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Leveraging Student Employee Expertise for Collection Projects

Karen A. Reiman-Sendi
University of Michigan-Ann Arbor

Christopher A. Barnes
Gettysburg College

Pamela J. MacKintosh
University of Michigan-Ann Arbor

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Abstract

Collection stewardship responsibilities of academic librarians continue to be supported by approval plans, large e-resource packages, and material leasing programs. But while those technologies and programs can save time, librarians still find it challenging to engage with in-depth collection projects like systematic weeding, evaluation, and use analysis. At the same time, student employees are seeking opportunities for experiential learning and acquiring skills translatable to the professional world. The authors suggest some creative ways to match librarians' collection needs and students' job expectations by providing opportunities for these employees to collaborate with librarians in the management, development, and marketing of collections.

Keywords

Academic libraries, collaboration, collection management, mentorship, student employees

Disciplines

Collection Development and Management | Library and Information Science

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Authors

Karen A. Reiman-Sendi

University of Michigan Library

913 South University Ave

Ann Arbor, MI 48109-1190

karsendi@umich.edu

Christopher A. Barnes

Gettysburg College

Musselman Library

300 North Washington Street

Box 420

Gettysburg, PA 17325

cbarnes@gettysburg.edu

Pamela J. MacKintosh

University of Michigan Library

919 South University Ave.

Ann Arbor, MI 48109-1185

pmackin@umich.edu

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Abstract

Collection stewardship responsibilities of academic librarians continue to be supported by approval plans, large e-resource packages, and material leasing programs. But while those technologies and programs can save time, librarians still find it challenging to engage with in-depth collection projects like systematic weeding, evaluation, and use analysis. At the same time, student employees are seeking opportunities for experiential learning and acquiring skills translatable to the professional world. The authors suggest some creative ways to match librarians' collection needs and students' job expectations by providing opportunities for these employees to collaborate with librarians in the management, development, and marketing of collections.

Keywords

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INTRODUCTION

Academic librarians with collection management responsibilities are increasingly relying on approval plans, large e-resource packages, and material leasing programs to perform their work. However, while such technologies and programs streamline their workflows and increase efficiency, librarians may still find it challenging to engage with in-depth collection projects like systematic weeding, strategic marketing, collection evaluation, or use analysis. At the same time, student employees in academic libraries are seeking opportunities for experiential learning, project management, and obtaining other skills transferable to the professional world - librarianship included. By creatively leveraging the skills and interests of underutilized student employees, librarians can craft useful partnerships that accomplish collections needs while providing students the professional experiences they will value and enjoy.

At the University of Michigan Library, the authors wanted to address a challenge around maximizing the time, effort, and motivation of reference service student assistants while also addressing collection-related needs. The professional literature details many successful programs where student employees provide professional-level service, but the vast majority of these case studies are in the areas of reference and instruction. Over the years, University of Michigan librarians have been able to create a variety of collection projects customized to meet student employee skills and interests, availability of project mentors, and professional growth needs of library staff. We discovered that in addition to acquiring skills applicable in a variety of professional

fields, reference service student employees who work with librarians around collection-related projects acquire advanced knowledge of library tools and resources, and possibly envision themselves as future advocates for libraries or as librarians. For those students already preparing for careers as librarians, these projects provide highly relevant, real world experiences to add to their library school applications or post-MLS CVs.

We suggest that a typical public services student position and an eager collection librarian can develop projects within a mentoring framework that match library collection needs with students' personal paths, interests, and desire to contribute to the library mission in impactful ways. In the following pages, the authors provide concrete examples of such collection projects and offer advice for how readers can implement similar ones at their libraries.

MATCHING A STUDENT EMPLOYEE WITH A COLLECTION PROJECT

The three detailed examples we provide below show a range and variety of projects (short- and long-term, differing levels of engagement, exploiting differing stages of student experience/expertise) which address needs common to academic collections. While we have found these examples very successful in our environment, they can be scaled to suit your institution's size and needs.

EXAMPLE 1: OUTREACH

Do you have collections you would like to develop based on student input, such as a popular reading collection or one devoted to career success? Do you have an undergraduate student employee majoring in marketing, or a gregarious graduate student worker who wants experience with project management? A multi-part outreach project that can be scoped or divided between students could provide the opportunity for student employees to develop an assortment of skills and to produce the kinds of work - surveys, blog posts, promotional materials - that can demonstrate proficiency with digital platforms and design programs. These type of projects raise awareness of collections for users, but more importantly make ideal learning opportunities for student employees. Outreach projects also provide collections librarians with the opportunity to gauge worker aptitude in a relatively low-stakes environment.

One example of this approach is the *We Know What You Read This Summer* activity created by a graduate student employee for the Shapiro Undergraduate Library's annual open house for incoming students. In our yearly quest to find reading-related activities that are fun, informative, and serve as icebreakers, this graduate student employee suggested putting a social spin on a reader's survey. Rather than simply asking new students what they read prior to their arrival on campus, they were asked to write the title on a Post-it and affix it to a nearby window of the library where new students were gathering. The student employee was on hand to solicit participants and to engage the open house attendees in conversation about their summer reading. As was hoped, the activity led to many impromptu conversations between students,

sometimes facilitated by the student employee, about what they like to read and whether our library owned those works. In this case, it was an excellent opportunity to advertise the library's Browsing Collection of popular titles, and to gather suggestions for new acquisitions. Beyond supplying a list of new titles to purchase, the data from the Post-its was collected and analyzed. The student employee used that data to compose a [blog post](#) in which she shared her findings and promoted a number of library resources, from our Design Lab to the library's copies of the most popular titles.¹ The outreach activity formed the basis of another [blog post](#) in which the student reflected on the top reasons she loved working in the library.² At the conclusion of that post, the student explained how her library work "has been essential to building confidence in my abilities to adapt theoretical knowledge for practical applications."

Perhaps more importantly for the Shapiro Undergraduate Library collections, this outreach effort solicited a list of student-generated book suggestions which was compared to our holdings. With this information we were able to purchase a number of books to fill in a few collection gaps. The outreach work of this student employee allowed an easy connection between the library, library collections aimed at undergraduate students, and incoming students. The results provided the collection librarian with another ongoing and informal channel of student input which informed purchasing and content for a popular title collection.

¹ Faith L. Weiss, "We Know What You Read This Summer!," *Lost in the Stacks* (blog), October 24, 2016, <https://www.lib.umich.edu/blogs/lost-stacks/we-know-what-you-read-summer>.

² ---, "The Top 3 Reasons I Love My Job," *Student Stories* (blog), October 7, 2016, <https://www.lib.umich.edu/blogs/student-stories/top-3-reasons-i-love-my-job>.

Your outreach efforts could include regular book displays, the creation of digital signage that highlights collection strengths, current topics or new purchases, blog posts, or administration of short user surveys and informal polls about collection uses or needs. Each outreach project involves a different level of engagement with your community and your collections.

EXAMPLE 2: ONLINE RESOURCE EVALUATION

Do you employ a student that loves exploring new resources or technologies? Or, perhaps they are really great at getting into the nitty-gritty of how things work. Or, maybe you work with a student who is pursuing User Experience (UX) interests. If so, you might create a project where they conduct online evaluations of trial resources and new platforms.

New online resources become available constantly. Publishers and vendors often offer discounted prices for online resources of possible interest, but with short turnaround times to evaluate them and make a purchase determination. Collection librarians commonly find it challenging to conduct in-depth and detailed evaluations of the product content and/or interface on offer. In our academic library, reference service student employees worked with collection librarians to create a process and associated documentation for detailed evaluations of online resources under consideration for purchase or subscription. The process included the creation of an evaluation rubric that student employees use to capture information such as platform features, search and output options, and uniqueness of content in relation to other resources in our

collections. The information the student employees discover during their testing is shared with collection librarians involved with the decision to acquire the product. Student employees, selected to participate based on their communication skills, created training documentation on this process to evaluate the trial resources, and delivered that training to other reference service assistants.

The entire project, and the ongoing work to evaluate online resources, provides collection librarians with detailed product reviews that aid in their selection decisions, thus saving them time for other collections-related duties. Additionally, librarians supervising such projects benefit from understanding how a typical student researcher uses the online products provided by the library. The student employees gain skills in effectively evaluating a resource, including interface design. But perhaps more importantly for those students providing reference service, the process improves their familiarity with existing resources when assisting library users as well as alerts them to potentially new resources. These evaluation skills can easily translate into the professional arena of usability research, but really provide an opportunity for practicing critical thinking and communication. Student employees exercise their leadership and project management skills by creating and maintaining the training documentation, instructional delivery guidelines, and managing the process to complete specific resource evaluations. Student employees have shared that this type of project develops key skills and an appreciation of research tools. (See one example in a student [blog post](#).³)

³ Shelby Stuart, "My Experience Co-Managing a Library Project," *Student Stories* (blog), February 11, 2016, <https://www.lib.umich.edu/blogs/student-stories/my-experience-co-managing-library-project>.

This particular project could be implemented with public services student employees, who could conduct resource evaluations during “down times” at library service desks. The effort also could be concentrated during a particular period of your collection budget cycle, or evaluations could happen as new resources become available throughout the year.

EXAMPLE 3: WEEDING/SELECTION

Do you employ a graduate student or an upper-level undergraduate with in-depth subject expertise? A weeding project in that subject area could be a perfect fit. Collections that need regular management and require time-consuming weeding and updating efforts may benefit from a tiered approach between student employee and collection librarian. For example, our Shapiro Undergraduate Library collection comprises high-use, current content which supports the needs of lower-level undergraduates. As such, there is a need for ongoing weeding to remove material now out-of-date or out-of-scope. The careful, book-by-book review of materials and associated catalog records, and the evaluation of items targeted for withdrawal according to specified parameters, is time consuming, particularly if the collection librarian’s expertise does not reside in a subject discipline within the collection area requiring updating.

Collaborating with a graduate student employee with an advanced degree in chemistry, our Shapiro Undergraduate Library collection librarian designed a project to

weed science books. This student employee – a library and information science (LIS) student – conducted a variety of tasks related to this weeding project. She ran circulation reports from our LMS and then did a book-by-book review in the stacks. In addition to identifying books for withdrawal, she also noted areas where content needed refreshing or gaps existed. The student employee coordinated with appropriate subject selectors in our Science Library to determine if any unique content should be transferred to another collection. Finally, she identified titles for purchase within a set budget limit and then handed the list off to the collection manager to make the final purchase decisions.

The student employees who conduct weeding develop skills in using the catalog, increasing their citation and bibliographic knowledge, and attention to detail. With most of these projects they also develop analytical and other evaluative skills. For those doing more detailed selection work, they learn to identify sources, evaluate publisher information, and stay within a budget. This particular student employee was able to leverage her subject expertise while developing librarian-level collection development experience and budget management skills. She found great satisfaction in capitalizing on her subject knowledge and putting the theory she learned in her collection development course into practice. Months after graduating and beginning her career as an academic librarian, she shared with us that, “[d]oing a large scale weeding project has made me much more careful about purchasing books.” For the library, and especially the collection manager overseeing these projects, the payoffs can be great. Collection assessment and weeding projects can be scaled up with the additional help,

and more importantly, take advantage of the student's subject knowledge to make better, more informed collection decisions.

A weeding or selection project could be designed for a small section of a larger collection, or for a complex, interdisciplinary subject area, depending upon your student employee's subject knowledge and ability to manage multiple approaches. In our case, crafting this collection-related effort as an internship allowed a regular and frequent engagement with the collection and those associated collection librarians.

MATCHING A COLLECTION PROJECT WITH STUDENT SKILLS AND INTERESTS

Within the scope of this article, it is impossible to share the large variety of collection projects we have tackled alongside our student employees. Below we offer a table of possible collection projects organized by category, duration, difficulty, student expertise, and librarian engagement.

Tables of Student Collection Projects

[insert tables here]

CONCLUSIONS & LESSONS LEARNED

Using our experience as a case study, we would like to conclude by sharing some lessons we have learned. Undergraduate student employees who work with collection librarians develop a deeper expertise with library tools and resources which can then be applied to their own coursework. LIS graduate students, especially those students who

seek more of an internship experience, learn much from a specialized experience with collections, which adds to their understanding of future professional responsibilities beyond the classroom environment. Scaffolding student projects enables student employees to gradually increase their responsibilities and build their professional confidence. The variety of work, increasing project complexity, as well as increasing accountability can lead to better deliverables. Finally, librarians can count on concentrated help with larger collection projects, allowing them to accomplish a variety of tasks with an engaged talent pool.

We also learned that it is important to create a project that is achievable within a defined time period (e.g. a term, a month, or something else that will fit into a student employee work schedule). To make the most of a student employee's interests and motivation, we recommend that supervising librarians consider learning outcomes and individual capabilities when designing a collections project. As is typical in any project design, it is best to scope the role of the librarian and to develop project milestones that serve as learning moments for the student employee, as well as check-in points for the librarian (e.g. strategize about details such as regular communication, training needs, project assessment, system permissions, partners, workspace, etc.). And while we did not institute a formal assessment process for the variety of collection projects in which we engaged, collection librarians and student employee supervisors regularly met with and engaged with student employees to assess and understand the process, potential barriers, and individual learning. Developing collaborative projects within a mentoring

framework can match your collection needs with your student employees' personal paths, interests, and desires, to the mutual benefit of all involved.

Table 1. Student Collection Projects: Outreach

Project Details	Project Duration	Level of Difficulty	Student Employee Level	Potential Skill Development Area	Librarian Oversight
Create a single book display on clearly defined topic	A few hours	Low	Undergraduate or above	Catalog researching, content evaluation, marketing	Guidance on topic development, catalog searching, temporary location changes
Curate a series of book displays on campus or media themes, coordinated with accompanying video displays, blog postings, and/or bibliographies/reading lists	Semester to full-year or longer	Medium	Upper level undergrad and above	Catalog searching, content evaluation, technology use, graphic design, teamwork, communication, marketing	Guidance on topic and thematic development, oversight of schedule, catalog searching, temporary location changes, coordination with other units such as marketing team or tech processing

Students write posts about items in collections reflecting current interests, new additions, reporting on outreach projects, etc.	Few hours or full-year or longer (if providing regular series of entries)	Medium	Upper undergraduate and above	Resource evaluation, communication, marketing, outreach, blogging technology	Provide training on blogging platform, library blog practices/style book.
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Table 2. Student Collection Projects: Patron Input Gathering

Project Details	Project Duration	Level of Difficulty	Student Employee Level	Potential Skill Development Area	Librarian Oversight
Solicit input from students on what they are reading/recently read using Post It Notes or a web form	A few hours	Low to Medium	Undergraduate and above	Student engagement, communication, teamwork, outreach	Arrange for venue, discuss conversation starters, arrange for incentives
Solicit input (like above), then compile titles, compare to library holdings, provide recommendations for content to purchase, write blog post on experience, compile	A month or two	High	Graduate student	Student engagement, communication, teamwork, outreach, graphic design, project management	Discuss parameters for analysis and book recommendations, provide access to software and permissions for blog posting and blogging

statistics on top choices					guidelines
Run focus groups with patrons to gather input on format preferences and collection usage	Semester	High	Graduate student	Focus group design, question design, capturing of useful information to supplement the recordings and transcripts, coding, data analysis	Guidance on question development, focus group facilitation, coding, and data analysis and report generation

Table 3. Student Collection Projects: Resource Evaluation & LibGuides

Project Details	Project Duration	Level of Difficulty	Student Employee Level	Potential Skill Development Area	Librarian Oversight
Search catalog to verify holdings against <i>Choice</i> cards or other selection tools	Semester or longer - can be done as a filler for slow times at a service desk	Low	Undergraduate and above	Catalog searching, review reading	Provide training on catalog searching and key data to note on the cards
Students conduct evaluations of online resources under consideration for purchase or	Semester or longer, on as need basis	High	Upper undergraduate and above	Communication, team work, exposure to new library resources and new	Create template of evaluation criteria, guidance in process, documentation, and

subscription. They provide evaluative content to collections librarians and training on this process				technologies, critical thinking, leadership, project management.	training, alert students to new trial resources and to whom to provide reviews
Students edit LibGuides for broken links, update content in established guides (e.g. Women in Comics, Basic Reference Resources), and create guides for topical areas represented in collections (e.g. College & Career Success Collection)	Semester or longer	High	Graduate students	Communication, teamwork, use of content management systems, exposure to new library resources, critical thinking, resource evaluation	Provide training in LibGuides software and guide creation best practices

Table 4. Student Collection Projects: Weeding

Project Details	Project Duration	Level of Difficulty	Student Employee Level	Potential Skill Development Area	Librarian Oversight
Use a defined pull-list to remove books from collection (which will be evaluated and further processed by librarians or library staff)	Small one-off projects or ongoing maintenance weeding	Low	Undergraduate	Shelf reading, understanding call number arrangement, attention to detail	Provide instructions on how to interpret pull list and how to read call numbers, barcodes, or other item identification

Students conduct evaluation of selected sections of collections based on agreed upon criteria. They review circulation data, create and assess results of user surveys, and recommend replacement copies or new editions	Semester or longer	High	Graduate students	Communication, teamwork, exposure to library technology, exposure to new library resources, critical thinking, user research, ability to use subject expertise	Provide training in pulling circulation reports, guidance on evaluation criteria, respond to questions on difficult decision points, make final withdrawal or replacement decisions
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Table 5. Student Collection Projects: Selection

Project Details	Project Duration	Level of Difficulty	Student Employee Level	Potential Skill Development Area	Librarian Oversight
Curate small, focused topical or subject collection by identifying material in collection or to acquire on a narrowly defined topic	Semester or longer	High	Graduate students	Leadership, communication, teamwork, exposure to library technology, exposure to new library resources, critical thinking	Provide training on how to pull lists of books on a specific topic from catalog, set collection criteria/parameters, provide guidance on source selection, and make final decisions
Take on subject selection responsibility for some	Year or longer	Very high	LIS students with appropriate subject	Leadership, communication,	Provide full-level selector training,

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aspect of the collection			expertise/education	teamwork, exposure to library technology, exposure to new library resources, critical thinking, budgeting, understand scholarly landscape and publishing environment	including budget management, use of approved vendors, selection criteria, fund management
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