

Public Health Outreach Project Description

Title: Partners in Information Access for Public Health Professionals

Staff: Sharon Gray, M.L.S., Robert O'Shea, Ph.D., Jacques Berlin, Ph.D., Marcy Daumen, M.L.S., Renee Masters, M.L.S

Organization: Health Sciences Library, University at Buffalo

Date: 1998-2000

Objectives:

Objective (1): To provide a series of regularly scheduled workshops throughout the course of the project on: searching the Internet; accessing Internet resources available from the National Library of Medicine, Centers for Disease Control, New York State Health Department, and the University at Buffalo (including the Health Sciences Library) and other relevant sites; advanced search strategy; and discipline-specific Internet resources.

Objective (2): To promote and provide consultation with reference librarians on search strategy, database selection, and resource referral for public health professionals in Western New York.

Objective (3): To facilitate Internet access to those county health departments in the seventeen counties of western and central New York that do not already have it.

Objective (4): To develop Web sites linking relevant information resources for public health professionals in this region.

Objective (5): To provide instruction on assessing the quality of information resources retrieved.

Objective (6): To assess the information retrieval skills of the public health professionals participating in the project.

Objective (7): To provide interlibrary loan service through Loansome Doc.

Target Audience:

Approximately 700 public health professionals who work in the seventeen counties served by the Western Regional Office of the New York State Health Department.

Needs assessment (methodology and results):

During the second quarter of the project a survey was sent to the professional staff in the 17 county health departments and the regional office of the state health department. This asked about the means they used to obtain information and the degree of access they had to computers and the Internet.

Intervention:

The workshops were sequenced so participants could attain a basic knowledge of the Internet and resources, and then build on that knowledge to develop advanced searching techniques and familiarize themselves with discipline-specific Web resources. The workshops were offered nine times each in two locations so participants could attend when they were most ready or had a need for the information.

The workshops included instruction that addressed search strategy recommendations found during the literature review for the preparation of the grant proposal.

The workshop series consisted of:

Part 1. Basic Internet instruction. This training consisted of a 2-hour class with hands-on practice for novice Internet users on how to navigate the Internet, the different search engines available, and how to evaluate Internet resources so all participants would have a basic level of experience in searching the Internet.

Part 2. Half-day training on PubMed, Internet Grateful Med, Internet resources from the Centers for Disease Control, New York State Health Department, the University at Buffalo, and the Health Sciences Library (University at Buffalo).

Part 3. Advanced search strategy training including MESH, bibliographic database structure, and indexing for active users of PubMed or Internet Grateful Med. 2 hours.

Part 4. Discipline-specific training sessions on nursing, health education, mental health, and environmental health Internet resources. 1.5 hours each.

Training and other materials developed:

Syllabi and handouts.

Website (developed as part of project):

<http://ublib.buffalo.edu/libraries/units/hsl/ref/publichealth.html>

The web site is maintained by Sharon Gray and Renee Masters.

Evaluation (methodology and results):

An initial survey assessment was conducted with all of the participating departments to determine their level of computer and Internet access.

At the end of each workshop an evaluation form was given to each attendee to assess the effectiveness of the content and presentation.

There was an informal mid-point assessment of those who attended training to determine whether adjustments in the curriculum needed to be made.

A slight variation of the baseline survey was sent again at the conclusion of the project to all professional staff to determine whether their methods for finding information had changed during the course of the project. Results have not yet been analyzed.

The number of Loansome Doc requests UB HSL received from health departments was monitored to determine the extent to which participants were requesting interlibrary loans. Only thirty requests were submitted to the UB HSL during the course of the project.

Poster Sessions/Exhibits/Presentations/Publications:

Gary Byrd gave a Powerpoint presentation on the project at a meeting of resource library directors at New York Academy of Medicine during Quarter 2.

Partnerships:

The Western Regional Office of the New York State Department of Health and each of the 7 county health departments provided a staff liaison whose responsibility was to coordinate with the Outreach Librarian on scheduling, registration, and post-training follow-up. Faculty from the University at Buffalo Department of Social and Preventive Medicine collaborated extensively on all aspects of the project. The Office of Medical Computing at the University at Buffalo School of Medicine and Biomedical Sciences authorized use of its computing lab for the workshops held in Buffalo. Ziff-Davis training center, Finger Lakes Community College, and Erie 2 CC BOCES in Fredonia provided computer labs for training held in other locations throughout the area. University at Buffalo Department of Library and Information Studies students participated in practica to assist with the design and development of relevant Web sites and to assist the Outreach Librarian during the workshops.

Marketing:

When funding was announced, the University's news bureau prepared a press release and the project was publicized in the *Buffalo News*, the *UB Reporter*, *Buffalo Business First*, *HSL The Periodical*, and the Syracuse newspaper. A column in the *Buffalo Physician* (Winter 2000:18) featured the project Web site. Publicity about the project appeared in:

The *Buffalo Physician*

The SUNY Librarians Association *Newsletter*

"Western Region Report," *PHA Perspectives: A Quarterly Newsletter of the New York State Public Health Association*, Summer 1999, p. 4.

"Area Health Professionals Benefit from Prestigious National Award to HSL," *Access: A Newsletter from the University at Buffalo Libraries*, Autumn 1999 p. 3.

There were links to the project from the HSL and NN/LM region web sites.

Administrative issues:

- Indirect costs required by the University administration used half of the funding that was allocated.
- Due to time constraints and other priorities, the project director could not dedicate sufficient time to overseeing the project.
- The Project Librarian could only be funded half-time. With more funding, the Project Librarian could have assumed more responsibility for the project.
- It was better to schedule workshops in smaller computer labs because there was more discussion, questions, and the ability to immediately customize the workshops based on individual needs.
- The workshops were originally scheduled on consecutive days. This was later adjusted when it became apparent that it was difficult for health department staff to be away from their offices for two days in a row.
- Scheduling the UB Medical School computing lab was not reliable.

Challenges Faced:

- Obtaining adequate computer lab space at no charge throughout region required persistence.
- Advising project participants on interlibrary loan mechanics was a challenge because of the size of the region and the multiplicity of libraries and library systems available to serve the health departments.
- No-shows were an ongoing problem.
- Turnover in project staff (Marcy Daumen) and advisors (Neville Prendergast and Jeanne Fielding)
- HSL instruction coordinator, who was an advisor to the project and left during Quarter 2, was not replaced till Quarter 6.
- The enthusiasm and willingness of health department liaisons to promote the project within their agencies proved to be the most reliable indicator of participation levels.
- Periodic on-site visits by the Outreach Librarian would have helped to maintain interest in the project.
- There was inadequate research support for analyzing the survey data.
- Formal networking between project staff and a mentor and other project directors would have been helpful.
- Novice Internet users expected to find the full text of all relevant information for free on the Internet.
- The cost of ILL and its mechanics were a barrier to obtaining articles identified in bibliographic database searches.
- There was minimal participation from departments that did not have adequate Internet/computer access.

- The PubMed search interface changed during the project without notice. This required updating and revision of the curricula and handouts for the two MEDLINE workshops.
- Differences among the 18 participating agencies such as size, amount of computer access, and urban versus rural setting, posed challenges.

Were Project Objectives Met?

Yes.

Sustainability:

The web site that was developed to provide links to relevant sites for regional public health professionals and the discussion list will be maintained by the library.

Anecdotes or Other Observations:

Participants commented that they had not developed “the habit” of using the computer to help meet their information needs before the workshops were offered.

“Kudos to you and your staff on a thorough and informative web page. The Health Science Library’s links for Public Health Professionals represent a job well done, and a real service to us in the public health community.”

“I love them [public health links] and use them frequently if not daily...I have also referred them to others who did not get to the seminars you held last summer.”

“I didn’t realize how valuable the links page could be. This could make it easier for me to do research.”

“Thanks for setting up the public health listserv. I have already printed out many useful journal articles from the free medical journal links you gave us!!!”

“I’m so glad I joined this listserv. I don’t have the time to look into all the web sites that could help me, so I really appreciate it!”

Workshop participants expressed enthusiasm about materials found through PubMed. “This is exactly the kind of information we need!”

Workshop attendees commented that they were surprised at how quickly they learned to navigate the Web.