

Lori Chapin, Annie Nguyen, Jovonah Kramer, Hayden Dutro, and Elias Tzoc

# Intentional diversity in the Makerspace

## A student worker hiring plan

On top of the COVID-19 pandemic, 2020 was also a year when we witnessed racial injustices and were reminded that we need to focus and practice intentionality more than ever. This article reflects on an intentional plan to diversify the student workers in the Makerspace at Miami University Libraries. We are going to discuss our work in four sections: the need and value for more diverse student workers, the hiring plan and strategies, early



Miami University Makerspace front desk view.

examples and indicators of success, and an engagement and retention plan. We have also invited three of the students to share and reflect on their experiences and how working in the Makerspace has been beneficial to them both personally and professionally.

### The need and value for diverse student workers

The Miami University Libraries started a new strategic plan in 2020.<sup>1</sup> The commitment and

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Lori Chapin is manager of Innovative Spaces, mail: pheanila@miamioh.edu, Annie Nguyen is a student assistant, email: nguyeu196@miamioh.edu, Jovonah Kramer is a student assistant, email: kramer56@miamioh.edu, Hayden Dutro is a student assistant, email: dutrohn@miamioh.edu, Elias Tzoc is head of Create and Innovate Departments, email: tzoce@miamioh.edu at the Miami University Libraries

understanding for such an important activity was evident when not even COVID-19 could stop us from this important work. Along with the strategic plan, we also developed a core set of organizational values: welcoming, curious, collaborative, and trailblazing. All library services are impacted and benefited from the strategic and values conversations, including the Makerspace, which was only launched in fall 2019. The first semester proved to be



Makerspace student workers.

quite successful: 500-plus walk-ins, 200-plus waivers signed, 13 tours, 800-plus attendees at 10 events. But as we had to close operations in March 2020, and as we transitioned into a hyflex format for the academic year 2020-21, we also realized that there was an area where we could do a bit better—and that is with our student workers.

We typically employ 12-to-15 students during the school year and while we always had success in having talented groups of students, for the 2021-2022 academic year, we set a goal to intentionally diversify the student workers. We knew that a diverse and inclusive hiring plan would help us with three goals: 1) to exemplify/support that the Makerspace is a truly inclusive space for creativity and collaboration open to every Miami student, 2) to further support the library role as an equalizer on campus, and 3) to align our priorities with the university goals in providing diverse and inclusive opportunities for the Miami community. The Makerspace ultimate goal is to provide a welcoming, creative, and inclusive space that will further support active and experiential learning to every student regardless of their discipline.

## **The hiring plan and strategies**

To achieve this goal of diversification, we examined where to find students in underrepresented populations. This approach took multiple avenues. First, at Miami University, a popular method of reaching out to student organizations is through a site called the Hub.<sup>2</sup>

After researching for diverse and different groups, we identified about 15 to reach out to directly via the information they provided to the Hub site. Around two weeks prior to the start of the semester, we sent out an email asking that they share our posted position within their organizations and included a flyer with a QR code.

Then, for the first week of classes, we decided to block off our schedules and made ourselves available for a drop-in style open house, which allowed students to come in and interview in-person, with the option to meet virtually, if preferred. This get-to-know and interview plan also coincided with the library's Explore King, a yearly resource fair directed mainly at first-year students, to showcase the services available to them through the libraries. Students had the opportunity to drop into the Makerspace in addition to table sessions occurring that week. During this week, we received several emails and visits from students, which resulted in the hiring of eight additional student employees for the Makerspace.

Our third opportunity to reach a diverse body of students took shape in our collaboration with the Louis Stokes Alliance for Minority Participation (LSAMP).<sup>3</sup> Prior to the start of classes, we participated in an event with LSAMP students, providing Makerspace services, such as vinyl stickers and virtual reality. At this event, we encountered three additional students who pursued employment in the Makerspace.

## **Early examples and indicators of success**

As is often the case, the hiring process is not a quick one. Our student hires have trickled in due to the requirements of human resources, which has allowed us the unexpected opportunity to train students on a one-on-one basis. It has been extraordinarily fulfilling to see their interactions and collaborations in the Makerspace. As they meet each other and learn more about the Makerspace, they have begun to train each other on new machines and work together to solve problems. They show an investment in the space when working with patrons by observing each other's work and rushing to assist each other. Four exceptionally rewarding examples of early success are: 1) the wide variety of students represented in the Makerspace: we have students with African-American, Middle Eastern, Latinx, and Southeast Asian backgrounds; 2) the creation of a new training system where students receive an apron and decorate it with materials created from each station in the Makerspace; 3) the day a student took the lead and conducted a demo with a faculty member because our librarian was at a last-minute meeting; and 4) when we witnessed one of our international students instructing a fellow student on how to use a 3-D printer in their native language. Being able to serve students and allow them to see themselves represented in our student employees is the embodiment of inclusion.

## **An engagement and retention plan**

Of course, real change will only be impactful if it becomes a sustainable change. As Miami University's president has stated, "Inclusive excellence is not a race with a finish line, but rather an ongoing evolution based in a human community strong enough to respond effectively to whatever challenges arise."<sup>4</sup> At present, we are pleased to have done the first step in hiring a diverse and talented group of student workers, and we are already working on a retention plan, which will include activities such as Students of the Semester, where we plan to create opportunities for the students to work on a list of suggested projects that will help

them learn something new but also help us further understand and test/prototype ideas we have heard during brainstorming sessions.

Additionally, we also plan to retain students by being intentional and strategic with flexibility for scheduling, encouraging personal projects to learn equipment, and promoting the general fun nature of our work to keep students coming back to work. At the end of the day, we want the student workers to feel empowered to continue to innovate, experiment, and contribute to the mission of the University Libraries to “proactively connect our community with the resources and personalized guidance to empower discovery, creation, and success.”<sup>5</sup>

Our students have responded in a universally affirmative way to our training. In order to include some student reflections in this article, we invited three students to join us as contributors. We created a brief survey asking five questions: the first question was “How would you describe your fall semester working in the Makerspace?” Answers were all positive, with each student confirming that they have enjoyed their experience working in the Makerspace. Our second question delved more deeply into their thoughts on inclusion, “Do you feel you belong in the Makerspace? Is there anything else we can do to make all students feel included?” Our student, Annie Nguyen, a first-year student from Vietnam replied, “I cannot feel more welcomed than I currently am in the Makerspace. It is really easy to communicate with my co-workers, my bosses, and patrons.”

A particularly rewarding answer came from Jovonah Kramer, a first-year, LSAMP student who answered the question, “What skills have you learned in the Makerspace that you believe will help you in the future?” in an exceptionally gratifying manner. Kramer replied, “I’ve of course learned how to use a lot of the machinery in the space like the Lulzbot Mini 2 3-D printers among others. However, I’ve also learned how to better articulate my ideas in a concise way that lets me teach others. This acquired skill has already paid off in the long run as it helped me receive a GE Aviation Digital Technology internship over the summer. They were incredibly impressed with my hands-on experience with 3-D printers and VR, as well as my speaking ability. I credit the Makerspace for this opportunity.”

This creates such pride in our students and really makes us feel that they are receiving as much benefit from working in the Makerspace as we, the staff receive by working with them. We closed out our questions by asking, “Does your Makerspace experience change your perception of libraries? If so, how?” Answers to this were also gratifying. Hayden Dutro, a nontraditional student whose military service has necessitated breaks in his enrollment, answered, “Before I worked at the Makerspace I honestly just thought of libraries as places to go for books and slow Internet. Having experience at a place like makerspaces has shown me that libraries can really be with the times and modernize so the community can still learn after high school and college.”

Annie Nuygen brought us back to our inclusion efforts, reflecting that working in the library had a big impact on perceptions of the library, “Not just mine but also my friends who I have brought to the Makerspace. Usually one would not expect to have such cool machines available to public use outside of specialized labs. However, our perception of libraries, particularly King Library has shifted from being a place just to study to where I could actually enjoy my time being there and learn new skills.”

Having confirmation that our work to increase inclusion is effective is one of our greatest accomplishments. Kramer’s response to the fifth question embodies the essence of our goals.

He replied, “The C+I Makerspace really changed my perception of libraries. I’ve always loved the atmosphere of libraries in general because I like books. However, I always felt like the library was a place to learn about the accomplishments of others and be instructed on how to do something. With the Makerspace, however, the space allows us to learn by experience and acquire our own accomplishments. I’ve always learned better by doing something rather than reading the instruction manual, so the Makerspace seemed like the right fit for me.” This embracing of the different skillset and experience that the Makerspace brings to the library is exceptionally satisfying. It’s clear, from this sample, that we are doing some things very right in regards to our student employees’ Makerspace experience. As we gather and try to make sense of the stats of the fall 2021 semester, it’s also clear that the 300% increase in appointments and walk-ins in the Makerspace is outstanding, and it was manageable because of the extraordinary support we have from the C+I student workers.

## Notes

1. Miami University Libraries, “Miami University Libraries Strategic Planning,” <https://www.lib.miamioh.edu/strategic/>, accessed October 26, 2021.
2. Miami University, “The HUB: Miami University Student Organizations Website,” <https://miamioh.campuslabs.com/engage>, accessed October 26, 2021.
3. Miami University, “Louis Stokes Alliances for Minority Participation,” <https://www.miamioh.edu/cas/academics/programs/lamp/> accessed October 26, 2021.
4. Gregory P. Crawford, “4 Ways Universities Can Take The Lead On Diversity” *HuffPost*, [https://www.huffpost.com/entry/universities-education-diversity\\_b\\_5b242abce4b056b2263a1bee](https://www.huffpost.com/entry/universities-education-diversity_b_5b242abce4b056b2263a1bee), accessed October 26, 2021.
5. Miami University Libraries, “Miami University Libraries Strategic Planning.” *zz*