



Special Collections LibGuides: An Analysis of Uses and Accessibility

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Abstract

Content management systems (CMS), such as SpringShare's LibGuides, have become a popular method of creating online pathfinders or subject guides. At the same time, special collections have explored new digital ways to reach their users. Ease of access and simple navigation are keys to reaching all types of users. Special collections have explored different ways to use a traditional subject guide system to meet their unique needs. This article investigates the navigation pathway to special collections LibGuides at Greater Western Library Alliance (GWLA) member institutions and analyzes the different ways special collections are using this tool.

Keywords: special collections; LibGuides; outreach; online guides; accessibility; academic libraries

Introduction

Special collections librarians continually seek new and better ways to reach users and communicate the value of their unique collections. Materials in special collections and archives can be of great value and interest to a much wider audience than a college's or university's faculty and students, but reaching this audience can be a challenge. A collection's materials may be of historical interest to a local senior citizens group, of educational value to students in an undergraduate course, and a treasure trove of primary sources to scholarly researchers around the world. The potential for a special collection's broad appeal makes it important that special collections librarians successfully reach out to users in multiple ways, including online guides.

As technology has changed, so have guides to collections, from paper copies to electronic formats. The availability of tools, such as SpringShare's LibGuides content management system (CMS), has led to a major shift in online guide presentation. Instead of simply transferring the information from printed handouts to a website, librarians can quickly and easily create dynamic pages with embedded digital media. LibGuides have made it possible for special collections librarians to creatively expand their outreach opportunities, and careful consideration of guide location on websites is necessary in order to maximize access to them and their usefulness.

When librarians decide to create or modify content that will reside on their library's website, they often get ideas and identify trends by conducting an environmental scan of peer institutions. The idea for this article began with an attempt to gain an overview of content that might be added to local special collections guides by reviewing the content of other libraries' LibGuides. During a preliminary review, an unexpected frustration was encountered; LibGuides for special collections were surprisingly difficult to locate on many libraries' websites. Multiple steps were frequently required in order to find a special collection's LibGuide. This experience raised questions that we hoped to answer. Are librarians using LibGuides for special collections? How are librarians categorizing or listing special collections guides in relation to other LibGuides? How might access to the LibGuides for special collections be improved?

This article examines the presence of LibGuides for special collections on Greater Western Library Alliance (GWLA) libraries' websites and how special collections are using LibGuides. Throughout this article the term "special collections" is used to indicate all types of special materials, including virtual or digital collections, museums, and archives.

Literature Review

A search was conducted for literature about online guides in general, LibGuides for special collections, and about the accessibility of those guides on libraries' websites. In reviewing the literature, a couple of themes emerged that apply to this study and thus form the focus of it, i.e., online guides are an increasingly necessary and important way to reach users, and librarians could do a better job of making them accessible on libraries' websites.

For at least a century librarians have been creating guides in one form or another to help students and other patrons use academic libraries. The history of subject guides, or pathfinders, has been traced by Morris and Del Bosque (2010). Their literature review begins with the type of printed guides described as "long bibliographies covering specific topics" (p. 179) and ends with the types of online guides and guide content made possible by the Internet and Web 2.0 technologies.

Writing specifically about LibGuides, Griffin and Lewis (2011) explored many of the various uses of the tool and how guides can and do expand librarians' instructional and outreach roles. Their article reports on the uses of LibGuides for special collections. Through analysis of usage statistics from multiple sources, including statistics provided by LibGuides, they found that having online guides increased exposure to each of the individual special collections studied. Their LibGuides were deemed a great success for providing information about and access to their unique materials. It has also been noted that Web 2.0 technologies enabled through LibGuides "give librarians an edge in expanding their roles" (Chang, 2014, p.1) and energize subject guides.

The Association of Research Libraries' (ARL) SPEC Kit 317, Special Collections Engagement (Berenbak et al., 2010), presents the results of a survey conducted in 2010 to determine how its member libraries were promoting their special collections through exhibits, events, and curricular engagement. LibGuides are mentioned as one tool librarians were using to engage students with special collections resources through course-related and subject guides. Special collections librarians are committed to outreach activities, and online guides provide a way to reach a wide range of known and potential users.

With LibGuides, special collections librarians can focus on the broader public extending beyond the academy. This point was made by Harris and Weller (2012) in their article about the different methods used to increase knowledge of and access to special collections at the University of Illinois-Chicago. LibGuides are mentioned as one tool for achieving this goal. Online guides are useful for making collections visible both on and off campus, and they

provide a way for librarians to articulate and demonstrate a collection's value to multiple stakeholders.

The use of LibGuides for special collections is the focus of an article by Lewis and Griffin (2011). It provides examples of how LibGuides were being used by special collections at the University of South Florida (USF) Tampa Library and several other universities. The authors noted that although the USF library had begun using LibGuides in 2009, "there were few examples of their use by special collections units" (p. 24). Although libraries were using LibGuides to create and manage much of their websites' content, using them for special collections was not a widespread practice at that time.

For all of the uses and benefits that can be accomplished with LibGuides, a problem identified in the literature is that they are not as accessible as they could and should be on libraries' websites. In an examination of 45 online guides (pathfinders) from Canadian university libraries, Dahl (2001) found inconsistencies in how they were listed on a library's website. Some pathfinders "could not be found, even though they were listed on the library's website" (p. 229). Thus, she advised that "libraries should be careful not to hide them deep within their websites" (p. 237). This point is emphasized in Kumar and Farney's (2013) discussion of decisions that have to be made regarding the placement of LibGuides on a library's website. They state that "links to LibGuides must be prominently displayed either on the library's home page or top secondary page for effective dissemination of the LibGuide contents" (p. 58).

Dunsmore (2002) found that navigation paths to online guides (pathfinders) could be confusing and frustrating. In a study of 20 business libraries' websites, she found that although guides were usually mentioned on libraries' home pages, "generally, the actual pathfinders were found at the fourth or fifth level of the Website" (p. 145). One factor she identified as a contributor to access problems was the inconsistent terminology used to describe or categorize guides, which "imposed an unnecessary burden on the user to dig for information" (p. 151).

Issues related to the language used to name or describe LibGuides have been discussed by other researchers. During a LibGuides 2.0 implementation case study project at the University of Saskatchewan, researchers noted the importance of using terms and labels that will make sense to library users. The researchers maintain that "the way language is used in guide navigation and content description is important to optimize usability" (Duncan, Lucky, & McLean, 2015, p. 250). These issues are relevant to the way LibGuides for special collections are named and described.

Normore (2003) studied web access to 24 special collections, noting that "[t]he value of

a collection's content derives from access. If people don't know the content is available, it won't be used. If it's not used, it won't be valued" (para. 42). If special collections librarians are going to reach the greatest number of users, they must be aware of and work to solve issues that inhibit access to their online guides.

Methodology

The LibGuides home pages of all Greater Western Library Alliance (Greater Western Library Alliance, 2015a) member institutions were checked for guides about special collections. This was done to determine how visible special collections guides are on institution-level LibGuides home pages. Each library's LibGuides home page was evaluated for the presence of the term "special collection," a specific collection name, or related terms, such as rare books or archives. Some member libraries do not use LibGuides, and these libraries were not included in the study. Websites were examined between April and July of 2014 and again in November 2014. Some libraries may have been transitioning to LibGuides 2.0 during the initial review, so multiple visits were made to check for potential changes that may have occurred during the transition.

Greater Western Library Alliance (GWLA) libraries were chosen for several reasons. They are all research libraries in the central and western United States (Greater Western Library Alliance, 2015b). Member libraries must be from a university that is classified by the Carnegie Foundation as an R1 (highest) or R2 (higher) Doctoral Research University and bring in library resources or services that add to the depth and breadth of GWLA (Greater Western Library Alliance, 2015c). At the time of this study, 33 libraries formed GWLA with locations ranging from Illinois to Hawaii. A study of these libraries provides a snapshot of LibGuides usage across a diverse set of libraries that have a common emphasis on research.

Individual special collections' online guides were also evaluated for how they used the LibGuides CMS. If special collection guides were not featured with a subject listing, the special collection's web page was visited to search for links to guides. Sometimes a link on a collection's home page labeled "Research Guide" or "Guide" led to individual LibGuides. Other times subpages related to research included guide links. If links were not available on special collection web pages, staff listings were browsed for special collections staff names that could be searched in LibGuides. In some cases, special collections' websites included staff directories; in

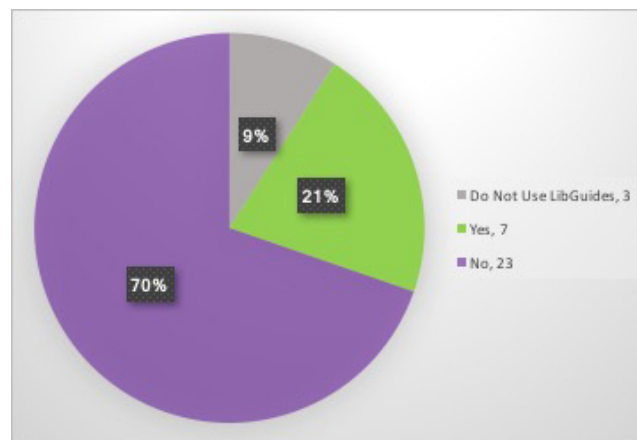
other cases, the entire library's staff directory was browsed for special collections staff.

These special collections staff names were taken back to their respective institution's LibGuides home page and were used to browse by librarian or LibGuide author, if that feature was enabled. Browsing by author limited results to only those guides authored by special collections staff, eliminating guides that mentioned these staff but were not authored by them. If the browsing feature was not enabled, the institution's LibGuides platform was searched for the individual's name, and then only guides that listed special collections staff as authors were evaluated. In some cases, only one author displayed, so if a special collections staff member was not the primary guide author, his or her name may not have displayed, resulting in a guide being overlooked.

Findings

Ninety-one percent (91%), or 30 of the 33 GWLA libraries, were using LibGuides to create the wide variety of guides that are common to all academic libraries, but 23 (70%) of them did not identify special collections as a category on their list of LibGuides. Only seven (21%) had a subject listing for special collections, archives, a collection name, or any other similar terminology on the LibGuides home page that indicated the existence of online guides for special collections (see Figure 1). Therefore, it was necessary to look beyond the list of guides and conduct a variety of steps (described in the Methodology section) in order to locate guides that could not be found on the LibGuides home page.

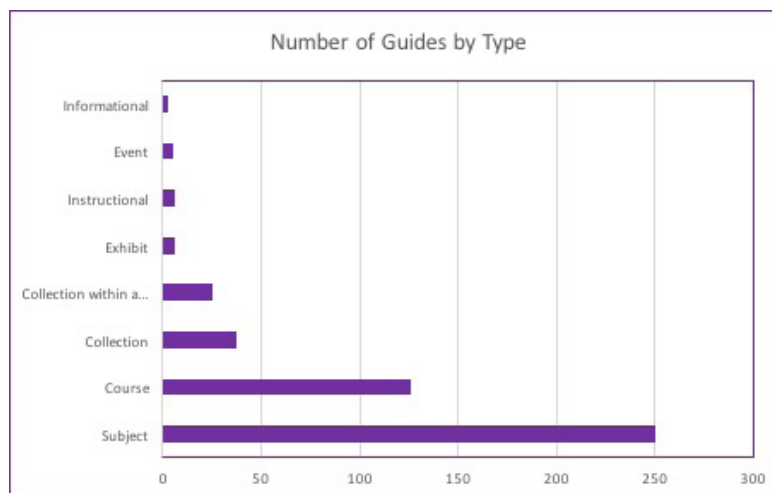
Figure 1: Special Collections Listed on LibGuides Subject Page



After an exhaustive search to locate guides not listed on LibGuides home pages, it was determined that 27 of the 30 GWLA libraries using LibGuides (90%) were using LibGuides to create online guides to their special collections. As already noted, only seven libraries (26% of 27) had special collections guides listed under a findable category on the LibGuides home page. The total number of guides related to special collections at these 27 libraries was 458, ranging from one to 92 guides per library, and approximately one-fourth of these were not listed with all of a library's other LibGuides. The average number of special collections guides per library was 17, and the median was 13.

Special collections at the 27 GWLA libraries reviewed in this study created 458 individual LibGuides that could be grouped into eight different categories: subject guides, course guides, collection guides, collection-within-collection guides, exhibit guides, event guides, instructional guides, and informational guides (see Figure 2).

Figure 2: Number of Guides by Type



Subject guides (about a specific subject that include a variety of resources) numbered 250, the most popular category. Course guides (designed for specific classes) were the second-most popular group with 126. Collection guides (for a general special collection) numbered 37, the third-most popular category. Collection-within-collection guides (describing a smaller collection within a general collection) were fourth-most popular with 25. The remaining 4 categories dropped off significantly. Exhibit guides (supplement physical exhibits or serve as stand-alone virtual exhibits) numbered six, while instructional guides (relaying how to do

something) numbered six. Event guides (advertising specific events) numbered five, while informational guides (generic information not specific to a collection or subject) numbered three.

Discussion

The ease of creating and updating LibGuides is a major advantage of this content management system. In some instances, a large number of guides are listed at a given time, such as course guides, but may be removed once a course ends, which can change the number of guides related to special collections. The same principle can apply to exhibit and event guides. Technology changes can also affect study numbers. When the data for this study was collected, several institutions were transitioning from the original LibGuides to LibGuides 2.0. This may have affected some results as guides were being transferred.

Although the majority of libraries using LibGuides do not feature special collections as a subject heading, the larger issue is that the majority of libraries have more than one special collections guide with no easy navigation pathway to these guides. Seven libraries include a subject listing for special collections, and of these institutions six libraries have more than one guide. Twenty libraries do not include a home page listing for special collection LibGuides, and six of these libraries only have one guide related to special collections. Though it may seem less important for libraries with only one special collections guide to have a subject heading, it does ease navigation. This leaves 14 libraries (70%) that have more than one special collections guide that do not include this as a subject listing on LibGuides home pages. Lacking a subject listing, these guides are more difficult to locate.

Though having multiple pathways to a guide is good practice, there should be an easier way from institutional LibGuides home pages to locate special collections guides. Checking multiple locations, searching for specific staff names, and eliminating guides that mention special collections but are not authored by special collections staff is a time and labor intensive process. Many of the individual guides were located by searching the names of special collections staff rather than by using subject listings, which is not how students, researchers, and other potential users typically look for guides. Having a link on the LibGuides home pages makes locating special collections LibGuides easier by requiring less clicking and searching.

Ease of access is important in getting students to use resources such as LibGuides. Burying special collections guides can make these difficult to access and can lower their impact

on student learning and their value to researchers. Some guides may be integrated into other subject categories, such as Humanities or History, which can bring them onto a student's radar while looking for other guides in those categories. Many guides may also be found in course guide listings, so either a subject listing within a course guide subpage or an alphabetical list may bring these guides into a student's search. Even with these other discovery pathways, a separate special collections subject listing on a library's complete list of LibGuides can prove useful as a quick place for all special collections guides to be accessed as some users may be looking for information about a specific collection rather than a general topic.

Increased subject tagging of special collections guides can also aid in finding resources. Tagging guides with commonly searched terms, such as genealogy, family history, local history, historic photographs, or manuscripts, will bring these guides up during LibGuides site searches. Though these tags may not necessarily fit traditional academic library subject terms, they are words the average person would use. These terms span subject categories, meaning researchers can locate guides from a variety of subject listings with one search.

The variety of ways special collections are using LibGuides points to a desire to reach users in new ways. Subject guides still appear most frequently, perhaps because special collections staff are familiar with this type of learning tool since they are similar to pathfinders. Though some guides integrate digital media, many still contain lists of resources, though now they appear as hyperlinks. Librarians also know that many users search by topic or subject when doing research, and creating these types of guides can increase accessibility to these unique resources. Course guides may also have higher numbers if existing course handouts were adapted to LibGuides. These guides are also a way to directly relate special collections to students if assignments can be used to build guides. Collection and collection-within-collection guides many times contain similar information to that found on a regular website. These categories may have higher numbers since the LibGuides platform is easier to update than a website, and in some cases special collections either use LibGuides as their web platform or heavily link to LibGuides pages from collection websites.

Some special collections uses of LibGuides are less common than those adapted from traditional tools. Though instructional and informational guides have their purposes, many times this information could be integrated into a different type of guide or displayed in a different manner, such as online tutorials or a press release, which could explain the lower usage of these types of guides. An increased use of LibGuides for exhibits and events could contribute to outreach efforts. These types of guides can showcase unique items from collections, highlight physical items, and entice those who might not normally visit a special collection to do so.

Advertising physical exhibits and events through LibGuides and sharing the links on social media could further enhance outreach opportunities. Particularly for exhibits, LibGuides can be an affordable and fairly easy way to host digital exhibits for libraries with limited resources.

Conclusion

As technology creates change across libraries, special collections are looking for new ways to improve access to their resources. An important element of enhancing access to special collections is visibility. Applying technology, such as LibGuides, to historically printed special collection subject guides will further enhance access to unique and rare resources. Whether this is accomplished through a link on a collection's webpage or a link on the library's main LibGuides page, finding the special collection guide needs to be as easy as possible in order to provide quick and direct access to guide content.

As librarians work to create online guides, it is important for them to consider how informational content regarding special collections will be presented and accessed by potential users from their library's website. This study showed that guides to special collections are often difficult to locate if they are not categorized as such and listed along with a library's other LibGuides. Special collections librarians, LibGuides administrators, and library website designers should consider ways to improve access to these guides to unique collections. Presentation of information and the type of guide selected are also important considerations. Many times the traditional subject and course guides will meet students' needs, and occasionally these can prove useful for external researchers. General collection and collection-within-collection guides serve as a good introduction to what can be an intimidating environment, both physically and virtually, for all types of researchers. Increased usage of exhibit and event guides can draw in potential new users and promote special collections in a new way. For each type of guide, decisions about appropriate content remain critical. They should be more than a virtual version of a paper handout; they should incorporate new technology to enhance the presentation of information.

LibGuides can be a useful tool for special collections. Considering the points of access, navigation pathways, and content will provide a large return on investment and bring greater awareness of the sometimes hidden treasures found in special collections.

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