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Joan Barnes
University of Nebraska-Lincoln, jbarnes3@unl.edu

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Peer Guides Deliver Popcorn and More at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln

By Joan M. Barnes

In recent years, one of our key strategic goals at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln (UNL; http://libraries.unl.edu) has been to transform into a more student-centered library by creating a more inviting and comfortable environment for study, collaboration, and academic programming. To accomplish this goal, we needed feedback from students, which meant we had to develop formal, and informal, ways to engage them. As a member of the User Experience and Student Success Team, in August 2014, I was given the responsibility of coordinating a new initiative called the Peer Guide Program. The plan was that I’d hire undergraduate students to assist me in communicating and engaging with their classmates and peers.

Hiring the Peer Guides

UNL Libraries’ student employment database provides potential peer guides. I really believe in matching the students’ interests or areas of study with the responsibilities they will perform. Six of the nine students I’ve hired for the program have majored in one of the following subjects: advertising, public relations, graphic design, communications, and hospitality. The other three majored in business, pre-health, and environmental science.

NC State’s ‘Library Stories’ Publicize Librarians’ Innovative Collaborations

By Chris Vitiello

If a tree falls in the woods and you’re not there to hear it, does it make a sound? Yes—if someone tells you about it.

Academic librarians deal with something similar. Each day, they enable access to rich collections, next-gen resources, and cutting-edge technologies. They provide cross-disciplinary services and learning spaces to support innovative pedagogy and research. But these interactions with students, faculty, and staff are typically ephemeral, and the evidence of a fruitful collaboration often disappears as soon as everyone leaves the room.

Librarians at North Carolina State University (NCSU) Libraries (www.lib.ncsu.edu) are making sure that people know about the innovations and collaborations involved in their daily work through an initiative called Library Stories (www.lib.ncsu.edu/stories). The idea is simple: As librarians work directly with users across the university and community, they capture the stories of that work. Then they publish these stories so that other users, donors, and advocates can see the vital roles librarians play in teaching, learning, and research.

“There’s so much that libraries’ staff are doing unbeknownst to other people,” says Anne Burke, undergraduate instruction and outreach librarian and Library Stories team lead. “Without Library Stories, it all just would have stayed between the people who did it.”

About NC State and NCSU Libraries

Located in Raleigh, NC State is the largest school in the University of North Carolina
The pre-health student has a very bubbly personality, and her goal is to become a nurse. She staffs the libraries’ booth at university recruitment events and greets the students. All of the students have to be outgoing because they will be interacting with the public often. Other skill sets I look for are the ability to solve problems and work independently.

During the interview process, I ask each student what he or she hopes to do as a career. One student answered, “I want to manage the social media for a national or international brand.” That student ended up helping me manage our social media accounts.

When there’s a solid connection between interest and responsibility, students are more invested in the assigned projects and do better jobs. I make it clear that each student can use the peer guide experience to leverage more rewarding career opportunities in the future. Since these are paid positions, they have extra incentive to do well.

There are five main areas in which peer guides assist us. They are recruitment outreach, user surveys, promotional outreach, events, and social media. I’ll discuss each of them here.

### Recruitment Outreach and User Surveys

Recruitment outreach and user surveys have been two of the five areas in which the peer guides have yielded the most success.

Recruitment outreach involves the libraries’ presence at an event known as Red Letter Days, which is sponsored by UNL’s admissions department. I assigned a peer guide to staff our booth at the “fair,” where a majority of prospective students stop by various information tables. She takes care of all the supplies and keeps track of all the dates of the various recruitment outreach events.

The peer guides have had great success in helping us implement user surveys by facilitating more interactions with potential respondents. I send the peer guides out with either printed survey sheets or tablets to access online surveys. In addition, I arm them with some kind of reward to give each survey participant, such as a stress ball or smartphone screen cleaner. The peer guides don’t confine themselves just to the libraries; we send them to various buildings on campus to recruit survey takers as well. We’ve found that two peer guides can collect more than 100 responses within a week by working a couple of hours each day.

### Promotional Outreach

Promotional outreach is one of the fun tasks for our peer guides because it usually involves our popcorn machine and a lot of interaction with other students. Sometimes our promotional outreach is done spontaneously; sometimes we plan it ahead of time. We have tried it both ways and found that planning for a specific date is more efficient. I’ll assign two peer guides to take our popcorn machine into the library, hand out free popcorn, and converse with other students about a library service or event. I call it promotional outreach; others may call it word-of-mouth marketing.

Last semester, we concentrated these efforts on the upcoming opening of the Adele Coryell Hall Learning Commons. Many students knew we had closed one floor of the main Love Library for construction, but only a few knew why and what would result. Peer guides went out five to six times during the semester with the floor plan of the learning commons and the popcorn machine. (They work 1–3 hour shifts depending on their schedules.)

I love this type of outreach because the conversations can reveal some interesting rumors or misinformation that’s being passed along. After each shift, I make a point of asking the peer guides what types of responses they received from students, and it is always illuminating. In the case of our learning commons promos, the guidelines being “in the know” and enthusiastically shared the information with friends, classmates, and other students. Listeners’ responses to the news conveyed by their peers were overwhelmingly positive.

Sometimes this type of outreach is more than popcorn and talk. Two of the peer guides took a laptop into the Love Library’s lobby and helped students open Uniprint (printer-payment) accounts. (We wanted to encourage students who were paying cash at our circulation desk to turn to Uniprint.) The guides gave a stress ball to each student who stopped to open an account.

### Other Major Events

The Love Library is evolving into an academic and cultural community center on campus. The university has added exhibit space, and it built programming space into the new Adele Coryell Hall Learning Commons that opened in January 2016. I hired a hospitality major as one of the peer guides to help me meet the growing demands of programs and events.

The hospitality peer guide and I developed an events checklist and an event timeline template. She also helped me organize a lecture series and a gallery opening. Since donors, alumni, and the chancellor of the university would be attending the gallery opening, it was a major event that had to be...
impressive. The peer guide shadowed me in meetings with the caterer and kept track of planning notes. I also turned over the responsibility for other details such as rentals, flowers, name tags, and the event timeline so that she would experience this unique learning opportunity within a real-life application.

Social Media
One of the ways I think our Peer Guide Program is different from other programs in academic libraries is that our guides write posts for the libraries’ blog and Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram accounts. There are some steps we take before a peer guide is ready to assist me with our social media.

The first step is to acquaint each peer guide with our social media contract, which is based on a contract written by Tyler Thomas, the university’s social media specialist. I revised it for the libraries’ needs. (Email me if you’d like to see a copy.) Its purpose is to help the peer guides fully understand their responsibilities and to ensure accountability. The social media contract includes guidelines regarding the university’s brand, computer-use regulations, parameters of content, consequences of inappropriate posts, and more. I go over the contract with the peer guides who are assigned to social media and answer all of their questions before they sign it.

The next step is to help them understand the type of content we are looking for when it comes to promoting our events, resources, and services. During the training period with a new peer guide, I have him or her review the libraries’ website to become more familiar with the services and resources. We sit down together and go over the content calendar (an Excel spreadsheet that contains the posts that will go out on our social media accounts). A new peer guide can review the type of posts we’ve done in the past. I review, and sometimes edit, all posts they write. When I’ve approved the copy, the peer guide adds it to the content calendar for future posting. The content calendar is a great way to plan ahead for posts related to future events and programs.

During the 2015–2016 academic year, I added a peer guide who majors in graphic design. She assists our full-time graphic designer, and she also creates visuals that accompany our social media posts. The addition of the visuals has revitalized our Facebook posts and increased our followers on all platforms. For example, she created a visual series titled “study by style” with text descriptions on the merits of each study space (i.e., quiet versus collaborative).

Peer guides have also taken the initiative to propose ways we can increase the number of followers on social media. For instance, one guide proposed we add a hashtag and our Twitter handle (@UNL_Lib) to the popcorn bags they distribute.

More Engagement, Increased Skills
I am really proud of this program because I know we have reached and engaged more students than ever before. I wish I had hired a student to host the libraries’ table at admissions events years ago. Students’ peers have attracted many more young people to our table than any of the previous staff volunteers ever did.

Peer guides help us gather important marketing data on UNL undergraduate students, and these guides themselves also provide us with insight into being UNL students. They not only represent our main customers, they are our customers. I take into consideration their opinions on our services, potential events, and promotional materials.

One of the things I love most about this program is being able to mentor students. They gain skills and knowledge through valuable teaching moments in the context of a real work experience. The Peer Guide Program follows a teacher–practitioner model. I practice my profession and teach the peer guides through training and supervising projects. The peer guides then are acquiring significant experience for the future.

In fact, two of our peer guides have attained great internship opportunities based on the work they did for us. One guide who helped manage social media went on to intern with the Nebraska Tourism Commission. Her portfolio included much of the work she did as a peer guide. Another guide won a teaching assistantship within the department of her major.

The peer guides have also given their feedback on the program. One said he liked having a position that “brought me closer to my career goals,” and another said, “I felt like I was a part of something greater, within the library system.”

There are a lot of positives about the Peer Guide Program. But anyone who wants to set up such a program needs to be realistic about the amount of work and time that goes into hiring, training, and supervising these student workers. Consider the amount of work required to plan projects for them and to monitor their progress. The other challenge is having a good hiring pool. I have not been able to find an adequate replacement for the peer guide to the hospitality program has not produced more undergraduates, and these guides themselves also provide us with more students who bring new ideas and energy into the program. They help complete much-needed work; they engage many students; and they even serve popcorn.

Regardless of those challenges, I continue to hire new guides who bring new ideas and energy into the program. They help complete much-needed work; they engage many students; and they even serve popcorn.

Joan M. Barnes is the community engagement librarian, associate professor of practice, at the University of Nebraska–Lincoln (UNL). She holds an M.L.I.S. from the University of Rhode Island in Kingston. Barnes is responsible for marketing, outreach, and communications for the UNL Libraries. Past responsibilities include event planning, grant writing, fundraising, and coordinating the Friends of the Libraries. Her email address is j.barnes3@unl.edu.