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Collaborating with Course Pages: Strategies for Curriculum-based Development and Assessment

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Collaborating with Course Pages: Strategies for Curriculum-based Development and Assessment

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Abstract:
Collaboration represents both a challenge and an opportunity for librarians working to develop a collection to support a university curriculum. Whether articulated in terms of communication between librarians, students, and teaching faculty, or in terms of planning efforts between collection managers in overlapping subject areas, collaboration in development is often greatly enhanced by the use of select assessment tools and technologies, and by a combination of qualitative and quantitative approaches. In this presentation, two American University librarians discuss the use of LibGuides and other systems as valuable tools for collaborative collection assessment and development, specifically in terms of making visible hidden and evolving interests on the part of students and teaching faculty.

Introduction
One of the greatest challenges for collection managers at academic libraries across the country is the ongoing evolution of students' research habits, exemplified by the massive shift in library access from solely "in the library" to online, off-campus, and in the cloud. As resources for scholarly information migrate into new types of physical and virtual spaces, librarians tasked with curriculum-based collection development face new sets of obstacles in gathering effective and meaningful feedback from students and teaching faculty alike. To address these problems, librarians often turn to quantitative solutions in the form of ERM statistics and tiers of enrollment numbers. Unfortunately, these solutions are partial at best when assessing collection use and value at the course level, as they do little to capture the activities and preferences of patrons in an actual classroom setting. Consequently, we suggest a more proactive and methodological diverse approach to curriculum-based collection development, one which combines principles of collaborative collection development with various types of quantitative and qualitative information in order to critically assess a particular segment of the student population.

The following presentation consists of a brief review of collaboration and collaborative topics within the literature of collection management, followed by numerous examples of our collaborative practices for innovative curriculum-based collection development and assessment at American University.

Collaboration in the Literature
Concepts of collaboration appear frequently within the recent literature of collection management, and in reference to a variety of collection-based concerns and projects. Dominating the literature for the past ten years have been articles that view collaboration as at least a partial solution to the issues that stem from the general problem of shrinking materials budgets (Bullis, 2011). In particular, numerous case studies point to the advantages, and to a lesser extent disadvantages, of collaboration between academic librarians and research faculty in the context of weeding and serials cancellation (Bullis, 2011; Soma & Sioberg, 2011; Gillespie, Tusa, & Blake, 2008).

Only slightly less prominent have been articles that discuss possibilities for research-based collaborative collection development, or collaborative projects for positive collection growth between academic librarians, individual researchers, and larger research partners. However, there continues to be significant overlap between discussions for collaborative collection growth and weeding, due to shared concerns regarding the future economic climate (Prottsman, 2011). It is therefore curious that ostensibly similar articles that discuss the value of collaboration in the context of curriculum-based collection development have been notably less prominent in collection management literature in recent years (Austenfeld, 2009). While this discrepancy is in part explained by the relatively minor proportion of small to mid-size academic libraries that target their collection building efforts to support the

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special needs of the student population and teaching faculty (Austenfeld, 2009), it is nevertheless an area of some concern for academic libraries of all sizes, and therefore worthy of further development.

One important gap within the existing literature on curriculum-based collection development is the problem of collaborative librarian efforts to gather feedback from the student population, specifically at the class level. Most curriculum-based collaborative collection development efforts focus librarian attention entirely on tailoring materials and services to meet the needs of university instructors. This "consultant-librarian" model (Austenfeld, 2009) offers many practical benefits—yet it makes a mistake in assuming that most instructors are adequately aware of the information needs, behaviors, and values of students in light of official and unofficial library materials and services. Such literature also tends to overlook the value of already-deployed classroom technologies, such as course guides and course management systems, which can be leveraged by librarians and instructors together as tools for meaningful assessment and development.

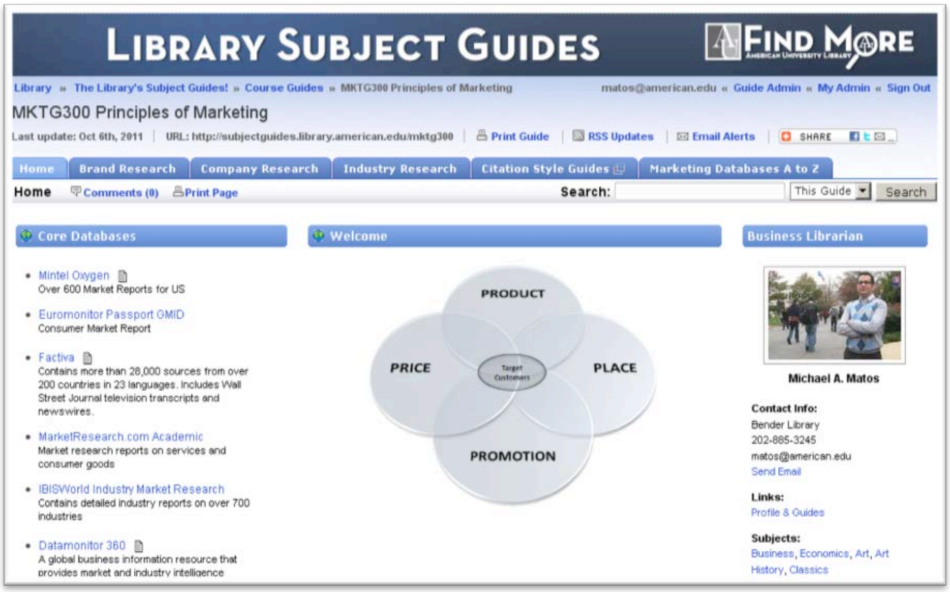
Collaborating with Course Pages: LibGuides & CampusGuides

LibGuides and CampusGuides are two examples of existing library technologies that have high potential for curriculum-based collection development and assessment at the classroom level. Designed by SpringShare as content management tools for libraries, LibGuides and CampusGuides give librarians the ability to organize, customize, and otherwise advertise resources for discovery and use by library patrons. At present, many academic libraries deploy LibGuides or CampusGuides as means for creating subject guides, and for individual course guides on a temporary basis (e.g., for one semester or quarter only). However, based on our experiences as joint collection managers and departmental liaisons at American University, we have come to view this "one-off" notion of course guide creation as mostly unproductive from the viewpoint of both outreach and collection development. Course guides, we argue, are better viewed as ongoing resources that must be carefully managed through a dialogic feedback process, with regular updating and reconfiguring by librarians based on the changing needs of students in the classroom. Moreover, as products that come preconfigured with statistical features at guides' page and link-levels, LibGuides and CampusGuides are extremely well positioned to support such efforts, thus filling in some of the key quantitative gaps left by ERM statistics.

Example #1: Marketing 300, with Business Librarian Michael Matos

Marketing 300, or "Principles of Marketing," is a lower-level course at American University that introduces students to marketing decision-making and the analysis of customer needs, segmenting markets, and product strategies. Over time, I developed a Marketing 300 course guide, which is currently accessed over 3,000 times a semester. This high level of use is in great part due to the nature of the course's major assignment, which is always introduced in conjunction with a tailored library instruction session, by agreement with the course instructors. Using the "Lists and Links" boxes in LibGuides, I have been able to track the use of individual databases that I showcase in these instructional sessions. By comparing changes in database usage within the Marketing 300 guide before and after a given session, I get valuable feedback about the value of resources, as well as the effectiveness of my teaching. Overall, this type of tracking allows me to tweak my guides and instruction, all based upon LibGuides-generated student usage.

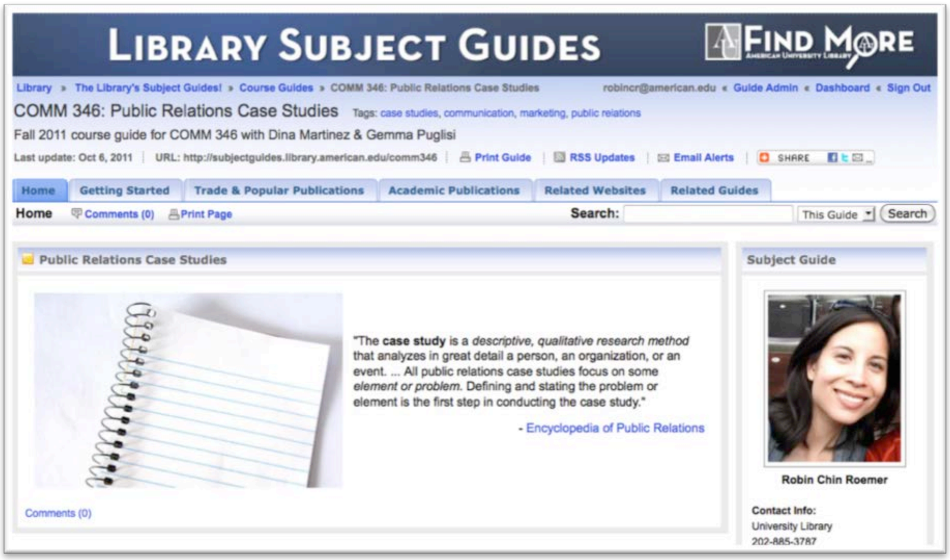
Figure-1: Course guide for Marketing 300, “Principles of Marketing”



Example #2: Communication 346, with Communication Librarian Robin Chin Roemer

Communication is a both highly interdisciplinary and highly practical field of study, which makes it sometimes difficult to predict the library resources will prove most valuable to a given course within the curriculum. To add to this, my position as Communication Librarian is relatively new, which means that many instructors with whom I work have not previously worked with a librarian to track or discuss their students’ information needs. This year when working for the first time with Communication 346, “Public Relations Case Studies,” I decided to address this issue by creating a course guide using CampusGuides, which I built in collaboration with two of the course’s instructors. After introducing the guide to students in a face-to-face instruction session, I used Campus Guides’ link-level statistics tracker to better understand what sorts of databases public relations students utilized most. Over the semester, I observed that students in the course clicked links to business databases with the same frequency that they clicked links to traditional communication databases—which I gave as feedback to the course instructors, and to the AU Business Librarian. Overall, the experience led to meaningful opportunities for qualitative collaboration with both teaching faculty and with a fellow collection manager.

Figure-2: Course guide for Communication 346, "Public Relations Case Studies"



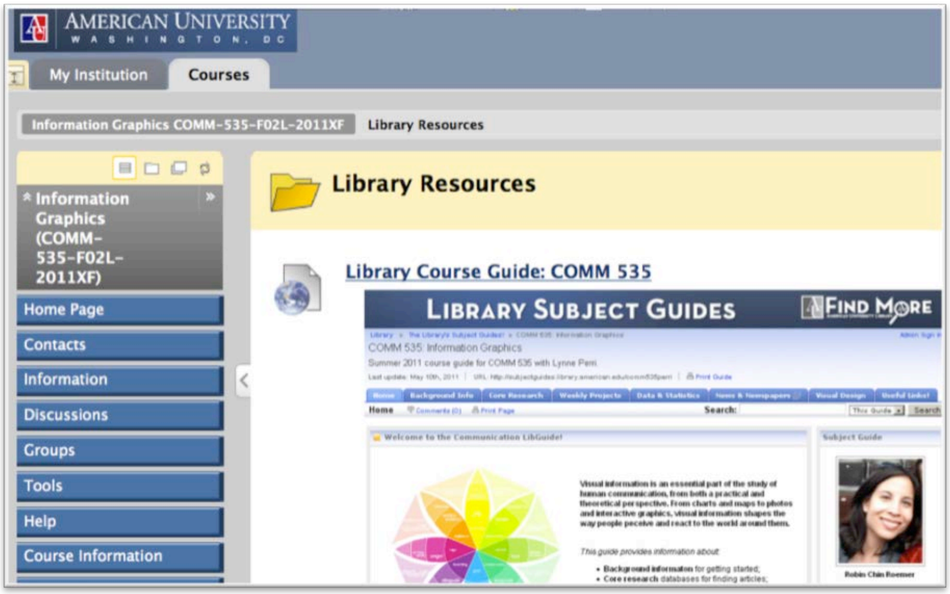
Blending Services & Technologies

The creation and management of statistically enabled course guides represents one alternative means of collecting patron use information toward the goal of curriculum-based collection development. However, it is important to recognize that without proper exposure and enticement on the part of librarians and instructors, even such seemingly established technologies may fail to capture accurate student use, resulting in distorted data and potentially poor collections decisions. To combat this risk, we suggest that libraries consider a second tier of targeted curricular engagement, in the form of blended services and overlapping assessment technologies. Such blendings will inevitably vary by institution and librarian, but are highly recommended in the form of embedded course guides (e.g., in a larger course or departmental website) and enhanced course guide content. By joining forces toward the goal of promotion and assessment, collection managers and their institutional partners both benefit in the long-term, increasing the likely success of more commonly discussed forms of collaborative collection development and outreach.

Example #1: Communication 535, with Communication Librarian Robin Chin Roemer

Communication 535 is a special topics course within the School of Communication, which during the summer is taught as entirely online as "Information Graphics." Having established a previous relationship with the summer instructor, which at the time involved the use of LibGuides, I approached her with the idea of not only creating a tailored guide for her online 535 course, but embedding information about the guide prominently within the course's Blackboard site. She agreed to the arrangement, which allowed me both to promote my guide to a student population that I couldn't meet face-to-face, and to get continual access to details about course assignments, online student discussion, and other information that informed my understanding of hidden student needs. It also encouraged the course instructor to become more involved in the maintenance and development of the course guide, to which I gave her editing permissions.

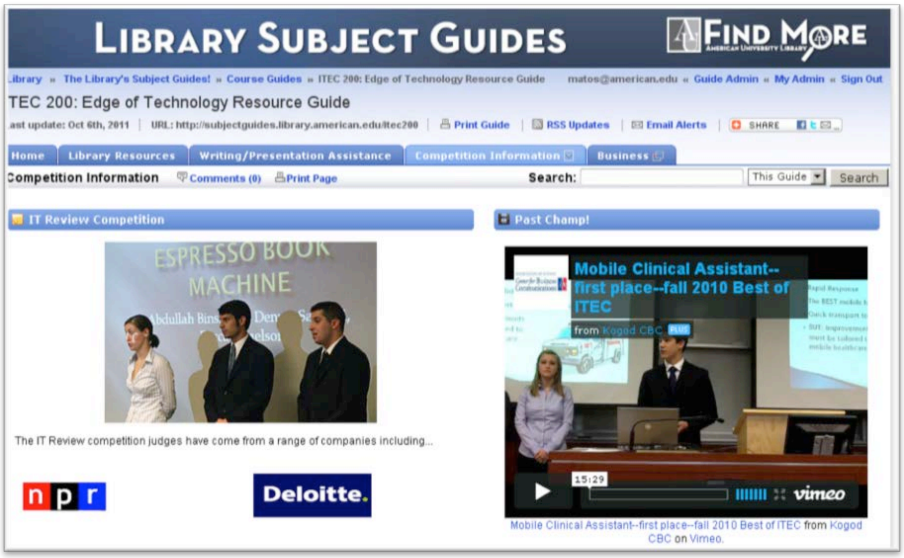
Figure-3: Blackboard-Embedded Course guide for Communication 535



Example #2: Information Technology 200, with Business Librarian Michael Matos

Information Technology 200 is a sophomore core-course that centers on teaching students the basics of IT in business. One of the facets of the course is a semester IT review project in which student teams develop presentations to pitch emerging technologies to a business. These teams compete at the end of the semester for the title "best in class." In support of this project, I initially created a guide that listed only the library's resources. With this guide, usage wasn't terribly high, and it became clear that students had trouble understanding the assignment—and thus were not aware of how the library could help them. Consequently, I decided to add to the original guide links that covered other areas of need, like information about the competition and how to the contact the Writing Center. By blending services in the research guide, I was able to increase interest in the guide and its value to the students. As a result of these changes, clicks to the guide and to library resources linked on it jumped 40-45%.

Figure-4: Course guide with Enhanced Content for Information Technology 200



Beyond Couse Guides

Practically speaking, effective opportunities for collection managers to blend services and technologies are the direct result of collaborative relationships that librarians build over time with teaching faculty, academic units, and active student organizations. For this reason, proactive and widespread liaison work is still a largely underestimated component of successful efforts at curriculum-based collection development. Similarly, qualitative information gathering in the form of student meetings, focus groups, and engagement with students in extracurricular contexts is due greater weight in collection assessment activities and planning. Admittedly, not all collection managers have the required flexibility in their schedules or job descriptions to take on additional responsibilities in the realm of outreach. However, these are obstacles that may be addressed through closer partnership with other library units, through the thoughtful use of online tools and social media, and through the improved consolidation of both qualitative and quantitative data from student-focused units across campus. By moving beyond course guides to new places of student activity, collection managers are significantly more likely to make discoveries about student information needs, not to mention unravel mysteries inherent to more passive techniques of evaluation and development.

Example #1: Office Hours in the Business School, with Business Librarian Michael Matos

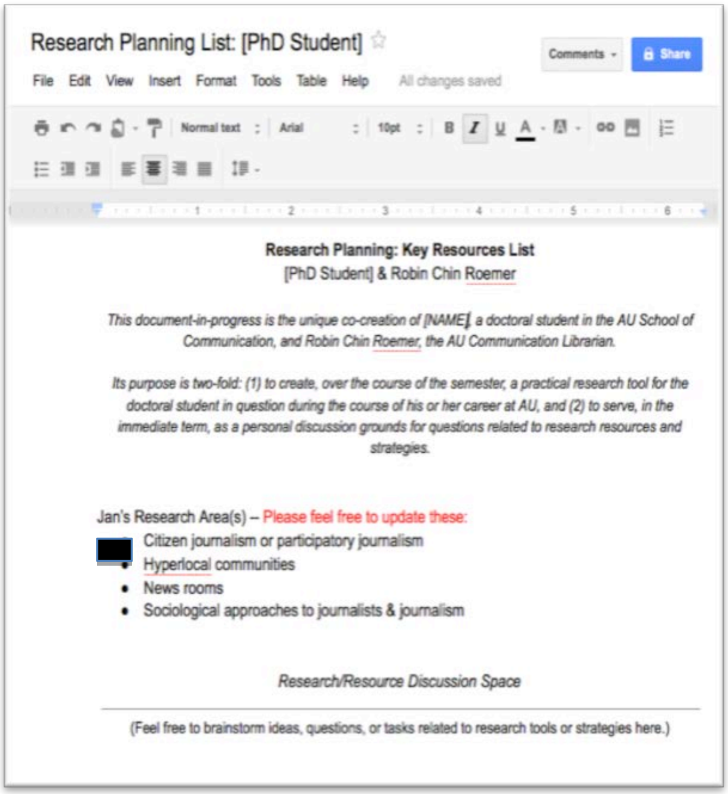
I recently began holding office hours in the business school at AU, which, beyond course support, has helped me understand the nature of the school's assignments and the sources students are using to support their arguments in papers. The hours take place two days a week for two hours (4-6 p.m.) for the last four weeks of each semester, during which time I sit in a high traffic area of the business school building and wait for walk-in appointments. I find these hours to be an excellent way to speak with the students informally about their projects, and at the same time to offer needed help. Another unit that I work with regularly is the business school's writing center, where I volunteer time as a paper reader. As a librarian, I almost never see students' finished products, or what it is they actual turn in to their instructors. However, when they meet with me in my office, I know what databases they've been using—or if all their information is collected from Google. By volunteering as a reader, I now can evaluate what information is being used for which individual courses and can identify where students are most often turning to the Internet to look for answers. Overall, the information I collect directly helps inform how I manage my collection funds.

Figure-5: Snapshot of Librarian Office Hours in the Business School

Example #2: New PhD Student Google Docs with Communication Librarian Robin Chin Roemer

This year, AU launched a Communication PhD program, with a small inaugural class of students. From the start, I felt strongly that it was important for me to reach out to this new cohort group, in no small part because their research interests would likely influence and shift both the research and curriculum-based needs of my collection area. To accomplish this task, I established an early correspondence with faculty affiliated with the PhD program, and encouraged them to include a group meeting with me somewhere in the students' fall semester schedule. This eventually led to multiple opportunities for me to speak with the new PhD cohort during their first semester, during which time I frequently offered to meet with each student one-on-one to discuss how the library might relate to his or her research interests. This offer proved highly successful, with over 80% of students opting to schedule a one-on-one meeting. As a final reward and future incentive, I decided to create a "Research Planning" document for each individual who met with me, using Google Docs as a tool. These documents are allowing me at present to keep up a sort of correspondence with the PhD cohort as their research interests change over their first year of study, assisting them in their assignments and me in my efforts at both research and curriculum-based collection development.

Figure-6: Snapshot of a "Research Planning" document prepared for a PhD student



Conclusions

Collaboration and curriculum-based collection development continues to be an area worthy of greater consideration within the larger world of collection management and assessment. By utilizing a combination of new and existing tools with more targeted strategies for collecting student use statistics, academic librarians with collection responsibilities can access valuable information about student resource needs at the course and classroom level, and enhance their understanding of statistics for the university at large. However, it is not enough for collection managers to focus their efforts on new quantitative strategies. Rather, to maximize the value of quantitative information at any level, it is imperative for managers to experiment with new opportunities for outreach and partnership along the lines of the curriculum. By proactively balancing these qualitative strategies with quantitative practices, libraries position themselves for innovation across multiple units, and in the long term.

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