Developing Future Colleagues

By: Diane Dallis, Carrie Donovan
& Emily Okada

In 2003, the Reference and User Services Association Board of Directors approved a set of Professional Competencies for Reference and User Services Librarians which included teaching classes, preparing presentations, developing web pages, mentoring, and generally participating in online and face to face communication about the profession. How do librarians develop these competencies? Are these skills addressed in Library Science graduate programs? How does a librarian master these competencies and move beyond the basics? A team of librarians and staff at Indiana University Bloomington believe that mentoring, communication, and experience impart these competencies in new and seasoned librarians alike.

Changing Landscape of Libraries

The librarians and staff of the Information Commons Undergraduate Library Services (ICUGLS) department at the Indiana University Bloomington Libraries offer traditional library services including reference services, instructional services, workshops, outreach, multicultural programming, library collections, and media services. ICUGLS teaches over 600 classes annually and provides more than 4,600 hours of reference service. The Information Commons (IC), which is the context for ICUGLS, is a dynamic 36,000 square foot technology-rich learning environment, spanning three floors and receives over 1.5 - 2 million visitors annually. Non-library IT support staff also provide services in the IC and librarians work side-by-side with non-library staff. This dynamic environment demands that the librarians remain flexible and keep their skills sharp. Pre-professional librarians also help these librarians keep on their toes.

ICUGLS, like many library departments, is made up of dedicated librarians and staff who enjoy their work and appreciate the contributions of their colleagues. However, the volume of service and innovation would not be possible without the graduate student employees from the Indiana University Bloomington School of Library and Information Science. The work of the 6 librarians, three support staff, and one professional staff person is significantly extended and enhanced by 15-25 library student employees. The librarians and staff feel very fortunate to have these students as a resource and take seriously the responsibility of nurturing them and contributing to their pre-professional experience. The Librarians also take seriously the knowledge, experience, and new perspective the graduate student employees bring to the department and benefit from their optimism and creativity.

Experiential Learning

It is more than training. The hours of orientation, instruction, review, and discussion that the librarians plan for the library school student employees is designed to not only prepare them to provide the highest quality services possible but to prepare these students to become professionals. The ICUGLS librarians idealistically hope to prepare colleagues with whom they would like to work. The two most formal programs established to prepare excellent future librarian colleagues are the Reference Assistant and Instructional Assistant programs.

Reference Librarians: The Next Generation

Graduate student reference assistants (RAs) were an integral part of the IC-UGLS (Information

Commons – Undergraduate Library Services) department long before the IC became part of our departmental name. Hourly student employees from the School of Library and Information Science have worked side by side with librarians since the days of the old green Reader's Guide volumes. They helped introduce the first databases available on dedicated terminals to undergraduates when students were afraid to press the "return" (now known as "enter") key. They helped make the decision to send the contents of the pamphlet file to the recycle center. They helped develop a homegrown, internal blog before the term blog was coined.

They bring new ideas and talents to the department. Their presence in the department requires that the veteran librarians constantly examine our individual professional philosophies, the department's mission, policies and procedures… the status quo. The librarians hope that we do more than supervise and train these future colleagues. We hope we encourage and inspire them to be in what one of us recently described as "a state of constant learning."

The Wells Library Information Commons is a partnership between the Libraries and University Information Technology Services (UITS). It is open 24/7, closing only on Thanksgiving Day, Christmas Day and New Year's Day. Reference services are offered during what might be considered conventional library hours: Monday through Thursday from 8 a.m.to midnight, Fridays from 8 a.m. to 9p.m., Saturdays from 10a.m. to 9 p.m. and Sundays from 11 a.m. to midnight.

We share a service desk with UITS technology consultants who refer "library questions" (I need three scholarly journal articles on DNA and privacy) to the reference staff and reference staff refer "technology questions" (how do I convert this video to a DVD so that I can edit it?) to the consultants. When reference staff is not available (see above), the consultants refer their customers (our patrons) to the "Ask a Librarian" feature on the Libraries' Web site.

Most of the "library questions" are directional: where can I check out this book? Is there a FAX machine? Many are not exactly library related: Where do I get a new student ID? Why did I get this parking ticket? Some make you smile: Do you check out highlighters? You have a 3-hole punch, why don't you have a one-hole punch? If you've been a reference librarian for any length of time, you've heard these questions before and you know how to answer them seriously and respectfully without batting an eye. You know that answering these questions are the dues we pay to get to the interesting reference interactions.

ICUGLS reference assistants are all SLIS students and have all completed S501 (formerly L524): Reference. According to the course description "This course introduces students to the basic information sources and services among different types of libraries and information centers, including academic, public, special, and school media." You can review various syllabi for this course at: http://www.slis.indiana.edu/courses/course.php?course=S501. After completing this course most students know how to search databases and other information resources that meet the needs of most undergraduate students. They have read about and discussed the "reference interview" and understand the concept of question negotiation.

Competence, however, goes beyond knowing something in theory. And it is competence and professionalism that ICUGLS RA orientation and training seeks to develop. Before the semester starts new RAs attend approximately 6 hours of group orientation. They meet each other and they meet each full time staff and librarian in the department. They also meet many of our partners, for example, the UITS staff member who supervises the technology consultants. These introductions are important because we want the RAs to know from the very beginning that they are joining a staff, a team, a group of people working together toward a common goal. Every RA must understand that how we interact with each other and with our clientele is crucial to the success of the entire unit.

In addition to the group orientation sessions new RAs must take a self-guided tour of the entire library, not just the Information Commons. This tour is not the standard new student orienta-

tion tour, rather, it points out resources & locations and provides information that staff needs to know about in order to help students navigate the building. New RAs must also explore the Libraries' Web site, read all the help files for the online catalog (IUCat), and use a public workstation in the IC to accomplish specific tasks. There are also worksheets with typical reference questions that each new RA must complete by the end of the first week of the semester. Our catch phrase during the training and orientation period and the first week of the semester is "Be Observant and Communicate."

Each new RA meets with their supervisor, the Reference Services Librarian, during the third week of the semester. Before the meeting, librarians who work on the desk with the RAs are solicited for their observations about how the RAs are doing, what their strengths are and what they still need to learn. During the meeting policies and procedures that were covered during the group orientation are quickly reviewed, input from the other librarians and any questions the RA may have are discussed. The purpose of these early individual meetings is to identify and resolve any problems and concerns the RA may have, or that the librarians have observed.

Weekly meetings are held for the first half of every semester. Policies and procedures are reviewed; guest speakers make presentations about important resources or services. This is also where we discuss security issues and dealing with "problem patrons." These meeting also serve as a team building tool since RAs either work alone or with full time staff and librarians rather than with each other.

Mid-semester meetings between each RA and the Reference Services Librarian are held to discuss individual concerns and explore issues related to reference services. RAs are asked to evaluate our services & resources, the support they receive from the full time staff and to make suggestions for improvement.

All ICUGLS staff (full time and hourly) are subscribed to the departmental listserv that we can use to trade hours, make announcements, and

generally keep each other informed about issues relating to reference services and resources. We make extensive use of our [electronic] desk log. This semester (fall 2008) an RA initiated cooperative project: the ICUGLS Reference Wiki is being developed. The ICUGLS Reference "newsletter" is electronically distributed on an irregular/as-needed basis, once or twice a semester. Communication is key.

ICUGLS librarians have an unofficial "super star" list of RAs; people we have worked with over the years who stand head and shoulders above the rest, sometimes even above us librarians. These are RAs, now librarians, who use the RA position as an opportunity to learn all they can about how a library "works," about how patrons think and act, about mainstream and obscure information sources. They get excited about a new web site; they continue to research a topic even after the reference interaction is over. They take responsibility for reporting that the lights in the parking lot are not on at 10 p.m. or that a trash can on the 3rd floor is overflowing. They follow up. It may be impossible to teach these traits and attitudes. How do you teach someone to be interested in everything? How do you teach someone to own the job? Our theory is that we approach what we do at the reference desk as a team, constantly interacting with each other as well as with our patrons. Constantly learning from each other and teaching each other.

Graduate Students as Library Instructors

The IUB Libraries have embraced a tradition established by most academic departments at the university by employing graduate students as instructors. The librarians and graduate students they employ in an instructional capacity benefit from working together to achieve a common mission and growing together as professionals. Although many graduate students from IU's School of Library and Information Science are hired and trained to be Instruction Assistants (IAs) in the Information Commons/Undergraduate Library Services (IC/UGLS), it is typically the mentoring that occurs as a result of their participation in the IUB Libraries' teaching initiatives that is the most meaningful and long-lasting aspect of this job. Since the

mid-1990s, IC/UGLS has regularly employed 10-15 Instruction Assistants who provide a variety of library instructional services, including: teaching one-shot library instruction sessions, providing library tours, creating library web pages for specific classes, and writing instructional handouts. Much of this work is very solitary, so the team of Instruction Assistants meets monthly with each other and their supervisor in order to discuss common concerns, issues, and topics related to teaching. Their participation serves to further the IUB Libraries' instructional mission and prepares them to enter a profession that places great value on teaching and learning.

As many students in the School of Library and Information Science have no background or knowledge of educational theory or pedagogical practice in the library setting, the IUB Libraries do not hire Instruction Assistants based on their prior teaching experience and knowledge. Instead, they are hired based on their interest, enthusiasm, and curiosity about teaching and learning and the librarian's role in it. For many graduate students, this is their first foray into the classroom as the expert and the IC/UGLS librarians encourage them to use the library's classrooms as their laboratory in order to practice new strategies and discover effective pedagogy. Upon joining the team of library instructors in IC/UGLS, new Instruction Assistants participate in four hours of training in which they are introduced to the procedures for communicating with a course instructor, planning an instruction session based on learning outcomes, and assessing those outcomes, as well as practical tips and strategies for teaching information-seeking and the research process.

In order to allow new IAs to see a variety of teaching approaches, they are required to observe experienced library instructors and to reflect on these observations before teaching on their own for the first time. Many instructors choose to teach with a partner, in order to have the opportunity for guidance during the planning process and for support while teaching. This is especially helpful for first-time teachers who may be anxious or unsure about teaching for an entire class. IC/UGLS is a department that fosters and encourages this type of collaboration among librarians and Instruction

Assistants. Though the training and observation process can extend this period of initiation for several weeks, it is not intended as indoctrination. Instead, Instruction Assistants are encouraged to develop their own sense of professionalism and a philosophy of how teaching will fit into it.

From practical experience to professional preparation, the Instruction Assistants benefit greatly from joining the IC/UGLS team of instructors. However, working as an Instruction Assistant is not a typical job that requires a certain level of participation or a set number of hours per week, so Instruction Assistants must take the responsibility to make the experience valuable. This includes having the self-direction and self-efficacy to approach the challenge of teaching in libraries and to continually seek ways to improve and enhance their own instruction.

The IUB Libraries and librarians also benefit from hiring graduate students as library instructors. In addition to having an army of instructors to tackle the more than 600 requests for library instruction received annually in the Undergraduate Library, librarians gain a renewed sense of energy and enthusiasm for teaching by working with those who are new to it. IC/UGLS librarians believe in the positive impact librarians can make on student learning through their role as teachers and working with Instruction Assistants allows them to share that passion and philosophy with the next generation of librarians.

What Do They Think?

The following quotes are from former graduate student employees, now librarians; illustrate the impact of experience, communication, and mentoring on their professional lives.

"My experience as an IA groomed me for my current position as Information Literacy Librarian at my university. I gained confidence with my presentation skills as well as public speaking skills. My time in as an IA was interesting and provided me with an experience that I refer in my daily work routine. Since [graduate school] offered only one class in bibliographic instruction, I feel that the IA position was truly helpful in making me market-

able for future work. "

"Not only was it a great preparation for my professional career, but I am still in touch with many of my IA colleagues so it was a great opportunity to begin building a professional network."

"I do feel that my experience will help me prepare for my career. I have seen what works, what doesn't work, what I do well and what I need to improve on, and what to expect ... These understandings will help me improve what needs improvement, and build on what is going well, making me the best librarian I can be in the future. The most meaningful aspect of this program for me has been meeting and getting to know other [graduate] students in a way outside of class."

"I really appreciate that we are given a chance to kind of mentor each other, especially in the beginning. It was comforting to see how other people teach before I had to stand up in front of the class, and it was nice to be able to get feedback from fellow IAs without it being like a formal evaluation thing."

Conclusion

What started as a solution to meeting increasing demands for services has become a cornerstone of ICUGLS purpose and mission. While the Libraries services and resources continue to grow and improve, a human resources model is in place to match that growth. The unforeseen benefits of the collaborative environment described above are manifest in the enjoyment and satisfaction each employee, regardless of status or rank, experiences each day. While ICUGLS Librarians can expect this type of fulfillment daily, it is expected that graduate student employees will transfer these collegial practices and sensibilities to their new professional environments and future colleagues.

References

Whitlatch, Jo Bell et al. "Professional Competencies for Reference and User Services Librarians." Reference and Users Services Association. 2003. American Library Association. 15 Oct. 20087 < http://www.ala.org/ala/mgrps/divs/rusa/archive/ protools/referenceguide/professional.cfm >.

Authors

Diane Dallis
Head,Information Commons/Undergraduate
Library Services
Herman B Wells Library
Indiana University Bloomington

Carrie Donovan
Instructional Services Librarian
Information Commons/Undergraduate
Library Services
Herman B Wells Library
Indiana University Bloomington

Emily Okada
Associate Head and Reference Services
Librarian Information
Commons/Undergraduate Library Services
Herman B Wells Library
Indiana University Bloomington