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Breaking Boundaries: Cross-Training For Flexibility in Community College Libraries

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ABSTRACT

This article explores the evolving role of librarians in small to medium-sized academic libraries, using the Everett I.L. Baker Library at Norwalk Campus, Connecticut State Community College, as a case study. As academic libraries transition from traditional, specialized roles to more versatile staffing models, the importance of cross-training among library staff becomes increasingly apparent. In environments dominated by electronic resources and constrained by limited budgets, libraries must adapt by developing a workforce capable of handling diverse tasks, from cataloging to providing research assistance. This article details the Norwalk campus library's implementation of a cross-training program designed to enhance staff flexibility, professional growth, and service delivery. Through comprehensive training in circulation, reference services, cataloging, and technical support, the library has successfully created a more cohesive and responsive team, better equipped to meet the dynamic needs of its academic community. The findings underscore the critical role of continuous learning, collaboration, and adaptability in modern academic librarianship, positioning cross-training as a key strategy for ensuring the sustainability and relevance of academic libraries in today's rapidly changing educational landscape.

Keywords: Cross-training, collaboration, academic library, teaching and learning

INTRODUCTION

Everett I.L. Baker Library serves the Norwalk campus of Connecticut State Community College, supporting faculty and students in their teaching and learning endeavors. The library is staffed by four professional librarians, including the library director, one library associate, two part-time Education Assistant Librarians, and two student workers. With a student FTE of 3,000 to 5,000, Baker Library operates 60 hours per week, offering services during evenings and weekends to accommodate the needs of the campus community.

In a traditional academic library services setting, a library typically staffs according to specialized roles: a cataloging librarian for processing materials, a reference librarian for public service and teaching, and a systems librarian for maintaining the integrated library system and managing electronic resources. In this structure, librarians often focus solely on their specific areas, which can lead to a gradual loss of other essential library service skills acquired during their

graduate studies. Because of this phenomenon, it's not uncommon to hear the phrase, "it's not my job." When library staff say this, it could indicate one of two things: either there are rigid boundaries preventing them from crossing into other roles, or they may feel they lack the capability to carry out those functions. I recall a colleague sharing an experience where an academic librarian, who was scheduled at the information desk, declined to assist a student with using databases. The librarian, being primarily a cataloger, responded with "it's not my job," highlighting the limitations of rigid role definitions in traditional library settings.

Obviously, the traditional library setting has its limitations and impracticality. It no longer meets the needs of today's small and medium-sized academic libraries. With required library opening hours and a restricted college budget, a library staff must be versatile, capable of handling all aspects of library services to meet the needs of both students and faculty.

Today, most academic libraries operate in an environment where electronic resources dominate, often accounting for 90% or more of the materials budget. As a result, the need for a full-time cataloger has diminished, especially in smaller academic libraries that may add fewer than 100 physical titles per year. Additionally, some consortia have adopted centrally managed cataloging processes, further reducing the demand for dedicated cataloging staff. Similarly, being part of a consortium with shared library system support reduces the necessity for a full-time systems librarian. As we can see, the title of "Systems Librarian" has diminished in use, often being replaced by "Digital Librarian."

In addition, the role of librarians has evolved; they are no longer simply guiding patrons to the location of resources but are now actively teaching essential research and critical thinking skills. This includes building effective search strategies, analyzing search results, and properly citing information, reflecting the dynamic nature of academic libraries today. At the Norwalk campus library, students often bring their papers to librarians for assistance with citation and formatting. Additionally, students sometimes seek help from librarians to narrow down or broaden their research topics. Being able to provide only a narrow aspect of library functions does not meet the needs of today's academic libraries.

Librarian cross-training can be defined as the process of training librarians to acquire skills and knowledge across multiple areas of library services, beyond their primary specialization. This approach enables librarians to perform a variety of roles, such as reference services, circulation management, cataloging, and systems support, regardless of their original area of expertise. The goal of cross-training is to create a more flexible and versatile workforce, capable of adapting to the dynamic needs of the library and its users, ensuring continuous and efficient service even when staff numbers are limited or specialized roles are not feasible

Cross-trained staff can increase staff flexibility; librarians can fill in for various roles, ensuring that all library functions continue smoothly, even during staff shortages or peak times. With cross-training, staff members gain a broader understanding of library operations, leading to professional growth and increased job satisfaction. Cross-training encourages collaboration and understanding among team members, leading to a more cohesive and supportive work

environment. With knowledge of multiple areas, staff can assist patrons more effectively, providing a seamless library experience.

To effectively serve the evolving needs of students and faculty in a resource-heavy electronic environment, small to medium-sized academic libraries such as the Everett I.L. Baker Library must adopt a versatile staffing model that transcends traditional specialized roles, emphasizing cross-training and the development of comprehensive research and teaching skills among librarians.

CONTENT

It's true that from a student's perspective, distinguishing between different library roles, such as a cataloger or systems librarian, can be challenging. The role of the librarian has evolved in response to the changing needs of students, faculty, and academic institutions. The following image illustrates the essential skills that today's academic librarians should possess to effectively support their communities. Typically, students perceive all library staff members as "librarians" because they interact with them primarily for assistance with resources, research, or general inquiries. The specific titles and roles, like cataloger or systems librarian, are often invisible to students because these roles typically involve behind-the-scenes work that doesn't directly interact with library patrons.

In an academic library, the primary goal is to ensure that whenever a course is offered, corresponding library support is readily available to meet the needs of students and faculty. At my institution, this commitment is reflected in how we carefully review the course schedule before determining the library's opening hours. By aligning our services with the academic calendar, we strive to provide continuous support throughout the day, extending into evenings and early mornings as necessary. However, achieving this goal can be particularly challenging in a small or midsized academic library, where staffing resources are often limited. Unlike larger institutions that may have specialized staff available around the clock, we must carefully manage our personnel to cover all essential services. This becomes especially demanding during certain hours, such as evenings and early mornings, when only two staff members may be available to handle all library operations. In these situations, flexibility is crucial. If one librarian is engaged in teaching or conducting a library instruction session, the other must be capable of performing multiple roles simultaneously. This includes acting as a reference librarian to assist with research inquiries, managing circulation tasks to ensure smooth check-in and check-out processes, and providing technical support for issues such as printing or access to digital resources.



(Felix, 2022)

This level of versatility is not just a practical necessity; it is essential for maintaining the seamless delivery of library services that our academic community relies on. By equipping our staff with the skills and training needed to handle diverse responsibilities, we can continue to support the academic mission of the college, even with a lean team. This approach ensures that students and faculty receive the assistance they need, when they need it, thereby enhancing the overall educational experience.

A multifaceted approach to cross-training not only enhances technical skills but also fostered a collaborative and supportive learning environment. “Developing a cross -training program forces library leaders to assess current work flows and gaps, and preparing for a program requires individual department to develop workflows and training manuals that unquestionably beneficial for successors and colleagues” (Wilhelm, 2016). To support the college's goals and meet the teaching and learning expectations of faculty and students, the Norwalk campus library has identified core areas where cross-training would be most beneficial, such as circulation, reference services, and user support. One of the ways we attempted to solve this problem was by redesigning the library entry area. The library used to have a “Circulation Desk” separated from an “Information Desk.” Although these desks were not far apart, they were still distinctly separate spaces. We often had to first identify what a patron needed and then direct them to the appropriate desk. With limited staff members, we could only assign one staff member to each desk. This sometimes meant that if a staff member stepped away temporarily, there would be no coverage at the desk.

In Fall 2023, the Norwalk campus library merged the traditional “Information Desk” and “Circulation Desk” into a unified “Research Assistance/Material Check Out” station. Located right inside the library entry area, this station is always covered by two library staff members to ensure comprehensive support for patrons. This integration requires all librarians to be capable of handling circulation tasks, such as managing patron files, checking in or out library materials, and adding items into the system for circulation. Additionally, all librarians are equipped to provide research assistance by being familiar with both electronic and physical library resources. Furthermore, they are trained to offer technical support, including resolving issues with printing, login passwords, and basic software problems.

The Norwalk campus library has systematically implemented comprehensive training programs, including mandatory database discussions among librarians and staff as well as circulation and cataloging training. This training plan brought to life a dynamic blend of activities designed to empower our library staff. Engaging database discussions sparked new insights, while hands-on library instruction sessions allowed staff to hone their teaching skills through presentations and constructive feedback from coworkers. In our database discussion sessions, for example, we took an innovative approach by organizing the databases according to their vendors. This method created a platform for library staff to exchange valuable insights about the unique features, user interfaces, and content coverage of each database. Our collaborative atmosphere

fostered lively discussions where team members could share their experiences and strategies for navigating these digital resources and platforms effectively.

This exchange of knowledge not only enriched our collective understanding but also allowed us to tailor our resources more precisely to the academic disciplines and specific course needs across campus. By mapping databases to relevant subjects, we enhanced our ability to guide students and faculty toward the most appropriate tools for their research. This alignment of resources with academic goals has been instrumental in empowering our users to conduct more effective research, ultimately elevating the quality of their work and contributing to their academic success. Through these sessions, we have also strengthened our team's cohesion, as librarians and other staff members became more adept at cross-referencing each other's areas of expertise. The discussions have reinforced our shared mission of supporting the educational objectives of our institution, ensuring that we remain a vital resource in the academic journey of our students and faculty.

We build on our database discussions in our Library Instruction Mock-Teaching sessions, where we utilize the College & Career Success course, CCS 1001, as a dynamic platform for teaching demonstrations. Each librarian takes the opportunity to present their lesson within the allotted course time, thoughtfully delivering essential research information to the students. This process allows librarians to showcase their unique teaching styles and personal approaches, which not only adds variety to the learning experience but also highlights the diverse strengths within our team. After each session, we engage in a constructive feedback process, where librarians provide valuable feedback to one another. This collaborative exchange fosters a supportive environment in which continuous improvement and innovation are encouraged. Our goal is not just to refine our teaching techniques but to ensure that we are effectively meeting the students' needs by delivering research information in a way that is both engaging and accessible. Through these sessions, we aim to maintain the individuality of each teaching librarian while collectively enhancing our ability to impart critical information literacy skills. By embracing our diverse approaches and focusing on successful delivery, we ensure that students are well-equipped to navigate the complexities of academic research, setting them up for success in their academic careers.

For the cataloging component, the library organized an in-depth training session focused on metadata management, in which staff received practical training in cataloging physical materials. This comprehensive program equipped each librarian with the skills needed to navigate the complexities of cataloging, as they were individually tasked with managing a cart full of books following the training. This hands-on exercise not only provided practical experience but also ensured that every librarian developed a robust understanding of MARC fields, and the detailed processes involved in metadata management. Through this immersive experience, our librarians gained valuable insights into how metadata is structured and indexed within the discovery layer, a critical aspect of enhancing the user experience. By deepening their knowledge in this area, they are now better equipped to refine search results and improve the accessibility of resources for our

users. This training has not only strengthened our cataloging capabilities but also reinforced our commitment to delivering precise and efficient information services to our academic community.

During our circulation training, circulation procedures were reviewed with a focus on streamlining efficiency. Successfully staffing the circulation desk is a fundamental skill for every librarian and library staff member, serving as the backbone of our daily operations. At the Norwalk campus library, we have implemented clear and detailed opening and closing procedures at the circulation desk to ensure that all staff are proficient in these essential tasks. These procedures are prominently posted and regularly reviewed, emphasizing their critical role in maintaining the smooth and efficient functioning of the library. By reinforcing the importance of these routines, we ensure that each team member not only understands the steps required, but also appreciates their impact on the overall user experience. Consistency in following these procedures allows us to provide seamless service from the moment the library opens to the final minutes before it closes. This attention to detail reflects our commitment to operational excellence and our dedication to creating a welcoming and well-organized environment for our students and faculty.

Since implementing cross-training, the Norwalk campus library has experienced remarkable progress. Our librarians have become versatile professionals, confidently navigating multiple areas of library services. This newfound flexibility has not only enhanced our ability to meet the diverse needs of our patrons, but also has fostered a stronger sense of unity within our team. The significant increase in library instruction requests and the expanded number of sessions we've taught underscore our growing influence and importance within our academic community. In response to this heightened demand, we've extended our operating hours to ensure that our students and faculty have access to the resources they need when they need them. Most importantly, this transformation has revitalized our team spirit, with members enthusiastically supporting one another and collaborating more closely than ever before. The success of our cross-training initiative is evident not just in our operational improvements, but in the positive and collaborative culture that now defines our library.

Currently, we're in the process of hiring a new librarian, and the "Librarian" job description we use covers just about everything—cataloging, reference, technical services, you name it. Naturally, during the interviews, I'm often asked, "So, what exactly is this librarian position for? What is a typical day like?" And I can't help but chuckle as I explain: "Well, if it's listed in the job description, we're hoping you can do it!" We're looking for a librarian who's a bit of a jack-of-all-trades, ready to dive into whatever the day throws at them—because in our library, adaptability is key, and there's never a dull moment! In the summer of 2024, we successfully welcomed two new librarians who eagerly embraced the challenges ahead and quickly integrated into our team. They adapted swiftly to the new environment and were soon meeting—and even exceeding—our expectations, proving themselves to be invaluable additions to our library."

The Norwalk library actively promotes a culture of learning by encouraging staff to participate in workshops, webinars, and consortium retreats, fostering both professional growth and networking opportunities. Sometimes, the most effective training comes from active

participation in various library consortium teams, such as the 'Resources Management Team' or the 'Library Systems Team.' By engaging with these groups, our library staff gains practical, hands-on experience that offers multiple benefits. First, it allows them to assess whether our current approaches are on the right track. Second, it provides an opportunity to test and ensure that the needs of Norwalk's faculty and students are being met in a way that reflects the unique needs of a community college setting. Third, it helps build valuable networks and facilitates the sharing of information with peers from other institutions. Finally, it enables us to discover and adopt best practices that can further enhance our services and better serve our academic community. With support from the college's professional development fund, I, as the library director, am dedicated to creating and developing opportunities that allow our staff to enhance their skills and broaden their expertise across various library functions.

Regularly assessing the effectiveness of our cross-training initiatives through direct feedback from students and faculty is essential for ensuring that the library remains responsive to the evolving needs of our academic community. This ongoing evaluation allows us to identify areas where our services can be enhanced or adjusted to better meet the demands of our users. For instance, when new technology is introduced on campus, such as an email domain migration, or when a new subject course is added to the curriculum, the library must be prepared to adapt swiftly. To achieve this, we frequently distribute concise surveys to students, which provide valuable insights into their experiences and satisfaction with our services. By thoroughly analyzing the survey results, we can determine whether additional training sessions are necessary or if aspects of our services need to be refined. This proactive approach ensures that we are continuously aligning our efforts with the needs of our students and faculty, ultimately supporting their academic success and enhancing the overall effectiveness of our library.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, the role of the librarian has significantly evolved to meet the dynamic needs of students, faculty, and academic institutions. As we've explored, cross-training, technological adaptation, and a versatile skill set are no longer optional but essential components of modern academic librarianship. The successful integration of these elements, as demonstrated by the practices at the Norwalk campus library, illustrates how libraries can remain vital, flexible, and responsive to the shifting demands of higher education. The importance of continuous learning, collaboration, and adaptability cannot be overstated. As academic environments continue to change, librarians must be prepared to take on new challenges and embrace innovations that enhance their service offerings. The future of academic libraries lies in their ability to not only support but also anticipate the needs of their communities.

Moving forward, it is crucial for librarians and academic institutions alike to recognize the value of investing in professional development, fostering a culture of collaboration, and staying

ahead of technological advancements. By doing so, they will ensure that libraries remain indispensable resources in the academic journey of students and faculty. Ultimately, the future of academic libraries depends on our collective commitment to adaptability and growth. As we continue to evolve, so too will the impact we have on the academic success of those we serve."

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