Episode 5: Librarians in the LaunchPad

Omar Brown

Welcome to Libraries Out Loud, a podcast produced by the University at Buffalo Libraries. I'm your host, Omar Brown, evening supervisor at Silverman Library on the UB's North Campus. In each episode of the Libraries Out Loud, we'll explore the connections between the UB Libraries and the research, learning, teaching, and the creative activities of our faculty, students and staff. In this episode, we will be discussing Librarians in the Launchpad, supporting entrepreneurial information literacy, and our guests today are Hadar Borden, the director of UBS Blackstone's Launchpad, a campus-based entrepreneurship network supporting students to pursue their passions as entrepreneurs and develop the entrepreneurial mindset as incubators driving innovations within organizations. She also supports UB's Western New York Prosperity Fellowship program, a leadership development program that supports students who are committed to contributing to our region's economic vitality. Carolyn Klotzbach-Russell is the Social Sciences and Government Information Librarian working with the School of Management in Departments of Political Science, Sociology and Economics. She has expertise in competitor and market research. Erin Rowley is the Head of Science and Engineering Library Services and serves as an Engineering Librarian at UB. She has expertise in providing instruction on technical standards and patents. Ram Batta, who will be the interviewer today, is a recent graduate from University at Buffalo with a Master's in Biomedical Engineering and Philosophy. He recently served as the lead venture coach at Blackstone Launchpad, assisting and mentoring students looking to start their own venture.

Ram Batta

Hi everyone. My name is Ram and I'm the interviewer today. Our first question is for Hadar. So Hadar, for all of those who might not be familiar with Blackstone Launchpad. Can you give us the elevator pitch?

Hadar Borden

Sure. So Blackstone Launchpad inspires, empowers and catalyzes students, researchers, and community members to realize solutions that address the global and local challenges of our time. But the heart of it really is we support our students in developing their ideas, pursuing their passions, commercializing their research from the lab or embracing their inner entrepreneurial spirit as a curious student. We also helped to cultivate the entrepreneurialism spirit. Entrepreneurs are those individuals that really want to develop their entrepreneurial mindset and use that mindset to impact change within an organization.

Ram Batta

That's wonderful. So how did a library start to become involved in the Blackstone events? And how has this evolved over time?

Hadar Borden

Well, it actually started with a program called the Aging Innovation Challenge. This was brought down and opportunity that was presented by New York State Health Commissioner to support our aging population and their caregivers. And we teamed up with the Center for Successful Aging to host the competition, but we wanted to make sure that the students were grounded. And with the research, we are research one university and we wanted to engage more faculty and provide our students with more information about the market and the needs of this community. And so I thought, why not reach out to one of our librarians? And we actually reached out to Michelle Zafron, who is the Health Sciences Liaison in the Libraries, and we collaborated with her to create this fantastic research guide. I think I thought one one thing and she took it to the next level, and it really added and contributed to our students ability to develop great ideas, grounded...and research grounded in information that was already available around the market size and competitors so that their students could develop ideas that really had the potential to be sustainable.

Ram Batta

That's, that's really wonderful. You know, I know, I know working with students, it's really hard to aid them in understanding research that they might not be fully involved with their school. So, you know, Erin and Carolyn, how did how did the Libraries start getting involved in Blackstone events from your from your side?

Erin Rowley

Shortly after I became the Engineering Librarian here at UB, I was approached by a vendor of ours, a database vendor, IEEE, which is the Institute of Electrical and Electronics Engineers, and they had an event that they thought that UB might like to help put on in conjunction with IEEE. And it was an entrepreneurship panel, and so my first thought was to talk to Hadar. We've met and we met and chatted a few times, talked about potential ideas that we for collaboration. But I thought this was a really great first step and it turned out to be fantastic. We had a wonderful panel event with with experts from from from UB, UB alumni talking about entrepreneurship, answering questions for students. And really around that time was was when Carolyn started as our new Social Sciences Librarian, liaison to School of Management. And so I absolutely capitalized on that opportunity to introduce Hadar and Carolyn and say, like, OK, the three of us have to get together and start collaborating.

Carolyn Klotzbach-Russell

Yeah, actually, I met Hadar the first time at the IEEE panel and before we even initially started talking, I remember noticing the UN Sustainable Development Goal pin that you were wearing. And I knew that I had to be a part of the collaboration. So, you know, we all hit it off from the start. But I think over time too, we started bringing in not only Erin and myself, Michelle, but we've also brought in other colleagues to depending on, you know, the area that we were talking about with and the challenges. So for example, with our autonomous vehicle challenge, we also brought in our Architecture and Planning Librarian, Rose Orcutt, too. So it's that's kind of how it's evolved. We just kind of grow this network more and more.

Hadar Borden

I love that you notice the pin. You never you never know, right? What, what will catch somebody's eye and will make an impact. But I think I think you're right, Carolyn, that the Sustainable Development Goals kind of offer us an infrastructure grounding in the types of topics that we want to encourage our students to be innovating around. And it also provides us because the Sustainable Development Goals are so diverse, you've got 17 different goals. Every student on our campus, whether they're a Pharmacy student, Geography student to, you know, anything in between, can find a place for themselves. So they're really inclusive.

Ram Batta

Well, that's really wonderful as seeing so many different events come together and supporting students in so many different areas of interest. So how do you, how does this exactly where a country that the libraries work with Blackstone now and what does a typical collaboration look like?

Carolyn Klotzbach-Russell

We started referencing certain resources over and over again with some of these challenges, for one of our first steps was building an entrepreneurship library research guide, which we call Libguides for short in the Libraries, where anyone unfamiliar a Libguide is just basically a web page off of our library's website, and it can include a list of resources, databases, books, web links and research tips. So this guide will include resources on market and competitor research and patents and standards, which are some big areas that we cover in every challenge. But we also added general resources. So web links, business model examples, different reports on the state of entrepreneurship in the United States and the world, industry reports, and having one place to kind of point students to our top resources like here's our starting point has been extremely helpful with these challenges.

Erin Rowley

Absolutely. And in addition to that, Carolyn and I have also chatted about how to make that guide better based on all of these individual events that we've been collaborating on with Hadar coming in for support. So, so we would basically add additional tabs to the guide. So we have

some standard information that we have all the time and then we create these specialized tabs based on the events, so they only these times appear only when that event happening and then we archive them or just make them go away shortly thereafter. But it gives some really great, more specific information. So, for example, specific information related to accessing government transportation reports for the Autonomous Vehicle Design Challenge last summer was just one example of how we give more specialized information that was really geared specifically towards those students and that particular challenge.

Hadar Borden

And I just want to jump in and say that I think one of the biggest pieces that the Libraries contributes to Launchpad's efforts is when we're hosting these different competitions or innovation sprints or design challenges. Erin and Carolyn come in and serve as mentors or what we call experts and residents, and really offer the students some additional guidance from their respective domains and really add value to the experience. I remember one of the I think it was startup weekend that we hosted, and we actually invited all the mentors into one mentor room. And as students came in, we'd like pull Caroline or Erin into like a room with the with the student team, and it was like it became a competition who could get to Erin and Caroline first because there was such high demand, right? Once word got out on the street within the competition that that they had so much to offer to the teams, everyone was trying to meet with them. So I think that's a fun kind of additive piece to that collaboration and I don't know many other launch Launchpads that have this collaboration with their Libraries, and they actually had an opportunity to talk about it with some of my colleagues at the global network, with other launch pads really encouraging them to look around their campus and leverage the people that can make their program even stronger. That the collaboration the partnership has just been a fantastic, additive experience for all of us, whether as professionals having an opportunity to partner, but also for the student experience and their learning.

Ram Batta

It sounds like you guys have met a lot of students doing this kind of mentorship. So what? What have you learned supporting these students and all their diverse ventures?

Erin Rowley

I think it's been really exciting to see how students in Engineering, but also in other academic departments utilize some of these specialized documents, like patents and standards. I worked in industry for a really long time before coming to UB and academia, and I saw firsthand how important patents and technical standards are in business and industry. And it's really been a wonderful opportunity to introduce students to these types of documents to entrepreneurs, especially because it can really help to support their venture ideas in the long run. And I think it's a great time for them to learn about these things while they're in school, and they don't have

to wait until they're out outside of school to to learn and try to learn on the fly. They can really learn in an environment that's supportive.

Carolyn Klotzbach-Russell

And that's a great point, Erin. I've always been extremely interested in the wide range of questions student entrepreneurs will ask us and just learning all the different ways that the Libraries can assist in this way. And I'm always like, I've helped find such an array of resources, so the information needs from...they range, from statistics on potential customers and market research. So that's kind of the standard ones that I would expect like book and author recommendations. So, you know, I'm interested in marketing. What, what authors should I be reading? Where can I find who's funding what so like looking at venture funding and kind of conducting some of that research has been big in some of the challenges, where and how to conduct customer surveys. So you're talking about primary and secondary market research here, too. And then even how best to format slide decks and the list kind of keeps going. Some students really just like to bounce ideas off of us too. They want to practice a pitch or get feedback. Maybe they ask, OK, how do I incorporate this data point I found in my slide deck? Or how do I cite this source in the presentation in appealing way so it's not awkward when I'm pitching my idea. And so every challenge with students is a unique and exciting, and I love learning about each one.

Ram Batta

That's, that's wonderful seeing so much support for the students. So Hadar, I know you mentioned that this is this partnership of the Libraries is actually kind of unique for Blackstone. How has it been beneficial for Blackstone working with the Libraries like this?

Hadar Borden

I always say to my colleagues in the Launchpad network, is that your librarians are not what you remember them to be from back in the days when they would encourage you to stay quiet in the libraries and stay focused. You know, again, just going back. This partnership has been tremendous. Our Launchpad is a start up itself on our campus. And so it really that this partnership allows us to expand the individuals that are supporting our students and that it just is a wonderful way to offer a kind of a holistic approach to supporting our students as they develop their venture. Again, we are here at a higher education institution. Our number one goal is to enrich our students experiences through learning and experiential learning opportunities. And I think that allowing our students to develop their ideas, pursuing their passions, but showing them how to leverage resources around them through the Libraries, through research, is so valuable. And again, having them engage with people from different disciplines and different departments again provides them that feeling that they are fully supported. When a student is pursuing an entrepreneurial journey, they need a lot of people to walk alongside them. And I think, I enjoy and live vicariously through our students. But it's

wonderful to have collaborators and colleagues like Caroline and Erin and so many other Librarians to help our students in that journey In fact, we felt this was such a fantastic experience for our students and for fellow directors of Launchpad sites that we had an opportunity. I think it was Rachel who was a fellow in the UB Libraries, and she had accepted a position at UC Riverside and there's a Blackstone launch pad at UC Riverside. And so we took the opportunity and connected Rachel with their Launchpad director, and they've since taken on and developed more of a partnership. So I think we have had a really positive experience that we're trying to promote it to our colleagues that they reach across the campus and add additional resources and value to the student experience.

Ram Batta

That's really wonderful and so much help for the students across all the different fields. So I know you, I know you mentioned that there's been a lot of events that Blackstone has held throughout the year and that mentorship has been offered. So my next question is what what were your favorite challenges or events this year?

Hadar Borden

So I'll say, you know, Startup Weekend, I think I mentioned it a little bit ago, but Startup Weekend was an intense, 54 hour experience for all of us, and it really helped us just, find those like transitional moments, the opportunity to connect and really think on how we could better support their students moving forward and how to how to collaborate and where some additional opportunities to partner on so Startup Weekend was just fun and just to see Erin and Carolyn in action and to see that competition between the students just told me that we were doing the right thing.

Carolyn Klotzbach-Russell

It's great. I had a blast at the Fintech challenge. So that's a financial technology. And so not only were students able to listen to some amazing speakers in the industry, but I also learned a great deal about the industry. So as I was compiling industry reports and listening to the speakers myself and participating as a mentor. I, myself grew as a professional in that way, and the fact that the industry is so new and ever changing made the challenge that much more interesting. And I think some of the student pitches were the best today in my humble opinion on that in terms of creativity and the drive they had in that challenge. And that might have been the one where we started doing the three-to-five-minute pitch. So, the libraries, because students pitch their ideas at the end of challenges, we decided to pitch our services to students. So, we came on for like three to five minutes and we had a quick slide deck to just grab students' attention. And because we're one of many speakers in these challenges and we want to be able to kind of meet students in a space and a level where they're familiar with and they know pitching. And so, it was fun to kind of get up and try to kind of sell ourselves to them in that way.

Erin Rowley

Yeah, I totally agree. And that was really fun. I...I really enjoyed that challenge, too, but I think my favorite one to date so far was the Inclusive Autonomous Vehicle Design Challenge held last summer, summer 2020. It was just a really unique experience. It was one that was done in partnership with Blackstone and also the School of Engineering and Applied Sciences. It was four weeks which I felt like was a little bit different in terms of it wasn't just a weekend event, but from my perspective, I've always been really interested in the autonomous vehicle research that the School of Engineering is doing. And I love the idea of making them more inclusive and accessible. And like you said, Carolyn, how creative the students got, what were being presented with that challenge and how they really took it on and invested themselves and came up with these really fantastic ideas. So that was really my favorite one.

Ram Batta

Well, speaking of creativity, this last year was challenging for all of us with COVID, and the move to virtual events really impacted the typical in-person experience that people get. So how did the Libraries and Blackstone deal with this, deal with the COVID problem and how did they learn to innovate around it?

Hadar Borden

Yeah. So, I think like everyone else, we embraced Zoom and learned all that we possibly could do with Zoom, but also, so we moved all of our events to a virtual platform. And really, I think it was it was a fun experience. A stressful at times, certainly. But what occurred was we were able to engage not only our students, but we've referenced the Inclusive Autonomous Vehicle Design Challenge, that was really our first foray into a virtual program. We engaged over a hundred and ten students in a summer program. We collaborated with faculty from School of Engineering and Applied Sciences from the Idea Center, that's part of the School of Architecture and Planning, and we leveraged all of our contacts to engage industry partners and mentors, both alumni and friends of the university, able to come into the experience and provide additional perspective to our students because it was a virtual experience, and we could bring people from all over the country and all over the world. So I think that that's been like the beauty. We also were able to leverage tools, communication tools, like Slack and Discord, meeting our students where they are at times with discord and challenging our own tech knowledge and experience. But leveraging these tools really allowed us to create a community outside of the traditional experience and see the interaction among the students. But we also, both Erin and Carolyn and others that collaborated, we're part of that community, so they weren't just pushing into a virtual workshop session. But they were there as a resource that students could access at any point during the competition.

Carolyn Klotzbach-Russell

Yeah, and actually, I loved being on Dischord too, because I had used it kind of in my personal life, but never on the professional end of everything. So that was a really fun experience. But by the time I actually came into my first challenge with Blackstone, the pandemic was upon us. So I actually have not been to an official in-person event. And while the virtual challenges worked extremely well, in my opinion, the, I think that as we transition back, I'm excited to get a feel for the the dynamic and the vibe of the in-person events as well. So looking forward to that one.

Erin Rowley

Yeah, I totally agree. Carolyn, I'm looking forward to it too and besides the IEEE entrepreneurship panel, I haven't been involved in an innovation sprint or other startup weekend in person either, so I think it'll be interesting to see from our side how we can transition back to doing things in person. But it's been. I thought it's gone as others have said, it is going really well because it's been great to bring in people from wherever they are happened to be physically sitting. It's really helped us, I think, challenge you and I, Carolyn, to think about how we can make it exciting on a computer screen and convey something like library research and library resources and make it exciting, but on a computer screen and connect and make it be meaningful. But yes, I'm absolutely excited to see how one goes in-person then too, as we move forward.

Ram Batta

Well, speaking of looking forward and moving back to in-person, how is the Libraries and the collaboration with Blackstone going to look like moving forward?

Hadar Borden

That's a great question. I think we're all trying to kind of think and reimagine how we all emerge and how we come back and support our students. I think, you know, as as we were preparing for this conversation, I was thinking back as to what we have been able to accomplish together, and we've been able to support a program called Inclusive Launch Foundry, which is a micro credential that Launchpad offers. And the Libraries have become more and more of a partner in delivering that program to our students. And both Carolyn and Erin have not only created specific workshops and experiences for students to kind of demonstrate their proficiency in gaining some of the skills but have shared with our students specifically their time in developing their ideas and response that we've talked about. Workshops that we've collaborate on design challenges, innovation sprints. I think we're just going to go deeper and, in our relationship, and our collaboration with different challenges. And as we continue to kind of cultivate this experience, I know that we're going to find many more spaces for us to to partner on.

Carolyn Klotzbach-Russell

I agree, I, I'm always excited when I see a new emerging industry or trend that I can share with our group. And I think that's one thing where we've seen kind of this collaboration move from reactive to proactive and like how we're a little bit more involved in the planning stages and contributing resources prior to just like that week of the challenge. And for example, I just read some interesting reports on two industries that I'm watching, which include the cannabis industry and the food tech industry. In food tech ranges from reducing food waste in grocery stores to creating new dairy substitutes. So that's something that we can, we can take on a larger scale. And so I've been really interested in kind of supporting Blackstone through those ways as well. And I think we're excited to be a part of any challenge that Blackstone has. So we're always excited to jump on and kind of tackle all of these challenges together as a UB community.

Erin Rowley

Absolutely. Well, said Carolyn.

Ram Batta

That's wonderful. You know, I think I'm really looking forward to seeing everyone back on campus and in person next semester and what that brings back to the world because I've sorely missed it. Well, I really want to thank you all for your time today, Hadar, Carolyn and Erin. It was really wonderful hearing from you about Blackstone and the Libraries, and especially about how the partnership has blossomed and grown over the last couple of years. So, I'd really like to thank you for the time, and I hope everyone enjoyed the interview.

Hadar Borden

Thanks so much Ram.

Ram Batta

Yeah, of course.

Omar Brown

We hope you enjoyed this episode of Libraries Out Loud. Stay tuned for our next look at the UB Libraries on campus.