Customizing Subject Guide Content for Different Disciplines: A User-centered Approach

Shannon M. Staley, San Jose State University
Customizing Subject Guide Content for Different Disciplines

A User-Centered Approach

Shannon M. Staley
Subject Guides in Academic Libraries

- Academic librarians ascribe great importance to the creation and maintenance of subject guides as research tools for students and faculty.

- Subject guides offer introductory explorations of different topics, relieving users of additional research legwork.

- They also assist librarians with reference, instruction and collection development work.
Much of the literature on subject guides is concerned with establishing:

- formatting standards (layout, labeling) to increase usability
- guidelines for resource selection
- streamlining and cost-cutting measures for their creation
The Need for More Rigorous Investigation

- Very few studies examine how campus communities actually make use of subject guides, which is key to informing how they should be created.

- Usability studies of subject page use often yield inconclusive results because the test sample is not representative of the actual campus population. Usability studies / focus groups are an excellent way of supplementing data already in existence.

- There is a need to establish a strong foundation of data from which other kinds of studies can add dimensional value.
Objectives

- In reviewing survey data from this study, how can librarians make subject guides more useful for different academic communities at SJSU?

- How can we gather additional data to this end in other subject areas?
This study examines the use of subject guides at SJSU among undergraduate students in three different areas:

- Nursing
- Organization & Management
- Journalism & Mass Communications
Methodology:
Survey Research

- The author interviewed study participants through the distribution and collection of surveys. The choice to survey, rather than conduct in person interviews, better supported the need for broad input.
Methodology: Student Survey Design

- Each questionnaire was developed to gather as much information as possible within a 5 to 10 minute timeframe.

- For simplicity and ease of use, survey questions contained standard answers for participants to choose from as well as an opportunity to provide further comments.

- The survey questionnaire was formatted so that each page contained a single screen grab of a subject guide page with related questions.

- The same set of questions were asked in reference to each screen grab, minimizing the amount of new information and mind-shifting required to read, comprehend, and answer the survey questions.
Methodology:
Background Survey Questions

1. Please indicate your academic level in school:
   a. Freshman - Undergraduate
   b. Sophomore - Undergraduate
   c. Junior - Undergraduate
   d. Senior - Undergraduate
   e. Graduate
   f. Unclassified
   g. Other

2. Please indicate your major: ____________________________________________

3. Please circle your gender: Male   Female

4. Did you begin college at SJSU or elsewhere?  SJSU   Elsewhere

5. Have you received library instruction before at SJSU Library?  no   yes   not sure
Methodology:
Behavioral Survey Questions

6. Please indicate how often you have used the following subject guide on the King Library website within the past year. See the illustration below.

Screen Grab of Subject Guide Home Page

Note: Image should be large and clear enough for students to read page content

(6. contd.) Please circle the best option that describes how frequently you have used this library web page within the past year.

a. Never
b. 1 – 5 times
c. 6 – 10 times
d. more than 10 times

Comments (Optional):
Methodology: Behavioral Survey Questions

7A. How frequently have you used the Articles & Databases section of the guide in the past year (please see illustration below).

Screen Grab of Articles & Databases Subject Page

Note: Image should be large and clear enough for students to read page content

(7A. contd.) Please circle the best option that describes how frequently you have used this library web page within the past year.
   a. Never
   b. 1 – 5 times
   c. 6 – 10 times
   d. more than 10 times

Comments (optional):

7B. If you chose “never” as your choice in Question 7A, go to Question 8A. Otherwise, please indicate how useful you found this page.
   a. Very Useful
   b. Somewhat Useful
   c. Undecided
   d. Not so useful
   e. Not useful at all

Comments (Optional):
Methodology:
Behavioral Survey Questions

8A. How frequently have you used the Articles & Databases section of the guide in the past year (please see illustration below).

**Screen Grab of Subject Guide Page A**

*Note: Image should be large and clear enough for students to read page content*

(8A. contd.) Please circle the best option that describes how frequently you have used this library web page within the past year.

a. Never  
b. 1 – 5 times  
c. 6 – 10 times  
d. more than 10 times

Comments (optional):

8B. If you chose “never” as your choice in Question 7A, go to Question 8A. Otherwise, please indicate how useful you found this page.

a. Very Useful  
b. Somewhat Useful  
c. Undecided  
d. Not so useful  
e. Not useful at all

Comments (Optional):
Methodology:
Behavioral Survey Questions

Please circle all that apply.

a. Professor’s Course Page
b. E-journals List
c. Online Articles & Databases
d. Theses or Dissertations
e. Printed Newspaper Sources
f. Online Newspaper Sources
g. Printed Periodicals for popular magazine sources
h. Printed Periodicals for scholarly article sources
i. Circulating Books from the library
j. Reference Books from the library
k. Course Reserves
l. Interlibrary Loan
m. Link +
n. Library Catalog
o. Web site search engines
   (Please specify your favorites) ..................................................
   .................................................................
   .................................................................
   .................................................................
p. Web Sites
   (Please specify your favorites) ..................................................
   .................................................................
   .................................................................
   .................................................................
Methodology:
Survey Administration

- Instructors of randomly selected courses were contacted and asked to allocate 5 to 10 minutes at the beginning or end of one class session so that survey questionnaires could be distributed to and then collected from students in attendance.

- Students were specifically asked in each course setting whether or not they had already taken the survey in another class. Only those that had not taken the survey were included in the current data gathering process.
## Methodology:
### Sampling of Research Populations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Discipline</th>
<th>Total # of Students Surveyed</th>
<th>Total # of Declared Majors</th>
<th>% of Research Population</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nursing</td>
<td>255</td>
<td>1216*</td>
<td>21.0%*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Journalism &amp; MC</td>
<td>247</td>
<td>691*</td>
<td>35.7%*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organization &amp; Mgmt</td>
<td>529</td>
<td>1539*</td>
<td>34.3%*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Data Analysis:
Student Demographics

- Nearly all student responses are from undergraduate juniors and seniors taking Nursing, Journalism & Mass Communications and Organization & Management courses.
- While all Nursing students reported their major as “Nursing,” both Journalism & Mass Communications and Organization & Management students reported a range of specializations and majors not formally recognized by their respective departments.
## Data Analysis:
### Student Demographics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Discipline</th>
<th>Reported Major</th>
<th>Total Students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Advertising</strong></td>
<td>33.9%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Public Relations</strong></td>
<td>24.1%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Journalism</strong></td>
<td>13.9%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Photojournalism</strong></td>
<td>6.1%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Broadcasting / RTVF</strong></td>
<td>4.9%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Marketing &amp; Design Studies</strong></td>
<td>3.3%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Magazine &amp; Print Journalism</strong></td>
<td>3.2%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Mass Communications</strong></td>
<td>2.4%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Communication Studies</strong></td>
<td>2.0%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Reporting &amp; Editing</strong></td>
<td>1.7%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Undeclared or Unrelated Field</strong></td>
<td>4.5%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## Data Analysis: Student Demographics

### Reported Majors from Students by Discipline

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Discipline</th>
<th>Reported Major</th>
<th>Total Students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Organization &amp; Management</td>
<td>42.4%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marketing</td>
<td>7.4%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accounting</td>
<td>6.6%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business Administration</td>
<td>6.4%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>International Business</td>
<td>5.5%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Finance</td>
<td>5.1%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Business</td>
<td>4.5%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Hospitality Management</td>
<td>3.6%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Management Information Systems</td>
<td>3.2%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Human Resource Management</td>
<td>2.3%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Aviation Management</td>
<td>1.7%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Corporate Finance Management</td>
<td>1.3%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication Studies</td>
<td>1.3%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Accounting Information Systems</td>
<td>0.9%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engineering Operation Management</td>
<td>0.7%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Undeclared or Unrelated Field</td>
<td>7.1%</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Data Analysis:
Articles & Databases Page Gets High Use

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Discipline</th>
<th>At Least 1 time / year</th>
<th>More than 5 times / year</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Nursing</td>
<td>91.7%</td>
<td>46.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Journalism &amp; MC</td>
<td>76.1%</td>
<td>41.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organization Mgmt.</td>
<td>66.5%</td>
<td>30.1%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Data Analysis:
Less Frequently Used Subject Guide Pages

Aside from the Articles & Databases page, students across the three disciplines appear to be using other pages within their guide less frequently.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subject Guide Page</th>
<th>At Least 1 Time / Year</th>
<th>More Than 5 Times / Year</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Books</td>
<td>38.6%</td>
<td>16.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Related Subject Guides</td>
<td>32.7%</td>
<td>6.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Federal Govt Sources</td>
<td>18.1%</td>
<td>9.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Legislation</td>
<td>8.2</td>
<td>2.0%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
## Data Analysis: Less Frequently Used Subject Guide Pages

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Subject Guide Page</th>
<th>At Least 1 Time / Year</th>
<th>More Than 5 Times / Year</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Scholarly vs Popular</td>
<td>36.0%</td>
<td>7.3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Web Sites</td>
<td>23.1%</td>
<td>8.1%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Plagiarism</td>
<td>13.8%</td>
<td>1.6%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Citing &amp; Writing</td>
<td>13.0%</td>
<td>2.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Search Tips</td>
<td>12.6%</td>
<td>.8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evaluating Information</td>
<td>8.1%</td>
<td>1.2%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
# Data Analysis:
## Use of Different Research Tools

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Research Tool</th>
<th>Nursing Student Use</th>
<th>Journalism &amp; MC Student Use</th>
<th>Organization &amp; Mgmt. Student Use</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Professor’s Course Page</td>
<td>20.8%</td>
<td>40.9%</td>
<td>42.7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>E-journals Lists</td>
<td>42.7%</td>
<td>19.8%</td>
<td>21.2%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Printed Newspaper</td>
<td>9.0%</td>
<td>54.7%</td>
<td>37.4%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Online Newspaper</td>
<td>25.1%</td>
<td>71.7%</td>
<td>60.5%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bound Scholarly ArticleSources</td>
<td>31.0%</td>
<td>33.6%</td>
<td>18.3%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Recommendations: Enriching Current Subject Guides

Based on student survey responses, the Nursing, Journalism & Mass Communications, and Organization & Management subject guides at San José State University can be improved upon in several ways:

- Nursing students reported using the e-journals list twice as much as those in Journalism & Mass Communications and Organization & Management.

- Adding a direct link to this subject-specific information would create a more comprehensive research guide for students who regularly use the tool and raise more awareness of its availability to others.
Recommendations:
Enriching Current Subject Guides

E-Journals List

215 journals found in Health Sciences: Nursing

A.A.N.A. Journal (0094-6354) Title details from ulrichsweb.com™
from 2001 to present in CINAHL Plus with Full Text
from 02/01/2001 to present in Academic Search Premier

AACN Clinical Issues (1079-0713) Title details from ulrichsweb.com™
from 02/01/1996 to present in Journals@Ovid Ovid Full Text

AAOHN Journal (0891-0162) Title details from ulrichsweb.com™
from 2003 to present in CINAHL Plus with Full Text

ABNF Journal (1046-7041) Title details from ulrichsweb.com™
from 01/01/2002 to 11/01/2004 in Expanded Academic ASAP
from 2002 to present in CINAHL Plus with Full Text
from 11/01/2002 to present in Academic Search Premier

Accident and Emergency Nursing (0965-2302) Title details from ulrichsweb.com™
from 01/01/2005 to present in Expanded Academic ASAP
Recommendations:
Enriching Current Subject Guides

- In general, librarians can link to department pages that contain teaching faculty members’ course web pages.

- This is particularly important for the Journalism & Mass Communications and Organization & Management subject guides since these students reported higher use of those pages.
Recommendations:
Enriching Current Subject Guides

**Campus Links**

- College of Business
- Organization and Management Department
- Organization & Management Faculty Home Pages
Recommendations:
Enriching Current Subject Guides

Nursing students noted a number of web sites they visit regularly, which could be included as part of their subject guide. Among them are:

- The U.S. National Library of Medicine
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
- The U.S. Census Bureau
- The American Cancer Society
- The American Medical Association
- The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services
- National Institutes of Health
Recommendations:
Enriching Current Subject Guides

Web Sites

- The U.S. National Library of Medicine
- Centers for Disease Control and Prevention
- The U.S. Census Bureau
- The American Cancer Society
- The American Medical Association
- The U.S. Department of Health & Human Services
- National Institutes of Health
Recommendations: Enriching Current Subject Guides

- Journalism & Mass Communications students reported high use of print and online newspaper resources.

- Creating a separate page of news sources in this subject guide might prove useful.

- Since these students described their major area of study in different ways, the librarian in this subject area may want to explore categorizing resources under these headings or even creating a separate subject guide for some of them.
Recommendations:
Enriching Current Subject Guides

News Sources

Lexis/Nexis Academic
This is a full-text database. Lexis/Nexis is huge, and very up-to-date. Complete text of newspapers, magazines, newswires, transcripts of TV and radio news, trade publications, laws and court cases.
More details

America's Newspapers: California (SJCU)
Full text of many California newspapers, including the San Jose Mercury News, Los Angeles Times, Sacramento Bee, and the San Francisco Chronicle.
More details

ProQuest Newsstand
Full text of U.S. and international news sources in newspaper and periodical formats, other news sources and newswires.
More details

San Jose Mercury News - Today's Issues
Recommendations: Enriching Current Subject Guides
Recommendations:
Enriching Current Subject Guides

These same general recommendations can be applied to the Organization & Management subject guide since students taking these courses also described their majors in multiple ways.

- Descriptions such as “Human Resource Management,” “Corporate Finance Management,” and “Engineering & Operation Management” could be subtitles for categorizing resources within the subject guide.

- Additionally, a page of related subjects could be added with links to existing subject areas that students identified.

- Also, change “Web Sites” page to “Course Web Sites.” The change in labeling is more specific to the purpose of the page. Ask OM instructors to link to course web sites from their faculty pages.
Recommendations: Enriching Current Subject Guides

Related Subjects & Guides

- Accounting & Finance
- Business
- Communication Studies
- Finance
- Financial & Operating Ratios
- Hospitality Management
- International Business
- Management Information Systems
- Marketing, Decision Sciences & Business Communication
Recommendations:
Enriching Current Subject Guides

Web Sites

Sisu Course Websites

Sisu Course Websites

Change This...

Business 146 Project Management
Webpage for Project Management class.

Business 160 Fundamentals of Management and Organizational Behavior
Webpage for Fundamentals of Management and Organizational Behavior class

Business 187 Global Dimensions of Business
Website for Global Dimensions of Business class.

Business 189 Strategic Management
Website for Strategic Management class.

Business 286 Nursing Management
Website for Nursing Management class.
Recommendations:
Enriching Current Subject Guides

Course Web Sites

- Business 146 Project Management
  Webpage for Project Management class.

- Business 160 Fundamentals of Management and Organizational Behavior
  Webpage for Fundamentals of Management and Organizational Behavior class

- Business 187 Global Dimensions of Business
  Website for Global Dimensions of Business class.

- Business 189 Strategic Management
  Website for Strategic Management class.

- Business 286 Nursing Management
  Website for Nursing Management class.
Discussion and Further Exploration

- How do students in different types of courses (research-based, practicum, skills-based) make use of subject guides?
- How effective are subject guides in assisting students to complete assignments and research projects?
- How can information literacy principles such as “Evaluating Information” and “Citing and Writing” be incorporated into subject guide content in a way that makes sense and is useful to students?
- What steps are of particular concern to a student getting started with a course research project, and are these steps discernible when the student is using the subject guide?
Future Research & Application

Library faculty can:

- Utilize this survey as a template to gather preliminary data about student subject guide use in particular areas of study

- Collect and evaluate green sheets to determine the types of assignments and approaches to learning in need of support on particular subject guides

- Based on data collected, work with the Web Librarian to ensure full optimization of the Subject Page Builder in supporting user success.

- Use this same data to drive the customization of information literacy pages such as “Search Tips,” “Citing and Writing,” and “Evaluating Information” for specific subject areas.