Research shows students prefer connecting to library resources at the course level. But, Oregon State University (OSU) librarians still felt the need to introduce novice students to the breadth of disciplinary research resources beyond a particular course. Though subject research guides are one approach, OSU Libraries’ guides lacked visual appeal (Fig. 1), were difficult to find and use and did not engage students. The guides were time-consuming to create and maintain and were built using static HTML. As reference desk stats decreased and web and VR stats increased we knew more students were connecting virtually to the library. It was time to reenergize our subject guides and make them easy to create and inviting for students to use.

Project Methodology

Using project management principles and user-centered design techniques we defined the guides’ purpose, audience(s), content and identified new features to include. Librarian input was sought throughout the design process. After evaluating existing options we decided to adapt our open source software, the Interactive Course Assignment Pages (ICAP) tool. OSU librarians were already familiar with the tool and extending it met our budget, timeline and development framework.

Project Results

The ICAP tool was reconfigured and rebranded. Now called Library á la Carte, librarians make either course pages or subject guides. Librarians write content with an embedded WYSIWIG text editor. New content types can be included on the guides:
- RSS feeds
- Meebo widget
- Images
- Video

Guides feature tabs for navigation ease and quick viewing of content (Fig. 2). A re-designed, automatically populated portal page lists all guides. Users browse guides by subject, alphabetically or by tags.

Project management strategies kept the project on track and we were able to reengineer the tool in three months.

Subject Guide Challenges

Project Discussion

Subject guides offer a path to library resources for students new to a discipline or when there is no course web page. They also assist non-subject specialists at the reference desk.

OSU librarians easily create and update guides (Fig. 3). They focus on writing content rather than mastering HTML. Added bonuses include:
- Posting modules to either course pages or subject guides
- Sharing modules or pages with other librarians
- Consistent layout and design
- Displaying content in boxes with bolded headings for scanning ease.

Students find the portal page under the label “Get Help With a Subject” on the library home page. The portal page offers multiple access points:
- Tag cloud
- Google custom search box for searching all guides
- Subject directory

Guides are found more often by tags than by the subject directory, (Fig. 4) even though the tag cloud is displayed below the directory.

The Future

Future plans include making guides available for mobile devices and featuring book cover images. To learn more about Library á la Carte visit: http://alacarte.library.oregonstate.edu/

References
