

# Engaging in Campus Learning and Research Activities: Academic Librarians Catching up with New Subject Knowledge and Information Technology Skills

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – Aims to point out academic librarians can take advantage of and engage in campus scholarly activities for professional development purposes in order to keep current with technological developments and developments in social and scientific fields.

**Methodology/approach** – Introduces and reviews various campus scholarly activities at the University of Central Missouri (formerly the Central Missouri State University) during 2006 – 2007. Then, the article analyzes the benefits for the academic librarian to participate.

**Practical implications** - Through involvement in those campus scholarly activities, the academic librarian can learn of some of the latest research achievements by faculty and students and developments in social and scientific fields.

**Originality/value** – Other than going to professional conferences and attending classes, professional and continuing education can occur on campus via participation in campus scholarly activities. Academic librarians will be able to keep current with subject knowledge and learn of new terminologies. Hence, their professional skills will be improved.

**Keywords** Academic librarians, Academic libraries, Professional development, Continuing education, Campus scholarly activities

**Paper type** Research paper

## Introduction

Over the last two decades, technological change has been a force that drives academic librarians to provide better library services and access to new resources. The academic libraries have been requested to meet the increasing demands of their patrons in different generations (Beam, Schimming, Krissoff, and Morgan, 2006). The speed of change has never been slowed down and it is anticipated to accelerate in the foreseeable future.

Academic librarians, no matter if they are new or experienced, are struggling to stay current with technological developments and new achievements in social and scientific fields. They are overwhelmed by the call to keep up with the latest developments in information technology and with knowledge of various subjects. Some academic librarians embrace the trend by going to professional conferences and seminars. Some are taking credit or non-credit courses in class and online. Professional development or continuing education has become a necessity for academic librarians to adopt and perform so as to meet the challenge today in academic libraries. Many

academic librarians attend professional conferences and workshops. Many take advantage of on-campus courses and online classes to improve their skills and broaden their scope of knowledge. However, these professional development activities may incur travel costs and result in absence of duties in the library.

This article points out other possibilities of professional development opportunities for academic librarians to take in order to enhance their skills. The learning opportunities will include but not be limited to participation in students' presentations and debates, graduate degree defenses, campus and departmental in-service workshops, visiting scholar presentations, and campus research activities such as research showcases. Through involvement in these campus learning and research opportunities, the academic librarian can learn of the latest developments and keep up with new subject knowledge in various academic fields as well as new applications in information technology. Their engagement will help to build up their knowledge bases, and at the same time, to strengthen ties with the campus community so that they better understand their needs for information services.

## **Literature Review**

Academic librarians' professional development is not a new issue. Lifelong learning is a must for them in order to serve their patrons. The issue here is that the urgency for such an activity has been prioritized in today's academic libraries. With the increasing demand for better services in both traditional and online ways, academic librarians need to find all kinds of ways to improve their skills and knowledge to face this challenge.

Many library researchers approach this issue by pointing out the importance and needs of professional development for academic librarians. Cassner and Adams indicate that professional development is essential for academic librarians to stay up-to-date with skills, knowledge, and competencies (Cassner and Adams, 2006). Grealy points out that user expectations' change makes it necessary for librarians to conduct lifelong learning (Grealy, 2000). Saechan also stresses the need for continuing education for academic librarians in southern Thailand:

Continuing education is the formal and informal learning by which an individual attempts to update or advance his/her knowledge, attitudes, and skills and thereby enhance total job competence for the present and for the future (Saechan, 2005, p. 27).

Lachance points out "the skills developed from a master of library and information science degree remain relevant for approximately five years" (Lachance, 2006, p.8). Thus, in order to work effectively in an academic environment and in a continually changing world, librarians must continually update their skills through continuing education.

Stieg also writes about the importance and benefits of continuing education for reference librarians in academic and research libraries. The author specifically stresses the need to enhance the subject knowledge for reference work (Stieg, 1980).

Rader also recognizes the need and mentions that “academic librarians throughout the USA are rethinking their activities and repositioning themselves in their campus environment. They are taking advantage of new opportunities to build new partnerships and enterprising endeavors with faculty, researchers and campus related entities” (Rader, 2002, p. 187).

In addition to library researchers’ attention to continuing education for academic librarians, the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) Board of Directors approved the “Statement on Professional Development” in July 2000 (Engel, Huang, and Reiss, 2003, p. 234). The document clearly defines the responsibilities of academic and research librarians, the ACRL, professional educators, and academic institutions. These statements serve as guidelines for the academic librarian to be involved in and participate in professional development activities:

It is the responsibility of each academic librarian to identify the professional and personal skills and knowledge needed for current and anticipated responsibilities; to continuously assess the skills, aptitudes and knowledge they possess; and to canonize that awareness into personal learning strategies. (ACRL Professional Development Committee, 2000)

As indicated by Lanchance, “no library association can survive, sustain, grow, or remain relevant in the modern age if it does not address members' educational needs and provide innovative learning solutions that lower barriers to access” (Lanchance, 2006, p. 8). The ACRL document declares the importance of professional development and is a collective indication for professional excellence through lifelong learning and personal growth of the academic librarians (Lanchance, 2006).

Practical advice has been suggested and various topics are being discussed and shown in research papers, professional listservs, conferences, and blogs. Flatley and Weber describe various professional development activities for new academic librarians including publishing, presentations, involvement in professional organizations, continuing education, and institutional and community service:

It is very important for academic librarians to keep abreast of the profession as it changes so rapidly. One of the best ways to do this is by attending professional workshops, lectures, seminars, journal clubs etc. Consider both in-person and online continuing education opportunities (Flatley and Weber, 2004, p. 490).

Watson’s research on an online survey of Canadian academic health sciences librarians shows upgrading subject knowledge continues to be important to health science librarians (Watson, 2005).

## **Finding Opportunities**

Scholarly opportunities for professional development or continuing education do exist around academic libraries. These opportunities range from research-oriented, educational, instructional, cultural, and technologically oriented activities. They are an integral part to the university campus and learning environment. Through involvement and participation with these activities, academic librarians can keep current with what is happening in various subject fields, and as a result of that, benefit their professional work.

Here are some advantages in the process. The librarians can learn more about the faculty, students, and the institution. The librarians will probably meet people who have different perspectives and creative ideas and will learn of the research interests and achievements of faculty and students. The librarians will market themselves and strengthen the bond between the campus community and the library as a public relation measure. The librarians can be more aware of what the current issues and developments are subject disciplines and can use the participation experiences in library instruction, collection developments, and reference services. The librarians will learn of many subject-specific terminologies. The librarians can improve their own research and communication skills. The librarians will enhance visibility as a representative from the library, and as a researcher in the process. They can even promote library services through these activities.

## **Engaging in Campus Activities**

During 2006 – 2007, Central Missouri State University hosted the following typical academic and research activities by their faculty and students, which academic librarians could take advantage of for their professional and personal growth.

1. **Research on Friday** by Department of Psychology is a series of presentations by professors in the Department of Psychology to show their research interests and achievements. New development in their professional field has been introduced and discussed.
2. **Student Research Showcase** by undergraduate students in the Honor College is a yearly activity for all those honor students to present their projects accomplished in their program. Many of these projects are quite creative and original.
3. **American Democracy Project** is sponsored by the Department of Political Science, which holds debates, movie showings, and visiting scholar presentations. This activity reaffirms the values of the American political system and historical documents, in particular, the Constitution, and the rights it defines for its people.

4. Master degree defenses in various departments are good opportunities for the faculty, students, and librarians to learn of the latest development of different disciplines and creative research results of graduate students.
5. **Central Missouri State University Research Day** for the faculty by the Central Technology Office is an activity that showcases research achievements of the faculty in the past year. Those published research papers have been evaluated and ranked for an award. The level and topic of research demonstrated faculty's interests which can be profiled by the academic librarians when they build up their library collections.
6. **Faculty Research Showcase** by the University Assessment Office is a display of all the research work including published books, papers, and presentations by the faculty in the university.
7. **McNair Students Presentation** is a showcase of students who are in McNair programs. This program is funded by the U.S. government and sponsored by the university. Usually the first generation of college students from underserved groups is eligible to apply with the aim of pursuing the Ph.D degree. The librarian is one of the three mentors to those students. The other two mentors are departmental and research mentors from their respective departments.
8. **Learning Community Workshop** for freshmen is aimed at improving the learning community for freshmen. It requires that the librarian be part of the team to enhance students' learning and research skills when they start their college lives. Participating in this activity will make the librarian better understand students' needs and difficulties in their studies so that help can be provided in a proper and timely way.
9. **Tuesday Tech Talk** and other information technology workshops provide opportunities for the academic librarian to pick up skills in information technology. The latest Web 2.0 and Library 2.0 enable them to create better virtual services for their patrons. The new social network softwares such as MySpace and Facebook, the virtual Second Life have been introduced. Their educational potentials and values are discussed and explored. These popular online tools offer great opportunities for librarians to pick up these new tools and better serve their patrons.
10. **Art Exhibit** by the Department of Arts is a series of displays of university students. Their graduation works and award-winning works are exhibited in the university. The academic librarian can learn of different styles and themes of the art students.
11. **Free Film Show** is a regular activity by the university students organization. Some controversial films are shown and discussed by the students. It is a good

- opportunity for the academic librarian to learn of different perspectives of social issues in entertainment.
12. **Poetry Reading** by visiting nationwide famous poets is an activity sponsored by the Department of English. It would be beneficial for the librarians to get to know those poets and their literary works.
  13. **Minority Scholar Visits** is a series of presentations by minority scholars across the nation. This activity is sponsored by the Campus Engagement Office. The academic librarian usually can learn many new research results and experiences shared by minority scholars.
  14. **International Scholar and Students Panel** is an activity sponsored by the University International Students Office. Topics include international study and research. Different perspectives are presented and discussed on politics, social issues, cultures, and values. It is one of the rare opportunities for the librarian to be exposed in order to learn of international issues.

### **Some Limits and Issues**

Being aware of campus scholarly activities and the importance of getting involved does not mean the academic librarians can take advantage of them all the time. The librarians always need release of time from their libraries. The library's support is very crucial to the librarian's successful engagement and participation. A schedule conflict with some campus activities will make librarians miss that particular learning opportunity.

It could also be true that librarians are lack of certain background knowledge in some fields. That will result in not so easily or completely understanding some topics in certain subject fields. It is obvious that some presentations may involve technical terminologies which may require librarians to study that discipline beforehand systematically in order to understand.

Not all the scholarly activities are available for librarians to attend. For example, some degree defenses are only limited to the candidate student and his/her advisors. Librarians are usually not invited. However, if a defense is open to the public, it is up to the librarian to find out the when and the where of those defenses. A good relationship with campus teaching faculty would help librarians gain access to those defenses. It is certainly a great opportunity for librarians to learn of and upgrade their subject-specific knowledge.

Another issue worth mentioning here is that it is also difficult to assess and evaluate librarian's participation effectiveness in those activities. Their preparedness will matter in learning new knowledge and skills. Though many workshops and presentations are within a certain discipline, the topics change considerably and usually they are only offered once in a year. It is suggested that librarians try to get as much background

information about the presenter and topic as possible before a specific activity. To have a crash course on technical terminologies would also help and will enable the librarian to absorb and understand the most out of a single activity.

Apart from that, an institution's support has a great impact on librarians' success in professional development activities (Havener and Stolt, 1994). The provision of release time, financial assistance, university tuition benefits for the staff to attend credit courses, and a campus learning environment are factors which play important roles in making the professional development experience success. Librarians will feel more encouraged and rewarded to engage in campus scholarly activities if the institution takes their involvements into performance and promotion consideration.

## **Conclusion**

Information technology change has enabled academic libraries to bring new promises and ideas to serve their patrons in extraordinary ways. It is an ongoing force or catalyst that drives academic librarians to provide better library services and access to new resources. Like other professionals, academic librarians will be still struggling to stay current with technological developments and new achievements in social and scientific fields. Through involvement in their campus learning and research opportunities, the academic librarians can learn of the latest developments and keep up with new subject knowledge in various academic fields as well as new applications in information technology.

Although they may still feel overwhelmed from time to time by the challenge to keep up with the latest developments in information technology and with knowledge of various subjects, they need to take advantage of every means to enhance their skills in discipline knowledge as well as information technology. The academic librarians can better deal with the challenge by combining going to professional conferences and seminars, taking credit and non-credit courses in class and online, with engaging campus scholarly activities. These activities will benefit their work in reference desk and collection development and better understand the information need of their patrons such as faculty and students. By maintaining a proactive attitude and strong interest in getting involved in campus scholarly activities, the academic librarians can be well prepared for their daily challenging information requests.

The librarians need to explore and take advantage of all kinds of professional development and scholarly opportunities on campus to answer the today's challenge. The learning opportunities can include participation in students' presentations and degree defenses, campus and departmental in-service workshops, visiting scholar presentations, and campus research activities such as research showcases. Only when partnered with faculty members, students, and campus related entities and involved with campus scholarly activities, will the academic librarians be much better positioned and prepared to support their institutions' teaching, learning, and research missions.

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