

Raymond Pun, See Xiong, Adan Ortega, and Vanna Nauk

# Doing technology

## A teaching collaboration between Fresno State and Fresno County Public Library

In spring 2016, the President's Office at California State University-Fresno (part of the California State University system) offered grant opportunities for academic departments to create a community engagement program for students interested in supporting the Fresno community at large. Known as the Touch the Community project, the program solicited proposals that focused on a community concern and on how to address this issue. Several proposals were selected and funded (\$2,000) by the President's Office for the duration of two academic semesters. Some of these grant projects involved service-learning components: building computer labs, creating ESL programs, and engaging with K–12 students.

Fresno State librarians decided to put together a proposal focusing on the theme of the digital divide, and how collaboration with the Fresno County Public Library (FCPL) could address this concern through technology training workshops. This article will briefly cover how this academic-public libraries' partnership created new opportunities for the community, students, and for each collaborator. The article will also share the perspectives from student ambassadors who taught technology training workshops in selected FCPL branches.

### Starting the partnership

Several years ago, I co-wrote an article with

Professor Elaine Carey entitled “Doing history: A teaching collaboration between St. John's University and the NYPL.”<sup>1</sup> When I co-wrote this article, I was a public librarian at NYPL collaborating with a history professor at St. John's University. Now I am covering another kind of partnership, but from the other side as an academic librarian collaborating with public libraries. This experience was very helpful as I navigated through several communication channels and paperwork to ensure that both parties were in agreement with this partnership.

Fresno County is located in the heart of the Central Valley in California. Based on our literature review and statistics, we found that there is a high concentration of poverty in the Central Valley.<sup>2</sup> In addition, a 2013 study by the Public Policy of California revealed that 40% of state residents do not have access to the Internet.<sup>3</sup> With the rise of government information and job opportunities migrating to the web, and the rise of emerging technologies and online tools being adapted in

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higher education, for-profit companies, and other agencies, it is becoming important for all Americans to have access to these resources. On top of that, Fresno County is quite diverse with people who speak Hmong, Arabic, Cambodian, and Spanish, among other languages.

Our goal for this project was to demonstrate the library's commitment to support our community members to cross the digital divide. We hired and trained ten student ambassadors to lead and teach technology workshops and provide technology services to the community members in selected branch libraries. These student ambassadors gained leadership experiences and taught patrons how to create an email account, surf the Internet, use their mobile devices, download the public library's e-book collection, create resumes and search for jobs online, and learn to use social media sites, such as Facebook and Twitter.

Historically, there were limited contacts between Fresno State's Henry Madden Library and FCPL. This partnership led to new kinds of opportunities for both institutions. It started first with one email to the FCPL library outreach manager and several phone calls and meetings to solidify this collaboration. It became evident that FCPL wanted this collaboration, since they had limited technology instructors and wanted to provide more workshops to the community. There were also discussions on the memorandum of agreement/understanding, which is an important document to cover

the legal bases for both parties. We discussed at length which branches would host the student ambassadors, and it came down to three locations: West Fresno, Woodward Park, and Sunny Side. These libraries were located across Fresno County, and were selected because they had classrooms in which to teach computer skills. The infrastructure is an important factor to consider when organizing a technology-training workshop with public libraries.

Promotion flier created by the Fresno County Public Library.

### Launching the community engagement program

Once it was announced that our proposal was accepted, we immediately called for student ambassadors. We interviewed students and recruited ten to participate in this one-year project. In addition to basic technology skills, we wanted students who were bilingual in order to support non-English speaking patrons.

We had student ambassadors from different majors who could speak Spanish,

Arabic, Hmong, Cambodian, Hindi, and Punjabi. In our proposal, we described how the grant would fund their transportation costs. It was exciting to recruit these students who were ambitious and motivated to support our communities through this collaboration.

To build on this program, we had one orientation session where all students came together to learn about teamwork, instructional methods, and customer service techniques from librarians. We also showed them how to access specific resources, such as

FCPL's e-books, social media tools, and job sites. We wanted the student ambassadors to feel comfortable in teaching these tools and resources, since they were leading most of the workshops.

Logistically, it was challenging to schedule ten students at three different branches. In fall 2016, we had ten workshops and there were two student ambassadors covering each workshop. Each workshop covered a specific theme from basic computer usage to social media to job searching. FCPL handled most of the marketing for these workshops. Some workshops had more patrons attending, and others did not have anyone at all. This was a challenge, and we identified ways to improve this for spring 2017. In each workshop, we also had one librarian (either from FCPL or from Fresno State) to monitor the workshop and provide additional support, if needed.

After each workshop, we deployed a short (optional) Google Form survey for patrons to fill out. We found out that most of the patrons are senior citizens or veterans who were primarily interested in job searching and social media. Many times, patrons came in with a specific question and were not interested in the workshop experience. Some of the student ambassadors also provided feedback and suggested that it would be great to have more than two student ambassadors at each workshop because it could become challenging at times with the number of patrons and their demands.

As a result of the feedback and assessment, in spring 2017, we focused on four drop-in sessions in one branch library, the Betty Rodriguez Regional Library, and had four student ambassadors covering a shift from 10 a.m.–1 p.m. and another shift from 1–4 p.m. This was a dramatic shift, and, as a result, we supported more patrons on a one-to-one basis for longer periods.

We also reduced the Google Form survey to a short paper survey. Again, we found that people needed help with using computers, social media, and creating a resume. There were also unique questions that came up in

these sessions, such as cyberbullying and data privacy.

Two of the student ambassadors were computer-engineering majors and provided basic coding help, which was of interest to several patrons. The second semester of the project was much more successful and more focused for our student ambassadors and community members. It was quite the learning experience for all of us to design a collaborative workshop that could meet everyone's needs.

The Touch the Community grant project started in September 2016 and ended in April 2017. Based on our survey in spring 2017, we served more than 50 members of the community. FCPL patrons were calling the Fresno State Library to inquire more about the project. We see that this kind of service can be very helpful and supportive to the community. Here are three student ambassadors and their perspectives on the Touch the Community project.

### **Student perspective from See Xiong**

My experience as a student ambassador for the Touch the Community project was humbling. I think about how sometimes I have become out of touch with the community I live in because I spend most of my time in an academic environment as a student. I met people who used the service we provided and much more. There was one gentleman in particular who came to a session wanting assistance with a job search and left the session with his first resume. He spoke to me about his job search and unemployment dilemma. He spoke about not having a high school education, and how that affected his employment. Working with a lower socio-economic community that lacks the privileges of a quality education and computer literacy is difficult and exhausting. However, it's humbling and reminds me that I'm not too far from where I came from.

I worked sessions in the affluent, predominantly white, northern Fresno, and sessions in central Fresno, which is predominately Latino and Southeast Asian American. Yet,

not a single client I saw was of Hmong descent. Computer literacy is important to the Hmong community because modern technology allows the elders to communicate with their family members, but the use of services outside of the Hmong community is still minimal. To improve services to the Hmong community, we need to work directly with services that cater to them, and find people who are culturally aware of the needs of the Hmong and how to market to them.

### **Student perspective from Adan Ortega**

While being involved in the Touch the Community program, in particular the technology class initiative at FCPL, I came in contact with many people who spoke a variety of languages and came from a variety of backgrounds. The experiences I had with these community members, I feel, shows that not only is technology help needed for people who do not have access to technology, but it is also important to have technology help in a variety of languages, as well. America has always been a melting pot of people of different cultures, and it continues to be that way today.

I had an experience with a middle-aged Hispanic woman who was asking for general technology help because she had no idea of how to use the Internet. She also spoke no English, which possibly could have been problematic. Fortunately, I can speak Spanish pretty well, if not fluently, and was able to communicate with her as I went through the steps and processes of basic Internet usage.

We eventually were able to set her up with an email account and her own Facebook profile so she could communicate with her friends here in the United States and her family in Mexico. It was truly fulfilling to be able to not only communicate with her and help, but to also get her on her way to eventually becoming proficient when it comes to web browsing and social media.

### **Student perspective from Vanna Nauk**

When I took on the role as a student ambas-

sador for Fresno State, I knew that I would come across an array of challenges, but I wanted to participate in something rewarding. Working with Touch the Community gave me an opportunity to give back to young and middle-aged adults, who have found difficulties with using technology. In addition to technological challenges, I also found it common that students didn't know how to write a resume or lack the skills to conduct a job search efficiently. With rapid technological advances and competitive job skills forever changing with higher demands, I felt that it was beneficial for our students to stay up-to-date.

I feel certain that Touch the Community was not only a learning experience for the student ambassadors, but also for our students. Because for many of our students, it was the first time that they had ever learned basic skills, such as using the web browser, creating a cover letter, and being introduced to today's workforce expectations.

Lastly, as a Cambodian person, I know that the Asian community in Fresno tends to be afraid to ask for help. However, I think if we continue these efforts to promote our services, particularly the diverse and bilingual team of student ambassadors, they may be more inclined to ask for technology support.

### **Conclusion**

In the future, the Henry Madden Library may consider integrating this model into a service-learning program with an academic department or learning community that can build on students' professional experiences in technology and community engagement.

This partnership with FCPL has also brought new collaborative activities. Since the spring 2016 semester, FCPL offers public library cards to the academic community, and now we are thinking of providing new events and programs for the future, as well.

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vans. They go forward knowing that the route will be fraught. Many are working without a net. There is little prospect of fortune or fame—often there's barely prospect of a place to shower. But regardless of doubts or reservations, the highway stretches to the horizon all the same. And while we may not have the same romantic backdrop or narrative here in the academy, we really ought to learn a thing or two from those indigent but intrepid souls who find a way to make it work.

## Notes

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*("Doing technology," continues from page 306)*

Ultimately, these academic-public library collaborations can be fulfilling and engaging, and, most importantly, they can open new directions to support the academic institution's commitment to student success, diversity, and community engagement.

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## Notes

1. Elaine Carey and Raymond Pun, "Doing History: A teaching collaboration between St. John's University and the New York Public Library," *C&RL News* 73, no. 3 (2012).

2. D. Walters, "Fresno has high poverty concentration, national study finds," *Sacramento Bee*, August 14, 2015, see [www.sacbee.com/news/politics-government/capitol-alert/article31113221.html](http://www.sacbee.com/news/politics-government/capitol-alert/article31113221.html).

3. See California's Digital Divide, June 2013, [www.ppic.org/main/publication\\_show.asp?i=263](http://www.ppic.org/main/publication_show.asp?i=263). *ZZ*