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Librarian Mentoring of an Undergraduate Research Project

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Article

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Abstract

Bridgewater State University has a dynamic, highly visible, and increasingly successful Office of Undergraduate Research (OUR) that supports students and their faculty mentors with developing research opportunities. Students working on undergraduate research projects have sought the help of librarians, but the librarians had never been directly involved as mentors. A librarian mentor and student library worker collaborated on a project to develop an online library guide, which is used by faculty and student researchers for discovering social justice resources, and found new paths to teaching and learning information literacy skills.

The Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL, 2000) defines information literacy as a set of skills "requiring individuals to 'recognize when information is needed and have the ability to locate, evaluate, and use effectively the needed information'" (Information literacy defined, para.1). Information Literacy is, at its heart, about developing a love for life-long learning. One must learn "how to learn" in order to be information literate. There are many ways to teach information literacy in an academic institution. Most librarians are familiar with the "one shot" sessions in which we are invited to talk to a class on library resources relevant to a discipline. Some institutions teach credit-bearing courses on information literacy, or embed a librarian in a course to work with a faculty member in developing assignments and assisting students in completing them. Many college and university libraries also offer research consultations in which a student can make an individual appointment with a librarian and receive in-depth support. It is for in-depth research that librarians may be called upon to help with an undergraduate research project. The literature demonstrates, however, that it is less common for a librarian to serve directly as a mentor to an undergraduate pursuing a research project.

According to the Council on Undergraduate Research (n.d.), a national organization of 900 colleges and universities, undergraduate research is "an inquiry or investigation conducted by an undergraduate student that makes an original intellectual or creative contribution to the discipline" (para. 3). Furthermore, the Council (2005) states that undergraduate research "replaces traditional archetypes of teacher and student with a collaborative investigative model, one using research done with a mentor or done jointly by students and teachers…" (para. 2, bullet 2). The Council (2005) also states "with faculty mentors, students engage directly in practicing the work of their discipline while they avoid passively acquiring knowledge that that discipline has produced" (para. 2, bullet 4).

Stamatoplos (2009) adds that: "students have primary responsibility for their projects" (p. 237) and that

> …independent research experiences entail real hands-on experience in research conception, design, conduct, and dissemination and make inherent contributions to a discipline. Independent undergraduate research projects often derive from or relate to the scholarship of the faculty mentor and are expected to create new knowledge or creative scholarship as well as be disseminated in a public forum. (p. 236)

A literature search retrieved articles on how librarians can provide research assistance to undergraduate students, or how they collaborate with faculty in developing assignments, but almost no articles on librarians directly mentoring undergraduate research projects - a notable exception being "Growing our Own: Mentoring Undergraduate Students" by Harwood and McCormack (2008). This article describes a project in which a librarian mentored an undergraduate business major in creating web-

based tutorials on developing marketing and business plans (and for which the student received academic credit). Interestingly, Harwood and McCormack also note the dearth of literature on the topic of librarian mentors (p. 205). Stamatoplos reached a similar conclusion:

> LIS [Library and Information Science] literature effectively reduces the research of undergraduate students to processes of finding information and using information sources. Even when the term "undergraduate research" actually occurs in the literature, it generally denotes course-related information-seeking activities and processes. Based solely on the LIS literature, therefore, one would not know of the existence and nature of independent mentored undergraduate research or of examples of library engagement with it. (p. 239)

The lack of literature[1] may be related to the fact that Library Science is not typically an undergraduate field of study. Moreover, even those students who might pursue a project in Library Science would probably look to an LIS faculty member before seeking the mentorship of a practicing librarian. In some institutions, librarians may even be precluded from doing this type of work because they lack faculty status. The present paper describes an undergraduate research project, mentored by a librarian, in which information literacy skills were learned during the creation of a research guide.

History and Background

Bridgewater State University is a Carnegie Classification Master's L institution located in southeastern Massachusetts, with approximately 11,000 undergraduate and graduate students. Originally established in 1840, the University has seen much growth, and now houses five separate Colleges: the College of Education and Allied Studies; the Ricciardi College of Business; the Bartlett College of Science and Mathematics; the College of Humanities and Social Sciences; and the College of Graduate Studies. In recent years, the University has made commitments to both Undergraduate Research and to Social Justice. The University's Office of Undergraduate Research was established in 2006 with a mission to advance "the culture of scholarly and creative excellence at Bridgewater State University by supporting undergraduate research and educating students about how it fits into a college career and in realizing post-college goals" (http://www.bridgew.edu/OUR/mission.cfm). Mentorship is one way in which the Office fosters this.

The Clement C. Maxwell Library supports undergraduate research by providing scholarly resources and teaching students to use and cite them.

Creating Library Subject Guides

In the spring of 2010, the Clement C. Maxwell Library purchased a subscription to the LibGuides service. The librarians saw that many other academic libraries were using this service to create easy-to-follow guides to finding library resources. After the service

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[1] Even ACRL, which provides a great deal of guidance on information literacy instruction, doesn't provide guidance on mentoring students.

was purchased, we began creating guides under the brand "MaxGuides" (in reference to our library's name). We started by creating a library guide for each academic department on campus. Additionally, guides were created for special topics (e.g., Women's Studies, Entertainment, News). In the fall of 2010, we began creating guides for individual classes when they were brought to the library for instruction sessions. We were pleased to see that students were following the guides not only during the instruction sessions, but also continued to use them throughout the semester, as evidenced by usage statistics. It appears that the development of the guides has been beneficial to faculty and student users of the library.

During the fall 2010 semester, the University announced that it was establishing an Institute for Social Justice. Because guides had been developed to use in conjunction with other campus centers (e.g., the Center for Entrepreneurship, the Pride Center, and the Center for Sustainability), it seemed natural to create a guide for social justice resources, and so I began to consider what might be included in such a guide. It so happened that one of our best student workers in the reference department, Nicole (Nikki) Sauber, was also the president of the student-run Social Justice League, and so I thought I should talk to her about what topics I might include in the guide. As I thought more about the project, I realized that Nikki could contribute a lot more than just a list of suggested resources, and that perhaps she should create the guide. I was not quite sure how the logistics of this project would work, as only librarians were provided with accounts to create MaxGuides, and I also wanted Nikki to get academic credit for the work. Since the Library does not offer any credit-bearing courses, I spoke with the director of the Office of Undergraduate Research, Dr. Jenny Shanahan, and the Library Director, Michael Somers, and I was advised to pursue working with the College of Education and Allied Studies to offer a Directed Study. After speaking with Anna Bradfield (the Dean of that College), Nikki and I wrote a proposal outlining the goals of the project, for which she would earn two hours of academic credit at the 400 level.

Although we did not set up a separate MaxGuides account for Nikki, I learned that I could add her as a collaborator to any guide I created, so I simply set up a blank template, with the intention that she would populate it. With very few exceptions, she had all the necessary access to the template. The Library Director offered to let Nikki revise a guide he created on the U.S. Constitution so she could learn how the guides were created.

Once she learned the basics of using LibGuides, Nikki was ready to begin creating the social justice Maxguide. She began by looking at the guides that had already been created to get ideas. The additional advantage of this is that she became more familiar with what guides were already available--a true benefit to her work when helping others with research at the Reference Desk, and making her even more of an asset to the department. Nikki describes her experience:

> The MaxGuides have come in handy several times while I have been working at the Reference Desk in the past year. Often times… students approach me with a fearful look in their eyes as they tell me about… [an assigned paper] on a very vague topic…MaxGuides [are] user-friendly, visually appealing research portals that nearly any student can understand

and use to find scholarly information. … Students are…surprised at how "cool" and "easy" these websites are. (personal communication, July 6, 2011)

Each Guide has several sections with different types of resources (e.g, reference sources, books, online databases, web pages). Some of these are restricted to affiliated users; others may be viewed and used by anyone. As President of the Social Justice League, Nikki was already familiar with resources on campus and was prepared to link to those in the guide. She also knew about good external resources.

I removed my profile and picture from the template. Unfortunately, since Nikki did not have her own account, we could not create a profile for her. However, in removing my profile, I saw a truly blank template which allowed me to think about the design of the guides in new ways. I also had to let go of my own ideas about aesthetics. I had my own thoughts about how the guides should look and tended to follow the same formula whenever I created one. Nikki worked with a blank template and had her own ideas about placement and design. I also learned from her how to create links to RSS feeds and got the idea to create playlists from our *Films on Demand* database from her. She described her design process in an email to me:

> …with Social Justice being an academic and an area for student/faculty involvement on campus, I knew that I had to alter the format to include links and references to both research material and social justice initiatives…at BSU. I have done a fair amount of research on social justice issues myself, so I used many of the most popular and well-respected information and news websites as external resources on the Maxguide. (personal communication, July 6, 2011)

We worked together to determine what online databases to include. The Library subscribes to nearly 200 general and specialized databases, Nikki was not familiar with all of them. In evaluating the databases for inclusion, she learned about resources she had never used before, which resulted in her being able to answer questions more effectively in her work at the Reference Desk, whether they were included in the guide or not. The same was true of electronic encyclopedias and other reference resources.

We wanted to be sure to preserve the integrity of Nikki's work but still create a guide that could be maintained at the conclusion of her employment as a student worker. I could certainly edit it whenever I wanted, but that would necessarily mean that the guide that Nikki created would be changed. We solved this by copying the guide, an easy thing to do within LibGuides, and published for public use the copied guide. We published the original guide privately, which allows only those who are invited to use it. We provided Nikki with the private URL so that she has her work preserved, and can highlight it in a CV or portfolio, and we still are both able to make changes to the public guide. (See Figure 1 for a screenshot of the guide.)
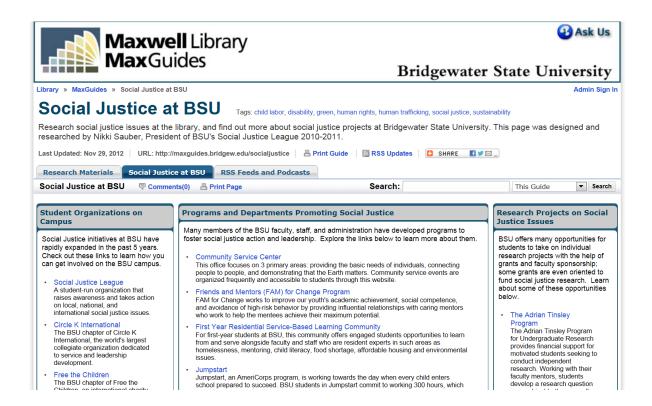
Maxwell Library
MaxGuides

Bridgewater State University

Library » MaxGuides » Social Justice at BSU   Admin Sign In

Social Justice at BSU   Tags: child labor, disability, green, human rights, human trafficking, social justice, sustainability

Research social justice issues at the library, and find out more about social justice projects at Bridgewater State University. This page was designed and researched by Nikki Sauber, President of BSU's Social Justice League 2010-2011.

Last Updated: Nov 29, 2012 | URL: http://maxguides.bridgew.edu/socialjustice | 🖨 Print Guide | 📶 RSS Updates | 🔗 SHARE ◼️🔵✉️...

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Student Organizations on Campus

Social Justice initiatives at BSU have rapidly expanded in the past 5 years. Check out these links to learn how you can get involved on the BSU campus.

• Social Justice League
A student-run organization that raises awareness and takes action on local, national, and international social justice issues.

• Circle K International
The BSU chapter of Circle K International, the world's largest collegiate organization dedicated to service and leadership development.

• Free the Children
The BSU chapter of Free the Children, an international charity

Programs and Departments Promoting Social Justice

Many members of the BSU faculty, staff, and administration have developed programs to foster social justice action and leadership. Explore the links below to learn more about them.

• Community Service Center
This office focuses on 3 primary areas: providing the basic needs of individuals, connecting people to people, and demonstrating that the Earth matters. Community service events are organized frequently and accessible to students through this website.

• Friends and Mentors (FAM) for Change Program
FAM for Change works to improve our youth's academic achievement, social competence, and avoidance of high-risk behavior by providing influential relationships with caring mentors who work to help the mentees achieve their maximum potential.

• First Year Residential Service-Based Learning Community
For first-year students at BSU, this community offers engaged students opportunities to learn from and serve alongside faculty and staff who are resident experts in such areas as homelessness, mentoring, child literacy, food shortage, affordable housing and environmental issues.

• Jumpstart
Jumpstart, an AmeriCorps program, is working towards the day when every child enters school prepared to succeed. BSU students in Jumpstart commit to working 300 hours, which

Research Projects on Social Justice Issues

BSU offers many opportunities for students to take on individual research projects with the help of grants and faculty sponsorship; some grants are even oriented to fund social justice research. Learn about some of these opportunities below.

• The Adrian Tinsley Program
The Adrian Tinsley Program for Undergraduate Research provides financial support for motivated students seeking to conduct independent research. Working with their faculty mentors, students develop a research question

Figure 1. Screenshot of the Guide, January 28, 2013

Results

This was an especially satisfying project. In addition to creating a new model for teaching information literacy, it fit well with our University's commitments to undergraduate research and social justice, and established the Library as a partner in these initiatives. In working together to create this guide, Nikki and I both learned some new skills. And, as with the Harwood and McCormack (2008) project, the real benefit came from the cascading effect of the mentee teaching others how to use resources more effectively.

This project fulfilled many of the salient outcomes of undergraduate research. It was a collaborative effort between mentor and student in which the student was directly, actively engaged; it produced an original contribution to librarianship; and it produced a publicly available learning guide for other students and scholars. It also required the student to use the information literacy skills of finding, and, more importantly, critically evaluating the information. Nikki stated that creating the guide:

> …was probably the most fun, educational, and worthwhile experience I could have had dreamed of doing since … first [discovering my] passion for social justice. …The education… was more comprehensive than a single class. …The approach was interdisciplinary: … computer science, communication, sociology,

> and library science were combined to create [a] useful project that will…help…students. (personal communication, July 6, 2011)

What made this project especially successful was that it was born from a library need, the mentee had a personal interest in the work, and she earned academic credit. All of these were also true of the project completed by Harwood and McCormack (2008), as they, like Nikki and I, discovered that the relationship between a mentor and a mentee blurs the lines between teacher and learner (p. 209).

Acknowledgement

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