

OWLSnet Competencies for Library Staff

1. Background

At the May AAC meeting, OWLSnet libraries identified staff competencies, both OWLSnet competencies and general technology competencies, as an important topic to be addressed as part of the OWLSnet planning process. This paper is an attempt to outline issues related to establishing staff competencies and providing training that would enable staff to achieve established competencies. The intent of this paper is to generate discussion by OWLSnet libraries that can be used in formulating a new OWLSnet plan.

However, in the course of preparing this paper, it became clear that OWLSnet competencies and general technology competencies should be handled separately. They are alike in that they are both “things you need to know to do your job,” but there are many differences as well. For instance, while libraries are not likely to make OWLS competencies a hiring criteria (i.e., libraries can’t expect potential staffers to know how to operate Sierra or understand OWLSnet policies), they can and should make general technology competencies a hiring criteria (i.e., potential staffers can be required to understand an operating system, know how to search Google, etc.). OWLS competencies are likely to change less frequently than general technologies, and we’re more involved in changes, making them easier to document. General technology competencies change quickly, can be more difficult to assess, and are likely to vary more from library to library. While member library staff need to possess competencies that enable them to use OWLSnet and general technologies effectively, the processes for establishing competencies and providing training seem to be different.

While it might be possible for OWLSnet to provide general technology training in the future, currently such training would be the individual responsibility of the libraries and systems, i.e., NFLS and OWLS. Consequently, this background paper will focus exclusively on OWLSnet competencies.

2. Potential goals of establishing OWLSnet competencies and related training for staff

There are likely to be many potential benefits in addressing OWLSnet competencies, and goals for this program could include the following:

- Develop a list of minimum OWLSnet competencies required of all member library staff or all library staff who use Sierra.
- Enable staff to apply OWLSnet software, hardware, skills, policies, and procedures appropriately in order to increase efficiency in daily tasks.
- Enable staff to answer patrons’ OWLSnet-related questions, including helping patrons manage their library accounts or use library-specific electronic resources such as InfoSoup and OverDrive.
- Enable staff to answer reference questions using OWLSnet-provided electronic resources.
- Reduce the incidence of mistakes made because staff are uncertain about the application of OWLSnet policies and procedures.
- Reduce the incidence of mistakes that require system staff intervention to fix.

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- Train staff to know when OWLSnet policies and procedures apply and when local library decisions take precedence.
- Train staff to understand the difference between OWLSnet policies and recommendations.
- Simplify policies and procedures that cause confusion and errors among staff and patrons.
- Create a better awareness of OWLSnet training opportunities available to member library staff.

3. Challenges to establishing OWLSnet competencies and creating a training plan

There are likely to be many challenges related to establishing a list of OWLSnet competencies and providing training to staff, including the following:

- Identifying a comprehensive list of OWLSnet competencies that is agreeable to system staff and member libraries might be difficult and time consuming.
- A list of OWLSnet competencies would require regular updating. Sierra has regular updates, and policies and procedures change.
- Expectations for minimum staff competency vary between libraries, among staff, and among supervisors. Factors that might influence minimum expectations for staff include pay and benefit levels, hours worked, and turnover incidence.
- Libraries have different staff structures and different needs. If we develop a program that's too broad, it may not be as useful. If it's too specific, then it may not be applicable to every library.
- OWLSnet library staff have a wide range of current skill levels. There is no common starting point. Even the most technically skilled people have gaps in their knowledge. People don't know what they don't know.
- Difficulties with OWLSnet competencies may result from underlying gaps in general technology competencies. Many library employees do not regularly use newer technologies at home or in other aspects of their employment. Some may not have a natural affinity for technology.
- Consortium structures and relationships are complex. Staff may have difficulty understanding how OWLSnet, OWLS, NFLS, and local library policies and procedures fit together.
- OWLSnet staff are not trained to be trainers. We need to find ways to effectively teach people who have a variety of technical backgrounds and learning styles. Teaching technology through technology is not an effective way to reach the technology averse, but on-site training is limited by time and expense.
- Many people fear technology, fear change, fear failure and thus might resist any externally imposed standard for OWLSnet competency.
- The relevancy of OWLSnet competencies must be clearly communicated. Staff must feel that the skills are useful, or they will not be interested learning them.
- Some staff members are not comfortable calling OWLS for assistance, which could impede the implementation of a training plan.

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- Information that system staff give to directors, or official contacts, is not always passed along to all appropriate library staff. This may be a reflection of differing expectations for what staff need to know.
- OWLSnet information can't all be found in one place – information is in a lot of different places.
- OWLSnet doesn't do a great job of communicating the application of OWLSnet policies and procedures.
- OWLSnet staff doesn't help much with general technology competencies.

4. Possible approaches to developing, and training staff in, OWLSnet competencies

There are many possible approaches to proceeding with OWLSnet competencies including:

- Develop an OWLSnet competency certification program. Staff members who complete required training could be called OWLSnet certified, OWLSnet guru, or OWLSnet certified Sierra guru. Would a certification program lead to the problem of staff saying – well, that's the OWLSnet guru's question to answer? We don't want to silo the information; we want to spread it out.
- Provide a list of OWLSnet competencies to member libraries for their internal use. This would be less work than developing a comprehensive training program, but it would still require some work to maintain the list of competencies. Creating a list doesn't solve the skills problem. How would libraries use the list?
- Convene a committee of OWLSnet administrators and frontline staff representing libraries of all sizes to compile a list of required OWLSnet competencies to guide on-the-job training priorities and to be used as benchmarks in performance reviews for existing staff. Update the list annually.
- From the list of competencies, AAC members could identify a few critical areas in which OWLSnet could provide training, whether through self-directed lessons, in-library training, or classroom training.
- OWLSnet could provide a "train the planner" workshop at which an expert trains library directors and/or key staff on how to develop and implement a training plan specific to their own library. This approach addresses unique location-specific needs, but is unlikely to result in implementation of a shared minimum standard for OWLSnet competencies.
- Develop a common training curriculum and provide self-paced, online OWLSnet training.
- Each library identifies its own OWLSnet training priorities and submits them to OWLS. OWLSnet staff provides resources and/or develops training to meet these needs, prioritizing competencies that are identified by the most libraries.

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5. Ingredients for success

The following elements are likely to contribute to a successful implementation:

- Vocabulary is critical! We could develop an OWLSnet glossary.
- Administrators must promote and model a culture of ongoing training. This includes providing regular training opportunities on work time and regular opportunities to practice skills once acquired.
- Integrate OWLSnet skills as professional development goals into the performance evaluation process for staff.
- Training should be developed according to research-based principles of adult education. Adults learn best when:
 - Learning is self-directed; they have a say in content.
 - Learning relates to and builds on their own experiences.
 - They need to learn; are motivated.
 - They know why the content is important and relevant.
 - They can apply new knowledge and skills immediately.
- Communicate information about competencies and training opportunities to all members of staff.
- Develop a procedure for libraries and/or staff to request training.
- Reinforce learning by encouraging/requiring staff to teach others.
- Provide recognition for staff members who achieve learning goals. Encourage staff to set goals beyond minimum competencies and establish rewards for achievement of those goals.

6. Questions for discussion

OWLSnet competencies and general technology competencies were identified at the May AAC meeting as a planning priority. However, at that meeting very little guidance was given for developing a background paper on the issue. While this paper may or may not appropriately capture the issues related to OWLSnet competencies, it is intended to be a starting point for discussion.

Prior to the November 9th AAC meeting, please come prepared to discuss the following questions in order to help better define the issue of OWLSnet competencies.

- When it comes to using OWLSnet, what do you think your staff could be doing better?
- Are there OWLSnet activities that you wish could be simplified?
- How does your library intend to use any OWLSnet competencies that might be established?

Of course, any other comments or thoughts about this background paper may be expressed at the AAC meeting and would be greatly appreciated.