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# Transforming special collections through innovative uses for LibGuides

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## **Transforming Special Collections through Innovative Uses for LibGuides**

### **Abstract**

**Purpose:** This article explores the utility of Springshare's LibGuides platform for special collections repositories and evaluates the collection guides built by Special and Digital Collections at the University of South Florida in LibGuides.

**Design/methodology/approach:** This article explores how academic libraries have used LibGuides previously and provides a case study that suggests new ways for special collections repositories to make the most of the product.

**Findings:** The simplicity and easy-to-update functionality of LibGuides works well for USF's Special & Digital Collections collection guides. The flexible API allowed SDC to embed digital content, enable user comments, advertise events, and measure the impact of various services.

**Practical implications:** LibGuides provides an intuitive, simple, and cost effective method to create dynamic and frequently updated guides to special collections.

**Originality/value:** This is the first article to explore the use of LibGuides in a special collections repository.

**Keywords:** LibGuides; Special collections; Digital collections; Collections management

**Article type:** Case study

### **1. Introduction**

Rare book and special collections repositories are often plagued by the myth that they are dusty, forgotten vaults of expensive, underutilized blocks of wood pulp. An October 2009 posting on the Chronicle of Higher Education's "Wired Campus" blog revitalized the image of special collections repositories as underused or forgotten corners of university libraries. "Don't lock your special collections away in neglected corners of the library," Jennifer Howard writes, "use them to teach students about the possibilities and principles of research" (Howard, 2009). On occasion, they are also perceived as being underutilized due to over-protection (Gilman, 2010), and the special collections and archival professions, which require and reward meticulous attention to detail, can all too easily become the butt of paper-pusher jokes, as witnessed by the November 11, 2009 want ads section on the Daily Show (Stewart, 2009).

In light of the truism that "perception is reality" and in response to the growing number of patrons and administrators whose first interaction with special collections departments is on the internet, Special & Digital Collections (SDC) at the University of South Florida (USF) Tampa Library transformed its web presence through the creation of collection guides using Springshare's LibGuides platform in order to reflect more accurately the robust use of its collections. This article explores using LibGuides in a special collections setting in general and SDC's experience with LibGuides in particular.

## **2. Background: LibGuides in Academic Libraries**

LibGuides is a Web 2.0 hosted solution content management system and publishing platform designed by Springshare specifically for the library community. As the LibGuides homepage notes (2010), LibGuides “is used to create attractive multimedia guides, share knowledge and information, and promote library resources to the community.” LibGuides provide an intuitive interface for embedding RSS feeds, audio/video links, books from the catalog, and Delicious cloud tags, and they also provide built-in support for user polls, surveys, and comments. At the same time, the LibGuides platform makes it easy to create consistent page layouts and navigation. As of August 2010, more than 1500 libraries subscribe to LibGuides, and over 20,000 librarians have created some 100,000 guides.

In an early review of the LibGuides product, Ellen Bushhousen noted the “versatility” of the product and the “diversity” of implementation models adopted by libraries (2009, 66). Despite the flexibility of the system, however, in academic libraries LibGuides are most frequently used to create subject guides for general circulating and reference collections or research pathfinders for specific courses. When SDC began building collection guides, there were no other examples of special collections guides in the LibGuides community index, and very few Special Collections units utilized LibGuides for general, directional information for their repositories.

To date, the vast majority of literature published about LibGuides focus on how they can be used as subject guides and general research pathfinders, mirroring practice in academic libraries. The case studies published focus on LibGuides as a tool for building subject guides, (e.g., Judd and Montgomery, 2009 and Moses and Richard, 2008). More theoretically, Buczynski discusses how LibGuides can take the subject guide to “a whole new level” (2009, 65), Morris and Del Bosque (2010) trace the evolution of the subject guide, and Little (2010) explores the relationship between cognitive load theory and subject guides and suggests ways to improve subject guides in response to this relationship. In contrast to this focus on LibGuides as a tool for crafting Web 2.0 subject guides, Harris, Garrison, and Frigo (2009) describe how Grand Valley State University faculty librarians use LibGuides to manage their tenure portfolios. There is currently no literature assessing how LibGuides might be used to market special collections online.

## **3. The USF Tampa Library Special & Digital Collections’ Project**

The USF Tampa Library licensed LibGuides during the summer of 2009, and SDC took advantage of the new platform to redesign its website in order to make its web presence more user-friendly, engaging, interactive, and holistic, as well as to highlight partnerships with other Library units, related academic departments, and the Tampa community. SDC investigated alternatives to LibGuides, including XHTML and Drupal, but ultimately adopted LibGuides due to their quick setup and user-friendly wysiwyg interface. Another consideration was the low level of systems support required by LibGuides; as the product is a hosted solution, librarians could create and mount content rather than focusing on systems support and maintenance. Ease and speed of updating proved an especially important consideration given our desire to have a dynamic, frequently updated website that provides timely information about

programs and events. In addition, the LibGuides report feature provides a simple, efficient method for assessing use patterns and tracking the impact of events on website traffic.

Before creating collection guides, SDC's web presence was scattered across a number of domains, with organization based on format rather than content. Our historic photographs, for example, had two discrete web pages, one for the negatives and prints housed in the Special Collections stacks, another for the digital collections created from SDC's photographic holdings. Any events or seminars related to the collection would often be advertised on yet another webpage. A goal of this project was to integrate the sites and provide patrons with a single point of access, thereby ensuring that the researchers interested in historic photographs who browse our website will be aware of all collections, regardless of format, and related events.

#### **4. Outcomes**

##### ***Thematic Presentation of Collections***

Three librarians in SDC, with the assistance of graduate students, created 14 collection guides in LibGuides in addition to six department and program homepages (Special & Digital Collections, Digital Collections, the Oral History Program, the Holocaust & Genocide Studies Center, and the Florida Studies Center). Each collection guide is built around thematically grouped collections, such as Floridiana, arts collections, or science fiction, and each guide contains an overview of the collection, information on the smaller collections which comprise the larger collection, links to finding aids (both EAD as well as legacy PDF finding aids), select reference resources that support the collection, and, when available, embedded digital content created from the collections (see figure 1). While the guide includes materials in both physical and digital formats, using the LibGuides tab structure made it easy to differentiate between materials that require a visit to the reading room and those that can be accessed online.

Organizing collections into thematically-grouped guides proved somewhat challenging as some collections fit into multiple groups. The Burgert Brothers Collection of Tampa Photographs, consisting of around 1,000 commercial photographs of the Tampa Bay region dating from 1880-1950, fits with the collection guide for prints and photographs as well as the guide for Floridiana, while the collection of Cuban artists' books from Ediciones Vigía complements both the history of book arts collection guide as well as the Latin American, Caribbean, and Spanish language guide. The linked box feature in LibGuides, which links the contents of one master box to boxes on other guides, provided us with an easy method for entering and maintaining content in one place while simultaneously offering users multiple access points to information about materials. In addition to streamlining website maintenance, linked boxes also helped us overcome inconsistencies across guides in navigation, layout, and terminology.

##### ***Embedded Digital Content***

The most challenging aspect in USF's implementation of collection guides was embedding digital content into the LibGuides platform. SDC began digitizing materials from Special Collections in 1995, but presentation of digital objects was divorced from the context of the larger physical collections as well as the materials in the Tampa Library that supplement research stimulated by our digital objects. Inspired

in part by the Library of Congress' American Memory project and the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill's Documenting the American South, USF sought a method for combining the online presentation of contextual collection information with digital objects. While LibGuides does not take the place of a digital repository or provide out-of-the-box functionality for presenting large digital collections, it does afford the means for creating the front end of a contextualized web presentation. In order to embed the digital content that is a result of USF's digitization projects out of Special Collections, our digital collections systems administrator created a custom Flash-based interface that, when embedded into an audio/video LibGuide box, retrieves digital content and associated metadata from USF's Fedora repository for presentation within the LibGuide (see figure 2). While initially labor intensive, this solution enables patrons to access digital content from a single website and retains the original context of the collection.

### ***Events***

We also viewed collection guides as a natural place to post information about upcoming lectures, seminars, symposia, and workshops associated with the Special Collections department (see figure 3). In addition to current events, we also added an archive of promotional materials about past events related to the collections featured on the guide; for example, the department hosts an annual symposium related to its science fiction collection every year, and our collection guide reflects this. By integrating information about our events with information about the collections to which they relate, we increased the chance that patrons interested in our collections would know of related events, and that patrons interested in events would be aware of our collections.

### ***Assessment***

While word of mouth and casual comments on Facebook and Twitter suggest that our implementation of collection guides has been successful, we looked particularly to usage statistics to measure the effect of our collection guides, promotional materials, and related events on driving traffic to our website and related collections. Annualized usage statistics harvested from our Fedora repository for the 2010-2011 academic year, the first full year that our collection guides are available, show a 30.2% overall increase in downloads from our digital collections. For some collections, the difference has been even more radical. The Slaymaker Collection of Glass Plate Negatives, for example, has traditionally been one of our least used digital collections. It is now featured on the prints and photographs collection guide along with some of our most heavily used digital collections, such as the Burgert Brothers Collection of Tampa Photographs, and the collection has seen a 200% annualized increase in downloads.

LibGuides' reporting functionality also makes it incredibly easy to capture statistics that help trace the impact of outreach and educational programming conducted by SDC. In August 2009, the Oral History Program collection guide (<http://guides.lib.usf.edu/ohp>) went live, and it included information on the Program, digital audio and full transcripts of interviews, and information on the Library's partnership with various groups to produce oral histories. Using the report function on LibGuides, we know that the collection guide got 312 hits in its first month. In September 2009, the Library hosted an event to launch the African Americans in Florida Oral History Project, which some 100 community and university

members attended. In September, the guide got 722 hits. In March 2010, SDC and the Oral History Program hosted author Michael Hirsch as he discussed his book *The Liberators: America's Witness to the Holocaust* and the oral histories, which were deposited at USF and accessible via the OHP collection guide on the Concentration Camp Liberators OHP page, that he conducted as research for this book. Some 150 community members, interviewees, Holocaust survivors, and students attended the event, and NPR's "On Point" did a story about Hirsch's book and the Library's archive of his oral histories. The OHP collection guide got a total of 1839 hits in March 2010, with 220 of those hits being for the page that contains the embedded oral history interview viewer. While this number is modest, the Concentration Camp Liberators content page was visited only 47 times during the previous month, resulting in a 21% increase in collection exposure. In addition, pages with related content, such as the Holocaust Survivors Oral History Project viewer, experienced a similar boost in usage, jumping from 38 visitors in February 2010 to 102 visitors in March and 181 in April. With concrete statistics such as these for our website in general and pages with embedded digital content in particular, SDC can now quantify the effect of our public programming.

## **6. Challenges and Moving Forward**

SDC considers its initial transition to LibGuides a success; we have been able to integrate the web presence for related collections across formats, and we have created collection guides that reflect the events and research that our collections inspire. Moreover, statistics suggest that these events further increase our website's usage, and we feel that building collection guides in LibGuides has resulted in a website that more accurately reflects our collections. In the future we will continue working with the platform to provide integrated, seamless information about and access to our collections.

In addition to the successes, however, we did encounter a few issues that proved challenging. Because LibGuides are so easily customizable, an early temptation was to make each collection guide unique, reflective in its design and layout of the collection's content, character, and nuances. This rapidly led to chaos, however, and we discovered that, tempting as customization was, the uniformity offered by LibGuides' system-wide templates would be more beneficial for users. In the early months of implementation, SDC also struggled with branding our guides so that they would be immediately recognizable as both products of USF as well as SDC. After the initial migration to LibGuides, the USF Tampa Library licensed Campus Guides, a related Springshare product that allows for additional customization. This solution allowed SDC to have greater control over the look and feel of our LibGuides and to create a custom banner that mirrors the design of the Tampa Library's but includes SDC information and breadcrumbs that lead back to the SDC homepage. We have also had to reassess our policies on assigning ownership to SDC guides. Previously, we assigned ownership of select guides to advanced graduate students with subject-specific expertise; due to their short tenure in the department, however, we discovered that we spent too much time reassigning guides to new owners as the graduate students left the department. A permanent staff member now takes ownership of the guide, with graduate students receiving editorial privileges.

As these examples illustrate, the challenges we faced did not stem from using a general library CMS for special collections materials, but rather were generic in nature and of the sort one might expect with

any content management system or with implementing LibGuides for use with general subject guides. This suggests that, despite the often narrow implementation patterns noted at the beginning of this article, LibGuides is as versatile as Springshare's promotional materials assert that it is and that libraries can make much more robust use of this economical platform than they currently do.

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Figure 1: Science Fiction and Fantasy collection guide homepage

http://guides.lib.usf.edu/content.php?id=49036&sid=371511

Getting Started | Yahoo! | Pandora | LibGuides | Connexion | Classification Web M... | Cataloger's Desktop | USF Libraries :: Login | GetMarc | Desk Tracker

R30-00115 Bowl - Farid Karam,...

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Farid Karam, M.D. Lebanon Antiquities Collection

A guide to the Farid Karam, M.D. Lebanon Antiquities Collection at the USF Tampa Library.

Last update: Sep 17th, 2010 | URL: <http://guides.lib.usf.edu/karam> | [Print/Mobile Guide](#) | [RSS Updates](#) | [Email Alerts](#) | [SHARE](#) [f](#) [t](#) [e](#)

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R30-00115 Bowl [Print/Mobile Page](#) Search [This Guide](#) [Go](#)

**Metadata**

**Object** 

**Title** Bowl

**Record** 14

**Box** 02

**Item** 115

**System #** R30-000115

**Material** Glass

**Dimensions** H: 3.7cm; Rim Dia: 9.8cm; Base Dia: 5.0cm; Wt: 40.2 g

**Date** 2nd - 3rd c CE

**Subject** glass bowls, bowls (tableware), glass containers, glassware, Roman, bowls, vessels (ast)

**References**

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Yael Israeli, *Ancient Glass in the Israel Museum*, p. 157, no. 156.

Bibliography

**R30-00115 Bowl**



**Glass Objects Index**

R30-00074 Dropper bottle

R30-00085 Unguentarium

R30-00110 Ointment jar

R30-00115 Bowl

R30-00117 Sprinkler flask

R30-00119 Jar

R30-00120 Double head flask

R30-00125 Unguentarium

R30-00128 Ewer

R30-00146 Goblet

**Curator's Notes**

This elegant little bowl has an overhanging rim that flares outward and downward. This object was created using the blown glass technique. There are clear indications that this bowl was made with considerable skill: the pontil mark has been effaced from the underside of the bowl, the rim is quite evenly rolled and finished, the overall shape is pleasing to the eye, and the vessel is nearly symmetrical. However, the roll line at the ridge where the body meets the rim rolls to the inside in two places. The glass itself is a common green, somewhat obscured by reddish dirt. There is very little weathering. The object is in excellent condition.

The rim resembles fragments of bowls found at Jalame, described by Gladys Davidson Weinberg. She dates objects like this one to the 2nd or the 3rd century CE.

Claudia J. Dold

*Collection Curator-Assistant Librarian*

Louis de la Parte Florida Mental Health Institute Research Library

**Reference**

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Figure 2: Embedded digital content in the Karam Lebanese Antiquities collection guide

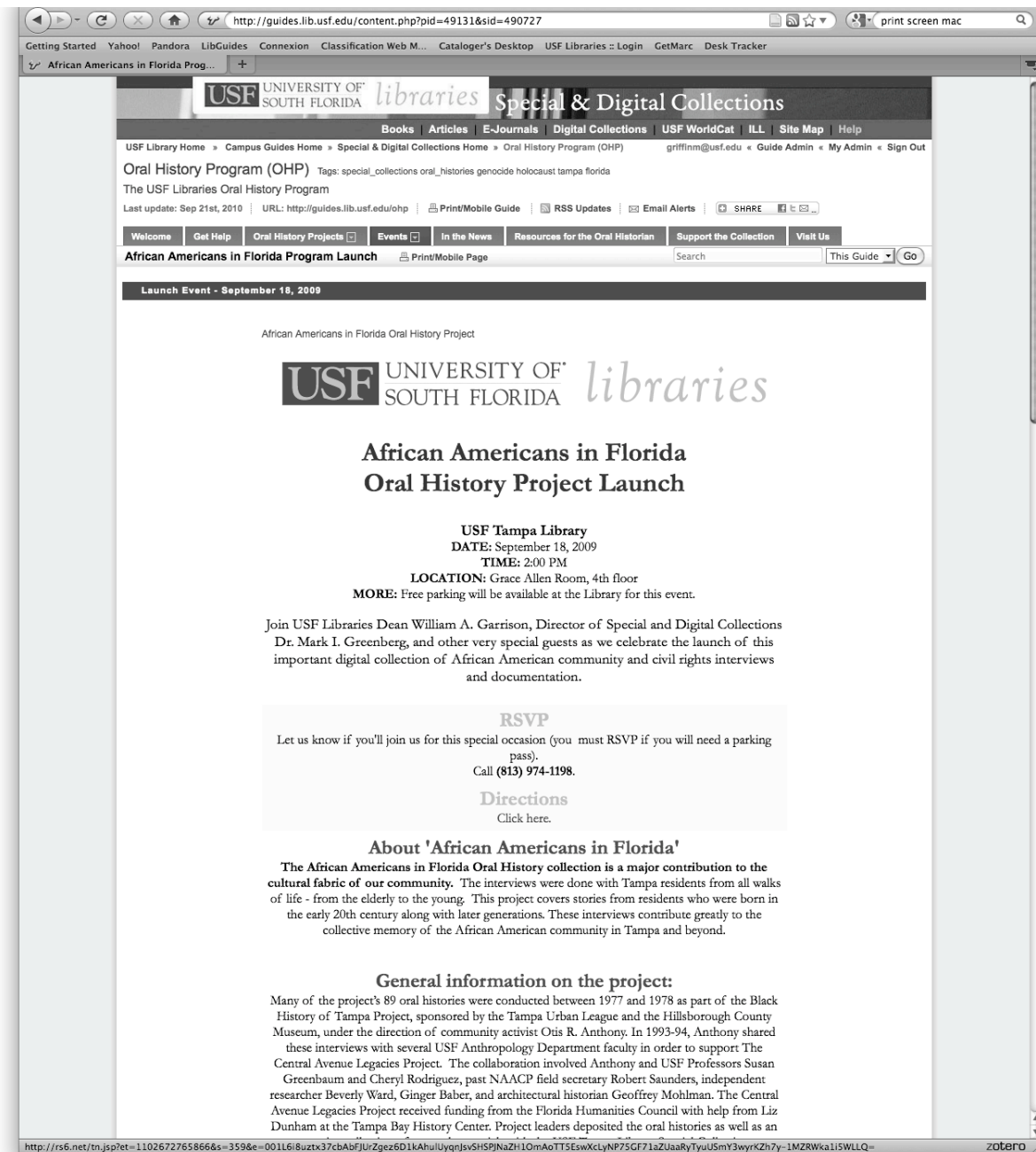


Figure 3: Event information featured in the Oral History Program collection guide