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Hiring Student Graphic Designers: Benefits, Challenges, and Lessons Learned

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Loyola Marymount University

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Fall September 13, 2021

Hiring Student Graphic Designers: Benefits, Challenges, and Lessons Learned

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EDITORIAL

Jamie Hazlitt and
John M. Jackson

Loyola Marymount
University

Hiring Student Graphic Designers: Benefits, Challenges, and Lessons Learned

Extending the impact of outreach

For the past decade, the William H. Hannon Library at Loyola Marymount University (LMU) has hired student designers to meet the demands of the majority of its print and digital graphic design needs. From fliers and table-toppers to digital banners and animated gifs, student employees have been instrumental in the success of our unique and ever-evolving visual identity. Maintaining an engaging visual presence in both physical and digital spaces throughout the campus extends the impact of our outreach efforts, helping students connect library programming, services, and collections to their personal and academic needs. With this goal in mind, we systematically include the development of promotional materials in the early stages of designing new programs and outreach initiatives.

Before 2015, there was a lack of library literature on the importance of graphic design in library outreach (Douglas and Becker 2015, 460). The next year, Diana Wakimoto published her study on graphic design best practices in libraries, which provided more detailed information about how graphic design work happens in various institutions (Wakimoto 2016, 71). The results from that study indicate that most librarians do the work themselves, and there was no mention of the use of students for graphic design needs (it is worth noting, however, that the study did not focus exclusively on academic libraries). Other authors have highlighted the benefits of using students' graphic design work in libraries to promote community projects and foster student engagement (Oldenburg 2020, 7; Ballengee, Segoria, Sisemore, and Towery 2019, 512).

Outside the studies referenced above, there is a dearth of literature that addresses the benefits of hiring (and paying) students to design outreach materials for the library. What follows is a summary of the William H. Hannon Library's success at working closely with students to create engaging and original promotional materials that support the messaging, programming, and other outreach needs of the library. We discuss the benefits and challenges of hiring graphic design students and offer a brief overview of what we recommend as best practices for managing these students.

The Benefits of Hiring Student Graphic Designers

The benefits of using student designers for outreach support outweigh many of the common challenges, which will be addressed later in this article. Students offer a fresh and contemporary aesthetic in the work they create. In

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our experience, their artistic eye is unburdened by the anxiety of influence, or the psychological burden of being seen as derivative or pigeon-holed into one particular style, often found in mid-career creators, even if they lack the benefits of experience. Combine this with the reality that new student designers need to be hired every 2–3 years as they matriculate, and we are able to add an element of flexibility (both a benefit and a necessity) to the library’s visual identity that enables us to stand out among our campus peers. Like many university libraries, we have campus-mandated branding rules and style guides for any official communications, particularly those that involve outreach into the local community. For on-campus outreach, however, we have some leeway, especially when our graphic design materials are developed by students themselves. Being able to use promotional materials in our outreach that are distinct from the “campus look” allows our messaging to stand out in an increasingly crowded communications space.

It is important to note the value we place on paying student designers for their work. It is not uncommon for undergraduate design students to have “real world” clients and projects that inform assignments in credit-bearing courses. For example, students in Graphic Design II at Loyola Marymount University have a poster design project connected to the university “Common Book” program, and the students’ final work is displayed in the library each year. This kind of partnership is mutually beneficial to the students and the library, even though it is unpaid. Less desirable are “design contests” (usually hosted by stakeholders outside of the classroom), where students are asked to develop and submit ideas for free, in the hopes of winning a small prize and getting the honor of having their work adopted by the client. Although this can be cost-effective, this practice diminishes the value of creative work, and it comes with no guarantee of an end-product that will meet the needs of the contest-holder.

For many small and medium-sized libraries with limited budgets, hiring a professional designer or asking a full-time library worker to dedicate a portion of their time to design work may not be a possibility; access to designers employed by other university departments may not always be available. For example, LMU has a well-funded and generously staffed marketing department, but their attention and resources are prioritized toward high profile initiatives. The university has an FTE of 9,577 students. On average, there are approximately 75 total students on the graphic design track. Of those 75 students, approximately a third are juniors or seniors with the necessary experience to take on pre-professional projects for the library.

On the surface, student assistants, especially those hired through college work-study, can offer a more affordable solution to meeting design needs than hiring new or using pre-existing full-time staff. It is worth noting, however, that industry rates for graphic design work are well above the rate typically offered to work-study students. If a library has the budget (and institutional permission) to pay these students more than the average rate for student employees, they are likely to attract and retain more skilled talent. Graphic design work requires a unique skill set that should be compensated accordingly.

There are benefits to the students as well. Student designers working in the library can build and practice skill sets applicable for a variety of future employment opportunities, and not only in the field of graphic design. As we will detail below, student graphic designers manage multiple projects with a variety of timelines, deliverables, and needs. They gain experience working with clients who have different sets of expectations and levels of involvement—especially if the student is creating outreach materials for a variety of units or initiatives within the library. In our experience, a successful student designer is one who is able to articulate their own ideas, empathize with and comprehend

the ideas of others, and craft those ideas into a message that is both clear and visually engaging at the same time.

The Challenges of Hiring Student Graphic Designers

The challenges that hiring student graphic designers brings to academic library outreach and marketing work are not all that different from the challenges a library faces when hiring students for other types of roles. Students' schedules are notoriously difficult to navigate and plan around. This is particularly problematic when we are working with hard deadlines, such as promoting an event or printing handouts for a workshop. To overcome this challenge, it is important to schedule projects well in advance and set clear expectations and boundaries for colleagues involved in the design process. We typically give our student designers at least two weeks to finish any project that requires developing a design idea from scratch (versus using a template). We also give our student designers flexibility in their schedule. As "a creative" (as they sometimes call themselves), their best work is often done at irregular times. Providing enough space for these moments to happen is important for giving students both the freedom and time to do their best work.

Of course, being students, they are not likely to be in our employ for long. Even if we are able to hire a talented first-year student, the maximum amount of time we will have with a student designer is three years. As a result, we have to onboard a new student designer every 2 years on average. However, since the best student designers tend to be those who have completed the core courses in their field, most of our student designers are seniors.

Best Practices in Hiring: Faculty Recommendations

Graphic design requires a very special set of skills. Depending on the size of the campus and the types of fine arts programs offered, the pool of students who have the requisite skills for graphic design work could be extremely limited or widely diverse. To overcome this challenge, we tap into the recommendations and expertise of our faculty colleagues in the studio arts to recruit skilled students. This strategy has never steered us wrong.

In particular, we reach out to faculty who teach the studio arts courses that cover the skills we are most interested in tapping: upper-level graphic design and typography courses. Classes such as history of design, multimedia design, and experimental design cultivate skills that may occasionally come in handy for library needs. Courses which dive into the essentials of layout and, especially, typography for two dimensional work cover the areas that we most desire in our outreach efforts: what and how to communicate. While the interplay between color, layout, text, and imagery is important, we have found that poor typography will most readily

“Courses which dive into the essentials of layout and, especially, typography for two dimensional work cover the areas that we most desire in our outreach efforts: what and how to communicate.”

sink a good design idea. For an academic library, most of our audience will be learning about our services, collections, and events through textual elements, so clear messaging is of the highest importance.

In the past six years, every student we have hired has had the recommendation of a faculty member who taught the student's Graphic Design II or Typography II courses. One additional benefit of hiring students who have completed these courses is that we are able to work with them using the methods and language employed by those same faculty, as we will discuss in the section on project management below.

Managing Student Designers

To meet the challenge of frequent turnover (with student designers graduating every couple of years), we have become adept at the onboarding process. The first two meetings with each designer cover a standard set of topics. After addressing administrative details like time cards and employee policies, we begin by discussing the typical types of deliverables the student will be expected to produce: fliers, half-sheets, large posters, button designs, web graphics, and social media graphics. We then review branding policies for frequently used materials, such as logos, images, and fonts. At this point, we usually introduce the student to some of the work created by previous student designers to show both the types of objects typically produced as well as the range of styles. Finally, we review the standard project management structure and workflow.



Figure 1. Posters Illustrating Various Student Designs, 2016-2021.

Each original design project begins with a standard set of instructions which includes the following information:

- A brief overview of the goals for these designs
- The target audience (e.g. students, faculty, etc.)
- Metaphors for inspiration and aesthetic (e.g. connection, conversation, growth)
- Expected deliverables (print vs. online, dimensions, resolutions, file size limits)
- Copy and other textual elements
- Links to required/recommended imagery
- Past examples (for annual or series events)

Having this information laid out in advance provides our student designer with the appropriate scope and expectations for their work. If specific deadlines need to be met or if there are milestones that need to be met along the way, those would be outlined here as well. While each piece of information is important in its own right, we have found that the metaphors are the most important to get right. This is a pedagogical technique we picked up from our graphic design faculty: what associations should the design evoke? What emotions and feelings do we want the viewer to experience? When explaining the significance of this information to colleagues, it can be helpful to refer to “the bouba/kiki effect” (Wikipedia 2021)—the concept that there are implicit connections between shapes and speech—to illustrate the importance of selecting visual elements with intention.

It is also important to provide students with both the tools and constraints of institutional design work: preferred fonts, approved logos, and a repository of high quality images. These resources and rules can usually be acquired from an institution’s central marketing office. Depending on how much approval is necessary for any graphic design work that the library puts out to external audiences, it is important to spend time reviewing branding guidelines and local policies for the use of institutional imagery.

To organize all this information, we use Trello, an online project management tool that allows users to collaborate using “boards,” “columns,” and “cards,” similar to analog sticky notes on a bulletin board. Our Trello board contains a column which lists information and links to all the resources mentioned above.

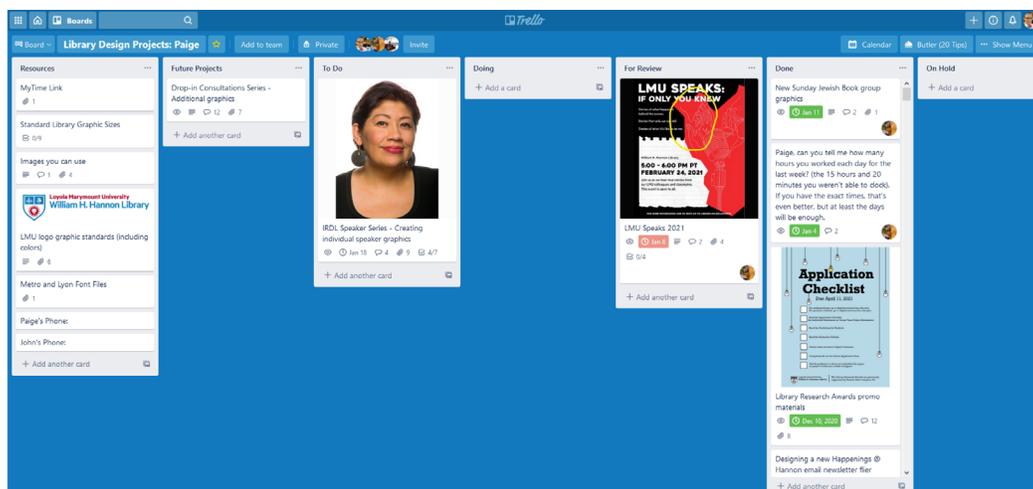


Figure 2. The “Library Design Projects” Trello Board.

Most of our “Library Design Projects” Trello board is dedicated to in-progress design work. There are six main columns: Future Work, To Do, Doing, For Review, Done, and On Hold. Each design project is listed on a card. This card contains the instructions, links to any needed files, a checklist of deliverables, and a deadline. As our graphic designer completes their work, they can ask questions or make notes using the commenting function. For example, when a project changes status, the student can attach their completed designs and drag the card from one column (Doing) to the next (For Review), which notifies their supervisor that the work is ready for them to review. If a draft needs additional work, the supervisor can add comments and move the card back to the To Do column.

Even before COVID-19, our graphic design students worked remotely, and on their own schedule, giving them the freedom to work when they are at their most creative. Using Trello allows us to easily keep tabs on their projects. When

providing feedback on a student's overall design, we try to limit the drafting stage to no more than two rounds of revisions. It can be easy to fall into the "just one more tweak" rabbit hole and so we create production timelines that build in time for two full rounds of work. Given the often limited timelines of our work, it is important to throw out undesirable design ideas early in the process so there is enough time to pivot to a new idea.

Conclusion

The practice and process of hiring student graphic designers requires the same attention to recruitment, onboarding, clear communication, project management, and constructive and productive feedback as that of our full-time professional staff. The return on investment can yield benefits for the library and the students alike. As it relates to outreach and communications work, the relationships between student graphic designers and library staff provide a flexible and ever-changing lens through which to see our work reflected in the eyes of our campus community. While the need to hire a student graphic designer may be one of necessity, it can simultaneously be a source of inspiration and creativity.

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