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The Five College Hub: Connecting Libraries Across Campuses

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Essay

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Five College Library Consortium – An Unlikely Cast of Characters

The Five College Libraries Professional Development Committee (FCLPD) comprises one member from each of the Five College Consortium's libraries located in the Pioneer Valley in Western Massachusetts. This is just one of several Five College Library Committees formed to address, advance, and consolidate efforts around common issues to all its members. This article focuses on the successful role of the Professional Development Committee as it fosters and supports conversations and collaborations across campuses. Learn about the Five College Consortium, its library connections, and how this committee coordinates, promotes, and engages its library staff in professional development opportunities.

The Five College Consortium is one of the oldest in the United States, dating back to its incorporation in 1914. The five institutions include an unlikely array of varying sized colleges and universities, each with its mission and characteristics:

- Amherst College is the quintessential small New England liberal arts college located on the Amherst town Square
- Hampshire College is an alternative small college living its ideals of independent thought and self-reliance
- Mount Holyoke College is a historically all-women's college steeped in pioneering education and the advancement of women's issues
- Smith College is also an all women's college, but with a more cosmopolitan feel located in downtown Northampton
- The University of Massachusetts Amherst is the 500-pound gorilla in the room as the state's large land grant flagship campus with some 35,000 students.



Clockwise from upper left: the libraries of Smith College, Amherst College, the University of Massachusetts, Amherst, Hampshire College, and Mount Holyoke.

The consortium offers several degree programs that draw upon the expertise of faculty from all the colleges. There is also a bus system free to consortium members that travel between campuses, allowing students to take classes and use resources across the Pioneer Valley.

The libraries on each of the campuses play an important role in student, faculty, and staff success. The Five College Library Consortium (FCLC) is fundamental to communication and collaboration across the five campuses. Library cooperation in the Five College Consortium focuses on several projects such as a shared catalog, borrowing, subscriptions, and shared storage facilities. The historical and unusual “Bunker” houses the Five College Library Repository Collection. The Bunker was built into the Holyoke Mountain Range by the federal government during the height of the Cold War as part of the Strategic Air Command, complete with war room and all. In 1994 this space was decommissioned and sold to Amherst College for archival storage. Our newest location, the Annex, was built in 2017 and is a 35,000 square-foot climate-controlled facility with the capacity to shelve up to 2.5 million items from the campuses. Much like the consortium members themselves, the projects and facilities are a mixture of traditional and modern, making use of what is available and imagined by bringing together diverse minds and dreams.

The Ins and Outs of the Five College Professional Development Committee

Most remarkable amongst such an otherwise distinct group of colleges is the commitment to diversity and inclusion. We are able to achieve this goal by leveraging each Five College member’s unique characteristics to strengthen the collective. As the Five College Library Professional Development Committee (FCLPD), we come together not to advance our home institution’s particular needs but to look to the collective and find ways to bring together staff across all libraries. The committee itself is a lean group composed of five members who serve for two years. Five College Library Directors suggest staff members that they feel will be valuable contributors and thrive in a collaborative environment. Individuals within this committee work in different areas such as access services, teaching and learning, and administrative roles. A Chair (or

sometimes co-Chair) organizes the agenda and leads the monthly meetings amongst other FCLC responsibilities. Once their two-year term is over, the Chair nominates a current committee member to take over to provide consistency in the group. The collegiality, professionalism, and variety of experiences and backgrounds among the group members are significant factors to its success.

The Five College Professional Development Committee addresses our institutes' diverse needs and goals in several ways. The main way we try to address Diversity, Equity and Inclusion is through the different types of staff that make up the committee. Members from different library areas, distinct roles, and experience levels provide various points of view, ensuring that diverse voices are represented. As the committee members change, so do the perspectives and framing. Every year we alternate, and one of the Five College institutions hosts our main event at a different venue. This variety of environments welcomes different people who might benefit from alternative presentation style spaces. We make a conscious decision to include a variety of presentation formats and tours at this event to appeal to different styles and tastes. The accessibility standards and assorted food options are also fundamental in our preparation. While we can control several aspects of our committee process, there are some areas that we can not. Pay equity for speakers is one particular area that we are working on since different standards exist for faculty and staff. The FCLPD committee also recognizes that progress with DEI initiatives can be very challenging because we are a predominately white profession. At the same time, we are confident that our work makes a difference in the institutes we represent and strive to develop.

The main goals of the FCLPD committee are to coordinate, promote, and engage Five College library staff in professional development opportunities that further the work of the consortium. The committee administers a professional development budget and works with other Five College library committees to plan and coordinate smaller, more targeted professional development opportunities on a biannual schedule. The committee's goals focus on collaboration both within and outside of the five colleges as relevant and to identify professional development areas that foster skill.

A call for proposals goes out in mid-September to our Five College Library group email list to promote modest funding in line with the main goals of the group using a google form. An individual or group can submit proposals, and the committee reviews them on a rolling basis throughout the academic year. Once a month, committee members meet to look at proposals and then either accept them or make minor adjustments to the proposed event. Each semester we receive about 4-5 proposals. We try to review proposals before we meet, gather a consensus before approval, or talk about what needs to be adjusted in the request, such as reviewing the cost of the event, what materials are required, or if we can make adjustments to ensure it appeals to a wider audience.

The committee uses the following criteria to help determine proposal acceptance and the best use of funds. The ultimate goal is to promote impactful programming that is most beneficial to multiple institutions and individuals. Therefore, we take into consideration various criteria that include proposals that:

1. support the FCLC strategic priorities
2. support additional learning opportunities for FOLIO, our new integrated library services platform
3. involve different campuses (preferably at least 3 of the five colleges)
4. be innovative
5. be far-reaching and inclusive of all staff
6. address previously identified interest in the topic

We have experimented with utilizing a rubric to streamline the approval process and make the process as equitable as possible. (See figure 1)

	1 point	3 points	5 points
Five College Strategic Priorities	Somewhat in line with the mission of the FCLC strategies	In line with the mission of the FCLC strategies	Strongly in line with the mission of the FCLC strategies
FOLIO	Tangentially supports FOLIO initiatives	Directly supports a FOLIO initiative	Directly supports multiple FOLIO initiatives
Campus Participation	Goal of 1 campus participation	Goal of 2-3 campus participation	Goal of full participation with all five campuses
Proof of concept / Innovation	Novel event with no prior similar workshop	Similar workshop offered previously	Similar workshop offered previously with success in participation
Proposal submitter	Submitted by one individual	Submitted by a group of people representing a variety of campuses	Submitted by a Five College Committee with committee endorsement and plans to participate
Audience	Targeted to one sector of library staff	Targeted to multiple types of library staff	Targeted across all types of staff
Total value for submitted proposal			

Figure 1: Scoring rubric for approving proposals

Once approved by the committee, an approval email is sent out to the proposer. After an event, the organizers complete an evaluation of how they thought the event went and how they hoped to improve it.

The Five College Professional Development committee itself sponsors a wide variety of activities. A few examples include:

- Practical anti-racism & anti-oppressive practices lead by prominent presenters in this field.
- Hands-on workshops focusing on how to support Trans*, Gender non-conforming (GNC), non-binary colleagues, and users within the library
- Skill-building events for public speaking to address a wide range of abilities and comfort levels.
- Potentially, virtual trainings related to the approaching implementation of the integrated library services platform (FOLIO)
- The Annual All-Staff

The Main Event: The Annual All-Staff

One would think that hosting a significant event that is attractive, useful, and fun for an eclectic group of Five College Library members would be difficult. That is correct. At the same time, the Professional Development Committee has successfully been able to host the annual All-Staff event since 2013, and each year it just gets better. The organizational component is vital for each All-Staff's development and smooth execution. Of course, the delightful and organized people on the Committee are indeed what makes the yearly event so successful.



All Staff event held at Hampshire College's Red Barn in 2018.

Since its inception, one of the five colleges' libraries has hosted the All-Staff event held at the end of May on a rotating basis. At the end of each academic year, the Committee decides the host institution and chooses a venue for the following year. The excitement begins in September when the Committee focuses part of its monthly meetings on updating a detailed event organizational task list. This ensures the completion of all the tasks, some simple, some complex, that are involved in organizing an event for 150 people across five campuses. While the Chair of the Committee has the lead on many tasks, they are genuinely divided among all members, and everyone plays an important role, depending on their strengths and interests. As a result, each year, the All-Staff event generally has the same primary components. However, it varies depending on feedback from the previous year and what might be happening globally, such as new trends in our fields or a worldwide pandemic.

To organize an All-Staff that is appealing to various folks within the complex world of librarianship and technology, the Committee created criteria for events based on specific standards and characteristics. The event must have multiple topics presented in exciting formats, provide opportunities for breakout discussions and workshops, allow time to socialize and network, including tours to campus attractions – and include a good meal! Each year the Committee chooses a theme for the All-Staff and sends out a call for proposals in early spring for presentations which are generally lightning talks. The half-day event begins at 8:30 am with a light breakfast, followed by the Committee Chair's opening remarks and the Library Directors' brief welcome address. Then the fun begins! A keynote speaker has sometimes given a presentation to set the stage for 7-8 lightning talks, though not at every All-Staff.

The Committee has tweaked the presentation format to include a variety of smaller discussion groups after the individual talks and other workshops and hands-on activities related to the different topics. It is essential to keep on track at a significant event like this, and the committee does a great job of timekeeping and moving the program along smoothly. Lunch is usually a highlight, as it gives the attendees a chance to mingle and catch up with colleagues from all five campuses. The All-Staff ends with optional tours at various

attractions on the host campus organized ahead of time and led by one of the Committee members and staff at the different locations. The Committee creates a website with the program and helpful information, including information about the tours. Here is an example from the 2019 [All-Staff website](#). The Committee sends out a post-event survey, and feedback from the All-Staffs is generally very positive, including comments such as “Learned about some of the things each of us have in common and learned about some unique things about each of the five institutions” and “It’s great to hear what people are working on throughout the 5C and to see people I don’t always get to see. Thank you!”



All staff event held at Mount Holyoke College in 2019.

In fall 2019, the Committee began planning the usual All-Staff for May 2020; then COVID hit in March. With the support of the Five College Library Directors, the Committee eventually decided that the show must go on. The plans to switch to a virtual keynote address with several lightning round presentations, breakout sessions, and interactive activities were successfully implemented in two months. Unfortunately, the All-Staff could not include the special lunch. Still, it did adapt its usual format to fit a trivia game based on questions about each of the five colleges, virtual tours of the host campus’ attractions, two film showings with discussions, and other breakout room activities. The organization of all these activities, along with the addition of a short optional mindfulness exercise and well-timed breaks with music throughout the day, lent itself to one of the most successful All-Staffs ever. More people could attend remotely, even if not for the entire event, and some comments on the survey concluded that many preferred the virtual format.

Perhaps for following All-Staff events, the committee will design a combination of in-person and virtual activities to appeal to a larger audience. But, for sure, the All-Staff is an essential part of building community in the Five College Library community. The tradition will continue no matter what the circumstances may be.

Our Strength is our Diversity

The Five College Professional Development Committee encounters many of the same issues and challenges common to any subgroup made of members from different parent institutions. Some of these challenges are structural, whereas others are more cultural.

Structurally, we have a challenge finding a secure, shared space across individual college practices and platforms to store documents and forms over time as the committee membership changes. We also need an agile and easily discoverable website to allow consortium members to submit, learn about, and sign up for events. On the cultural side are issues attracting proposals across all library staff, librarians, paraprofessionals, those working on the technical side of things, and those working in public service points. We also hope for a more inclusive All-Staff event that addresses all members' needs and concerns, not just those who feel comfortable in a large public setting. Some of this might be addressed by creating incentives or establishing a fair presenter compensation practice. But, again, finding ways to be more inclusive of all members is a constant challenge.

Looking to the future, we hope to offer more committee-generated events and collaborate with other Five College Library committees to provide programs. As we embark on a new shared catalog, this will allow meeting and learning from one another. This shared project might be the perfect vehicle to spark new connections across campuses, enliven conversations, demonstrate our shared values of equity and inclusion, and allow us to once again focus on individual differences coming together to form common strengths.

1 thought on “The Five College Hub: Connecting Libraries Across Campuses”

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