Reaching Out with LibGuides: Establishing a Working Set of Best Practices

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ABSTRACT. With an increasing number of distance education students at New Mexico State University, the library sought a way to strengthen the delivery of its resources and services to off-campus students. Specifically, and faced with the problem of outdated paper subject guides and infrequently updated online subject guides, the library acquired the LibGuides platform to more efficiently meet the research and information-gathering needs of the changing student dynamic. Combining user feedback, usage statistics, information from the field, and many lessons learned from the implementation and maintenance of the LibGuides platform, a working set of best practices is presented, addressing: purpose, organization, and plan; faculty involvement; audience awareness; and evaluation and assessment.

KEYWORDS best practices, faculty collaboration, Lib Guides, online guides

INTRODUCTION

Historically, the nature of library collections brought users into the library, where librarians were able to easily identify them and help them find the information they needed. The steady movement of library resources and other information to an online format along with the ubiquitous increase in students who take classes online has continued to challenge librarians to deliver needed information to users in an efficient and reliable format. Creating contextual and remotely accessible research help is crucial to the relevance of the library in distance education. Without the physical contact of the library, students can easily miss the off campus services that libraries...
provide. Additionally, students can be unaware of the role of librarians in their academic experience. When both the information and user are online, librarians need to be there, too. Online guides have played an important role in helping librarians make information available to users, specifically those who are not standing in front of them at a reference desk. Additionally, online guides have evolved from online versions of paper handouts to pathfinders to sophisticated (yet somewhat complicated) interactive sites. With the recent release of several different software programs designed to assist libraries with the creation and maintenance of modern online guides, many libraries are transitioning from traditional pathfinder-style online guides to a platform supported by one of these many software programs. Since so many libraries are embracing this new technology, it seems reasonable to begin discussing and sharing, as a profession, experiences regarding the shift to a new format of reference outreach. In this case study, the authors outline one library’s experience of choosing, adopting, and maintaining an online guide software package, LibGuides. They plan to open the discussion of the state of online guides by proposing a working set of best practices for librarians to consider and adapt as more and more libraries adopt programs like LibGuides to manage their online guides.

LITERATURE REVIEW

There are many case studies that outline the process and purpose of a library’s collection of subject guides, but few that focus specifically on the transition from a traditional online guide to the use of a commercial platform to support the creation and maintenance of online guides. However, there is much written about how and why libraries proceed in investigating the purpose and worth of guides.

There are several common concerns that arise when investigating online guides: the technological knowledge of librarians, and the manageability, accessibility, and currency of the guides. Both Vileno (2007) and Smith (2008) provide thorough literature reviews of the history of research guides, from bibliographies to online pathfinders to LibGuides. Each identifies common concerns specific to online guides. Smith points to manageability as a core problem. His review finds that librarians are often not trained in authoring Web pages or other back-end technologies that provide users access to guides (Smith, 2008). Vileno outlines another common concern: the sheer amount of time librarians spend authoring and editing guides, especially given that “few have reported using focus groups, surveys or usability tests in order to discover their target audience’s needs” (p. 448). Additionally, she found that in the case of electronic resources, “it is assumed that clients will use a tool, simply because it is online” (p. 442). Tchangalova and Feigley (2008) found a lack of awareness of subject guides among users, possibly
due to “poor promotion and visibility” (para. 2). They, too, refer to the disconnect between the large amount of time put into guides and the seeming indifference librarians have as to whether or not “users are even aware of the existence of subject guides” (Tchangalova & Feigley, 2008, para. 2). And as Arnold, Csir, Sias, and Zhang (2004) conclude, “in order for online help to be effective, it must be fully integrated into the functioning of a library’s web site and available at a user’s point of need” (p. 132). Another major concern motivating librarians to take a good look at their subject guides is the issue of currency. In Wales’ (2005) content management case study, his subject team “found that 25 percent of links were out-of-date in one printed guide alone after one year” (p. 115). Considering that many libraries’ online guides are not easily updatable, this number is alarming.

Arnold et al. (2004) outline the modern library users as people who “prefer to be independent and tend to avoid help” (p. 118). Additionally, they claim that most students “do not have general research questions” rather they “have specific needs” (p. 118). They responded by consolidating all of their online help points into one central page. Considering that users’ needs are likely to be specific, it is discouraging that Tchangalova and Feigley (2008, para. 6) found that “the majority of academic libraries do not offer an explanation as to the purposes of their guides.” Similarly, Jackson and Pellack (2004) found that only 38 percent of guides had annotations to help users figure out what each link meant in context. Therefore, it is reasonable that Reeb and Gibbons (2004) concluded that course-related guides are more effective than general subject guides. Interestingly, in Vileno’s (2007) compilation of electronic pathfinder guidelines, there is reference to scope, specifically that it should be defined. But there is no suggestion that content should be course related rather than discipline or subject related.

There have been a few studies evaluating content and format of online guides. In 2001, Dahl assessed 45 electronic guides for conformity to past suggested guidelines. She suggested several evaluation criteria for online guides: consistency, scope, readability, and use/usability. Additionally, she states that URLs are very important to include in guides. If the URL isn’t provided, then the user’s only access to a Web site is through the guide. Echoing the same thoughts about the important of URL’s in online guides, Jackson and Pellack (2004) found that a majority of guides did not contain URLs to the locations listed in the guides.

It is clear that more evaluation and assessment of guides is necessary. More information about the context within which students use guides is important for better practices in creating, maintaining and evaluating guides. Grays, Del Bosque, and Costello (2008) discuss their use of virtual focus groups in assessing the value of subject guides. They present best techniques and common mistakes when conducting research on subject guides. Staley (2007) notes a lack of user-centered research showing how different disciplines use guides differently. She finds a correlation between library
instruction and higher use of subject guides. Reeb and Gibbons (2004) also find that context is an important factor in students’ use of subject guides. They note the movement from subject guides to course/assignment guides as another argument for the importance of context in using guides.

Morris and Grimes (1999, p. 216) surveyed research university libraries regarding their subject guides, finding that 70 percent had no updating schedule in place. Overall, there was no formal protocol in the selection and maintenance of resources. Less than half of the survey participants keep statistics on guides. They concluded that more time needed to be invested in maintenance of guides since “… there may be little uniformity in size, content and interface of many of the libraries’ subject guides.”

Concerning uniformity of guides, Dupuis, Ryan, and Steeves (2004, p. 272) present a case study of guide creation at York University Library. They also find that organization, simplicity, and the ability to access guides from more than one access point are important aspects in effective guide creation. They found that “… it became clear that what was needed was a number of fixed categories, along with the ability for subject librarians to create customized categories based on the individual needs of their subject.”

Standards for guide creation are explored in several articles. Strutin (2008, para. 42) reiterates the need for more than one access point for guides and the importance of consistency in guide creation. He goes on to list a set of attributes that “… will produce well-used guides.” Among several attributes, the author lists course-specific guides, good library Web site placement, and using chat to embed librarians within the guides. He also stresses context and encourages presenting guides in library instruction sessions. Brazzeal (2006) discusses guides as library instruction tools and compares elements of instructions guides with a few sets of standards including the Association of College & Research Libraries’s (ACRL) Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education. He offers suggestions for the improvement of guides as instruction tools, but stops short of listing best practices for guide implementation.

BACKGROUND

New Mexico State University Demographic

Located in a state with a scattered population, New Mexico State University (NMSU) has a growing number of distance education programs and students. Presently, there are 34 distance-education programs with degrees ranging from certificates to doctorates. Nine thousand of NMSU’s 17,200 full-time equivalent students take classes online (College of Extended Learning, Distance Education office, personal communication, November 15, 2009). Additionally, an increasing number of classes that are taught in a traditional face-to-face classroom supplement their coursework within the NMSU...
course-management system. This creates an additional point of access for traditional students who are off campus and needing research help and/or library instruction. Considering the trend of students locating themselves outside of the library’s walls, the NMSU Library felt the need to facilitate better access to the library and librarians.

Stating the Need

Facing similar problems as other university libraries, the NMSU Library sought a method and a tool to create more effective online guides. The existing online subject guides lacked a common look and feel (categories, elements, structure, and appearance), leaving a user with no indication that the guides were reliably serving a common purpose. With no template for online guides or oversight in their production or maintenance, guides were created for some areas and not for others. Updating online guides required coordinating with the staff in another department. This extra step alone seemed to be enough to deter the regular maintenance of guides, resulting in many out-of-date guides. Furthermore, the online guides were not referenced intuitively from the main library Web pages, so their existence often went unnoticed. Additionally, many online subject guides were merely static HTML versions of paper subject guides and pathfinders, which the library still produced in great number despite their declining use. Keeping paper subject guides as the main format for guides seemed irrelevant and outdated. Offering out-of-date, hard-to-find online subject guides was no better. A new approach was needed.

Choosing LibGuides

Although there are other software packages and open source products that facilitate in the creation of online guides, such as SubjectsPlus and LibData, LibGuides was the best fit for the NMSU Library. LibGuides is a software application that creates a way to collect knowledge and present information in an organized manner. LibGuides has a tab based structure with a variety of boxes and columns available to create content in many different formats. Web 2.0 technologies such as RSS feeds, instant messaging widgets, and social networking applications are integrated into the LibGuides platform creating a more participatory setting than traditional online guides. Through LibGuides, online guides can be linked to from appropriate pages within the larger library Web site and from within course management systems.

LibGuides offered solutions to the library’s specific issues and concerns. Since most of the people that would be using the product were not experienced with Web design software or HTML, the ease of creation and incorporation of Web 2.0 elements was seen as one of LibGuides’ main benefits. The overall navigation would help to address the present organizational
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and linking problems. The option for the remote hosting of LibGuides was ideal for the library and especially the systems department, which at the time was focusing on a major renovation of the library Web site architecture and the implementation of a federated search tool. Additionally, a perceived benefit to selecting LibGuides was the larger LibGuides community, where nearly 1,000 libraries share over 58,000 guides and use different universities’ guides as templates for creating their own guides (Springshare, Inc., 2009). The LibGuides community offered a simple way to learn from what others in the LibGuides community were doing. LibGuides had the interactive quality and user friendliness that facilitate the creation user-centered guides that would meet the needs of on and off campus users simultaneously.

PLANNING

Initially, the LibGuides project was a way for the library to reach all students, both on and off campus. Since the product was originally being trialed for a year, planning was crucial.

Establishing Leadership

For the success of the renovation of the online guides, structured leadership was necessary. At the onset of the project, it was not entirely clear what type or how much leadership would be appropriate or necessary. The reference coordinator and the instruction coordinator were selected as project leaders due to their leadership roles in reference and outreach. Although the coordinator positions were positions of leadership, the coordinators themselves were not supervisors in the library. Considering this, assuming a leadership role required a great deal of teamwork and patience. Eventually, project leaders learned to successfully and diplomatically guide the project. Still, discussions and questions concerning the roles and responsibilities of project leaders continue to surface as the project evolves. Defining the role of a project leader is an important decision and requires complex consideration.

Administrative Buy-In

From the beginning, project leaders knew that buy-in from the entire library staff was necessary to support the LibGuides project. The first level of buy-in necessary was at the administrative level. Through the initial trial period, project leaders demonstrated to administration that this effort to reach students off campus was pressing. Reaching off-campus students was an issue that concerned library administration. The creation of new guides and
improvement of existing guides presented a logical solution. Additionally, a successful demonstration of LibGuides was presented to the library’s administrators. Department heads were impressed with the versatility of the product and began to see possible use of guides across departments.

Moreover, subject specialist participation was crucial to the success of the project. Project leaders knew that managing the work load with as many dedicated librarians as possible would be most advantageous. Librarians needed to be sold on the concept of reformatting all existing guides and creating new guides. Librarians were generally dissatisfied with the non-standardized appearance of the existing guides but many librarians had invested a considerable amount of time creating them. After a demonstration, librarians were convinced that the time spent creating the existing guides was not an accurate estimate of the time they would need to dedicate to renovating guides using the LibGuides platform. An additional level of support was necessary as project leaders began to realize that including support staff and students in the project might be necessary to mitigate the amount of time that librarians were to invest in the project. By achieving a high level of dedication, a strong foundation and high expectations for the project were established.

Creating a Template

In order to prepare for training, the project leaders created a handful of subject guides on the LibGuides platform. Soon after, they created a template guide (see Figure 1). The original purpose of the template guide was to save the time of the future guide authors by providing a set of fill-in-the-blank sections. A template also provides a consistent look and feel, which has been identified by users as important (Dupuis et al., 2004). Additionally, the template provided a place to showcase all of the different types of boxes that are available to authors to enhance the user experience. The template quickly became a promotional and assistive tool. It was invaluable during the initial training sessions as it allowed librarians to all work on a similar looking guide at the same time. Additionally, the template allowed students to become involved in helping to transfer information from the existing guides to the new LibGuides platform without having to make formatting decisions on behalf of a librarian. Later in the project, unfortunately, the template was misunderstood to be a rigid guideline for the format of a typical subject guide. The template was created to assist librarians as they learned their way around the LibGuides platform, but it was then taken very literally and proved to squash a good deal of potential creativity in the first set of LibGuides that were published. In fact, librarians were surprised to hear that they didn’t have to use the template when creating new online guides.
EXECUTION

The combination of administrative support, a leadership structure for the project, and a working template for the new set of online guides allowed the project to move from the planning phase to the execution phase.

Training

With just a 1-year administrative commitment to the LibGuides platform, it was originally thought to be imperative to create a full new set of online guides (to replace the full set of existing online and paper guides). If the LibGuides platform became essential, then administrative commitment was likely to continue. However, if the project lagged and was seen to be of peripheral interest and importance to librarians, then continued approval of funding would be harder to secure from administration. Asking librarians to essentially redo all existing guides is asking for a serious commitment of time and energy. However, motivation was not a significant barrier since most librarians were well aware that the existing online guides were in need of an overhaul. Additionally, the mere idea of a system that could meet common challenges provided interest.
With the template and a handful of first-draft guides, training sessions for librarians began. The first session was held at the beginning of the fall semester, before classes began. Librarians were encouraged by department heads to attend the training session which included time to create a first guide. This allowed for the project leaders to troubleshoot common problems that guide authors encountered and provide individual hands-on help. The initial request of subject specialists was to create one guide each by the end of the semester. The goal was set intentionally low in order not to overwhelm librarians with yet another task, especially before they were familiar with the software.

After the initial training session, project leaders provided any support that was requested, including individual training sessions, editing, and training staff and students to help with the mass transfer of information from existing online guides and paper handouts to the LibGuides platform. Training continued as needed throughout the semester and at the end of the semester, another workshop was offered so that librarians could ask specific questions; share successes, ideas, and setbacks; and, ideally, complete the guides they planned to publish by the end of the semester.

By December, 39 guides were published. This success was recognized and the library signed a three-year contract with LibGuides. This increase in commitment to LibGuides provided librarians with the motivation to continue publishing guides and familiarizing themselves with the intricacies of the LibGuides platform.

Placement

With the creation of guides well underway, placement would be important to the project’s overall success. If users were not able to locate the guides, the quality and number of guides would be irrelevant. In her analysis of successful elements of electronic pathfinders, Dahl (2001, p. 237) finds that a “direct path [to the pathfinders] is necessary.” With a library Web site redesign happening simultaneously, an opportunity to negotiate a strategic placement of the guides was available. The project leaders pushed for home page-level linking but were offered a reasonable compromise: a second-tier “Research Guides and Help” page (see Figure 2).

Users are able to access the library’s guides within two clicks of the library’s homepage. Additionally, users can be directed into the LibGuides platform at specific organizational points. For example, users can link directly to a list of the course/assignment guides or directly to a list of general subject guides. This navigational assistance was seen as important since the LibGuides pages are so different in look and feel from the rest of the library’s Web pages (see Figure 3).
Naming

While attempting to place the guides in a logical location on the library’s Web site, another major question arose: what would the guides be called? Since the introduction of the software, most librarians referred to the guides themselves
as “LibGuides.” Although the term LibGuides was understood by librarians, the term means nothing to users. Of course, the debate became even more complicated by the fact that throughout the semester, it became clear that LibGuides would be used to create more than just subject guides. LibGuides was proving to be an ideal platform for all types of guides, including course, assignment, and current event-specific guides.

Would referring to subject guides as LibGuides be just as unhelpful to users as an obscure placement on the Web site would be? Reeb and Gibbons (2004) discuss Jared Spool’s theory about “trigger words” for library Web links. In their study, they surveyed students at Bucknell to suggest names for their subject guides. According to the authors, “The student’s suggestions reflected not what the subject guides are, but what they do” (p. 127). Project leaders knew that the branding of the guides was an important factor in guide success and polled reference librarians for naming suggestions. Among the proposed names were: Subject Guides, Research Guides, Research Help, and Help Finding Information. The reference librarians, as a group, couldn’t come to a consensus on what to call the guides. After much discussion, there was still disagreement on what term to use, although the term “LibGuides” was always excluded. The decision was made to call them “Research Guides.” Finally, we named the link from the homepage, “Research Guides and Help.”

Unfortunately, the delay in naming the guides within the library has led to some confusion with the branding of the guides. Within the library, the guides are always referred to as LibGuides. Reference and instruction librarians then refer to the guides as LibGuides to users, creating a term without practical meaning.

BENEFITS

Faculty Collaboration

During implementation, it became overwhelmingly clear that course-specific and assignment-specific guides were being accessed much more than general subject guides. This wasn’t completely surprising, considering that Reeb and Gibbons concluded in 2004 that students, generally, have no idea what subject guides are. In fall 2008, the first semester that LibGuides were available to NMSU users, the guide created as a supplement to a first-year business class assignment received more hits than all 26 subject guides combined. In hindsight it seems obvious, but it was exciting to encounter a new opportunity for collaborating with faculty. Additionally, seeing that students were indeed using online resources that were created specifically for them helped to justify the amount of time spent creating the resource.
Using the LibGuides platform, guides can be created, updated, and changed relatively quickly. Since creating guides was becoming much less burdensome for librarians, they are able to create guides to meet specific, and often changing, needs of students and faculty. Without any input from faculty besides a syllabus or assignment, course/assignment guides can be created, shared, and used to open the door to future partnerships. These guides provide faculty with a vetted, organized set of tools to provide to their students. Because they reflect the current semester, students interact with resources that they perceive to be current and relevant. Students can spend more time becoming familiar with appropriate resources and less time overwhelmed by the vast array of resources available on any given topic. For students, the course/assignment guides not only serve a useful purpose, but, as Kerico and Hudson (2008, p. 40) point out, they also “help reinforce the librarian’s role and importance in the educational process.”

As faculty began to see the benefit of guides tailored to their students’ immediate, specific needs, they simultaneously began to request guides for their other classes. Additionally, they became more involved, offering suggestions and asking for certain elements to be included or excluded. Using course/assignment guides to collaborate with faculty also provided a much needed, built-in marketing device. Guides created for courses or assignments often were introduced to students via instruction session, both in-person and distance. Since faculty most likely requested the guide, they were then embedded into the course management software and students were reminded to use them. Without a true marketing plan in place, these guides then provide a direct conduit to the primary users: students. Additionally, the perceived success of the course/assignment guides caused faculty to market the service to other teaching faculty. In the fall semester of 2008, there were five course/assignment guides. One year later, there were 33 course/assignment guides. Moreover, 83 percent of the instruction sessions during the fall 2009 semester were supplemented with a course/assignment guide.

Student Involvement

Once the project was well underway, librarians indicated that they were comfortable with student workers assisting in the development of the base set of guides. Students were tasked with transferring content from existing guides into the LibGuides platform. Once content was added, the editorial rights were passed to the appropriate librarian to edit as necessary. Student involvement expedited the process of creating a full complement of subject guides. Additionally, students systematically browsed the guides, checking for missing links and other potential problems. Students benefitted from this process.
by becoming more familiar with library resources via the guides. Since students were responsible for communicating guide problems to librarians, they were able to interact with subject specialists and familiarize themselves with the librarians’ respective expertise. Consistent and thorough maintenance of the guides would be next to impossible without the students’ help.

The guides also served as a training tool for student workers at service desks. Students learned to rely on the guides to assist users. Students could look at guides to address questions that arose from popular assignments and courses. Guides also gave students a quick way to find subject specialist information when referring more complex questions to librarians. Guides became beneficial in instructing student workers as well as users.

Real-Time Feedback

Given the amount of concern expressed in the literature regarding the absence of knowledge about users’ needs and interest in online guides and given the short time frame with which to show the success of the overall LibGuides project, the built-in statistics mechanisms were incredibly useful (see Figure 4).

Project leaders were able to see, at a glance, how many and which guides were published and in progress. Since a first goal of the project was to create a full set of subject guides, these snapshots helped direct resources, such as student help, appropriately. By the second month of the project, individual guide statistics showed that subject guides were getting little use, but other guides were receiving high traffic. Again, the guide created to
supplement the first-year business class assignment was the most popular by far. In October, when the assignment is due, the guide was visited 2,893 times. Interestingly, there were fewer questions at the reference desk than in past semesters concerning this assignment, indicating that students are using the library whether or not we see them doing it. Another guide, unrelated to NMSU, was also quite popular. With the 2008 presidential election upcoming, one of the reference librarians created an Election 2008 guide which was viewed 1,264 times in October 2008, more than any individual subject guide was viewed over the entire semester. These individual guide numbers indicated that users were coming by guides with specific interests.

Because feedback can be gathered directly from users via the LibGuides platform, librarians can address user input in real-time. Also, users are able to access the reference desk from anywhere within the guides. This provides a particularly useful placement for and marketing of the Meebo chat widget, which is the Library’s virtual reference tool.

LibGuides Meets Many Needs

In addition to providing an easy-to-use platform for subject, course, and assignment guides, LibGuides has provided a platform for hosting and disseminating many different collections of information. Twenty-one percent of NMSU’s LibGuides are neither subject guides nor course/assignment guides. The LibGuides platform has allowed librarians to present collections of information easily and this ability has encouraged both creativity and functionality. For example, there are LibGuides promoting library exhibits, outlining NMSU’s commitment to the year of sustainability, and providing information for military families. On the other hand, the LibGuides platform has been used to create a holding place for all of the library’s print handouts and a portal to the library’s online reference collection. And since LibGuides can be printed, this has proven very useful to users who prefer handouts to online guides.

CHALLENGES

Funding

When using a commercial product, securing ongoing funding is almost always a challenge. However, it would be relatively simple to quantify the time-saving benefit of using a commercial product. The usage statistics collected by LibGuides provide data that are necessary when communicating the value of the product to administrators. LibGuides is no longer seen as a peripheral or optional product at the NMSU Library; rather it has been absorbed into the library’s online interface and workflow and is rarely noticed as a financial extra.
Participation

Asking librarians to completely revise an entire set of online guides is a tall order. Any conversion is front-loaded in terms of time investment. Even if everyone is on board with the project, training can be cumbersome and maintenance is ongoing. Not all librarians participated in the first phase of the project. However, after it was clear that LibGuides was a long-term commitment, all librarians began publishing guides. An upcoming goal is to have an online guide for every library instruction session. Considering that 83 percent of sessions were supplemented with a course and/or assignment guide in fall 2008, it is clear that librarians see the guides as a useful tool and are able to create them in short order.

Template

The most significant ongoing challenge stems from attempting to provide librarians with a reliable set of time saving tools. In its first iteration, this set of tools was made available via the template guide. However, the template guide was too restrictive and was stifling the creativity of the authors and the potential uniqueness of the individual guides.

Presently, the project leaders maintain a master guide, which is available privately (and therefore is only available via direct link) to librarians. The master guide (see Figure 5) is a large collection of content boxes that are likely to be useful in more than one guide. For example, there is a “Contact Us” box. Instead of individual guide authors creating contact information every time a new guide is created, the “Contact Us” box can be linked to from any number of guides. This saves the time of the author and, as important, it allows for global changes to be made. If the library’s contact information changes, the information can be changed in the master guide and will be reflected in all of the guides that have linked to it.

Marketing

Finding users and connecting them to the information they need is a permanent challenge for librarians. The project leaders did not develop a plan for marketing the guides to potential users. When looking at usage of subject guides, it is clear that they receive little attention.

However, the other guides marketed themselves. Most course and assignment guides are requested and supported by teaching faculty. In nearly all cases, the guide was created as a supplement to an instruction session. Therefore, the students are introduced to the guides in context, and the guides are seen as relevant and helpful. Many course and assignment guide are included in the class learning management system. Again, this puts the resource where the student is.
Assessment

Assessing guides has always been problematic. As Courtois, Higgins, and Kapur (2005) point out, we know very little about user satisfaction with subject guides. Justifying the time and creative investment, however, is important for buy-in and for the overall success of a comprehensive and ongoing guide project. The simplest assessment of LibGuides, and for which the data is compiled automatically, is performed by tracking use. This is a crude measure, but one that can guide the allocation of effort, especially if there is an initial push for quantity. For example, librarians at NMSU learned early that general subject guides were not getting much use but course and assignment guides were accessed hundreds, even thousands of times more often. Immediately, priority was shifted from creating a detailed guide for every department to creating a guide for every instruction session.

After librarians became comfortable with the new format for guides, the shift in assessment went from looking at use to looking at student perception and success using the guides. Presently, there are two research projects in progress: one is looking at whether or not assignment guides are effective enough to replace instruction sessions and the other is looking at whether students have a preference for the format of research guides.
Maintenance

Internally, the assessment of guides is done primarily by project leaders in the form of collection maintenance. Most comments and concerns regarding the guides are forwarded to the leaders. Some have been moved to an unpublished status due to incompleteness and lack of organization. Presently, there are no policies or procedures that dictate who can and cannot publish or unpublish a guide. The ease of use of the LibGuides platform has led to a plethora of guides, organized in a variety of different ways, serving a variety of purposes. It will remain important to keep the integrity and purpose of the collection at the forefront of the project as it continues.

Additionally, an inventory of all guides is kept and maintained by student workers. This list matches guides to departments, identifies guides as temporary or permanent, and allows editors to anticipate needed updates.

CONCLUSION

The LibGuides project at the NMSU Library is considered a success. However, it is clear to all involved that is an ongoing process that requires consistent attention and maintenance. As the library moves forward, it will be essential to continue measuring the quality and usefulness of the guides through regular assessment. With the exception of two focused research projects, all assessment of the guides has been top-down. The next step will be to solicit and analyze user feedback.

Since there is no cap on the number of guides that can be created by an institution, there is a tendency to create a guide for any and every situation. And while this attitude benefits the overall completeness of the collection, it can lead back to the same types of problems that initiated the LibGuides project. For this reason, oversight of the project will remain important to its success.

Considering that libraries are likely at many different stages in the process of choosing, implementing, creating, and maintain online guides, the authors have compiled a working set of best practices based on both the literature and the general experiences at the NMSU Library (see Appendix). This list is meant to be a starting point for discussion as more and more libraries face the transition from static to dynamic guides.

All in all, the transition from traditional online guides to a commercially hosted solution worked to address the needs of the NMSU Library. As with all library projects, a continued focus on the user experience is necessary to guide the future direction of this project.
REFERENCES


APPENDIX

LIBGUIDES BEST PRACTICES, NEW MEXICO STATE UNIVERSITY LIBRARY

Throughout the process of transferring online guides to the LibGuides platform, the project leaders kept a working list of best practices taking into consideration all the challenges, benefits, and lessons encountered. Access to the NMSU Library’s collection of guides is at: http://libguides.nmsu.edu.

Purpose, organization, planning

- Articulate problems with current situation and be specific in identifying specific organization needs.
- Establish buy-in with involved parties (administration, reference department, systems department, etc.).
- Plan for dissemination both internally (e.g., training) and externally (e.g., placement, naming, and marketing).

Audience awareness

- Make guides accessible to users at their point of need and point of access (e.g., course management systems).
- Use guides consistently in library instruction and in reference transactions.
- Create a consistent look and feel.

Evaluation and assessment

- Monitor the use of guides.
- Create a policy for adding/deleting guides.
- Solicit user feedback.
- Create an assessment plan.
- Share assessment with involved parties (administration, reference department, systems department, etc.).

Faculty collaboration

- Collect syllabi and create course/assignment guides.
- Use guides as basis for communication and collaboration.
- Embed links to guides in course management systems.

Maintenance

- Use available resources (e.g., student workers)
- Maintain an inventory of guides.
- Identify long-term editors who will oversee the entire collection of guides.