Job of a Lifetime

Erin Dorney

Jason Casden: Digital technologies development librarian

Creativity. Flexibility. Collaboration. These three words cropped up time and time again in my interview with Jason Casden, digital technologies development librarian at North Carolina State University (NCSU).

"To me," says Casden, "being a digital technologies development librarian means building new things. This is an intensely creative job, where I am constantly adapting to new technologies and ideas, while focusing on building new and useful library services."

Clipped from his original job description, Casden's responsibilities include providing technical leadership and hands-on programming expertise for digital library projects; identifying emerging technologies that have potential for new and improved library services;

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and developing new digital library services through an iterative process that emphasize performance, sustainability, and usability.

After earning dual degrees at Ohio State University (B.A. in English and B.A. in Linguistics with a Computer and Information Science minor on the side), Casden earned his MLS from the University of North Carolina (UNC)-Chapel Hill. His graduate work was inspired by positive experiences as a student worker in the library at OSU and subsequent mentorship at the Jerome Law-
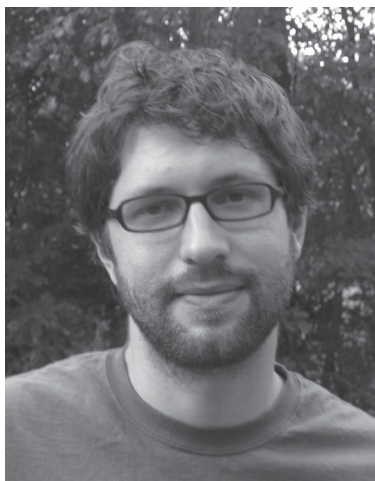
rence and Robert E. Lee Theatre Research Institute and UNC Libraries.

Casden's initial plan upon starting library school was to become an archivist. However, once word got around that he had technical skills (based on his degree switch from a major in Computer Science to Linguistics), Casden moved to working on digitization projects, advancing to develop an application for normalizing dates in EAD-encoded finding aids, and eventually entering the arena of emerging library technologies.

Now he spends his days developing software, meeting with colleagues to help plan new projects or work through difficult problems, helping to orient new staff to the library, participating in broad investigations of future project areas, helping to plan professional development opportunities, or presenting his work both inside and outside of the library. "Something I love about my job is the lack of a typical day . . . This variety is very engaging for me," he says.

Casden's position as digital technologies development librarian has existed in one form

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or another for several years. While the description and expectations have shifted over time, the general idea is that this is a person who both tracks and builds implementations of emerging technologies. It is a job that, Casden says, "comes with a higher expectation of software development proficiency than some librarians who work with emerging technologies, but with a lower expectation of operational work than many systems librarians. As a result, I am able to focus my time on implementing new systems."

One of many favorite projects that he has worked on at NCSU is the Course Views Project. Course Views is a system that automatically creates course pages for every course on campus by making smart use of both pre-existing data and content created by subject specialists for specific courses and disciplines.

Casden was the developer and technical lead for the Course Views Project, which was awarded with a 2009 Cutting-Edge Library Services award by ALA's Office for Information Technology Policy (OITP). The project is a prime example of how technology can be combined with librarian expertise as a value-add to provide more scalable service to students. OITP praised the project as one that could be replicated by other libraries.

Another project currently in the mix is WolfWalk—a mobile library project that enables users to explore the NCSU campus history using a location-aware interface optimized for mobile devices. As developer and technical lead for WolfWalk, Casden has been able to experiment with using mobile user's location to expose collections in a unique way.

In addition to WolfWalk, he has been helping NCSU libraries to develop more sophisticated mobile versions of services like their catalog and Webcams.

"I have been able to help develop some great mobile services in the last year, and I have tried to share the things I've learned by giving presentations in-person and as Webcasts . . . I think this is a really exciting time to work with technology in libraries," says Casden.

Also on the horizon is the new James B. Hunt Jr. Library. According to Casden, this new building will take a fresh and innovative approach to spaces and technology in order to support the university in new ways. ". . . I think something I've seen in strong academic libraries is a desire to better understand their patrons, and to think creatively about the best ways to support them. . . . Of course, I also feel that technology can play an important role in this," he says.

When asked about advice for academic libraries wishing to create a position similar to his, or with a focus on mobile services/applications, Casden stressed the importance of strong technical skills, an appreciation of collaborative work, and a creative and flexible mindset. "New technologies are always coming down the pike, so it would be good to hire someone who is enthusiastic about learning new things and is also actually able to implement new projects," he says. Librarians who want to end up in his shoes should take programming and systems analysis classes and should try to get as much collaborative work experience as possible. "Everything we do is a collaboration, so the ability to work well as a part of a team is essential," says Casden.

"There wasn't even such a thing as an iPhone app when I was in library school," he says, ". . . but I do think that the best way to develop the skills you will need to succeed is to work as much as you can for the people who do what you'd like to do. I had terrific mentors at UNC Libraries (where I worked during graduate school) who had a big impact on my career."

For more information about NCSU Library (Course) Tools visit www.lib.ncsu.edu/dli/projects/courseviews/; WolfWalk mobile historical campus tour see www.lib.ncsu.edu/dli/projects/wolfwalk/; and NCSU Libraries mobile, see www.lib.ncsu.edu/m/about.html. ⚡