Launching the Leadership Academy

by Elizabeth Hensley

In April 2010, the Virginia Library Association (VLA) launched the Virginia Library Leadership Academy (VALLA), the first-ever leadership development training program of its kind for staff in Virginia libraries. This article explains how VALLA evolved and how you can participate in VALLA 2012.

The Virginia Library Association approved the formation of the Leadership Development Forum (LDF) in early 2007 after a prompt from newly elected VLA President Pat Howe and the submission of a petition that included twenty signatures of current VLA members. As part of the process for requesting approval of the creation of the LDF, we submitted the following:

Purpose:

• To encourage and support the development of current and future library leaders, whether professional or paraprofessional, in all types of libraries in Virginia

Objectives:

• To develop a training program for library supervisors upon assessing needs and investigating potential models for such a program
• To provide members with information regarding additional continuing education opportunities for professional development
• To increase awareness of the ways that professionals and paraprofessionals can take leadership roles in VLA

We held our first meeting on May 4, 2007, at the Ashland Branch of Pamunkey Regional Library. We introduced ourselves and talked about why we were drawn to this forum, what we hoped it would be, and how we could make it work. We wanted to provide Virginia library employees working in a supervisory capacity the opportunity

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to develop themselves as leaders and hone their management skills. We discussed how one administration course in library school did not necessarily prepare professionals for the practical aspects of managing, coaching, and training staff. We thought paraprofessionals working as supervisors also deserved the same opportunity. While lack of preparation can create stress for the supervisor, the far-reaching consequences of poor leadership ultimately affect frontline staff and the patrons we serve. We wanted this program to address those issues.

In order to gather information to support our purpose and objectives, we developed a plan. We decided to survey VLA members to determine how valuable they thought a leadership training pro-

gram in our state would be and what topics they would like the training to address. We also determined that we needed to research other examples of leadership training models to see what could work for us.

New Jersey's "Super Library Supervisors" initiative was one of the models we wanted to investigate. Fortunately for us, one of the founders of the program, Claudia Sumler, was willing to come speak with us. Sumler had been the director of Camden County Library when she lived in New Jersey, but she had recently become the public services administrator for Harford County Public Library in Maryland. We were grateful that she took a day out of her own busy schedule to drive to Fredericksburg, explain how the New Jersey program began, and give us advice about what we could do to ensure that our effort would be successful.

One of the forum's members, Michele Brown of Central Rappahannock Regional Library, compiled a list of other leadership training models that included the following:

• California Library Leadership Training Program

Elizabeth Hensley *is the past-chair of the Leadership Development Forum. She has worked in public libraries for more than twenty years and has been the adult services coordinator of the Culpeper County Library for the past seven years. She can be reached at ehensley@cclva.org.*

- Leading from Any Position: A Workshop for Leadership Development, California Library Association
- Florida Library Leadership Program, State Library and Archives of Florida
- Maryland Library Leadership Institute
- MPLA Leadership Institute, Mountain Plains Library Association
- Nebraska Library Leadership Institutes, Nebraska Regional Library Systems and Nebraska Library Commission
- New England Library Leadership Symposium (NELLS)
- North Carolina Library Association Leadership Institute
- Public Library Institute for New and Creative Leadership Education (PINNACLE), Georgia Public Library Service
- Sun Seekers Leadership Institute, SEFLIN Leadership Institutes, Southeast Florida Library Information Network
- Synergy: The Illinois Library Leadership Initiative 2007, Illinois State Library
- TALL Texans Leadership Development Institute

We also reviewed an excellent article by Florence M. Mason and Louella V. Wetherbe from the summer 2004 issue of *Library Trends*, "Learning to Lead: An Analysis of Current Training Programs for Library Leadership," which summarized current library leadership training programs and made recommendations for future programs to teach a consistent set of skills and competencies.[1]

During the last few months of 2007, our meetings focused on creating our survey of the membership. Thanks to Cindy Church, continuing education consultant for the Library of Virginia, we were able to send out the survey in January 2008 using the state library's SurveyMonkey account. (VLA has since subscribed to its own SurveyMonkey account.) We sent the survey out to all of VLA's electronic lists as well as to the state's VALIB list. We reviewed the results in March. The forum's current chair, Steve Hartung, wrote an article for *Virginia Libraries* detailing the results of that survey.[2]

Of the 319 responses we received from the survey, 93 percent of respondents said that this type of training program was either "Very Important" or "Important." The most desired topics for training included technology trends,

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planning and needs assessment, managing from the middle, and personnel management.

After reviewing the survey results that confirmed we should move forward, we began discussing the format of our training. Should we have a variety of one-day workshops held over a number of weeks or months? Should we try to have a week-long retreat where participants could immerse themselves in leadership concepts? Should we join our efforts with an existing program at a nearby university? Should we hold it in conjunction with the annual VLA conference?

We realized that holding multiple one-day events could be problematic in terms of consistent attendance on the part of the participants. We also thought that option created some challenges in finding a trainer or trainers for each workshop. We thought the retreat idea was appealing because it gave participants a chance to get away from their typical work environment and focus on the program contents. But we knew we would have difficulty in providing an affordable retreat if it lasted an entire week. Some LDF members pointed out how difficult it would be for participants to get away from their jobs for an entire week, even if the idea was appealing. When some members suggested offering the training as a preconference event along with the annual conference, other members voiced the same concerns about being out of the office for so many days in a row. Factoring in concerns about time and affordability, we decided on a two-day workshop that would be held at a different time than the annual conference. In trying to work around potential weather issues and other popular conferences, such as the American Library Association's annual conference, the Public Library Association's biennial conference in March, and "Computers in Libraries" every spring, we ultimately decided to hold our program during the latter half of April.

At about the same time, we also chose the name "Virginia Library Leadership Academy." Many words were suggested for the ultimate spot in the name, such as "institute," "retreat," and "boot camp." "Academy" connoted a place where learning occurs, which underscored our goal of having this program be a transformative experience for attendees.

We then needed to determine our location and our consultant. In discussing options for the location, fiscal concerns were also at the forefront. While holding the program in a more urban area would potentially give us more venue options, we also knew that it would cost more and increase the registration amount for participants. We

were also conscious of trying to keep the location as central as possible, even though Virginia's elongated foot to the west makes that goal almost impossible to achieve for the library employees who work in far-flung Region 1. So we focused our attention toward the central-western side of the state.

Charlottesville was the meeting place for the VLA Council at the time. One of our members, Connie Gilman, had served as cochair in 2008. Recently elected as VLA Secretary, she was familiar with the hotel that housed VLA Executive Committee members the night between Executive Committee meetings and VLA Council meetings. She suggested we investigate the English Inn of Charlottesville because they had worked well with VLA for the council meetings and because they appeared to offer everything we would need for our event. We also considered Natural Bridge Hotel, Hotel Roanoke, Graves Mountain Lodge, the Florence Elston Inn at Sweet Briar College, the Courtyard Marriott in Roanoke, and the Hilton Garden Inn in Lynchburg. After getting price quotes for the rooms, meeting room, and equipment, we ended up with a close race between the English Inn and the Florence Elston Inn. Ultimately, the catering for the English Inn made it a more affordable option, and that became the venue for the Virginia Library Leadership Academy.

In the midst of researching location options, we were also selecting potential consultants. It was important to us to find a consultant who had the expertise, experience, and willingness to customize a program to our specifications. We contacted nationally known consultants who had worked with other leadership institutes and checked on their rates to see if they were even viable options for our limited budget. Some quotes were so far beyond our price range,

Dr. Robert Burgin

it would have been pointless to request a proposal from those consultants. We did receive three official proposals and had a narrow vote between two of them. One consultant had the expertise in leadership training we desired, but not the library experience we thought so valuable.

We hired Dr. Robert Burgin, whose varied background working in libraries and teaching library school courses at North Carolina Central University impressed us. The more we worked with him to develop the program, the more we realized what a great fit he was for us. He went out of his way to tailor program content to our specifications. He exuded authority and knowledge, but had a flexible and approachable working style.

He created the content for the two-day training program in Charlottesville, but was also willing to work with participants ahead of time through a Google group. This allowed us to address some content without taking up precious on-site time. During the on-site portion,

Burgin built in group exercises and role-playing to help attendees practice handling real-life scenarios in addition to giving practical tips on leading oneself and others.

He also supported our goal of having each participant complete a project within a year after the on-site portion. This component was suggested by Sarah Smith, a member of the LDF who had graduated from the North Carolina Library Association Leadership Institute. The project is intended to help participants and their sponsoring libraries derive a tangible benefit from the training and to give participants the chance to exercise their leadership skills in heading a project of their choice.

After determining our format, location, consultant, and content, we still needed to determine our budget and find a way to make it affordable for participants with the economy in turmoil and with libraries eliminating their continuing education budgets. We were fortunate that the VLA Foundation moved the funds from its accounts into a special professional endowment fund for VLA. Financial assistance from that fund allowed us to lower the registration rate by more than $100 for each participant.

We then turned our focus to designing the application. We also needed to convert it to an electronic format, since VLA wanted to digitize all forms. We are grateful for the assistance of Christine White, administrative services librarian at Williamsburg Regional Library, for helping us with this conversion. Even though she was not officially a member of the LDF, we could not have created our electronic application without her.

We also needed to publicize VALLA. With the assistance of Sean Bonney, head graphic designer at Central Rappahannock Regional Library (CRRL), and Lisa Varga, who was in charge of human resources and staff training there at

that time (Lisa is now executive director of VLA), we managed to produce hundreds of flyers to promote VALLA and get them into all the VLA conference bags.

Our application was ready in conjunction with the annual conference at the end of October 2009. Applications were due to the LDF in mid-January.

With the dramatic change in the economy, we were concerned that we might not receive enough applications to make VALLA happen, but after extending the deadline and flooding the electronic lists with encouraging emails, we ended up with twenty-three applicants. We had space for twenty-four. Even though we envision a competitive application process in the future, it was good to be able to offer a spot to everyone who wanted one for the first session.

The first VALLA cohort included two participants from Region I, six from Region II, two from Region III, five from Region IV, seven from Region V, and one from Region VI. While many already held leadership roles, it's worth noting that following the academy, two went on to become heads of youth services departments; three rose to the height of director or interim director; and one each became an assistant manager, public services manager, or archivist. The participants included Rhonda Belyea, Nan B. Carmack, Mary Catherine Coleman, Toni Cox, Daza Craig,

Myra Cramer, Sara Elisa Rollins, M. Teresa Doherty, Barbara Dawn Fisher, Olivia Kardos, Karen A. Kuhn, Deborah Lammers, Jody Lewandowski, Elizabeth Marsh, Nicole McGee, Chandra McPherson, Kirk Morrison, Autumn Reinhardt Simpson, Jason Rodgers,

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Judith Rodriguez, Nancy Schleh, Sandra Shell, and Jaime Stoops.

We are now working on VALLA 2012, scheduled for April 30–May 1 at the English Inn in Charlottesville. We had always intended that VALLA would occur again and again to give all interested library staff in Virginia the chance to participate if they so wished. We knew holding one every year would be too frequent and too difficult while we were also overseeing the project portion from the previous cohort. We considered every three years, but that would require a nine-year commitment from the LDF chair, since our

chair structure is similar to that of VLA presidents, with a chair-elect, chair, and past-chair. This structure allows for continuity, consistency, the transfer of knowledge, and a way to balance the workload. With VALLA occurring biennially, it requires a six-year commitment from each chair. Steve Hartung is the LDF chair for VALLA 2012 and Sarah Smith is currently interim chair-elect, so she will become the chair for VALLA 2014 when Hartung becomes past-chair.

The commitment demonstrated by the LDF members who have worked tirelessly to make VALLA a reality is the same kind of commitment we are looking for in VALLA participants. Whether or not you are a professional or paraprofessional, if you are dedicated to the profession, enthusiastic about developing yourself, and looking for ways to support others in their professional development, we think VALLA is for you. Applications for VALLA 2012 are currently available at vla.org.

Notes

1. Florence M. Mason and Louella V. Wetherbe, "Learning to Lead: An Analysis of Current Training Programs for Library Leadership," *Library Trends* 53.1 (2004): 187–217.

2. Steven Hartung, "Survey Results for Emerging Library Leaders," *Virginia Libraries* 54.2 (April/May/June 2008): 29. **VL**