

BEGINNING IN THE SUMMER OF 2021,

Alexandrea Glenn and Michelle Nolan launched a pilot undergraduate peer mentoring program and hired a cohort of four undergraduate students.

OMOLOLA SULEIMAN ('23)

is a junior Biology and African American Studies double major who plans on attending medical school after graduation. She is an avid reader and her favorite place to study is Marston because of its welcoming, social environment. Lola is a leader in student organizations including Campus Diplomats, Gatorship, and Footprints. She finds the libraries to be a comforting respite space and wants to help ensure that her peers feel the same way.

Over the course of the summer semester, these students attended weekly seminars, explored the George A. Smathers Libraries, and created their own “Undergraduate Guide to the Libraries” aimed at first-year undergraduate students.

In this *SOURCE* article, we (Alexandrea and Michelle) briefly reflect on our own experiences entering academic libraries as college students, describe the peer mentoring pilot program and the creation of the guide, and showcase the perspectives of the student cohort. We interviewed the students from the cohort to hear more about what they learned, why they decided to make their guide, and what recommendations they have for better connecting the Libraries to the undergraduate student body.

A Glimpse of the Libraries through Undergrads' Eyes

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As an undergraduate student at the University of Michigan, Alexandria made little use of the librarians, instead utilizing the library's space, too worried about "bothering" a librarian with half-planned assignments. Michelle used the University of Florida library spaces to study, but never knew how many resources were available. As first-generation college students, we both remember feeling intimidated by approaching library workers about getting help. We know now that library workers want to help students succeed, but many undergraduate students still experience the same hesitancy we did. After Alexandria joined as the Student Success Librarian, we teamed up to develop a new pilot program aiming to help undergraduate students see the George A. Smathers Libraries as a resource to support them.

When brainstorming ways to better connect with the UF undergraduate student body, we kept returning to one central question: why don't we just let undergrads themselves lead the way? How can we empower undergrads as student leaders, library colleagues, and experts on the student experience? We envisioned a new peer mentoring program that would elevate undergraduate voices directly as partners. The *Undergraduate Peer Instructor* mentoring program began with a job description that stated students "will work as a part of a cohort of undergraduate leaders representing, promoting, and teaching for the Libraries. In this paid position, Peer Student Instructors will have the opportunity to learn more about the Libraries while working collaboratively on a project designed to help other UF students."

CASSIDY SMITH ('23)

is a junior English major with a specialization in children's literature. She is currently interning with a literacy agency based in New York and plans to become a book editor. She loves to read and her favorite spot in the Libraries is the Smathers Library Grand Reading Room. Cassidy is also involved in UF student organizations, including the Extreme Dance Company. She particularly enjoyed getting to tour Special Collections while developing the Guide.



NABIL CHOWDHURY ('22)

is a senior majoring in Microbiology and Cell Science with a minor in Health Disparities in Society. He plans to go to medical school next. His favorite place to study is Smathers Library because of its antique atmosphere and inspiring collections. He is a student leader in the Bangladeshi Students' Association and the Center for Undergraduate Research Board of Students. Nabil was particularly interested to learn about capturing student activism in the University Archives.



Central to this pilot program, we wanted to give students the capacity to explore the Libraries, see “behind the scenes” of how the Libraries work, and learn about library services beyond our function as a study space. We wanted them to feel empowered to activate their own voices and tell us what undergrads need from the Libraries. We planned to give the students a large degree of autonomy: rather than assign goals and tasks, we would encourage the cohort to lead the charge while we acted as advisors and cheerleaders along the way. We hoped the student cohort would pursue a creative project of their choosing to serve as a resource for their undergraduate peers. What we never could have predicted was that we would have the privilege to work with four brilliant, excited student leaders who would develop a 10,000+ word *Undergraduate Guide to the George A. Smathers Libraries* in one summer semester.

The pilot program began in May 2021 when we welcomed our four students to the Libraries. We started to develop the cohort’s foundational library knowledge by inviting colleagues across the Libraries to speak in a weekly seminar series. We tailored the seminar topics according to the students’ interests, including information literacy; conservation

and preservation; exhibitions; textbook affordability; outreach; and diversity, equity, and inclusion. For the students, the seminars provided an avenue to get a fuller perspective of first-hand library work and gave them time (on the clock!) to be curious. For us as advisors, the seminars opened our eyes to the students’ interests and reactions to new knowledge about the Libraries in a way that we have never had access to before. A phrase we heard multiple times from everyone in the cohort was “I wish I had known this sooner.”

With that spirit in mind, the project of creating a student-written guide to the Libraries was born. “I think the cohort decided to make a guide because we all knew that this is something that we would’ve wanted when we first came to UF,” said Nabil Chowdhury, one of the student authors. To develop the *Undergraduate Guide to the George A. Smathers Libraries*, the cohort spent time exploring each library’s physical spaces, meeting with library workers, perusing collections, and documenting what they learned. Omolola Suleiman said that the cohort became “aware of how many hidden gems every library on campus contains” and she couldn’t wait to tell other students about it, especially first-year and first-generation students. Ava Kaplan commented that a “barrier” for undergraduates is that the Libraries “can

be intimidating or overwhelming to navigate.” She said that one of the biggest strengths for their Guide is that it will help students “get to know the Libraries from the perspective of fellow students.”

Through weekly working meetings, the students synthesized all that they learned and wrote their guide. As their advisors, we gave them feedback, offered contextual information, edited their writing, and provided a general helping hand. We noticed the students were passionate about incorporating information that library workers may not have thought to add, such as how to submit accounts of campus activism to the University Archives and how to collaborate on the development of an exhibit. We stayed committed to trusting the cohort on leading and developing the project and we are infinitely proud of the work they’ve accomplished. On writing the *Guide*, Cassidy Smith said “it has been a great experience working [...] to learn more about the libraries and help other students do the same.” From here, our goal is to get the students’ *Guide* into the hands of as many first-year students as possible by adapting the guide into an ebook while continuing to support the cohort in connecting with other undergraduate students.

When asked about ways to better connect with undergraduates, Omolola said the Libraries can “connect with undergraduates [by] listening to what they want.” Bringing student voices directly into library outreach has been an invaluable experience for us and our colleagues who engaged with the cohort. We had the opportunity to gain insights we often wish for when creating programs, services, and more. As two formerly intimidated-by-the-library students turned librarians, it was a pleasure to work with such amazing students. We recommend other library workers seek direct ways to center student voices as we continue to build our Libraries’ legacy.



AVA KAPLAN ('23)

is a third year Political Science major with double minors in French and Philosophy. She is a dedicated student activist working with the Food Justice UF initiative and the Goddsville Dream Defenders. She’s also on the executive board for the Hula Hooping Club. Her favorite library to hit up is Library West because of its spaces and collections, as well as its social atmosphere for collaborating with friends. Ava was especially interested in getting involved with the textbook affordability work through the Libraries.

Excerpt from the *Guide* Welcome Letter:

As students ourselves, we are aware that it takes time to fully explore every part of the Libraries; we hope to make things easier by compiling all that we can into one small book. We spent the summer of 2021 exploring the different libraries on campus, meeting with library workers, and collecting information about the unique resources each library has to offer. We are excited to share with you our efforts and hope that you gain more insight as you explore the libraries through our eyes.

Happy studying!

UNDERGRADUATE LIBRARY ADVISORS (ULA)