



An Association-Based Continuing Education Certification Program: The Library Association of Alberta Pilot Program

**Sandy Campbell,
Diane Clark, and
Allison Sivak**
University of Alberta Libraries
Edmonton, Alberta, Canada

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Abstract:

Continuing education services are often among the benefits offered by library associations to their members. The Partnership is an association of provincial, regional and territorial library associations in Canada. On behalf of this organization, The Library Association of Alberta undertook a 1-year pilot of a Continuing Education Certification Program. The Continuing Education Certification Program allows participants to document and reveal the day-to-day learning that they undertake both formally and informally. It does not replace post-secondary training, but allows all library workers to show the extent to which they stay up to date and move forward in their knowledge. The program is designed to be open to all library workers, inexpensive for both the participants and the associations and flexible enough for someone working in remote library to be successful in the program. The positive results of the pilot study allowed The Partnership to consider the costs and benefits of the program and begin work towards a national implementation of the program.

Many professions require that their members, in order to maintain good standing, demonstrate that they have kept themselves up to date in their field. Staying current is especially important in the rapidly changing world of libraries, due to the speed at which information is published or otherwise made available. Within the international library community, there are some programs that help individual's structure and document their continuing education activities. For example, The Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals (CILIP)¹ in the United Kingdom and the Australian Library and Information Association (ALIA)² offer continuing education programs, which include some

form of certification. There are also sectoral programs, such as the Academy of Health Information Professionals (AHIP)³ program offered by the Medical Library Association in the United States. However, in Canada, there has been no national structure to allow workers in the library community to document and reveal their continuing education activities.

Canada is a large country with a widely dispersed population. There are ten provinces and three territories, each with its own library Association. There is a national library association, the Canadian Library Association, and many local and regional library associations. Although groups of associations may collaborate on particular projects, all of the library associations operate independently of each other.

The Partnership⁴ is a national network of the Provincial, regional and Territorial Library Associations. Working jointly through this network, the Associations currently offer a number of national products to their members. These include a national job board; The OLA Store, which is an agent and distributor for over ten companies offering quality professional library literature and promotional materials; The Education Institute which supplies the learning programs of The Partnership year-round, coast-to-coast through teleconference, webcast and on-line, and Partnership: the Canadian Journal of Library and Information Practice and Research⁵, an electronic peer-reviewed practitioners' journal. Each of these services is operated by a member organization on behalf of The Partnership. In 2010 and 2011, the Library Association of Alberta (LAA)⁶ undertook to pilot a Continuing Education Certification Program as a potential additional Partnership service.

Description of the Continuing Education Certification Pilot Project

A working group of The Partnership began developing this project in 2007. This working group developed guiding principles and a general structure, borrowed heavily from the ALIA Continuing Professional Development (CPD) Scheme. In 2010, these were handed over to a small pilot project research team of LAA members, who undertook the development and operation of a Continuing Education Certification Pilot Project.

The guiding principles that The Partnership established for this project require that the program be:

- ◎ **Inclusive** - open to all Canadian librarians, library technicians and library staff* who are members of Partnership Associations, including unemployed members
- ◎ **Flexible** – so that a solo person working in a remote location could complete the requirements
- ◎ **Participant-centred** - focused on participant needs, participant activities, participant ownership
- ◎ **Inexpensive** - so that cost is not a barrier to participation or to administration by the Associations
- ◎ **Simple** - so that the Associations can operate the program easily
- ◎ **Portable** - so that participants can transfer activities from Association to Association

The Pilot began with a general call to LAA membership for volunteer participants and members who would become mentors to participants. Although the full implementation of the program calls for a three-year cycle, the Pilot was set for one year and began in September 1, 2009 with 43 participants and 8 mentors. The role of the mentors was to answer any questions or address any concerns, which the participants had, in order to avoid additional demands on the time of LAA association staff or Board volunteers.

The Continuing Education Certification Program was designed to encourage participants to learn in areas beyond their immediate work needs and encourage them to explore different modes of learning. The primary requirements were that learning be undertaken in at least three different subject areas (e.g.: public services, library information technology, cataloguing, etc.) and through at least three different modes (eg: discussion, professional reading, in-house training sessions, etc.). Participants were required to track each of their learning activities on a paper form that asked them to identify what activity they had done, and to reflect on what they had learned and how they intended to apply that learning. At the end of the pilot, participants were asked to submit their documentation to receive a certificate. No fees were charged to participants during the pilot.

A Participant Handbook was developed to explain the categories of learning, the modes of learning and the points earned by each kind of activity. This was delivered to each participant electronically, and also made available as part of a Frequently Asked Questions page for the pilot, accessible through the LAA Continuing Education web site

Before the start of the pilot, a teleconference training session was offered to all of the mentors, in which the contents of the Handbook were reviewed. Each mentor was assigned an equal number of participants, with care taken to ensure that no participant had a supervisor from their workplace as a mentor.

At the mid-point of the pilot, participants were surveyed to create a snapshot of how the project was progressing. The most important findings from the mid-point survey were that: most participants were able to find continuing education opportunities, about half had difficulty understanding the point system and some found that the record keeping was too complicated or too time-consuming. However, many participants reported that they appreciated the flexibility of the learning choices, the acknowledgement of ongoing learning and the fact that the system provided a way to keep track of learning. The most surprising finding was that participants wanted the program to give them more contact with others in the program, to help them build community through professional development. In response to this a Facebook page was created for the Pilot Program.

The pilot project formally ended after one year. Eight individuals, who completed and submitted their documentation, received certificates to acknowledge their having met the requirements of the program. By the end of the pilot, LAA had already decided to continue the program as a membership service to their members, whether or not The Partnership decided to implement it as a national program. Participants in the program, therefore, could choose to submit their documentation for a Pilot certificate or continue and submit their documentation at the end of the first three-year cycle.

At the end of the pilot, all participants and mentors were surveyed, with questions focusing on whether or not the program should be implemented nationally and how it could be improved. Most participants (87.5%) supported a national version of the program. In terms of improvements, participants again requested a simpler recording system, with an electronic method of recording and logging their hours. They appreciated the flexibility of the learning

and valued the fact that informal learning could be recognized. Some also valued being able to see how much they had accomplished and thought that they could apply this information in their annual performance evaluations or when applying for new jobs.

During the course of the Pilot, presentations were made at several professional conferences and formal feedback was invited from attendees. This information, together with the results of the mid-point and final surveys, was used to develop a final evaluation of the Pilot. A final report and recommendations, Document and Reveal: Library Association Continuing Education Certification Program Pilot Project⁷, was presented to The Partnership in February 2011.

Subject to a thorough cost/benefit analysis, The Partnership agreed to a national implementation of the program, with Library Association of Alberta operating the project.

Analysis of Costs and Benefits to the Associations

Library Associations in Canada are voluntary organizations, that is, there is no requirement that individuals become Association members in order to work in the field. The Associations typically charge membership fees ranging from \$20.00CAD to \$100.00CAD for personal memberships, often on a sliding scale based on income.

Some of the larger Provincial Associations employ one or more staff to direct and manage the Association's business. However, many of the programs operate through the work of volunteers. Smaller Associations operate wholly through the work of volunteers.

Library Associations offer a variety of benefits to members, often including continuing education opportunities. Volunteering for committee service is also a membership benefit, giving members opportunities to build skills and extend their professional networks.

The Continuing Education Certification Program is designed to be offered by each of the Provincial and Territorial Associations as a membership benefit. LAA will be the home Association for the program, mounting the website, developing and maintaining the national database and conducting the random compliance audits. However, members of all of the Associations will see the program delivered through their home Association and will receive their certificates through their Association. This will encourage members of the library community across Canada to subscribe to their own Associations.

The program is designed to operate on a triennium, or a three-year cycle. Because participants must be members in good standing with one of Provincial or Territorial Associations, this program will encourage members to maintain their memberships over the three-year cycle. In the final survey, when asked about the value of the program, seventy-five percent (75%) of the respondents selected the answer, that the program is "so important that I would maintain a personal membership to take part in it."

There will be costs to the Library Associations. In particular, there will be costs associated with the creation of a program-specific web site and a web-entry database.

It is clear from the participant survey that a national database for record keeping is essential. Not only does it simplify record keeping for the participants, it also ensures standardization of the record keeping, simplifies auditing, and ensures national portability of the program as participants move from Association to Association. It also places the

maintenance of individual records in the hands of the members, rather than making that work to be done by the association.

The construction of the web-entry database will incur costs. It is essential that the database be robust and that any problems, which occur with it, be resolved quickly. To this end it is more likely that it will need to be built and maintained by a web-development company, rather than by volunteers. Publicity will also need to be developed for the program and random audits conducted to ensure compliance. Finally, certificates of completion will need to be created and delivered to participants. While there will be costs associated with all of these facets of the program, much of this work can be undertaken by volunteers.

While there was no cost to participants in the one-year pilot, the final survey asked participants to respond to a hypothetical three-year cost of \$35.00, which mirrored the cost charged by the ALIA CPD Scheme. All of the respondents thought that this fee was “about right”. However, the ongoing cost of the program, which must at least operate on a cost-recovery basis, can only be established after a full cost analysis has been completed.

Depending upon the subscription levels, the Continuing Education Certification Program may supply a small revenue stream to the Associations. However, the primary benefits to Associations will be reflected in increased membership subscriptions and increased uptake of fee-based continuing education programs already in place.

For members, the benefits encompass the opportunity to develop a personal continuing education program and to be able document and reveal their learning accomplishments within a nationally comparable environment.

While The Partnership’s Continuing Education Certification Program will be developed in an electronic environment, to respond to the challenges of distance, any library Association could undertake to offer a program similar to this one. At the most basic level, it requires volunteers to organize and operate it. While paper records are cumbersome, the program can operate in a paper environment, at minimal cost. Much more important for the operation of a Continuing Education Certification Program, is the willingness of workers in the library community to come together, agree on the principles and minimum requirements and to leverage the strength of their Associations to deliver the program.

*Note:

Library Technicians are graduates of a two-year college-level-diploma program in Library and Information Technology. Canadian libraries also employ general staff, whose qualifications vary, but do not include the Masters of Library and Information Studies or the Library Technician diploma.

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Speakers' Contact Information:

Diane Clark
Staff Development and Training Librarian
University of Alberta Libraries
5-02A Cameron Library
Edmonton AB Canada
T6G 2J8
780.492.9364 phone
780.492.8302 fax
diane.clark@ualberta.ca

Allison Sivak
Assessment Librarian
Administration
University of Alberta Libraries
Edmonton AB Canada
T6G 2J8
780.492.7324 phone
allison.sivak@ualberta.ca

Sandy Campbell
J.W. Scott Health Sciences Library
University of Alberta
Edmonton, AB
Canada
780.492-7915; fax: 780.492-6960
sandy.campbell@ualberta.ca

Biographical Information:

Allison Sivak is Assessment Librarian for the University of Alberta Libraries in Edmonton, Alberta, Canada. She holds a Master of Library and Information Studies.

Diane Clark is Staff Development and Training Librarian at the University of Alberta Libraries. She holds a Master of Library and Information Studies and a Master in Education.

Sandy Campbell is a Public Services Librarian at the John W. Scott Health Sciences Library at the University of Alberta. She holds a Master of Library Science.