

Academic Libraries Report Minimal Standardization and Oversight of LibGuide Content

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Evidence Summary

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A Review of:

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Abstract

Objective – To determine what strategies academic libraries use to govern creation and maintenance of their LibGuides.

Design – Online survey questionnaire.

Setting – A selection of academic libraries that use Springshare’s LibGuide system, mainly in the United States and Canada.

Subjects – Academic libraries with administrator level access to LibGuides at 120 large and small, private and public schools.

Methods – Researchers made their online questionnaire available on a Springshare lounge and recruited participants through electronic mailing lists. Respondents were self-selected participants. The survey consisted of 35 questions, including several about their institution’s size and type, the number of LibGuides available through their library, and how their guides are created and reviewed. There was space available for comments. The survey stated that the researchers’ goal is to complete an “environmental scan of content strategies” in LibGuides at academic institutions.

Main Results – Of the 120 responding institutions, 88% are located in either the United States or Canada and 53% reported that they do have content guidelines for LibGuide authors. Content guidelines might include parameters for topics, target audiences, or purpose. Parameters for structural elements, including page design, content reuse policies, naming conventions, and navigation, were most commonly represented at those institutions that reported having guidelines. Seventy-seven percent of respondents reported that their LibGuides do not go through a formal review process prior to publication.

Regarding LibGuide maintenance, 58% reported that LibGuides are reviewed as needed, while 27% indicated a more systematic approach. In most cases, the LibGuide reviewer is the author, though sometimes a LibGuide administrator may take on a review role. The most common considerations for LibGuide review are currency, accuracy, usage, and consistency. Of the responding institutions, 74% reported that they do not conduct any user testing of their guides.

Two of the biggest barriers to introducing and maintaining LibGuide guidelines identified in the survey were lack of time and a sense of librarian ownership over content and workflow. The strong culture of academic freedom may make some librarians resistant to following institutional guidelines. Survey respondents noted that, where content guidelines are present, they tend to address “low hanging fruit” issues, such as page design and naming conventions, rather than more complex issues around tone and messaging.

Conclusion – Content creators tend to have many competing priorities, so a workflow and guideline system might help librarians spend less time on their guides. Despite a large amount of research on LibGuide best practices regarding content strategy, few institutions seem to be taking systematic steps to implement them. Further research examining the experiences of LibGuide authors and administrators and on the effectiveness of content strategy practices is necessary.

Commentary

As noted in the Introduction to this study, much of the previous research on LibGuide content management has focused on best practices. Some researchers have explored content management at the institutional level. Notably, McDonald and Burkhardt (2021) summarized findings from a survey of content managers at academic libraries and found that “web content strategy as a community of practice in academic libraries is operating at, or just above, a basic level” (p.15). This is similar to Logan and Spence’s findings. A previous article by McDonald & Burkhardt (2019) explored the relevance of cohesive content strategy given the proliferation of LibGuide content at large institutions.

This review used a tool from the Center for Evidence-Based Management (n.d.) to evaluate the survey’s design quality. This survey included clear research questions regarding how academic libraries govern their LibGuides and what strategies they use and successfully gathered information on the prevalence of LibGuide guidelines at academic institutions.

Survey participants were self-selected based on their participation in online forums and electronic mailing lists and their willingness to take the survey, a shortcoming acknowledged by the researchers several times. However, data concerning the location, size, and degree-type of responding institutions was collected and reported, and the survey instrument was included as an article appendix. Responses to a number of questions included in the survey, such as those addressing LibGuide workflow, could have potentially added depth to the article discussion, but were not reported in the results.

This study provides few recommendations for organizations seeking to improve LibGuide cohesion, as though it is not yet known how content guidelines influence the quality of guides. Nonetheless, organizations may be able to review and compare their own internal LibGuide practices in relation to the data presented, considering their content strategies from a different perspective.

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