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# GTA = Great Teaching Adventure!

## *Graduate Teaching Assistants at the Emporia State University Libraries and Archives*

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We're all familiar with the catch-22 of trying to embark on a new career—it's often difficult to land a job without having experience, but there's no way to get experience without having a job. One institution's effort to beat this no-win scenario is outlined in the following column. Through a partnership between the libraries and the School of Library and Information Management (SLIM) at Emporia State University, graduate teaching assistants (GTAs) are now able to gain practical experience, learn first hand about the evolving academic library environment, and make real professional contributions before they graduate, thereby giving them a leg up as they seek a career foothold once the MLS is in hand. Coupled with coursework, the GTA experience allows them to put theory into practice and provides a golden opportunity to help manage successful career development.—*Editor*

**T**he academic library realm knows well that while many entry-level reference and public services librarian positions require library instruction responsibilities as part of the job, many applicants for those positions lack formal experience or coursework in teaching basic and advanced information literacy competencies. One approach to solving this problem is employing graduate assistants in various capacities, if the college or university offers graduate-level academic programs. Emporia (KS) State University is the home of the School of Library and Information Management (SLIM), an ALA-accredited program for the Master of Library Science and related degrees. In the fall of 2011, the Emporia State University Libraries and Archives began an experiment in hiring graduate teaching assistants from the SLIM program. This column discusses how students in these positions gained practical expertise in reference service and in a classroom environment through teaching library instruction sessions in English composition and other general education courses. It suggests ways to utilize upper-division undergraduate students as well as graduate assistants from other academic disciplines. It also shares lessons learned and plans for future graduate assistant positions in the Libraries and Archives.

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### BACKGROUND

At the ESU Libraries and Archives, we as teaching librarians have learned not to make broad assumptions about digital natives and technological literacy when we work with our current undergraduate and graduate students. Given this, the teaching roles of reference and instruction librarian positions

in academic libraries are more critical than ever these days. Findings indicate that the questions librarians receive at reference desks involve individual teaching opportunities for which training is needed. In 2008, Rachel Applegate noted that declines in reference transactions reported by Association of Research Libraries (ARL) institutions do not necessarily mirror reference trends at other academic libraries,<sup>1</sup> and even virtual reference service queries through chat, e-mail, and other mechanisms reflect only the patrons who feel comfortable asking questions in the first place. Information literacy, described by the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) as “form[ing] the base for lifelong learning” and “enabl[ing] learners to master content and extend their investigations, become more self-directed, and assume greater control over their own learning,” is one way to bolster college and university students’ self-confidence in finding, accessing, and utilizing information for any research need.<sup>2</sup> Increasingly, academic librarians are finding themselves in educational roles they may not have been prepared to assume when making the initial decision to earn a master’s degree in library and information science (LIS).

It is impossible to predict the exact types of courses needed by LIS students as libraries attempt to satisfy every information need for every patron. In LIS master’s-level programs, there are still gaps in curricula relating to information literacy and library instruction pedagogies for higher education. In her 2009 article about training graduate teaching assistants to offer basic-level library instruction, Mary Todd Chesnut includes an appendix outlining library instruction courses that were offered by ALA-accredited programs in the southeastern United States at that time. The listed courses primarily addressed the instructional design and general education roles of academic librarians, although one course at Louisiana State University specifically mentioned information literacy in the title, LIS 7807: Information Literacy Instruction.<sup>3</sup> The Emporia State University (ESU) SLIM presently offers only two courses that touch upon the teaching role of information professionals in the higher education library environment. LI835, Information Services for Academic Libraries, has a “special emphasis” on “understanding the components of the academic libraries that serve the information needs of higher education communities,” and LI837, Teaching in the Information Professions, is an “overview of the theories and models of instructional design, learning pedagogy, and assessment associated with teaching in the information professions.”<sup>4</sup>

Another consideration for training future reference and instruction librarians is the concept of core competencies. Laura Saunders writes about the recent results of a survey of non-ARL academic libraries to gain a sense of the general, technology, and interpersonal/personal skills most valued by reference librarians in new colleagues entering the college and university library profession. In the general category, searching skills and customer service are highly rated, along with the ability to conduct a reference interview. Results from the technology category indicate a great desire for online searching knowledge, while the interpersonal/personal

category includes four essential attributes of verbal communication: listening, approachability, comfort with instruction, and adaptability/flexibility.<sup>5</sup> It is revealing to compare these responses with the ACRL Standards for Proficiencies for Instruction Librarians and Coordinators, which emphasize the skills of communication, instructional design, and presentation in seeking to “clarify confusing terminology, avoid[ing] excessive jargon, and us[ing] vocabulary appropriate to level of students.”<sup>6</sup>

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## OPPORTUNITIES FOR TEACHING

The utilization of graduate teaching assistants (GTAs) in colleges and universities to teach general education courses or provide instructional support to faculty is certainly not a new concept. Nancy Van Note Chism describes a chronological overview of graduate student positions as moving from a “Nothing to Say” phase with little to no training of graduate teaching assistants to a more current and relevant focus on GTAs’ professional development in the classroom environment. She adds, “Historically, the expectation has been that seasoned teachers will develop these attributes through experience. . . . It is thus more urgent than ever to focus on effective preparation of future postsecondary teaching professionals.”<sup>7</sup>

A number of graduate LIS programs offer opportunities for their students to learn more about teaching pedagogies in library instruction and information literacy throughout their curricula. However, these courses may often be elective rather than required for the LIS degree. Unless the student expresses interest in taking a course when it is an elective, theoretical knowledge and practical expertise in library instruction and information literacy may be difficult for a student to obtain. Practicums in academic, public, and other types of libraries in reference and instruction can provide the student with short-term experience, but not the kind of long-term planning, teaching, and assessment skills from which a beginning LIS professional can greatly benefit.

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## RATIONALE FOR THE GTA APPROACH AT ESU LIBRARIES AND ARCHIVES

ESU is a public university located in Emporia, Kansas and governed by the Kansas State Board of Regents. It is considered to be a Master’s L: Master’s Colleges and Universities (larger programs) under the Carnegie classification and offers one doctoral program in SLIM.<sup>8</sup> SLIM is accredited by the ALA, and as of Fall 2012, the program’s full-time student headcount was 320:<sup>9</sup>

- 24 students in the PhD program
- 284 students in the Master of Library Science (MLS) program
- 12 students in the Archives certification program

## MANAGEMENT

The ESU Libraries and Archives (ULA), composed of the William Allen White Library (WAWL) and the University Archives, currently employs eight librarians with faculty status and rank. The faculty operate under university expectations for teaching faculty in terms of teaching/performance of primary duties, research, and service.

Library instruction at ESU takes a multi-tiered approach in which the ACRL *Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education* are incorporated into undergraduate general education courses and into upper-level undergraduate and graduate research courses. In the spring of 2007, ULA was approached by the ESU dean of graduate studies to become part of a general education revision that would incorporate information technology as a new requirement. The director of instruction wrote a proposal for a two-credit-hour course titled "Information Literacy and Technology" with the UL100 course number designation for University Libraries. The proposal was accepted by the ESU General Education Council to begin in the fall of 2009.

Courses in other departments can fulfill the information technology general education requirement, but one long-term ULA goal is to increase the number of UL100 sections, and student enrollment in them, in order to start embedding information literacy outcomes in the undergraduate curriculum. The ULA faculty and dean soon realized that the attainment of this goal necessitated some changes in other library instruction approaches that had been working fairly well for years. In 1997, the director of instruction and the ESU director of Freshman Composition established a series of primarily face-to-face instruction modules in two introductory English composition courses, and both ULA and the English Department were loath to completely give up this method of reaching undergraduate students at beginning writing and research levels. The ULA faculty also knew that, until UL100 became more of a requisite course or at least a strongly recommended option for the general education information technology skills, it was crucial to incorporate basic library instruction into other general education courses to reach as many students as possible. Finally, the faculty needed time not only to build the UL100 curriculum and outcomes, but also to assess students' learning through pilot projects with standardized testing and writing/reviewing grading rubrics for course assignments. Clearly, the time needed for curriculum revision was not going to mesh with the number of composition courses, the ULA faculty's teaching of the instruction modules within those courses, and the performance of other primary duties during a given work week.

In the summer of 2010, a new dean of University Libraries and Archives was hired. One of his foremost initiatives was to highlight the teaching aspects of ULA faculty job descriptions. The ULA dean approached the SLIM dean in the late spring of 2011 with a proposal to hire two graduate students as graduate teaching assistants. The job description for both positions was for an average of twenty hours per week in the Public Services Department of the library. Approximately half of those hours would be dedicated to teaching the established

library instruction modules in freshman composition courses and other undergraduate general education courses and to assisting with the instructional development of various UL100 modules. The other half of the hours would be spent staffing the reference desk, primarily on weekends. The director of instruction and the head of public services were assigned as formal cosupervisors of the graduate teaching assistants. In reality, though, several ULA faculty were given opportunities to collaborate with GTAs on teaching and additional projects.

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## BENEFITS AND FEEDBACK

The first pair of GTAs was hired in the summer of 2011. Both students were beginning their first semester in the SLIM program that fall. As can be expected with GTAs, each brings unique experiences to the position, and some may find the prospect of teaching college students to be especially intimidating. Such was the case with Tiffany Newton, one of the GTAs. As she recalls, "Before my GTA position, I had never worked in academia. The entire experience was new, yet there were several aspects that were similar to what I had done in public libraries or as a substitute teacher in the public school system."<sup>10</sup> Conversely, the other GTA, Kellie Meehlhause, did have experience in academia through another master's degree in English but was limited in her knowledge of academic library databases and resources. Though initially intimidated, she, too, found she wasn't entirely lost, especially when it came to connecting with faculty through library instruction:

Most of the classes I worked with were taught by GTAs, so I understood and had personally experienced many of the challenges they faced in terms of classroom management and curriculum development. I could then use these shared experiences to not only connect with the instructor personally and professionally, but also to better anticipate their students' needs and skill levels when they visited the library. At the same time, providing one-on-one research assistance at the reference desk helped to improve my confidence in regards to databases and other library resources. Helping a student find scholarly sources often enabled me to identify firsthand the most useful features and common challenges of a particular database, which later further influenced how I structured my lesson plans.<sup>11</sup>

To help alleviate anxiety, training was offered prior to the start of the fall 2011 semester. It consisted of hands-on observation at the reference desk and an overview of the information literacy curriculum for both composition courses. Because the library already had established lesson plans and materials for the sessions, this training benefited the GTAs by giving them a foundation in library instruction while simultaneously removing the added stress of developing a curriculum right away. Over the course of their assistantships, the GTAs' instruction was regularly observed by their supervisors,

while post-instruction surveys provided additional feedback on teaching style and effectiveness.

Three years later, one of the most obvious benefits of the GTA program has been the practical application of MLS coursework. Many of the SLIM classes have a theory-based approach to library and information science concepts. The theoretical approach has the advantage of preparing students to interpret and strategize the ever-changing role of libraries, but it cannot replace applied experience in the workplace. Working and teaching in the library allowed students to put theory into practice by applying the concepts they read about to their interactions with students and other library staff. According to Newton, "If I learned new ideas, I could immediately put them into practice at work. I have remembered these ideas and concepts that I practiced, and it has helped me in my professional career by giving me more experience as well as concrete evidence of things that I had learned in school. Sometimes it didn't always work, but I learn from failures as well as successes."<sup>12</sup>

In many instances, the students found opportunities to combine course assignments with job responsibilities, thereby allowing them to further expand their skills while fulfilling MLS core competencies. For example, in LI813, Reference and User Services, one project required students to create a research guide or pathfinder on a specific subject for a specific user. Meehlhause used this opportunity to address an observed gap in the library's own LibGuides collection by creating a pathfinder specifically for Ethnic and Gender Studies students, collaborating with department faculty in order to evaluate the usefulness of certain resources for this target group. The resulting pathfinder was then published on the library's website and remains accessible to this day.

Along the way, one unforeseen and incredibly valuable advantage of the GTA program was the ability for the students to work on multiple aspects of librarianship, enabling them to both actively participate in library projects and further explore their own interests and talents. While the job description was initially limited to reference and instruction, students soon found themselves eager to explore other departments and opportunities, something their supervisors were more than willing to accommodate. Having found an interest in the LibGuides management system, for instance, Meehlhause was given the freedom to identify and create learning tools, such as an introduction to library resources for international students and a guide tailored to library instruction sessions for Honors English Composition courses. Newton's creative ability likewise allowed her to design bulletin boards and book displays and plan library events. GTAs also have been encouraged to participate in the work of search committees, chair library task forces, and provide leadership for ESULA, a recognized student organization sponsored by the Libraries and Archives. Their instruction responsibilities were also expanded to include working with honors composition classes, community college and international students, and other subject-specific, one-shot sessions as needed. A bonus of expanding the GTAs' responsibilities was freeing up

additional time for librarians to focus their attention more on outreach, collection development, and one-on-one research assistance.

Since receiving their degrees in spring and summer 2013 respectively, Meehlhause and Newton have both found employment and are regularly able to apply their ESU experiences in their new positions. Meehlhause is the instruction coordinator at Briggs Library, University of Minnesota, Morris. Newton is the library director at Green Forest Public Library, Green Forest, Arkansas. When asked about their job hunting, both remarked that their diverse experiences at WAWL helped them to demonstrate to employers how their skills could be applied to a variety of tasks outside of reference and instruction departments.

Another GTA, Kael Moffat, who was hired in summer 2013 and graduated in May 2014, agreed that the insight he gained from his assistantship was extremely valuable as he began his job search. Moffat was hired in May 2014 as the information literacy librarian at St. Martin's University, Lacey, Washington, and speaks about his GTA experience:

Given the nature of the duties, I have been able to gain important experience with reference and instruction, of course, but I've also had the chance to get involved with outreach activities and technical services as well. I think another important aspect of having this experience in a smaller library is that I've had the chance to see how university governance works. In job searching, this has been valuable because I have been able to confidently claim experience in a number of different areas of service.<sup>13</sup>

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## LESSONS FOR THE FUTURE

When the ESU Libraries and Archives created the GTA positions, the hope was to give students a unique opportunity to learn more about the current academic library environment and to learn problem-solving skills by facing daily customer-service challenges. The director of instruction and the head of public services, both of whom served as references for the graduate teaching assistants, have been able to speak to search committees about the specific knowledge and skill sets the GTAs would bring to a job. The creation of learning objects, such as LibGuides, is a tangible output the GTAs can present to prospective employers.

In any new endeavor, there is a need to assess the relative success of the approach and identify areas for improvement. There are two lessons ULA faculty have taken away from the initial GTA program:

1. *Rotate GTAs by start date in a graduate program.* When the initial two GTAs were hired in summer 2011, both were first-year students in the SLIM. When one GTA graduated in spring 2013 and the other in summer 2013, the faculty were forced to consider starting over with

training two new GTAs. The dean and faculty decided that in the future every effort would be made to hire students with some overlap. One returning, experienced GTA would then always be available and could provide peer guidance as a new GTA began employment.

2. *Set concrete expectations for the positions, but allow for flexibility depending upon the students' interests.* Currently, the graduate teaching assistants remain primarily responsible for teaching the library instruction modules in freshman composition courses. This expectation is made clear when student candidates are interviewed for the positions. However, it is entirely possible—and welcome—that students coming into library science programs have previous work experiences or interests that they would like to develop further in the graduate teaching positions. For example, the two graduate teaching assistants for the 2013–14 academic year had different backgrounds which, when combined, brought breadth and depth to their positions. One GTA taught for a number of years in public high schools, while the other GTA had worked extensively with undergraduate student organizations and as a peer tutor with a professor. In the short term, the library instruction modules for composition courses will continue to be a focus for these positions. Long term, the ULA faculty hope to ensure that the GTAs have ample opportunities to bring their experiences, strengths, and enthusiasm to projects for the benefit of ULA as a whole.

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## CONCLUSION

Since Emporia State University is fortunate to have an ALA-accredited library science program, it is perhaps inevitable that the partnership for graduate teaching assistants was initiated with the School of Library and Information Management. However, colleges and universities without library science programs, or with primarily undergraduate populations, can still derive benefit from collaborating with their libraries by identifying and mentoring upper-level student assistants in disciplines for which teaching and research are key. Some obvious partnerships are with majors in education and the humanities. In other fields, students who are majoring in business, management, and marketing could bring to the job some fresh ideas for customer service, focus groups, and surveys. Sociology and anthropology majors employed as library student assistants could help craft ethnographic studies of student research practices, as evidenced in the ERIAL Project and resulting book, *College Libraries and Student Culture*.<sup>14</sup>

In writing about graduate assistants in library reference departments, Qi Wu notes that “the partnership between

graduate assistants and the library (and its librarians) is a unique one. It needs to be protected, reinforced and enhanced. It works best when both parties benefit from the relationship and get what they want, and deserve.”<sup>15</sup> The same holds true for any graduate assistantship or upper-division undergraduate student assistant position. Offering a combination of classroom theory and practical expertise in library instruction as a grounding framework is a positive, proactive approach to staffing, on the job training, and long-term collaborations for current students as they become our future colleagues.

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