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Utilizing Student Workers at the Digital Library of Georgia

By Mandy Mastrovita and Donnie Summerlin

Introduction

Like many other library departments in higher education, digital libraries depend upon student workers to accomplish tasks that in previous days would have been assigned to professional staff members. This paper describes how the Digital Library of Georgia (DLG) hires, trains, manages, and mentors student workers. Student employees at the DLG have included undergraduate students and graduate students in MLIS programs; we have addressed these varying levels of skill and experience in incorporating the students into different project workflows. We discuss hiring procedures and instruction in the following digital library areas: handling archival materials, digital imaging, basic metadata entry, more advanced metadata remediation, subject analysis, and social media/promotion. We examine how cross training students in different task areas has improved efficiency, and provide examples of how we have encouraged student workers to pursue fulfilling library careers.

Hiring Procedures

When hiring student employees, the DLG's job description emphasizes a need for students with technological skills and great attention to detail. We send a questionnaire to every applicant requesting information about their major, schedule, work experience, and grade point average. Manley and Holley (2014, 80) argue in their article "Hiring and Training Work-Study Students: A Case Study," that it is "more likely for students who are serious about their studies to be serious about their jobs." The DLG has certainly found this to be true and heavily emphasizes a student's grade point average when selecting applicants to interview. Ideally, we search for students interested in a library career, or with majors in computer science, history, journalism, and English, but are willing to hire students with various interests if they are exceptional candidates. During the interview process, we ask more in-depth questions and administer an editing test to assess their attention to detail. Our hiring process has proven extremely successful and has resulted in high quality employees and excellent retention rates.

Imaging

The DLG often asks students to scan government documents, crop newspaper page and archival document images, and rename digital image files. Imaging is perhaps the most integral step in producing and delivering online digital materials and requires a great level of attention to detail. If digital images are improperly captured or delivered, it can be more expensive and troublesome to fix the problem once a project is complete. Imaging work introduces students to scanning and imaging software and impresses the necessity of implementing digital archival standards (such as those for image capture and file naming), all important to learn before students are assigned more complex tasks in the overall digitization workflow.

Handling archival materials

Since students are working with sensitive materials the same way a professional archivist would, the DLG trains them in many of the

principles of archival work. Students are required to sign an expectations and responsibilities form that emphasizes the security and safeguarding of archival materials. They are also required to read through a set of workflow instructions that require them to handle items with clean, dry hands, or, when encountering materials sensitive to direct handling, to wear cotton gloves, and to turn pages gently. Additionally, the students learn not to rearrange the order of items in the folders and boxes that materials arrive in. Staff members also teach the students how to operate the scanners and set file structures for the resulting digital files.

In addition to the added responsibility of handling archival materials, it can also be rewarding and educational for the students involved. As Miller and Morton (2012) suggest in their article "Hidden Learning: Undergraduates at Work in the Archives," hiring students to work in an archival setting provides "an exceptional opportunity for applied learning under the guidance of professional archivists who can provide for the growth of intellectual and practical skills." In a digital library, the opportunity includes the added dimension of connecting their understanding of history with the expanding digital world that they were born into.

Metadata

Emily Gainer and Michelle Mascaro's 2014 case study "Faster Digital Output: Using Student Workers to Create Metadata for a Grant-Funded Project" closes a gap in library and archival literature on determining what kind of metadata work can successfully be delegated to student workers; their grant project involved simpler tasks, such as creating inventories, and more complex work, such as the assignment of subject headings.

The DLG assigns numerous descriptive metadata tasks to undergraduate students that are simple, such as transcriptions and editing

XML elements that cannot be adjusted with regular expressions. Some tasks require more judgement and training. We also work with MLIS graduate students who have been introduced to digital library and cataloging work, assigning them advanced tasks that apply cataloging and metadata best practices. Their work includes analyzing and remediating harvested XML records for inclusion in the DLG's portal. Upgrading these records involves editing Dublin Core fields to ensure that the data complies with the DLG's metadata guidelines and applying Library of Congress subject headings. Training the graduate student involved showing her how to harvest records, to use tools to quickly make changes to multiple records, to familiarize her with our metadata guidelines, and to enhance Georgia-specific data in our subject headings. Shan Lorraine Martinez (2014, 557) notes in her article "Training Tech Services' Student Employees Well: Evidence-based Training Techniques in Conjunction with Coaching and Mentoring Strategies" that "Along with direct, face-to-face instruction or blended training methods, the supervisor should provide a written training manual. Easy accessibility in the form of a blog or LibGuide may encourage use at the point of need."

Our metadata guidelines are made available in our departmental wiki. We also provided our graduate student with examples of records to refer to as she grasped concepts moving forward. We showed her how to use ClassificationWeb for subject analysis and taught her how basic text editing programs could be used for running regular expressions and editing the XML records. Martinez (2014, 557) also recommends "...when initiating the employee training process, supervisors should remember the challenges they themselves met while acquiring all the information they needed to know in order to perform their jobs competently...Overloading new employees with too much detailed information in training sessions will result in mistakes and frustration." With this in mind, we worked together with the

student on several smaller groups of records, so that she could incrementally build her confidence and feel comfortable asking questions as she referred to her written training materials.

Conversion project for veteran students

As students demonstrate increased proficiency in their work, the DLG often assigns them more complex and diversified tasks. A recent example of this is one student's work on a digital newspaper conversion project. The DLG has been working to reformat our newspaper archive sites to make them more user-friendly, which involved training an experienced student to learn and execute a conversion workflow, a responsibility previously reserved for staff members. This workflow included the use of optical character recognition software to create full text XML records for user searching. She also learned to use imaging software to produce newspaper page derivatives (PDF, JPEG, and JPEG 2000 files). Additionally, the student was responsible for adding image dimension fields to our pre-existing metadata and altering other fields to meet changing technical requirements. This student's work led to a significant increase in the rate of conversion and the completion of several projects ahead of schedule, and resulted in her winning a University of Georgia Top 100 Student Employee Award.

Cross Training

To meet the growing needs of the DLG, it has become necessary to train students in multiple technical duties, including imaging, metadata, quality control, and the scanning of archival materials. Cross-training has improved efficiency and has given us the ability to assign students to different projects as funding shifts and deadlines approach. Draper, Hall, Oswalt, and Renfro (2008), in their article "Student Workers: Cross Training in the Academic Environment," discuss the benefits training students in the various service points at Stephen F. Austin State University's Steen

Library. They conclude that cross training students and assigning them to different departments (in the DLG's case, different projects) improves flexibility and keeps students interested in their work. This has certainly been the case at the DLG, where cross training students has been beneficial both to the efficiency of the department and the employment experience of our students.

Social Media

We give some students the opportunity and time to research the many collections that the DLG makes available online and construct their own Facebook posts from items they have found to be intriguing. We give them basic parameters (to write professionally and to convey the breadth of our collections). Social media assignments provide students with the opportunity to develop a more global view of DLG projects and project partners. Students have had the most direct input with our "Throwback Thursday" project, which has allowed students to compose posts on their own and to develop a professional social media voice. We have utilized a Google spreadsheet so that students can "bank" future posts and staff can still perform quality control. As Hagman and Carleton (2014, 243) note in their article "Better Together: Collaborating with Students on Library Social Media," it is important to appreciate "that sometimes their voice or approach to developing content may not always be the same as your own." We try to recognize that a student's approach to a Facebook post may be more casual than that of a librarian or archivist, but it may also convey a liveliness that appeals to our readers.

Impact on students' careers

Research suggests that one of the most significant factors influencing a library student worker's decision to join the library profession is a positive workplace environment (Maxey-Harris, Cross, McFarland 2010). The DLG has embraced this approach toward attracting

students to the profession. We have incorporated a successful supervision strategy over the past decade that emphasizes positive reinforcement, constructive criticism, and diversification of the work experiences of the students through cross training. A majority of students hired during the past decade have remained with the DLG until their graduation. The high retention rate not only reduces the inefficiency of training new employees, but also exposes the students to a positive library environment for a longer time. As a result, several of the organization's student employees have gone on to careers in the library field.

Digital libraries can also play a unique role in broadening the definition of librarianship to student employees and potential future librarians. Reference and circulation librarians are most commonly associated with the profession due largely to the public nature of their work. As a result, students frequently identify librarianship with those roles. One former student employee who became a private school librarian remembered, "The DLG was my first experience working around the field, and it was surprising to see how many different definitions a librarian could have. I liked the idea of having a career that could be so multifaceted, and the field has definitely been shifting and changing as technology becomes more integral in our lives." This

diversification of the identity of librarianship is a valuable tool for attracting students who might find interest in lesser known aspects of the profession.

Conclusion

Thanks to the efforts of our student workers, the DLG manages to consistently work towards satisfying the demand for online cultural heritage resources. Our success has come from recruiting students who have performed well academically, providing them with basic training in archival principles and digitization standards, and gradually building upon those skills by training them to perform more complex tasks, such as conversion projects or metadata remediation. Through cross training, these students become familiar with different projects and further engage themselves with our department. We then solicit the input of deeply immersed students to promote our resources through social media. All the while, we mentor them as colleagues and encourage them to further their professional interests in libraries and archives.

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