore leading participants to favor F2F sessions over web-based options. This does not appear to be just limited to library staff, however; LIS faculty holds these same preferences as well. When surveying library and information science faculty, Hahn and Lester (2012) discovered that most faculty favored in-person workshops and seminars over online training. Even though technology helps makes physical proximity less of an issue when attending events, seminars, or trainings, Haley (2008) found that online instruction may be more effective when only rudimentary and technological topics are presented, suggesting that more advanced or complex topics are better suited to an in-person, classroom environment. Lynn, Bose, and Boehmer (2010) also similarly suggest that the type instructional modality utilized may depend on the subject matter.

Time, Cost, and Administrative Support

Finding time and money to complete professional development activities are barriers staff encounter and are mentioned extensively in the literature (Cassner & Adams, 2006; Bierbaum, 1988; Ritchie, Hallam, Hamill, Lewis, Fonti, O'Connor, and Clark's (2010), 2010; Carson, Colosimo, Lake, & McMillan, 2014; Lynn, Bose, & Boehmer, 2010). Lack of time and funding are not unique issues to North American libraries; they are seen in Australian and Canadian librarians, as well. Ritchie et al. (2010) discovered that common challenges to completing PD in health sciences libraries in Australia include time to devote to PD, physical proximity to training sites, and cost. Carson et al. (2014), researching PD in Canadian academic libraries, concur that lack of time is one of the main concerns library professionals have when it comes to completing PD education. In the United States, Cassner & Adams (2015) found that 86% of survey respondents cited "time restraints" as a challenge to completing PD opportunities, while Lynn, Bose & Boehmer (2012) found that cost ranked "significantly higher" than any other factor when ALA, MLA, and SLA members determined whether to attend a CE course. Clearly, these are prominent hurdles that administrators face and finding resolutions is essential so staff can feel empowered to extend their professional growth.

Along with concerns about finding time to fit PD into already-busy schedules, previous research has shown that libraries have room to improve when accommodating professional development needs from a budgetary standpoint. A study by Haley (2008) revealed that only 55% of library staff surveyed thought their library budgets adequately supported PD. Whether that is a perceived or an accurate representation of library budgets is not clear, but either way, if staff feel they cannot ask for additional training because their request requires funding, opportunities for professional growth could be lost. Though library administrators are encouraging the PD needs of their staff, when push comes to shove, they may not be supporting it financially, expecting staff to pay out of their own wallets, as Ritchie et al.'s (2010) research found. The authors discovered that while employers of health librarians supported continuing professional development in theory (67%), few employers lent any financial support to these endeavors (15%), leaving employees who desired PD to fund it on their own. And the desire to grow professionally is a reality; Ritchie et al. (2010), found that 80% of survey respondents had a dedicated interest to continuing PD. Funding, in conjunction with time restraints, may put more pressure on staff to shoulder more of the responsibility for finding both time in their personal schedules and money in their wallet to attend career-enhancing events, if they choose to pursue them at all.

There are options to combat the time and money conundrums that are frequently reported as challenges to PD. Sewell (2014) suggests that a self-directed learning approach

may be one possible answer. Self-directed learning allows full-time and part-time staff to take 1 hour of time each or every other week to improve their skillsets using online and traditional print resources. This approach alleviates the problems inherent with presenting PD programs, such as technological knowledge needs, shrinking budgets, and time constraints (Sewell, 2014). Meanwhile, Stephens and Jones (2014) researched a type of self-directed learning that occurs in massively open online courses, or MOOCs. This learning approach is usually offered for free, solving the cost dilemma that may preclude some staff from participating, but it is also advantageous since it offers a more participatory experience among students, echoing Brown, Dotson, and Yontz's (2011) research that places importance on peer collaboration as an important part of the adult learning process. Even though MOOCs and self-directed learning appear at odds with the face time that library staff desire, a compromise that incorporates both F2F and online learning (Haley, 2008) is a realistic proposition. A PD formula of administrative support, adequate funding, and a mix of in-person and virtual learning can create opportunities that are more effective (Haley, 2008).

Relevancy of Content and Implications for Practice

For a complete overview of PD studies in librarianship, it is worthwhile to include literature outside the United States. Studies from Canada and South Africa contribute to the body of knowledge related to professional learning. In one such study surveying Canadian public librarians, Chan and Auster (2003) found that staff was dissatisfied with workshops offered at professional conferences, primarily because the topics were not relevant to them. The authors stress that providing content that is both easily accessible and connotes real-world application is likely a better recipe for success. Hart and Hart (2014) found such success in their survey of library managers in South Africa who participated in a train-the-trainer leadership education program; after attending the program, 75% of respondents stated they "used new skills every week," and 95% of respondents graduated to more complex work tasks. The skills and topics learned benefited the managers on the job, and they continued to grow professionally. This study makes a case that time invested in relevant, job-related PD opportunities that can be put into practice on the job will benefit staff.

Local Partnerships and the Role of State Library Associations

Evidence in the literature notes that for institutions which collaborate with other organizations or associations, costs are minimal and manageable since resources are pooled together. The literature suggests these partnerships can occur on a local, as well as a statewide, level among groups who share common interests and goals. One example is a study by Carson et al. (2014). The authors formed a research partnership, inviting librarians from neighboring McGill and Concordia Universities to participate in eight meetings to share ideas, facilitate learning, and provide a feeling of community in the research-intensive focus of academic LIS practice. Ultimately, the authors attributed success of the project to the physical proximity between the participating universities, common research interests and analogous work settings. Due to constraints such as physical location, this type of partnership may only be scalable on a local level versus a national stage; however, it is an example of how collaboration and sponsorship of PD can work if individual groups sharing similar interests come together. Likewise, Bierbaum (1988) found similar results when studying Museum, Arts and Humanities librarians' PD needs. The author concluded that these small niche libraries, along with surrounding library schools and professional associations, should form collaborative peer partnerships and freely exchange knowledge and resources that may be unique and specialized to these institutions.

Not only should local groups take initiative, but there is also room for more support from statewide library associations to take on a larger role than they currently do in providing and supporting CE for their member libraries. When surveying how state library associations currently support PD, Kenney and McMillan's (1992) study showed encouraging results. The authors discovered that 95% of survey respondents indicated their associations offered PD opportunities to members, primarily through workshops and programs. The Chief Officers of State Library Agencies (2016) survey returned similar results, with all 50 states indicating available initiatives for library staff to participate in professional growth and development. Though these numbers look very favorable, Kenney and McMillan caution that "quantity does not necessarily imply quality," suggesting that the PD activities offered by state associations may be plentiful but could also lack the substance that is valued by library professionals. Furthermore, the literature on this topic revealed several studies on the collaborative efforts between individual institutions and professional organizations (such as state library associations) pooling their resources to provide successful PD opportunities to staff (Bell, 1979, Bierbaum, 1988, Broadbent and Grosser, 1987, Carson et al., and 2104, Ritchie, 2008).

Additionally, there is a desire for interstate collaboration and the merging of resources with other library associations. In the Chief Officers of State Library Agencies (2016) report, the results indicated that there was a clear interest in partnering with other states for staff CE, especially in the areas of producing synchronous workshops (39 states agreeing), developing self-paced training modules (38 states), coordinating F2F classes (26 states agreeing), and initiating a mentoring program with other state libraries (23 states agreeing).

However, libraries are not the only institutions interested in collaborating with other associations to bring PD activities to staff. Library and information schools have also looked at the role of PD and sponsorship from participating organizations. Bell's (1979) research about the role of library schools in the professional development arena finds that library schools should support the CE of their students by working cooperatively with professional organizations; this can take multiple forms, whether through shared funding, shared resources and staff, or soliciting feedback on what kinds of PD opportunities people prefer. Collaboration, Bell (1979) claims, helps streamline and unify a PD process that is currently "fragmented." Likewise, Broadbent and Grosser (1987) came to similar conclusions in their research of assessing special library and information center managers' PD in Australia, suggesting that a cooperative approach between employers, educational institutions, and professional organizations may be beneficial to meet managers' PD requirements.

Research Questions

The goal of this study is to take a snapshot of the current perceptions and preferences of PD opportunities of public library professionals and paraprofessionals. The analyzed responses will offer insights for administrators and others responsible for training and development needs. The questions guiding the research included what current opportunities and support for PD activities are available to public library professionals and paraprofessionals? What PD delivery methods and learning activities are most important to public library professionals and paraprofessionals? What challenges impede PD opportunities for public library professionals and paraprofessionals? What improvements would enhance PD activities for public library professionals and paraprofessionals?

Methodology

The researchers created a web-based survey tool, designed to address the research questions, included Likert scale and open-ended questions, reflecting a research design that was both quantitative and qualitative. The Institutional Review Board of San Jose State University (SJSU) verified the research survey questions in the spring of 2016.

Sample

The target population for the survey was determined to be professionals and paraprofessionals working in the public library setting. Previously, similar studies and surveys have been done with very small respondent samples as noted in the literature review. This study expands upon those findings by delivering a much larger sample size. The survey was promoted on public librarian electronic mail lists, via social media, and emails to contacts at state library associations. Responses deemed incomplete were those in which no answers were given beyond the initial informed consent question; we removed these responses from the data set. A total of 445 valid responses were collected. From that total 377 respondents identified current employment in a U.S. public library as a professional or paraprofessional. The 68 respondents removed from the data set were not currently employed in a public library in a professional or paraprofessional capacity.

Content Analysis Methodology

Open-ended survey question responses were coded using descriptive content analysis (Neuendorf, 2002), with emphasis on exploring recurring themes that occurred within responses to individual questions as well as throughout the data as a whole. The responses were coded in spreadsheets by hand. We initially coded the qualitative survey responses separately, developing our own codebooks at first. Subsequently, we reviewed, edited, and merged the preliminary codebooks into a master codebook. We shared coding duties to ensure inter-coder agreement.

Findings

Demographics

Most of the respondents reported the Master's in Library and Information Science (MLIS) as the highest degree held (78%), while 15% held an undergraduate degree, 6% were currently MLIS students in a masters program and 1% held a PhD. Over 50% identified their library setting as suburban, followed by 35% in an urban setting and 14% in a rural setting.

Frequency, location and opportunities for PD

Respondents (n=363) reported participating in PD activities one to two times per month or per quarter as the most frequent responses (38% each). Respondents reported participating in PD activities at both work and home (59%) most often, followed by "At work during scheduled work hours" (37%) and "Away from work during my own time" (3%). Most public libraries provide opportunities for learning programs originating from a state library (75%), online courses (65%), and an annual staff development day (62%).

Topics of PD offerings

Technology topics were identified as the most important needs for survey respondents, including current technologies in use as well as emergent technologies and trends. See Table 1 for a full breakdown of this section of the survey.

Table 1
How important are the following topics to your professional development needs? Select all that apply.

Answer	Responses	Percentage
Emerging technology and information trends	254	12%
Current technology (in-use at your library)	245	11%
Customer service	214	10%
Community outreach and partnerships	212	10%
New content and new formats (i.e. ebooks)	195	9%
Leadership	190	9%
Planning and project management	162	8%
User instruction and learning	173	8%
Marketing	159	7%
Human resources issues	119	6%
Work-life balance	117	5%
Funding	112	5%

Delivery & participation

The majority of respondents preferred F2F meetings for PD activities, especially those that occurred locally (27%). Shorter webinars of one to two hours were favored as well. Other delivery methods favored included attending state conferences and self-directed online courses.

Effectiveness of delivery

As a follow up to the delivery question, the next sought to gauge respondent perception of the overall effectiveness of PD delivery/participation via a Likert scale. Respondents chose F2F courses and workshops as the most effective delivery method, followed by local workshops, coaching/mentoring relationships, and webinars of 1-2 hours duration.

Important factors of PD

Respondents were asked to choose from a list of factors related to PD activities as most important to them. Content, quality of the presentation and delivery, and cost were the top three factors identified, while the least important factor from the list was "collaboration with other learners."

Satisfaction & Improvements

For the question "How satisfied are you with the formats of current professional development opportunities available to you?," 292 public librarians and paraprofessionals

responded. 70% chose satisfied while 17% chose very satisfied. 13% chose dissatisfied and 1% (n=3) chose very dissatisfied.

Challenges

Respondents were asked to identify challenges that prevented them from participating in PD opportunities. The most frequently selected choices include expense of PD, travel for PD, and the concern that PD is too time consuming. See Table 2 for a full breakdown of this section of the survey.

Table 2
What are the challenges that prevent you from participating in the professional development opportunities you need? Select all that apply.

Answer	Responses	Percentage
It's too expensive.	174	24%
It requires too much travel.	145	20%
It's too time-consuming.	115	16%
It's not offered in topics relevant to my needs or interests.	82	11%
None. I am able to participate in all the professional development opportunities that I need.	45	6%
I'm not compensated for participation.	44	6%
It's not supplied by my library.	40	5%
I don't feel motivated to pursue it.	25	3%

Qualitative Analysis

The qualitative data analysis of open-ended questions in the survey reveals further insights concerning public library staff perceptions of PD opportunities. These include how public libraries support PD, how PD experiences might be improved, and what types of PD experiences would be desired if time and money were not an issue.

Supporting PD experiences

Open-ended responses to the survey question, "How does your library's management / administration support professional development (i.e. through budgeting, scholarships, in-service training days, workshops, etc.)?" were analyzed and categorized into four major areas of support: (1) staff development day usually annual but sometimes more often, (2) financial support for state or national conference attendance, (3) promotion of PD opportunities such as webinars or consortial training, and (4) time for PD activities. Some respondents mentioned an organizational goal for formalizing learning plans for staff, but few noted achieving it.

A majority of responses indicated that an annual staff development in-service day was the main way that public library administration supported PD activities. This was usually a budget line item each year. Some respondents reported twice annual in-service or a

combination of one all staff event plus branch or department meetings for PD throughout the year. A few respondents indicated staff wide training was not regularly scheduled but desired and one noted: "I recently pushed to have in-service training and after many conversations, we will have our first in-service staff day. This is a huge win."

Respondents also often commented on the financial support to attend conferences, mainly state library association or regional conferences. Respondents noted various procedures and protocols for this source of support: budget line items by department or branch for PD travel, yearly rotation of staff eligible to attend, support provided for full time professional staff only, a small stipend for every staff member, or support for travel for a select few in management and administration. Some noted encouragement for professional staff to be involved in conference committees or presentations at the national level as a means to qualify for support.

Communication of online PD opportunities was the third major area of perceived support for respondents. Webinars and local training not requiring funding but necessitating time off were shared on a regular basis. A respondent working in library administration observed that they regularly offer PD opportunities by emailing out upcoming webinars that may of interest to staff, and along these lines, another respondent reported being encouraged by administration to sign up for webinars.

Challenges impeding PD experiences

Open-ended responses to the survey question, "Please describe the challenges for successful professional development offerings in your library" were analyzed and categorized. As expected, the challenges of time and funding for PD activities were the most often noted. Three other thematic areas rose to the top and demonstrate that organizational culture and administration of PD can prove to be a challenge. The thematic areas beyond time and funding include: 1) lack of an organizational emphasis on PD, 2) lack of a clearly defined PD program for staff, and 3) issues with staff buy in for PD.

Many respondents noted a lack of organizational emphasis on PD from administration. This included such statements as "no real encouragement from leadership" to pursue PD and no perceived "demonstration by senior management that PD is important for everyone." Others called out their institution's top administrator: "our director doesn't seem to value outside PD opportunities, nor internal opportunities," and PD is "almost completely self-motivated and selected - not appreciated or supported by Director for time and effort invested." For others, only low-cost PD was possible.

Another thematic area often mentioned was a lack of a clearly defined, systematic PD program at the library. One respondent stated: " I feel that the staff should be required to do a certain number of hours per year in PD, but am not allowed to suggest that in case there 'is no time.'" Part of a systematic program for PD includes sharing with other staff as part of the process. A respondent points out: "One challenge is when someone does go to a conference or meeting, there is nothing carried back to the other workers at the workplace so there is no opportunity for communal learning. That is not right."

The third theme in responses to open-ended PD questions focused on staff buy in for PD. Respondents noted that a challenge to PD success comes from the staff itself. From "getting para staff to take PD seriously" to a lack of "motivation" and "staff enthusiasm," survey respondents wanted more library culture investment and interest in PD.

Improving PD experiences

Two open-ended questions in the survey asked respondents to describe what would improve the format and content of PD opportunities. Coded thematic statements from the responses to these questions provide an overview of what respondents would like as part of their PD activities. Respondents described the following thematic areas related to the format of PD activities that would enhance their learning: 1) improved content, topics and delivery, 2) increased funds and time for PD, and 3) improvement of administrative aspects of PD activities.

Improved content, topics & delivery

Across the two questions related to improvement, respondents most often requested improved content of PD activities. Content was mentioned frequently across both questions and lead to a further breakdown of thematic areas. Respondents would like their PD activity content to include increased engagement, enhanced topics, and improved presentation.

Engagement with others as part of the learning process was the major thematic area under content. Respondents noted they did not want to sit passively and listen but would rather discuss or work hands on. One noted: "Bake the networking with peers into the class and let us help each other." Another wanted "to know what my colleagues are saying--they make me look at services & products in new ways" during online vendor demos that "hide other attendees' comments and questions."

Respondents also want more relevant, in-depth topics that are useful to the work at hand. "More practical offerings instead of theories and concepts," one stated. Another did want theory that would enhance practical work: "I would like to see more in-depth content…like theories on teaching computer classes." Others wanted learning beyond the basics: "Less emphasis on simple answers to complex issues. Stop dumbing it down." and "We're not working to our highest level and we're catering to the bottom end of our workforce."

The third most mentioned thematic area for content focuses on improving the delivery and presentation of PD opportunities. Respondents want "hands-on as much as possible, mixed with a really articulate speaker" and "more involved and enthusiastic instructors." Content should be focused, and presenters should not "drone on and on." Others noted that program descriptions at conferences and workshops should describe the actual content of the presentation and should be up to date. One respondent wished "presenters were a bit more current" and would avoid "webinars with outdated or 'too easy' content." Another noted "I find it difficult to care if the instructor does not seem to care - maybe if more trainers were trained as to how to give a presentation."

Increased funds and time for PD

The second most mentioned thematic area that would improve satisfaction is funding and time, which is expected. One respondent wanted money to "allow for more opportunities offsite for more staff than we are currently have the budget for because I believe this will foster more innovation, new ideas…." Another simply wanted "time to practice, learn, explore on my own."

Improved administration of PD

The third thematic area that would improve satisfaction with format and content of PD opportunities is related to the administration of staff learning and development initiatives. Library professionals and paraprofessionals in public libraries would like to see more formalized PD programs, with clear processes, opportunities for a wide range of staff to learn new things, and a transparent feedback and communication loops. Things would improve, stated one respondent, "if professional development were more varied for the wide range of paraprofessionals employed." Another wanted an authentic approach to PD: "management pays lip service to training, but when it comes down to it, they don't actually do anything because it would take up their time and cost money." Others wanted a consistent and supportive message from administration about PD of all kinds and "ongoing support and encouragement to use the opportunities."

Rewarding PD experiences

For the open-ended question "What would be the best or most rewarding professional development opportunity for you?," descriptive content analysis yielded a glimpse of what public library staff respondents would like in their PD activities. These include the following areas of interest most often noted in responses: 1) face to face interaction (F2F), 2) the chance to attend a conference, 3) time spent with a mentor, and 4) a model for what might be called the "perfect" PD experience. Other, less frequent themes included having local access to quality PD, useful webinars and online options, and a chance for networking opportunities as a means to learn.

Face to face (F2F)

The majority of respondents specifically stated they wanted a chance to talk F2F with others: to share ideas, to engage, and to talk about their learning. For example, one stated: "Give me anything interactive. I find in person workshops with the opportunity to try out something and discuss afterwards to be the most helpful." One librarian described an inspiring state library program that meets once a month for 10 months: "It is all day meetings with librarians from various institutions throughout the state." Respondents called for more activity and engagement on F2F sessions. Trainers should "lose the pre recorded bits that are archived and used for way too long" and focus on facilitating "workshops where I can brainstorm and share ideas." Then, respondents want to take concrete action items back to their libraries to share and implement.

Conferences

Conferences were an attractive avenue for learning experiences. The public librarians who took the survey noted state and national conferences as a worthwhile way to learn and grow professionally. Mention of national conferences often occurred with the words "rewarding" but also "expensive." One respondent stated "there's just no money" to go to ALA or Public Library Association. State conferences, however, seemed more affordable and valuable. One respondent described attending the state meeting, finding "numerous new ideas" and opportunities to network very easily because of location. For some respondents, the process for conference attendance was out of reach or opaque. "It seems like the same 10-20 people go to all of the conferences," observed one respondent, "the application process isn't available or discussed during training."

Mentoring

Wanting a mentor was the third most frequently mentioned thematic area in the responses. Others wanted time with a mentor "that I know and trust" or someone who could coach them through a project or initiative. One librarian noted "there seems to be a dearth of training to prepare our future leaders" but a lack of mentoring opportunities with established managers and administrators.

Retreat model

One concept from the data for this question was a specific model for professional learning experiences woven from the thematic areas above. Public librarians crave a chance to come together in a small group for active discussion, learning and hands on play with ideas and technologies. Some called it a "retreat" while others imagined "networking with peers over one or two days." This insightful response describes the model clearly: "I want a three day conference with about 20 people in the group. Three days allows us to transform our thinking."

Discussion

The research questions used in this study provide insights into the experiences and perceptions of public library professionals and paraprofessionals in relation to PD experiences. Overall the majority of respondents participate in PD learning experiences one to two times a month or one to two times a quarter via programs originating from a state library, online webinars or courses, or an annual staff development day. Respondents prefer F2F meetings offered locally or shorter one to two-hour webinars/online courses. Topics that garner the most interest include emerging technologies, current technology at use in the library setting, and customer service focused learning. Quality content and presentation, including deeper coverage of subjects, is of interest to most public library professionals and paraprofessionals. Challenges include the lack of a clearly defined PD program that is supported by library administration as well as staff interest in PD.

Action plans for PD

From these findings, it is possible to suggest three action plans for improving PD for public library professionals and paraprofessionals. These plans include: developing structured and supported PD programs as part of public library administration, promoting a culture of learning throughout the institution, and participating in and contributing to state and regional opportunities for public library staff PD.

Structured and supported PD programs

PD programs in the public library should be clearly defined, in order to formalize the process of staff learning. The program should also be communicated throughout the library in a transparent manner. This might include multiple channels, such as staff Intranet, email blasts, departmental meeting announcements, and other mechanisms for sharing. This would counteract such perceptions as "our system isn't as organized for systemic training as it could be - much of our training is hit-or-miss" from the survey data set. Part of creating a formal process for PD also includes defining how staff can be considered for various opportunities, including travel. As noted above, some respondents didn't understand the process for going to conferences because the "same 10-20 people" seemed to be going. Rotation of staff getting to travel, a reviewed proposal for conference attendance, or other policies that the entire staff is

made aware of could clarify the process. Financial support is also a consideration as budgets are allocated for various PD activities such as travel, bringing in speakers, or registering staff for webinars. Another type of support is time, a frequent response for challenges to successful PD. "If we choose to go to national conferences, we have to use vacation time," said one library staffer in the survey, "so being able to even attend a national conference would be great."

A Culture of learning

Although respondents believed supervisors and managers supported and participated in PD, some staff perceived a lack of emphasis or concern for PD from library administration as a challenge. Others stated there was a lack of interest in PD for staff in general: "Notion that PD is important or benefits the library (and patrons) is absent." This suggests the need for a cohesive and unified message from library administrators, as well as for managers to continue to support and encourage staff and participate themselves. Such recommendations echo findings from research regarding manager participation in Learning 2.0 programs in the mid 2000s (Stephens, 2013). Initiatives that have administrative and manager support inspire staff to participate.

It seems as though a culture of learning must begin with the individual, flowing into the department and the library as a whole, carefully nurtured by PD policies and plans for everyone. To cultivate this culture of learning the role of mentoring or coaching could be effective. Just as some faculty members are assigned mentors in new teaching positions, perhaps public library staff should be as well.

State and regional opportunities for PD

Finally, public library administrators and development managers may want to focus on contributing to state and regional opportunities for PD of public library staff in the form of monetary support, content creation from experts, and other ways to share the goal of PD for all. This could benefit every library involved as well as regional and state organizations. A survey respondent echoed this idea, wanting "more cost-effective ways for our profession to meet & network with each other (national conferences are expensive & don't always provide opportunities for meaningful dialogue)." Could state and regional groups provide enhanced opportunities for F2F sessions that meet the needs of staff? Could partnerships created between libraries of all sizes with state and regional groups yield strong results for PD for everyone? The data in this study points toward these ideas as leading to positive outcomes as less travel is required, libraries could contribute the time of staff experts to develop in-depth content on pertinent topics, and it would offer a way for people to meet F2F for sharing and collaboration.

Though personnel from library state agencies are available to conduct and plan training, staffing in most states is minimal. Recent research in 2016 by the Chief Officers of State Library Agencies indicates that 49 out of 50 states in the United States currently have at least 1 full-time equivalent (FTE) staff person to coordinate CE training opportunities for library staff in their state; other states have as many as 4 or 5 FTE staff managing CE programs. The limited staff allocated to PD for state libraries indicates that extended partnerships between multiple organizations could be beneficial. State libraries and associations could also reach across state lines to bring more dynamic PD opportunities to a wider audience. This further strengthens collaborative partnerships that ultimately benefit the staff and opens up PD opportunities that otherwise may never have been attainable if states pursued them individually.

Further Research

Other sections of the data set will be analyzed for future conference papers and articles. Findings will also be used to inform library school curriculum related to PD. This study will also be replicated further to understand the perceptions and preferences of public library staff for PD offerings. An updated and revised version of the survey instrument was used in a similar study in Australia to add further understanding of learning experiences in library work. To address the limitations of using the survey method, future studies will use methodologies such as narrative inquiry or phenomenology to better understand professional learning experiences for public library staff. Further study on various geographic areas within the US would offer deeper understanding of how library staff take advantage of learning opportunities. Another research option could be the focus on evaluating the impact of the noted action plans, including case studies of libraries that have formalized PD programs and encourage learning culture.

Conclusion

The primary purpose of this study was to investigate the preferences and perceptions of PD activities for public library staff. Beyond the challenges of time and money, a picture emerged of what might best serve the needs of librarians and paraprofessionals for PD. Staff want to feel encouraged and supported to learn for their jobs. The chance to network and meet in groups is preferred by most respondents with short webinars and online learning filling in the gaps, especially if content goes beyond the usual introductory level. Staying close to home saves not only money and time, but also offers a chance for staff to connect on a regional level with others in their states or nearby. These are all effective means to engage in PD activities, according to a significant number of respondents throughout the survey responses.

To facilitate this preferred PD scheme, public library administrators and development officers should consider the action plans presented here. These include state and regional partnerships with shared content creation, and a more formalized mechanism and transparent communication strategy for staff learning. Having staff development activities built into work schedules and job descriptions is one way to formalize this process. Another is offering opportunities for mentoring and connecting with other professionals for PD activities. Creating a culture of learning in public libraries means committing resources to benefit all.

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