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Digital Partners — An Incremental Approach to Supporting Digital Scholarship on Your Campus

Tim Bucknall

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Digital Partners — An Incremental Approach to Supporting Digital Scholarship on Your Campus

by **Tim Bucknall** (Asst. Dean of University Libraries, UNCG; and Founder and Convener, Carolina Consortium)
<bucknall@uncg.edu>

Introduction

With the arrival of each young, newly hired faculty member on our campuses, our research output shifts slightly from traditional to digital scholarship. Libraries nationally want and need to be part of this slow but inexorable change within the academy; to ignore digital scholarship is to deny our inevitable future. Many libraries have responded by successfully implementing digital scholarship centers that are capable of supporting a wide variety of projects and technologies, and can do so at scale. But how can small and medium libraries get from "here" to "there"? Most libraries lack the resources, staff, and expertise to launch a large, well supported digital scholarship initiative. Perhaps what is needed is an interim step that will allow academic libraries to engage and support faculty digital scholarship, with modest initial resources and controlled growth as demand increases.

Digital Partners

In 2015, there was a growing interest in new models of scholarship at the **University of North Carolina at Greensboro**. To address this need, faculty began creating a digital scholarship center proposal that unfortunately included only minimal library involvement. The **UNCG Libraries** found themselves in a difficult situation. If we failed to come up with a viable solution to expressed faculty needs, our opportunity to lead (or even to be significantly involved with) our university's digital scholarship efforts might be lost forever. But we had little time to develop a response. And, because this occurred during a year of budget cuts and belt tightening, we lacked the resources to move forward aggressively. Given the situation, creating a library digital scholarship center was impossible. But failing to respond at all was not an option. The **UNCG Libraries** chose a middle path by creating Digital Partners, an internal grant program that allowed us to support the most pressing and creative faculty digital scholarship concepts, while allowing us to strictly control the allocation of our very limited resources.

Digital Partners is a competitive grant program, with annual calls for proposals. A joint library/faculty committee reviews the proposals and selects the ones that best meet the program's criteria. Successful applicants are granted library staff expertise and time. Most of that comes from the Library's IT department, in the form of website development, user interface creation, and database design and development. But successful applicants have also been granted time from Special Collections and University Archives (for a local history project, and for personal archiving); from Scholarly Communications (for eBook creation); and from Technical Services (for metadata consultation and creation). Our stated cap on staff time allocated to Digital Partners is one half of an FTE per year.

Given that these projects are joint efforts of the faculty and the **UNCG Libraries**, we selected criteria that we felt best served the needs of both groups. The first criterion is that each proposal must be submitted by a **UNCG** faculty member. Although we would have loved to support student work as well, we lacked the resources to support the entire campus community. And, during this early phase of digital scholarship support, we were keenly interested in building long-term relationships with faculty who will likely remain at our university for many years to come. A few early successes would create faculty "champions" who would spread the word to their colleagues campus-wide.

The second criterion is that each digital project must be hosted on the Library's servers. Libraries have centuries of experience with preserving and protecting scholarship and we intend to continue supporting that responsibility in the digital age. Because our faculty are producing works with long-term relevance and value, those digital objects belong on library servers.

The third criterion is that the digital project must be open access. Freely sharing information is a core library value. It also serves faculty interests, because open access resources are more heavily used and thus have more impact. An unfortunate side effect of this criterion is that we are unable to assist with very important research projects that cannot be shared because they contain personally identifiable or sensitive health information. However, with limited resources we simply can't address every conceivable faculty need through the Digital Partners program.

The fourth criterion is that the faculty member must resolve any copyright or intellectual property issues. It is in no one's interest to spend significant time and resources constructing a digital object that we are later forced to take down, due to copyright infringement. The library does have significant copyright expertise and is happy to assist faculty, so this criterion is perhaps not as onerous as it sounds.

In order to be considered, each proposal must meet each of the four required criteria listed above. In addition, we give priority to projects that met three additional objectives. First, that the project has broad and lasting value. For example, we would not want to devote significant resources to a project that a professor intended to use only one time for one particular class. Second, we prefer projects that relate in some way to extant projects. The **UNCG Libraries** would rather have a cohesive collection of related items than a seemingly random collection of interesting, but unrelated, products. Third, we strongly prefer projects that have a significant chance of attracting external funding. We are particularly enthusiastic about creating demonstration projects that support external grant proposals.

The first call for Digital Partners proposals went out in 2015. We chose a January 2016 proposal deadline to align our grant timeline with three other internal faculty grants offered by other agencies on our campus. We strongly urged faculty to meet with us before submitting a proposal. In its inaugural year, the Digital Partners program led fourteen faculty members to meet with library staff to discuss their digital project ideas. One idea simply wasn't workable. For six others, we were able to direct the researcher to extant resources (campus IT support, open source tools, etc). While those ideas did not lead to formal Digital Partners proposals, we were able to help them clarify their planning and project design, and help them move toward full implementation. We were also able to point some faculty members towards specific external grants, and to help them write the technical portions of those grant proposals. After careful review of the Digital Partners proposals that year, we were able to award grants to faculty members from English, Biology, Art, and the Center for Community and Family Studies. To make these ideas a reality, the Libraries provided consultation, expertise, and labor for geolocation, mapping, digitization, metadata, copyright, hosting, and database and user interface design. At the end of the first year, we conducted an assessment to determine if Digital Partners was achieving its objectives, and to identify which areas needed to be improved. As is often the case, we found that the benefits and challenges were two sides of the same coin.

Benefits of Digital Partners

Building positive faculty relationships — Overall, faculty were thrilled to work with us. They felt that we shared their research and scholarship values, and we delivered on all of our promises and met all deadlines (which wasn't necessarily the typical faculty experience when partnering with campus IT units on projects).

Creating high impact products with lasting value — Our Digital Partners projects were
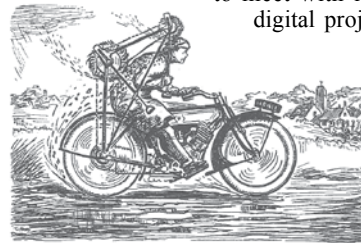
featured in national media and received external grant funding.

Controlling our resource commitment — We got more proposals than we could possibly accept and complete. Because we advertised this as a competitive process for limited resources, we were able to turn down some proposals with no hard feelings.

Challenges of Digital Partners

Building positive faculty relationships — The reward of a job done well is...more work. Faculty loved having an IT person devoted to their personal project for weeks or months at a time, and understandably wanted to take the fullest possible advantage of that. Nearly every researcher asked us to expand the scope of their Digital Partners project, or to work on additional, unrelated projects. It is, of course, nice to be in demand, but we already have plenty of projects and we need to give other faculty a chance to get their projects done, too.

Creating high impact products with lasting value — Every product we build adds to the amount of time we need to spend maintaining our existing digital projects. More time on existing projects means less time for creating new projects.

Controlling our resource commitment — We advertised Digital Partners as providing one half of an FTE for a year, to be shared among all the accepted projects. Internally, we allocated three quarters of an FTE because we knew we'd end up going over our resource budget. But our faculty kept having just one more excellent idea that needed to be implemented before we called their project complete, and we ended up utilizing the equivalent of about one and a half FTE on the four projects that year.

Plans for the Future

Our Digital Partners program was always intended as an interim step towards a full service digital scholarship center within the library. If we could establish a full service center, we felt we could discontinue the annual competitive grant process, and instead route researchers to the new center as ideas and needs arise.

The **UNCG Libraries** are now in the process of implementing STARS (Scholarship, Technology, and Research Services), a suite of digital services including GIS, data visualization, metadata, digitization, digital archiving, data mining, online publishing, copyright, large scale digital projects support, and more. We hope to have STARS in place sometime during the 2018/19 academic year. But we are finding ourselves reluctant to let go of Digital Partners. The bulk of the work that has come to us through that program has fallen to the Library's IT unit, which is currently quite busy working on several externally funded projects (one of which is a major, multi-year initiative). Lacking the capacity to expand our commitment to faculty-initiated digital projects for the next couple of years, we will likely maintain the Digital Partners grant and process for the foreseeable future. Ironically, our short-term, temporary fix has become a key element of our long-term digital scholarship center strategy.

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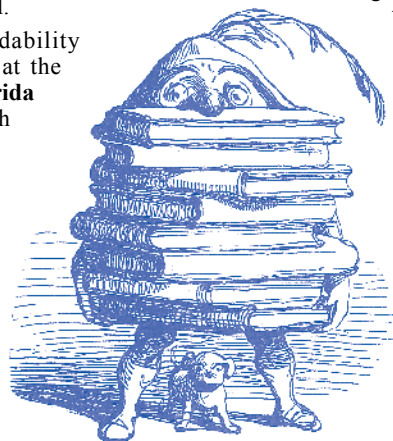
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Creating and Marketing Textbook/OER Programs

by **Laura Pascual** (Collections & Discovery, Assistant Librarian, University of South Florida) <lcpascua@usf.edu>

High textbook costs should no longer be considered an unchangeable fact of academic life. Although learning outcomes and overall student success improves with access to course materials, use of expensive textbooks that hold students hostage to increased debt and delayed graduation can be reduced as low cost and no cost alternatives grow in number. Textbook affordability is a broad issue that ultimately requires intervention by many stakeholders, but libraries have important roles both as innovators driving the creation of new content and access models and as traditional liaisons between content selectors and available content options. In addition to national and state level campaigns, each local initiative contributes to challenging the traditional textbook model.

The Textbook Affordability Project (TAP), founded at the **University of South Florida (USF)** in 2009 through the **USF Libraries**, has grown incrementally and exponentially with each new program and approach over the past nine years. The effect of the rapid and disproportionate rise in textbook costs was keenly felt at **USF**, a large metropolitan research university with a high population of **Pell** grant recipients, and the need for affordable course materials was realized early on. Beginning with a faculty survey to gauge awareness, a technology fee grant was sought and awarded and a website was created to inform students and faculty. The TAP website (*tap.usf.edu*) remains the foundation of all programs, hosting tools, data, communications, policies, and information concerning textbook affordability.

Open educational resources (OER) and textbook affordability programs continue to evolve as technology and business models for academic content change and alternative resources and purchase methods become available. One of **USF's** successful programs has been Ebooks for the Classroom. Beginning in 2011, using a TAP web page with an eBook request form, faculty gained the ability to request the purchase of their selected title as a library-licensed eBook for use in support of coursework. The form's fields included faculty contact information, course identification including the course and semester the eBook would be used, and book description elements such as title, author, ISBN, and publication year to identify the exact item being requested. A database tracking this information plus course enrollment, student cost to purchase the print version, and library cost to purchase the eBook was created to track usage of the tool and savings. Librarians working with faculty promoted the request form or made requests for course materials on their behalf. Outreach efforts at faculty and student events included advertising the TAP website in general and demonstrations of the Ebooks for the Classroom program specifically. Other traditional means of requests for books through the library such as course reserves, interlibrary loan, and faculty emails or in-person visits were funneled to the system if the material was to be used by students for coursework and could be fulfilled as library-licensed eBooks. Mediated requests from the library's demand-driven acquisition (DDA) program and low-limit or turnaway notices from previously purchased eBooks with limited access models were upgraded or re-purchased and added to the tracking system if course use could be identified. Processing of requests and collection of applicable course usage titles for these individual eBooks is a manual process requiring the time and attention of an electronic resources librarian.

Coincidentally, the Ebooks for the Classroom program followed a change in the **USF** Libraries collection development methodology from a print approval process to electronic