



## Staffing the Library Website

A SPEC Kit compiled by

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November 2001

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# SURVEY





## Executive Summary

### Introduction

For centuries librarians have organized information for ease of use; however, most libraries have been developing websites to organize prodigious amounts of information for fewer than ten years. Library administrators are grappling with assigning staff to this new service, dividing website responsibilities, and fitting staff who work on the website into the structure of the organization.

In summer 2001, ARL surveyed its 122 member libraries about their management of human resources assigned to the library website. Sixty-two libraries (51%) responded to the survey. Although all of the responding libraries assign staff to develop, manage, and maintain the website, the number of staff with website responsibility varies widely. While one library reports that 20 employees work full-time on the library website, the vast majority assign no employees at all (26 or 42%) or only one employee (another 26) to full-time website responsibilities. One library has 100 employees with website services as a primary job responsibility, but ten (16%) report no employees whatever with web responsibility as a primary assignment. In the remaining libraries the median is one position.

### Website Development and Maintenance

Respondents were asked to indicate which staff have responsibility for specific aspects of web development and maintenance. Their responses clearly show that responsibilities are spread throughout the organization and sometimes even outside the organization. It is no surprise that within the library the webmaster, web team, reference librarians, bibliographers, and staff in collection development and systems are heavily involved in developing and maintaining library websites. Indeed, this work has become so pervasive

that many libraries also ask support staff—and sometimes student assistants and other part-time staff—to handle certain website responsibilities.

Responsibility for website content—developing, editing, revising, and updating—is widely distributed among staff. Reference librarians at nearly every responding library do this work (98%). Other positions that work with content are the library's web team (81%), collection development staff (81%), bibliographers (79%), and the webmaster (66%). Responsibility for posting content to the website is also widely distributed, but the webmaster and reference librarians handle this work most often. Website graphic design is handled by the library webmaster (63%), the library web team (48%), or graphic designers (42%). The webmaster and the library systems office staff generally write code. While catalogers have most of the responsibility for creating metadata (58%), this task is shared with the webmaster, reference librarians, and the web team. Not surprisingly, troubleshooting is the responsibility of the library systems staff (84%) and webmaster (60%) with assistance from institutional systems staff (31%).

### Models for Managing Web Responsibilities

The survey asked additional questions about three models for managing website responsibilities: whether the library has a library webmaster, a web team/committee, or distributes web work across the staff. Responses show that libraries use elements of all three models. Forty-six (74%) have a webmaster; 51 (82%) have a web team or committee; and 58 (94%) distribute web responsibilities among library staff. Some libraries have mixed and matched combinations of these staffing models. A

few libraries even report coming back to a once-abandoned model after experimenting with another.

### **Webmaster**

Survey data indicate that there is no clear academic path leading to the library webmaster position. It is possible that today's library webmasters have acquired skills to do this job as the technology has been developing and in many cases outside traditional academic degree programs. Most library webmasters have a library science degree (70%), but other degrees range from the bachelor- to the Ph.D.-level in subjects as varied as English, history, law, and computer science. Only 57% of these library webmasters handle website responsibility on a full-time basis. Their other responsibilities may include reference, electronic resources management, user education, systems, and collection development. Webmasters typically report to a department head or an assistant or associate dean; in only three responding libraries does the webmaster report directly to the university librarian or dean.

Respondents listed numerous advantages to having a webmaster. This position provides leadership and a unifying force in building the website, a single point of contact for ideas and suggestions from the staff and users, a uniformity of the "look and feel" of the site, and adherence to standards and policies. Seven libraries say that there are no disadvantages to this kind of arrangement! Other respondents cite disadvantages such as the amount of work—which can be too overwhelming for one individual. They point out that experimentation and diversity of viewpoints can be compromised and getting staff buy-in can be tough under centralized control. The difficulty in finding a single individual who understands the library organization, possesses graphic design acumen, and has web development skills was also mentioned.

### **Web Team or Committee**

In the 51 libraries that report having web teams/committees, team membership ranges from a minimum of three to a maximum of 18 with a median of eight. Team members either have

continuing or indefinite appointments in more than half of the libraries that use this model. In the rest, the term of office varies from one to three years and is sometimes renewable. Web teams report most often to the assistant or associate dean or to a department head.

Listed among the advantages of the web team/committee model are: wider staff input and buy-in; diversity of viewpoints and perspectives; broader vision; shared skills, knowledge, and accountability; and coordination of web development library-wide. The disadvantages of the web team/committee model are those faced by any group charged with significant library-wide responsibility: protecting "turf" and the challenge of building consensus (making decisions and action slower); dealing with differing levels of technical expertise and knowledge; juggling web responsibilities with the demands of one's primary job assignment; difficulty in scheduling meetings; and not involving everyone who wants to be involved.

### **Distributed Web Responsibilities**

As seen above, almost all of the responding libraries encourage staff across the library to author library webpages within their area of expertise. The most cited advantage to this approach is distribution of the workload. Other advantages are sharing of expertise; departmental and local buy-in/ownership; familiarity with content and users; and quicker development, publishing, and updates. Distributed web responsibility also provides an opportunity for professional development and builds a core of web experts in the library.

The overwhelming disadvantage of distributing web responsibility is the resulting inconsistency in the "look and feel" of the site, in content, in coding, and in unified access—each a nightmare for those who manage the maintenance of the site. Other disadvantages are the difficulty of dealing with uneven expertise among library staff, inconsistent quality and currency of pages within the site, and providing training for large numbers of library staff.

### **Web Guidelines and Training**

The majority of respondents (79%) have guidelines to assist library staff who author webpages—some guidelines are detailed and technical while others are brief and practical. Clearly, detailed guidelines are important for libraries that allow staff to publish “live” to the website (62% of the libraries responding to this survey).

Web skills training is offered by libraries, the institution, and outside workshops. All three provide training in web development more often than other kinds of web-related training. A few libraries offer database management training, but most systems and software training is provided by the institution or outside workshops.

### **History of Web Staffing Arrangement**

Although 31% of the responding libraries report that the organizational structure of library web staff has not changed since the library website was first brought up, many libraries continue to experiment with ways to manage responsibility for web-related services. Those libraries that have tried various ways of assigning web staff indicate that their current staff arrangement has been in effect only a short time—in nine libraries for less than one year; three libraries are currently making new arrangements. Only a handful (5 or 11%) have used the same arrangement for five or more years.

Reasons vary for changing to their current web staff arrangement. Twelve libraries were striving for a common “look and feel” of the site, a cohesive information architecture, and consistent navigation. Ten libraries wanted more staff involvement and buy-in. Eight libraries needed a full-time position to focus on developing the website. One library started with a team approach and moved to a webmaster. Another started with a team, went to a webmaster, and then went back to a team. A third library started with a web librarian and a web committee, went to digital initiatives, and then went back to a web librarian and web committee.

### **Evaluation of Websites**

Libraries are developing and implementing measures to evaluate the effectiveness of their websites that also indicate something about

the effectiveness of the way staff is organized for producing and managing the website. The evaluation technique most often used by survey respondents is informal feedback (54%). They also conduct focus groups, user surveys, and usability tests to measure website effectiveness. While 16 libraries report that they do not yet have website effectiveness measures in place, nine of these are in the planning process.

Respondents were asked to indicate their expectations for minimum service and desired service from research libraries with respect to five web development and maintenance tasks. They were then asked to indicate their perception of their own library’s performance relative to these expectations. While responses on *minimum* expectations of service spanned the entire scale of 1 to 9, overall minimum expectations clustered in the middle of the scale. The mean minimum expectations for developing and editing content, updating/revising content, and posting content range from 5.55 to 5.88. There was a slightly higher minimum expectation for system trouble-shooting (6.27) and a lower minimum expectation for creating metadata (4.86). Responses on the *desired* level of service indicate a very high expectation for web services in research libraries. Means for desired expectations range from a low of 8.05 for creating metadata to a high of 8.71 for system trouble-shooting.

Regarding their own library’s performance, responses again covered the range from 1 to 9. One third of the respondents (20) perceive a negative gap between minimum expectations and performance in the area of creating metadata; almost a quarter (14) in updating web content. A number of libraries also struggle with creating and posting information on their websites. While six respondents perceive that they are not meeting any of their expectations, in the aggregate respondents perceive that they are exceeding their minimum expectations, but still have plenty of room for improvement to meet desired expectations.

### **Additional Comments**

Respondents were asked to comment on why their current web staffing arrangement works well or not so well. Among the libraries that are satisfied with their current arrangement, one touts the distributed model because the staff who deal directly with patrons also develop the site. This library uses templates to make content creation/ updating easier for staff as well as to ensure consistency. Three other libraries with distributed responsibility for the website say that the system works because it allows contributions of those who want to participate in web development. Website development enhances library jobs, and many librarians consider learning web skills important to their professional development.

Several libraries offer reasons why having a web manager combined with several working or advisory groups works well. Workload is distributed; there is better focus on web enhancements; and communication about the website occurs library-wide. The webmaster provides continuity and accountability while the advisory group—representing different areas of the library—promotes buy-in.

One library likes the web team structure because all team members, eager to learn new web skills, encourage innovation. Another library says that having a web team that concentrates on content combined with a library department that handles database infrastructure maximizes the contributions of all.

Respondents also explained why their current web staffing arrangement does not work so well and what changes are being made. Several libraries have discovered that it is more and more difficult to maintain standards and quality of editing while supporting many library staff who post “live” to the website. These libraries are discussing transferring responsibility for creating the webpages to the webmaster, systems staff, a unit of web managers, or some other small group. Other library staff will provide content, but most will no longer post “live”. At least one library mentioned moving away from hard-coding of webpages toward dynamically-created pages. Several libraries have discovered that their library now needs one or two full-time library

staff to provide high-quality web service rather than relying only on library staff for whom web-related tasks are not a primary assignment.

Responding libraries suggested ways to develop, manage, and maintain a high-quality website. Several commented that it is important for the library to place a high priority on its website by hiring a dedicated and experienced webmaster—someone with strong leadership skills and a vision for developing a website with high standards of usability and content management. They maintain that building specific web responsibilities into the library’s budget produces better results than adding these responsibilities to the duties of existing staff.

There were comments as well about the importance of setting up a web team comprised of individuals with complementary skills in graphic design, programming, database design, systems administration, content editing, information architecture, usability, and project management. No single person, they say, should be expected to possess all of these skills.

## **Conclusion**

Responses to this survey indicate that many libraries are still trying to settle on the best way to use staff to manage delivery of services via their websites. ARL library websites are now several generations old and they continue to evolve. More and more emphasis is being placed on having a usable, attractive, and up-to-date library website. Library school graduates with web skills are in high demand, and librarians in the field are scrambling to hone their web skills as well. Libraries unable to identify these skills among their existing staff are hiring new employees to do this work while also encouraging existing staff to learn. By now, many ARL libraries have hired at least one person to handle web responsibilities full-time, but the method in which that individual (or the group of individuals working full-time on the website) collaborates with the rest of the library staff to produce a quality library website is still under experimentation.