



Volume 2, 2012

Ad Astra per Aspera: Aspiring to Excellence in Challenging Times

Wanted: Bibliotechnologist

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Abstract

In the midst of a hiring freeze and a diminishing budget, K-State Salina embraced the continuing trend of a combined position that pairs library services and instructional technology. The current economic climate makes adding positions in higher education a luxury. Even a currently existing position is not always filled. The creation of a budget friendly, combined position meets the increased research needs brought about by a new university vision and graduate program. This coupled with the need for onsite instructional technology support led to the search for someone with a combination of library and instructional technology skills a “bibliotechnologist”. This paper explores and discusses how this position came to fruition, the research behind creating the position and how the merge was successfully justified and accepted by college administration. Furthermore, this paper discusses benefits and challenges witnessed since the merged position was implemented.

How Did We Get Here?

In August of 2008, the state of Kansas instituted a state wide hiring freeze, meaning that all positions must be justified. Even current positions that had been vacated were not automatically filled without sound reasoning, leading all state universities in Kansas to evaluate their personnel needs and work flow processes. At a smaller campus like Kansas State University Salina, the inability to fill positions when vacated or add new personnel led to many services and needs not being met, as well as frustrated faculty and staff. The hiring freeze is still in place today.

In February of 2010, Kansas State University unveiled a new university mission. *K-State 2025*, introduced seven themes the university community would focus upon to become one of the nation's Top 50 Public Research Universities. The first of those seven themes is Research, Scholarly and Creative Activities and Discovery or RSCAD. The RSCAD theme states that the university will, "Create a culture of excellence that results in flourishing, sustainable, and widely recognized research, scholarly and creative activities, and discovery in a variety of disciplines and endeavors that benefit society as a whole" (Kansas State University, 2011). In short, this element of the vision highlights that there is an expectation for faculty to increase production of research and scholarly activities, which leads to an increased need for support in those endeavors.

Kansas State University Salina started as the School of Technology and Aviation. The small campus just recently branched into other degree areas such as Social Work. Many faculty members are experts in their field that bring real life job and professional experience rather than a portfolio of research, leading to a small number Doctorate degreed faculty. Research, while required for tenure, is something that faculty at this campus had not widely participated in, making it a possibly new and intimidating task. Therefore the library needed to add staff in order to meet the increased research needs of the faculty.

In the spring of 2011, a new Professional Master of Technology program was approved. This meant a new population of students never seen on the Kansas State University Salina campus, graduate students. The program is designed to incorporate a large research project that will culminate over the whole of the coursework. The plan is that these students will be doing more advanced research than their undergraduate counterparts, pushing the needs for additional library staff even further.

Furthermore, this program is designed for most of the new courses to be offered online or in a hybrid format. Many of the faculty teaching in this program have never taught online. Therefore, participation in the new degree program makes it necessary to not only create graduate level courses, but to also learn a new technology that they may not be familiar with using. A faculty needs survey found instructional technology is a pressing need that is extremely important to all faculty, not just those teaching online courses. Many want to learn how to better incorporate technology in their teaching.

The demand for more support in both instructional technology and research led the campus to evaluate how to meet these needs in a cost effective and beneficial way. Therefore a new position was created and approved. A new faculty position was added to the library. The position was a Faculty and Graduate Services Librarian that would also handle instructional technology.

Research

The Assistant Dean of Academics conducted research to decide on the feasibility of this position and to find enough justification to sell it to the administration. Through research, a number of examples combining library and instructional design services and skills were found. In Hale Library on the Kansas State University campus in Manhattan, Kansas, the library houses the Information Technology Assistance Center (iTac). The iTac provides centralized information technology support to the students, faculty and staff of that campus. The combination of these services allows for a one-stop shop for all research, information, and technology needs. Another example is Georgia College, a liberal arts university in Milledgeville, Georgia whose instructional technology center not only provides technical assistance to their campus population, but also offers items such as Flip video cameras, iPads, and digital cameras for

check-out by the patrons. The center boasts PC and Mac labs as well as a state-of-the-art media lab. These services coupled with library research help make this space a valuable university resource.

There are many degree programs throughout the country that have successfully blended library and information science with instructional design and technology (IDT). Emporia State University, located in Emporia, Kansas, added a defined concentration in Instructional Design Technology to the Library and Information Management Doctoral program. According to Dr. Mirah Dow, Doctoral Program Coordinator at Emporia State University, this blend makes sense as,

“IDT is a very relevant topic to future LIS educators in terms of their knowledge-based and skills planning, designing and delivering instruction. Many library schools, or I-school, utilize distance (online) education in delivery of their programs. So, our graduates are likely to need expertise in teaching and learning online” (M. Dow, personal communication, October 17, 2001).

The idea of combining these two areas of knowledge is nothing new to the University of Missouri. The School of Information Science and Learning has offered Master's degrees in both Library Science and Educational Technology since 1997. The school also offers an interdisciplinary Doctoral program in Information Science and Learning Technologies. According to their department homepage, since combining these two areas, their, “numbers of faculty and students have more than doubled; our levels of scholarly productivity and grant-funded work are at an all-time high” (University of Missouri, 2010).

Justification and Acceptance

Finding proper justification for a combined position of a librarian and instructional technologist is not a difficult task.

Research on the subject shows that many universities offer combined library and technical services, which includes instructional technology, in one building on campus. Research also reveals a growing trend of interdisciplinary degree offerings blending the two skill sets. The only hurdle would be finding the right candidate with those skills for a small campus community. Information such as this made gaining acceptance from the Administration at Kansas State University Salina an easy charge as well.

Benefits and Challenges

Benefits

Cost savings is perhaps the most important benefit when it comes to any combined position. Individuals at small universities often take on many rolls in order to serve the needs of the campus community in a cost effective manner. A tightening budget, and a continued hiring freeze, makes this task even more daunting. The combination of a librarian with instructional technology skills met many important personnel needs in a budget friendly way.

The addition of a new position to the library allowed for more focus on different populations, leading to a higher level of service. In the past, one librarian served the research needs of both students and faculty. With the addition of the new position, the library now has an Undergraduate Services Librarian, as well as a Faculty and Graduate Services Librarian who can offer technical and instructional technology assistance, allowing for more focus on the different populations of patrons that come into the library. This level of service is one step closer to the one-stop-shop model that many libraries now offer.

Furthermore, the added position in the library led to the creation of a Faculty Development Center. The Assistant Dean of Academics and the Faculty and Graduate Librarian jointly run the center. The center utilizes the Kansas State University system to connect faculty to peers with noted expertise in the areas where individual development is needed. Examples of the services offered are: instructional design, assessment practices, course management, technology training, and developing online courses.

Always a Silver Lining

One aspect of the combined position could be seen as both a benefit and a challenge depending on the timeline. The new graduate program first offered classes in the fall of 2011. With only a small number of students enrolled, this aspect of the job is a small portion of the current workload. This allows for more focus on the instructional technology and faculty support aspect of the position. The ability to get grounded in these two areas is beneficial when trying to create the perfect blend of services in one position. In the future, the graduate program will expand. In time, this part of the job could grow exponentially, causing a need to reassess the duties of the position and the possible addition of personnel.

Challenges

With any new job, fitting in with an established staff and becoming familiar with institutional knowledge is a large challenge. Being in a newly created position, with no current history or familiar boundaries can make this task even more daunting. The existing library staff of four worked together for over three years, making it a group that had learned to successfully work and thrive together. Adding a fifth person, while it helped to alleviate some of the workload, caused anxiety in some as the new roles were established. This issue continues to be resolved with open communication and cooperation.

Another challenge with having the same staff for a long period of time is the comfort level of the faculty. In that time, they had created a relationship and a level of comfort with the existing librarians. It takes time to cultivate those relationships and earn the trust of new colleagues. It is important to help faculty to see the benefit of the new position and how it can help them to achieve their professional and personal goals.

Conclusion

The librarian profession is going through a change, change that is continuing to blur the lines between a Librarian and an IT Professional. To be an effective agent of change in the profession has always required a general knowledge of many different academic areas. However, that knowledge must now include a technical skill set that was once not a requirement of librarians. Many universities are leading the way, embracing this change with combined library and technology assistance centers, and interdisciplinary degrees, leading to a more knowledgeable, well-rounded, and patron friendly profession. The combined position at Kansas State Salina University is continually evolving as we navigate through the changes and challenges that come with this new endeavor.

References

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