Lynn Jones

The rewards of research

Library prizes for undergraduate research

Along my journey I found that some of my breakthroughs were not based on diligent researching but on mere chance. . . . made it all the sweeter and made me more excited about the research I was doing. I came to learn that doing research is not just about nding material; it is also partly about learning to recognize the value of something when you stumble across it.—UC-Berkeley senior

Between 2002 and 2008, North American academic libraries gave away thousands of dollars to students who had done research projects, part of a growing trend to offer prizes for undergraduate research. In 2002 the University of California (UC)-Berkeley Library created the first cash prize for outstanding undergraduate research projects. Five years later, more than 15 academic libraries have adopted or adapted UC-Berkeley's Library Prize for Undergraduate Research.

What do libraries gain from this kind of a program? What do students get out of them? How do they benefit the university? In short, is the investment of time and money worth it?

Genesis of UC-Berkeley's Library Prize for Undergraduate Research

While serving as Associate University Librarian at UC-Berkeley, Patricia Iannuzzi proposed that the library offer an undergraduate research prize. The impetus was a self-study on undergraduate education the campus had undertaken in 2000[1] informed by the 1998 Boyer Report "Reinventing Undergraduate Education" and other research that emphasized the value of inquiry-based education.

The first two recommendations of UC-Berkeley's Commission on Undergraduate Education included "integrate inquiry-based learning into every phase of the undergraduate education" and "improve instruction in information literacy and fluency in information technology." The Library Prize was a visible response to the self-study and a reminder to the campus that the library is an essential component of inquiry-based learning; a "laboratory for scholarship," in the words of the report. Library administration believed we could stimulate faculty to assign research by recognizing undergraduates who go far beyond the "two books and three articles" research model.

Features of UC-Berkeley's Library Prize

Applicants must follow certain criteria for eligibility:

- undergraduate papers or projects in any medium are eligible,
- project must have been completed for a registered UC-Berkeley course,
- work in any discipline is eligible,
- project must demonstrate "significant inquiry" (i.e, the topic must be worth researching),
- project must be based on research in a library's resources and collections,
- student must write a 750-word reflective essay on the research process, and
- project and essay must demonstrate learning about the research and information-gathering process itself.

Applicants must demonstrate key information literacy competencies:

Lynn Jones is reference and instruction librarian at University of California-Berkeley, e-mail: ljones@library.berkeley.edu

• Exceptional ability to locate, select, evaluate, and synthesize library resources and to use them in the creation of a project in any media that shows originality and/or has the potential to lead to original research in the future.

• Evidence of significant personal learning and the development of a habit of research and inquiry that shows the likelihood of persisting in the future.

As a creation of the library, the prize emphasizes the quality of research and the student's internalization of information literacy skills. Theoretically, a project with outstanding research but average organization or writing could beat out a better written paper derived from lesser research. In practice, the winning projects have been outstanding in all respects.

Other libraries, other prizes

Libraries large and small, from a wide variety of colleges and universities, have instituted prize programs. Many have adopted the UC-Berkeley model virtually intact, while a few have made substantial changes. For example, the prize programs of the University of Georgia, UC-Irvine, and University of Washington are offered in collaboration with their campus undergraduate research programs. This provides a ready-made pool of applicants who are already involved in research, and reduces the need for extensive publicity. It also ensures that library instruction can be integrated into students' preparation for the project.

An explicit goal of UC-Berkeley's prize is to promote undergraduate library research throughout the curriculum, thus we solicit research applicants from across the disciplinary spectrum. However, arts, humanities, and social science projects comprise the major source of our applications. Fewer science, math, or engineering applications are received, which is true for most other programs.

At UC-Berkeley we have heard from science, engineering, and math faculty that there are few applicants from those fields because the criteria for winning do not correspond to excellence in their kind of research: specifically, because fieldwork and experimental work are not eligible. Libraries that do accept

fieldwork and laboratory research projects (University of Georgia, UC-Irvine, University of Washington) receive many more applicants from the sciences, technology, engineering, and math. The University of Washington is considering incorporating discipline-specific information competencies into the judging to rectify this situation.

Another possible adjustment would be to offer separate prizes for science/technology and humanities/social science projects. UC-Berkeley has discussed and, so far, rejected this approach for a simple reason: reserving a set number of prizes for a disciplinary area could reduce the absolute number of winners, if no projects meet the criteria for that discipline. That is, if in a given year there happened to be four outstanding humanities or social sciences projects but no exceptional science projects, we would want the flexibility to award all the prizes.

What are the benefits to libraries?

The PR is amazing. The faculty really appreciate our recognition of academic achievement, and administrators like the positive publicity. It s great for librarians to see what the students are capable of accomplishing. —Candice Benjes-Small, librarian at Radford University

Offering a research prize enhances the reputation of the library on campus by demonstrating a tangible commitment to scholarship. Undergraduate research projects give students reasons to enter the library and consult with librarians. Publicity associated with the prize sparks donor interest in the library and student research, and highlights library resources to the campus community. Bringing attention to exceptional academic work can also enhance the institution's reputation beyond the campus if the prize is widely publicized.

According to Caroline Barratt of the University of Georgia, "The prize brings attention to the libraries' collections and services, and serves to highlight librarians as active collaborators in supporting excellence in academic inquiry. Students are rewarded and recognized

for their thoughtful reflection on the research process and for displaying exemplary initiative and commitment to scholarship. For the campus, collaboration between faculty and librarians that takes place during jury deliberations helps open doors to new services and to ways of helping students achieve academically."

The chance to work with faculty on a project directly related to student research is highly valued by librarians. Kathleen Collins of the University of Washington, notes, "Many librarians and faculty who have participated as jurors have commented on the positive opportunity to work with one another and to learn how the other group evaluates research—that sharing between librarians and faculty is perhaps the deepest and most valuable experience many separate participants take away from the award."

Not least of the benefits is the opportunity for librarians to see excellent student work that in many cases has been informed by library instruction. Most librarians never see the results of the instruction and reference we provide, so it's quite enlightening to read student work, both poor and excellent. The prize papers form an important archive of student research and writing that can inform library instruction, and support a university's reaccreditation process.

What students learn

The most important lesson I learned . . . is that methods of research can be planned only to a limited extent. I originally thought that once I narrowed my topic sufficiently, there would be little question as to what sources to consult and where to find more information. Only after I read congressional hearings did I realize that the ACLUs role was not as relevant or interesting as the JACL in opposing internment. —UC-Berkeley senior

The library helped me both to answer my existing questions and formulate new ones that I had not considered previously. My research experience really reshaped my appreciation of the centrality of the library at a great university. —UC-Berkeley freshman

Most library prize programs require students to write a reflective research essay as part of the application. The essay reinforces learning by requiring students to reflect on their own experience and makes explicit to librarians how students undertake research, informing both instruction and development of tools and services to facilitate that process.

The prize is fundamentally about encouraging student research, and the many essays that UC-Berkeley students have written testify to the power of research to transform students. The essays can be quite personal, revealing undergraduates' excitement, difficulty with, and even errors in research. Like a focus group, essays provide a window into the student research experience: the thrill of self-directed learning, the discovery of much larger worlds of information than they had known before.

We read in some cases striking realizations: call numbers are subject-related, there are subscription databases for different disciplines. Others students confess their prior ignorance of the catalog or interlibrary borrowing. But most essays induce a glow of pride for the enthusiasm of students newly in love with our collections.

This research project....revealed to me that research and writing are inextricable processes.... having nally put pen to paper... inevitably leads one to see gaps in argumentation that could be worked out through a point-speci c research strategy. . . UC-Berkeley senior

However, it is easy for students to use the essay to flatter the library by extolling its many resources and helpful staff, without engaging in honest analysis of their own research process. UC-Irvine and other libraries that require a research log or journal gain more reliable information about the research trajectory of student applicants.

One of the features that sets student research assignments apart from "real" research is the lack of an audience beyond the faculty member. According to Barbara Fister at Gustavus Adolphus College, the prize "gives students the sense that their work has an audience beyond their teacher, and that stirs them up." Some winners have gone on to win additional prizes and to publish their papers. Perhaps the most exciting

outcome for students is the discovery that they wish to pursue careers as researchers.

Lower-division student projects

Not surprisingly, lower-division students account for a small percentage of applicants and winners. These students typically have meager research skills, and are not often given assignments that require extensive research. Lower-division student projects, with a few notable exceptions, are not competitive with those of upper division students.

UC-Berkeley and some others offer a separate prize category for lower division students, to encourage their participation. However, even when lower-division projects are judged separately from upper-division projects, distinguishing excellence at a beginner's level is difficult.

One library offers a "best freshman paper" prize, which is only awarded if an outstanding freshman paper is submitted. Despite this, there are good reasons to try to attract lower division students to apply.

Offering a prize to lower-division students may encourage faculty to incorporate research into lower-division classes. Prizes may entice lower-division students to dig deeper and be more original in their explorations. Those students who do undertake original research during the initial years of college feel more comfortable with it later on and are likely able to achieve more sophisticated results. If prize programs are to fulfill the goal of building undergraduate research competence throughout college it is important to demonstrate that lower-division students can succeed.

Does it all add up?

Despite the work involved in conducting an annual research prize, it is an exceptionally rewarding experience. The Library Prize committee is one of the most popular at the UC-Berkeley library.

Librarians rarely get to see the fruits of our labor with students, and rarely do we connect with faculty in ways that so explic-itly present our work as part of the academic endeavor. A research prize program furthers many instructional goals of an academic library, and is a celebration of scholarship that delights students, faculty, and library staff. Try it at your library.

Note

1. Commission on Undergraduate Education, learning.berkeley.edu/cue/final/CUE_Final.pdf. ✏

Prize Web sites of libraries surveyed

• California State University Fullerton, www.library.fullerton.edu/libraryprize/default.htm
• Gustavus Adolphus College, gustavus.edu/academics/library/PatriciaLindell.html
• Indiana University-South Bend, www.iusb.edu/~libg/about/libraryprize.shtml
• Indiana University/Purdue University, www.ulib.iupui.edu/awards/ugaward
• Labette Community College, www.labette.edu/library/paper%20of%20the%20year.htm
• Loyola Marymount University, www.lmu.edu/Page29193.aspx
• Ohio State University, Columbus, liblearn.osu.edu/award/
• Oregon State University, osulibrary.oregonstate.edu/awards/ugresearchawards.html
• Radford University, lib.radford.edu/information/award/index.cfm
• University of California-Berkeley, www.lib.berkeley.edu/researchprize
• University of California-Irvine, www.lib.uci.edu/libraries/new/urop2007.html
• University of Alberta-Augustana, www.augustana.ca/facilities/library/infolit/awards.html
• University of Georgia, www.libs.uga.edu/researchaward/
• University of Washington, www.lib.washington.edu/researchAward/