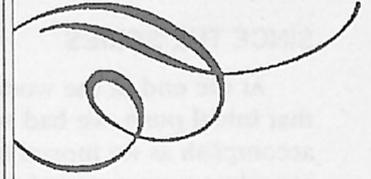# FITS AND STARTS: SUNY COBLESKILL'S CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT JOURNEY

by April Davies & Nancy Van Deusen

SOME BACKGROUND

The Van Wagenen Library is a small academic library serving a student population of approximately 2,400 FTE at the State University of New York at Cobleskill. In 2004, two of our professional staff members committed to the eight-month Continuous Assessment-Continuous Improvement (CACI) workshop series; total staff at the time included five professionals and five clerical staff plus part-time and student workers.

DURING THE SERIES

As part of our "homework," we held four full-staff meetings plus bi-weekly librarians' meetings at which we tried to bring everyone into the CACI mindset. The entire staff participated in revising our Mission and creating Vision and Values statements. The "Constancy of Purpose" document that resulted was something everyone seemed truly happy with. More importantly, the process we went through opened up communication and allowed us all to express both positive and negative things about the Library and how we all work together. Creating the Values statements in particular, helped us figure out what was really important to all of us.

While this was going on, we also worked on system maps for several areas, implemented some qualitative measures in Reference and Technical Services, chartered a Technical Services team to examine processes in that area and create process masters for one or more of them, and started using comment cards to elicit user feedback.

In Reference, we began recording positive and negative user comments in the areas of resources, services, and facilities. Shortly after beginning this effort, we decided to add a head count of users on the main floor at various times of day. These measures have allowed us to validate ideas that had previously been only anecdotal. Did we have to refer students to Interlibrary Loan for classic items we really ought to have? Is it cold in the Library in the morning? Does network performance drop in the afternoon? How many people are using the Library after 9:00pm? Being able to answer these questions in a verifiable manner has given us evidence to take to campus maintenance and computing departments when asking for improvements, has helped us identify and fill some gaps in our collection, and has given us useful ammunition when pushing for staffing and hours changes.

In Tech Services, we began tracking the number of enhancements made and errors fixed in catalog records. Again, this has helped us to quantify previously anecdotal information. It has also helped us to demonstrate some of the "value added" activities that are a routine part of the cataloging process. The whole notion of gathering evidence rather than proof has significantly changed our outlook on data collections and the value of even small pieces of data.

The process mastering team in Technical Services studied the process of getting books from receipt to shelf. This was a very thorough examination of one of the key processes for the department and the Library in general. In the end, we had very clear procedures in place that any staff member with a minimum of training could follow and complete the necessary tasks correctly. This proved very useful when cataloging operations switched from using OCLC's CatME software to their new Connexion platform. Everyone in the department had a solid understanding of what we were already doing with the old system, and this made it very easy for us to figure out and appropriately document new and changed processes.

Comment cards were introduced in 2004 along with a bulletin board devoted to sharing our responses to users' questions and problems—we call it "The Feedback Loop." Among other things, we got questions about exactly where tuition money is spent, complaints about our heating/cooling system, and suggestions to buy more resources on topics like saltmarsh invertebrates and maple syrup production. We especially got requests for longer hours, particularly for the lower level, which is home to the Center for Academic Support and Excellence (CASE), DisAbility Support Services, and the Writing Center, but not much "library" except for open access computers. At the time, the

lower level closed at 8 p.m. while the rest of the building closed at 10 p.m. Users were understandably confused and unhappy—more about this situation later.

SINCE THE SERIES

At the end of the workshop series and the end of that initial push, we had several things we hoped to accomplish as we moved forward. We wanted to create complete system maps for all departments, do process masters for managing reserves and other circulation activities, and develop a measurement plan. As of July 2007, none of those things have been done. The efforts begun during class have continued and sometimes grown, but moving CACI beyond those areas has stalled. This is due to a number of factors, most of which were unavoidable. For example, we replaced two professional staff members in Fall 2004 and then promptly spent the next six months preparing for and migrating to the Aleph 500 library management system.

Despite the problems we've encountered, we continue to benefit from our CACI training and to believe that we will eventually expand our efforts. The comment cards/requests for longer hours issue mentioned above is a prime example of why. Our users wanted longer hours and so did the Library. This was especially important as we had moved the entire juvenile collection to the lower level in October 2005 and we needed to integrate the academic support activities housed on this floor into the rest of the Library. Since no extra money was available at the time, as a compromise, we started closing the main part of the Library one hour earlier and the lower level one hour later, meaning both closed at 9 p.m. We also started keeping the Library Café (with its network ports and wireless access) open until midnight. We knew it wouldn't be popular but it was the best we could do. To get specific feedback, we added a specialized comment card along with a second card deposit box in the Café. We asked, "What do you think of the change in the Library's hours?" and people told us! We explained the reasoning behind the change and told users that if it mattered that much to them they should tell people outside of the Library as well—like deans and other administrators. Well, they did. Student and faculty complaints via our comment cards and other means provided the evidence needed to convince the administration to give us the funds needed to keep the whole Library open until 10 p.m. and to keep the Café open until midnight all week long. The reduced hours lasted only one semester, but the outpouring of public support helped further our move toward an Information Commons environment.

In January 2006, CASE, DisAbility Support Services, the Writing Center, and Instructional Technology Support became part of the Library/Information Com-

mons, reporting to the library director. During the academic semester, our hours have been extended until midnight throughout the building Sunday-Thursday; the Café is still open until midnight seven days a week. We also added two more hours on Saturdays. We have increased open access computing and now have on-site tech support to cover the 9 p.m.-midnight hours. We've set up more group work areas and gotten additional comfortable furniture for lounge seating areas. We renovated the classroom on the upper level to improve the instructional capabilities of the space and to give students a place to practice multimedia presentations. We have also introduced a popular reading collection (utilizing the McNaughton lease plan).

There's more that has already happened on this front with more changes still in the works. Our CACI efforts helped to make all of this possible. Comment cards and remarks collected at Reference combined with LibQUAL+ results from 2003 (which is what led us into CACI to begin with) and earlier focus groups provided evidence of sustained user demand for longer hours, leisure reading material, etc. Head counts combined with traditional reference statistics and gate counts helped show how many people were using the facility and in what ways. Using data collected from our library management system and log files from our EZproxy server, we have been able to map what percentage of our students either borrowed a book or used an electronic database. This evidence suggests our acquisitions dollars should be allocated more heavily toward electronic resources and that we need to stress instruction more. We may have gotten support for all of these changes without CACI but it probably would have taken longer and been tougher.

CACI activities in Technical Services have also continued. When the Library migrated to a new automation system several months after the workshop series ended, the change was very smooth for Tech Services thanks to our process mastering work. We are still tracking enhancements and error corrections for new and existing catalog records and now have a growing dataset that can be analyzed. We recently began another tracking measurement—the receipt-verification gap, i.e., how long it takes routine material to move through the department from the time it is received to the time it is ready for final processing and shelving. Analysis of this data may help us find ways to improve efficiency, or it may simply confirm that we're already functioning quite well and help us continue doing so.

We have seen the benefits of CACI in many other areas. When we went through our first full program review in 2006-07, we had a big advantage. We knew our Mission, we knew who our customers were, and we'd been consistently collecting statistics in various areas. On another front, when the campus began work

on a facilities master plan, our director was able to use our Vision statement to give the consultants a good idea of what we want to be and they seemed quite enthusiastic about trying to make it a reality. We feel confident that we are making progress in many areas. In Spring 2007, the Library participated in LibQUAL+ again and our results were very positive, showing an improvement from the 2003 survey.

WHAT'S NEXT?

Looking ahead, we hope to bring new areas of the Library/Information Commons into the CACI fold. With many new staff members and new services, we realize that we need to refresh our effort. We plan to introduce a specialized comment card for the various academic support services, revisit our Vision and Values, and do more process mastering. When viewed as whole, our CACI training and continuing work have nicely positioned the Library to provide leadership as the College moves forward with campus-wide assessment.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

April Davies has served as Catalog and Authority Control Librarian for SUNY Cobleskill's Van Wagenen Library since 2002. She currently serves as Chair of the campus Strategic Planning Committee and is the library's liaison to the School of Agriculture & Natural Resources. She also coordinated the library's recent LibQUAL+ survey run

Nancy Van Deusen serves as Director of Library Services at SUNY Cobleskill, having spent more than 20 years in various capacities at the Van Wagenen Library. Prior to becoming director in 1999, Nancy was Head of Technical Services and Automation Librarian. She recently served as project manager for the Aleph automation migration, and was instrumental in development of the Information Commons model.