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Mentoring: It's *Good* Thing

What we learned partying with student librarians

Images: University of Iowa Centennial Dinner, 1947 | Iowa City Town and Campus Scenes | http://digital.lib.uiowa.edu/ictcs

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Party hosting is an exercise in preparation and personal finesse. The ambiance and menu must be exciting, the guests lively and engaging. As host, you must set the tone and connect newcomers with those already at the party. No matter how charming or prepared you think you are, once the party starts anything can happen. Uninvited guests can come crashing, Uncle Gene can go heavy on the Riesling and start telling inappropriate jokes, and timid, tired Tina can suck the air right out of the room. But when conditions are right, and host and guests find their flow, the experience is a delight for everyone.

Last fall marked the end of a two-year digital librarianship mentor program where the University of Iowa Libraries' Digital Library Services (DLS) played host to a total of 18 fellows. We're exhausted but stimulated by the experience, savoring a number of successes and, well, blotting up a few messes.

While the students' experiences were no doubt fascinating with the usual mix of classes, seminars, and project work, our story here describes the party from the host's point of view – the planning that

worked and the unexpected surprises, the effect on staff dynamics, the unimagined strides made in growing a relatively young digital library program, and the impact of the students' departure forcing us to realign workflows and develop a new plan to sustain and move forward.

The background

In 2006, the University of Iowa's School of Library and Information Science received a $1.1 million Laura Bush 21st Century Librarian Program grant to fund two cohorts of digital librarianship fellows. The first 10 students arrived in the summer of 2007 and continued through the end of 2008. The second cohort of nine followed the same schedule one year later.

The stated goals of the grant were four-fold:

- To recruit two cohorts with 10 students each into the digital librarianship program.[1]
- To offer a curriculum emphasizing digital librarianship, interweaving course-based learning with project-based experience.
- To support digital library projects and services across the University.
- To contribute to the national pool of well-trained library professionals firmly grounded in librarianship and in digital services.

The program was designed to follow a clinical rotation model. Rather than the typical terminal practicum or internship experience, students would be assigned to projects throughout their entire library school experience, rotating from one project to another each semester to graduate with a varied collection of real-life digital library experiences.

Taking a broad view of digital libraries, the library school sought partnerships with four other campus units: the University Libraries, Information Technology Services (through its Digital Media Service group in Academic Technologies), the WiderNet Project (which provides training, computers, and digital resources targeted to schools and clinics in developing countries), and the Virtual Writing University (an umbrella encompassing the various writing programs at the University).

A defining characteristic of the Iowa program was to engage the fellows in digital library work from day one. With only a summer orientation behind them, the fellows began working alongside digital librarians, academics, and technologists. The early and steep immersion in digital librarianship allowed fellows to arrive at class with significant experience and context for learning librarian skills. Concepts that may have seemed abstract to others had real bearing on the work they were engaged in at their mentor site. Soon, the mentors were learning tricks from students who quickly gained facility transforming data using XSLT and writing scripts to cull metadata from the Internet.

Planning the menu

Prior to the first cohort of students arriving in the summer of 2007, each campus partner was asked to propose projects suitable for a semester-long rotation. As a central campus provider and primary host

[1] A slight change of plans after the program started reduced the second cohort to nine.

site, we knew we had the capacity to take on several fellows at once. We thus submitted seven projects and had a few alternatives lined up.

Our goal in the first semester was to provide a solid foundational experience in traditional digital library work. We identified projects that would be challenging yet have a strong likelihood for a successful first-semester experience. When considering projects, we asked ourselves:

- Are the prerequisite skills appropriate for incoming students who may not have any experience with digital library initiatives?
- Is the scope well defined so that it can be accomplished in a semester?
- Can a wide range of activities be accommodated so that a student with advanced skills can be as challenged as a student with no relevant technical experience?
- Is the project consistent with our strategic goals?
- Is there a plan to sustain the collection after the student's contribution ends?
- Given our dependency on third party content providers, are we confident they will be able to commit time and respond without delay?
- Can we reasonably anticipate that issues (such as copyright or adequate technology) will grind the project to a halt mid-semester?

To generate enough projects from which to choose, we not only culled current projects list but also stoked content providers for ideas. We knew we needed to be prepared to "feed the beast," although as the semesters progressed we became better at being more strategic about projects and recognizing ones that could be fraught. Still, we ran into a few projects that stalled out or had to be abandoned because of over-committed content providers or thorny rights issues.

For each project we listed key activities, prerequisite knowledge, skills that would be acquired over the course of the semester, and tangible end product (Figure 1). Students were asked to indicate their top three based on their own experience and interests.

Our goal was to provide fellows with an "elevated experience." We were not simply hiring student employees but providing a professional experience that would become a core component of each student's library school career. For relatively straightforward digital collections work, we tried to involve students in the full project lifecycle: planning, consulting, reformatting, creating metadata, interface design, and promotion and marketing.

Projects on the docket were already at different stages in their lifecycle. For each, we sought to articulate a plan for sustaining the project beyond the semester. If a fellow developed a pilot collection, we would enlist the Libraries' Preservation department to provide production scanning and Technical Services to provide metadata to flesh out the collection. Sustaining momentum for so many projects was difficult, and reframing projects from semester to semester to provide the right level of challenge wasn't always possible.

The guests arrive … and arrive

As the grant was initially conceived, we anticipated averaging about two fellows per semester. Instead, each semester DLS was assigned no fewer than four fellows; and one semester we had 12. That was a lot of staff time to manage, but it also allowed us to make significant headway on some existing challenges, such as finding aid conversion, institutional repository startup, digital library interface design, and expanding digital collections to incorporate streaming video.

Students were assigned a librarian mentor and quickly put to work. Initial steps often included researching how other academic libraries handle similar projects and the necessary software tools, standards, workflow, or interface design. From there, mentees attended planning meetings where they were introduced to other stakeholders from across the library, including staff from departments such as Preservation, Special Collections, or Applications & Web Services.

The increased attention to digital projects and implementation of the Libraries' new framework for project management demanded a lot from colleagues. To make the program work, we needed not only their buy-in to the process, but also a solid commitment of time—and quickly, since the semester cycle cannot accommodate roadblocks without serious consequences for the student.

The fellows experienced first-hand the cultural differences between digital library departments and those performing more traditional library tasks. Digital library workflows are typically organized around projects with a beginning and end, and a client-driven model frequently serving stakeholders outside of the library, including faculty researchers, academic departments, and other campus players. In contrast, staff in areas such as Preservation or Special Collections perform more long-term tasks, working primarily with internal stakeholders on ongoing processing and with donors on enhancing collections. These differing workflows can lead to tensions over project deadlines and priorities, and the fellows were able to experience that firsthand.

The life of the party

Standouts soon emerged. One fellow became facile with XML after receiving introductory lessons in class and applying that theory to her work in DLS. Several advanced out-of-state workshops later, along with plenty of independent learning, she had become the campus expert at data transformations. She even accepted an invitation to teach a course on XML in the library school, a case of the student truly becoming the master.

Over time we learned ways to position fellows for a successful experience:

- Start with a "garden variety digital project." New fellows typically started on Special Collections projects—planning, consulting with content providers, reformatting, creating metadata, interface design, and promotion and marketing. It was a good foundation before advancing to more complex projects, and also gave students a nice early capstone for their portfolios to which they could refer prospective employers.

- Use the buddy system. For more complicated projects fellows found it helpful to work in pairs. This way they could help each other troubleshoot and develop specialized roles.
- Take time for research. With their surfeit of time uninterrupted by meetings and other daily rituals of library life, the fellows could go in-depth about how other academic libraries handle similar projects and the necessary software tools, standards, workflow, or interface design.

As fellows became more skilled, we were able to implement an institutional repository, migrate flagship legacy digital collections into a content management system, convert HTML finding aids into EAD format, and develop a prototype for a digital library mobile interface. By the end, the number of items in our digital library had tripled.

Blotting up messes

As with any group of students, we encountered a range of potential and motivation. Although it's tempting to blame the victims, we recognize that as mentors, much of the responsibility for failure fell squarely to us. The issues included:

• Poor communication among project stakeholders. The usual memoranda of understanding outlining scopes, deadlines, and projected outcomes were created, but in the rush to get everything ready for the students, corner-cutting and misinformation crept in to the process. . In one memorably painful instance, a student's entire semester of work creating a collection of digitized videos complete with metadata records and a boutique interface had to be scrapped due to late-emerging copyright issues.

• Single-project approach. The practice of allowing fellows to select a single semester-long project was soon abandoned. Digital initiatives are full of dependencies, which often cause delays. By the end of the program, we had fellows juggling a primary project and fielding unexpected tasks or mini-project that arose; this allowed the department more flexibility and gave the fellows a more true-to-life experience.

• Insufficient expertise. For technology-heavy initiatives such as mobile interface development and using Flickr APIs, the fellows lacked the necessary programming background to make much progress on their own, and those in the library with sufficient expertise to mentor them were already too overburdened to provide enough help.

The fellows gave end-of-semester presentations on projects and we were often pleasantly surprised by their thoughtful and articulate analyses of their experiences, including strategies to correct or circumvent similar issues in the future. If it's true that one learns more from failure than success, then some of our fellows ended up very learned indeed.

The party's over?

As the fellows became more accomplished, we began to long for a way to retain them. But the first cohort was nearing graduation just as the national economy was tanking and the University was recovering from a record-setting flood that devastated large parts of central campus. We managed to hire two from the first group as temporary librarians with the hope that permanent funding might be forthcoming. In the spring, however, their funding dried up just as the second cohort was finishing. The

party was over. Our initial post-fellow staff meetings did leave us feeling bereft, and it was a struggle to readjust to our shrunken staffing levels.

The fellows had pushed the Libraries toward placing routine parts of digital collection work in existing departments, which allowed DLS to take on e-publishing and faculty e-research projects, initiatives that support the Libraries' newly revised strategic goals.

Almost a year after the last cohort graduated, we've adapted to the new normal – although we're still occasionally wistful for the fellows era.

But it's definitely not back to business as usual. As the economy slowly recovers, the University is undertaking new initiatives, including hiring six faculty members over the next two years as part of a digital humanities cluster hire. At the same time, a Libraries' reorganization has altered reporting structures, so Technical Services becomes part of our division. While catalogers have been involved with digital collections cataloging for years, this collaboration will likely increase due to trends such as vendor outsourcing and the implementation of next-generation catalogs that have caused traditional technical services work to recede. Now that we're under the same directorate, a fuller integration of workflows for digital collection, e-publishing, and institutional repository work are anticipated.

Gearing up for this influx of new people and projects feels daunting but also familiar, thanks to the digital library fellows. It looks like we won't be retiring our newly sharpened hosting skills any time soon.