The college library as guinea pig

By Sherman Hayes and Michael Kathman

Getting the most out of student projects

Do male and female students use the library differently? How does your order process work from a business perspective? Should the color scheme of the library be changed? After helping students answer these and other questions time after time, year after year, it struck us that one of the important roles for a college library is that of guinea pig. Our model examines the many ways that students employ the library as a real-life laboratory or subject for management analysis.

Student employees can manage projects

The first category of the model, project management by student employees, has been used to varying degrees of success. Although undergraduate and most graduate students have not had formal library training when they arrive at our door, they may bring special talents that can be channeled into specific library-designed projects. As small college libraries, we cannot afford to worry about hierarchical levels when our labor pool contains very few full-time staff and many student workers.

Student workers are usually employed at jobs that are routine in nature. This works well for the library in most instances and provides good basic help. Because student help turns over regularly, the library is not dependent upon it for management, policy decisions, training, and professional duties. Most students are content to trade less-than-fully-challenging jobs for a break from classrooms and studying, reasonable pay, good working conditions, and a part-time schedule that responds to their academic and personal needs.

Many times this talent pool is happy and even eager to help on projects a cut above their traditional duties. Working with the staff, our students have written specialized computer database programs (computer wizards are always welcome), designed and even led specific signage projects, reconfigured equipment for a more practical and interesting workplace (a specialty of mechanically minded students), transliterated non-Roman title pages for catalogers, drawn cartoons for library publications, copy-cataloged music (music majors may offer special knowledge not available on the staff), and drafted and produced floor maps and patron tracking sheets (drafting skills a must).

When considering possible projects, it is important that they be well defined, within the general guidelines of the job (do not take advantage of students without financial reward), and designed in relationship to permanent employees. Don't offer a challenging project to a student if a permanent employee is ready, eager, and willing to take it on.

The supervisor—who must have a direct management style—must work closely with the student to make certain he or she does not go off in a direction not intended. Students in these positions are highly motivated but need and deserve the attention special projects demand.

You must also plan for continuity of the project after a particular student team member graduates. The key parameters of student-employee projects are an employee/employer relationship with the employer/library controlling and guiding the project.

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Student volunteers

The second category of student project workers are volunteers who work on unusual special projects initiated and defined by the library. "Moving the library" or barcoding the collection are typical projects for them. They are one-time efforts shared by much of the academic community. Students may be part of the organizing committee and that makes sense if they are going to do the lion's share of the labor.

A subcategory of this group are student volunteer consultants who work independent of their program, classes, or other academic endeavors. They may be recruited through a general call for students to assist in a special project. The payback to the volunteer consultant is the experience and opportunity gained through working on a real-life task. The key parameters for student volunteers are that the library initiates and manages the project and the students work in a one-time volunteer relationship.

Library as guinea pig—for credit

The third category centers on the role of the student as project manager for academic purposes. Some aspect of the library may be under study by students as part of their curriculum and research agenda. Either the student's professor or the library may initiate the contact. The professor may want to assign an analysis and have the students work in a real-life situation. Or the library may initiate a project in order to tap into the expertise available on campus.

Our projects have included a student, with the close advice of her faculty member, setting up a computerized accounting system for the library; marketing students surveying people on the noise level of the library; art students working up a graphic design for library signs and brochures; marketing students doing a survey to prioritize student opinions on seating options for a major addition to a library; psychology students researching the advantages and disadvantages of various color and light schemes for the library; and marketing students examining ways to better market library services. The advantages of using students in these areas are that the library also gets the advice of an expert in the field—the faculty member.

This type of faculty contact has a real payoff in collection development and bibliographic instruction. The better the faculty know the librarians, the easier it is for us. This contact is also invaluable when the library needs new or more resources for the collection, automation, or an addition.

When that relationship is dominated by the student's need for an educational experience and not by the need of the library for the product, the benefit to the library is a bonus. The library is usually, after initial negotiations, the guinea pig and not the evaluator of the final product and may or may not see the results. The relationship is one of volunteer student workers performing for academic purposes with no final formal role in the library.

Students may also use the library for independent student projects. The student approaches a library staff member to seek help on a class project. The professor has not prenegotiated the ground rules or alerted the library that the project is coming. The student usually has to convince the staff member that their time is needed and it is to the library's advantage to participate. In this subcategory, the parameters are based on the student's academic need with little formal planning tied to the curriculum, library resources, or the professor. Results are seldom shared with the library and there is little interaction other than the usual giving of information, time, and advice by the library with no expectation of return.

Some individual student and team projects have been interviewing the reference staff to practice writing job descriptions (Human Resources classes), interviewing the director and acquisitions staff and examining documents to prepare flowcharts and systems analyses (EDP Auditing class), studying the probability of any given book being on the library shelf at a given time (mathematics classes), interviewing the director to meet a requirement for interviewing a manager (management classes), and interviewing staff members to determine if graduate student library orientation should be changed (independent study). We have participated in numerous student surveys concerning library services for marketing research classes and automation studies by computer students on almost every aspect of our operations. The library has even served as a model for still photography and video class projects.

Each institution should determine the mix of guinea pig student projects they want to encourage and the nature of the institution may make a difference on the emphasis of the projects. Bentley College, one of the schools examined for this article, is a business-emphasis institution. Their projects are usually focused

on personnel, computing, and accounting. St. John's University draws heavily from business and accounting courses with additional project inquiries coming from art, psychology, mathematics, and sociology students.

Student-initiated projects must be viewed with several caveats in mind. Part of a college's role is to offer learning opportunities outside of the classroom. The library may be a logical place to offer that experience and librarians should embrace that role as the advantages are many. As a guinea pig, the library is helping the curriculum and its relationship with faculty and students becomes richer. The experience can be fun for the staff, particularly with a captive audience that is really interested in what you are doing. The library's image as a friendly helpful place is enhanced and you may even learn something through an in-depth examination of a particular part of your operation.

Yet, there are pitfalls to becoming a guinea pig. Real guinea pigs get fed for their efforts; however, the library is mainly a giver and not a receiver except in the area of library-initiated projects. Time requirements and interruptions need to be balanced against the library's main duties and goals. Many students or project teams are not sure of what they want to do and the library's time commitment may be significant. Students may work on very inflexible schedules and expect you to be responsive. You should not do their projects for them either in information provided or design. Student groups also should not upset the staff or be privy to confidential information.

If you consider the class project/guinea pig model as beneficial, you should support it and look for ways to expand it appropriate to your library and student body. By all means, document the number, complexity, and costs involved as it will help you demonstrate to academic management and faculty that being a willing guinea pig is one more way that your library serves the purposes of the college.

Conclusion

In all academic libraries student projects are part of the scene. Smaller libraries frequently find that student projects can be especially helpful. In most cases, students are fun to work with. They are often amazed at the complexity of the library and can offer insights on how to improve its operations. Those reasons alone are sufficient "reward" for most of us to enthusiastically accept our role as project managers or guinea pigs for student projects. ∎