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The Front Face of Library Services: How Student Employees Lead the Library at Grand Valley State University

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Introduction

Academic libraries have always been involved in student learning, but our profession has perhaps failed to recognize that the students who work for us every day are likely the ones we can impact the most. Librarians and library staff have a tremendous opportunity to contribute to the professional growth of the students they employ. Historically, academic libraries have defined student learning in terms of librarian instruction, collections, and providing study space. While these remain important aspects of what libraries do, student employees benefit from intentional, empowered roles and, in turn, libraries are enriched when student employees take on leadership roles.

When walking into the Mary Idema Pew Library at Grand Valley State University, students surround you. As you walk through the li-

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brary's main corridor, students are staffing the service desk on your right, and the Knowledge Market on your left is bustling with students engaged in peer consultations. Professional staff are not visible. To students entering the building for the first time, the immediate impression is that students are front and center within the facility. Placing students in these leadership roles visually cues student patrons that the space is theirs and encourages them to manage their own learning. Additionally, this model provides high-impact learning experiences for the student employees themselves and positions them to make significant contributions to the library.

Research consultants and user experience (UX) student assistants are the two groups of student employees that serve as the front face of library services in the Mary Idema Pew Library. UX students staff the single service desk, and research consultants provide one-on-one peer consultations in the Knowledge Market. Both groups perform high-level work not traditionally entrusted to student employees.

Background

Various components of Grand Valley State University's institutional mission, makeup, and culture, as well as the culture of the University Libraries, have contributed to the formation and the success of these student employee programs. Grand Valley State University is a Carnegie classification "Master's Large" university located near Grand Rapids, MI. Eighty-five percent of the university's 25,000 students are undergraduate students, and the university is a liberal education teaching institution. Grand Valley is student-centered, and the institution values informed risk-taking. The Dean of University Libraries, Lee Van Orsdel, describes the culture of the university as "confident and innovative" and has surmised that this gives library faculty and staff the confidence to try new initiatives, including those involving student employment.[1]

As a result of the university's makeup and culture, the library strives to be user-centered with a focus on undergraduate students. Students are the front face of library services in an effort to capture the benefits of peer learning[2] and to visually illustrate to student patrons that library space is their space. "For students, by students" is the way that we often think about library services and spaces. This thinking did not happen in a vacuum,

however, and was the result of a long discovery process that was tied intrinsically to the design process of the new library facility.

Grand Valley opened the Mary Idema Pew Library Learning and Information Commons in 2013. The new library has been called a model of twenty-first century learning and is a radically student-centered space.[3] Students are encouraged to manage their own learning—furniture is mobile and there are few rules or directives for the space. Prior to the design process that started in 2010, Dean VanOrsdel started to share her vision for creating a new kind of library using the analogy of a shopping mall. In shopping malls, students and young adults are highly self-directed and self-motivated, and this is all visually evident. Part of the library design process included adding elements that would encourage that kind of self-direction and self-motivation. The vision for the building included the notion of student empowerment. Over time, staff started applying that thinking about student empowerment to student employment. Throughout the new building design process, staff started to rethink not only library spaces, but also library services. Dean VanOrsdel suggests that the design process "allowed us to move beyond the patterns that we already knew."[4]

Prior to utilizing students as the front face of library services, University Libraries had already made several bold changes to library services and, in particular, to service desk staffing. By 2010, liaison librarians were no longer working regularly scheduled shifts at the service desk. This decision was based on statistical data that indicated that most service desk transactions did not require the assistance of a professional librarian.[5] This change allowed librarians to concentrate on instructional sessions and faculty outreach. From 2010 to 2013, full-time support staff took the lead at the service desk. When the Mary Idema Pew Library opened, UX students started to staff the service desk, supported primarily behind the scenes by support staff. While these changes were not always easy, the "why" behind them seemed to resonate with library faculty and staff and, over time, most library employees have come to see the value of a student-led service desk. By witnessing firsthand the benefits of peer learning and the high quality of service provided by student employees, staff received a powerful confirmation of the advantages of this service model.

During the design process, the library also identified that employers often seek skills that students may not be able to master in the traditional classroom setting, such as identifying and synthesizing relevant informa-

tion, writing clearly and concisely, and speaking persuasively. Grand Valley had a well-established Writing Center in a building housing the university's writing program, and the library envisioned bringing a second Writing Center location into the library, where it would be in the heart of campus, alongside consultants ready to assist students with presentations and library research. Providing one location in the library for students seeking assistance with their assignments would ensure that the services would be visible to students in all disciplines. This space would eventually be coined the "Knowledge Market."

Research Consultants

A central feature of the Mary Idema Pew Library is the Knowledge Market, a space for students to seek assistance in researching, writing, and delivering presentations, skills that employers desire and evaluate but are not always explicitly taught by classroom faculty.[6] The consultants are intentionally visible from the building's main entrance, and the space is open with a receptionist staffing a small counter instead of an imposing desk. The idea of the Knowledge Market was inspired by kiosks at shopping malls. Designed to surprise you with products and services you did not know you needed, kiosks provide an opportunity for serendipity, and the Knowledge Market is designed to do the same for students who might desire assistance with their assignments.

Peer consultants exist in a space that faculty cannot. Students and teachers operate in different discourse communities, and students often struggle to understand the language faculty use to describe assignments and provide feedback.[7] Additionally, regardless of the tone or approach taken by faculty, students are aware of the inherent authority imbalance between them. Peer consultants are able to exist between teachers and students, translating assignment instructions in a non-evaluative context.[8] If, as Bruffee posits in "Peer Tutoring and the Conversation of Mankind," becoming a member of a community is dependent on learning its discourse, and the ability of students to practice normal discourse is paramount to their success,[9] such a process can be made easier when fear of "looking stupid" is minimized.[10] Peer consultants can provide this safe space for students to learn the language and values of their academic communities through trial and error using the medium of conversation.

Writing and presentation support are offered by peer consultants at the Writing Center and Speech Lab, and the University Libraries employs twenty research consultants to offer a parallel service for research assistance.[11] Originally, the library had intended to utilize reference librarians in the Knowledge Market to work with students. However, the library had recently transitioned librarians away from the reference desk so they could focus more deeply in a liaison capacity, emphasizing outreach and targeted instruction.[12] That transition, combined with research on the benefits of peer learning, led the library to join the Speech Lab and Writing Center in offering an academic support service for students, by students in the Knowledge Market.[13]

Research consultants are highly trained,[14] primarily undergraduate students who meet one-on-one with other undergraduates to talk them through the research process. Students can make thirty- or fifty-minute appointments in advance or drop in for a thirty-minute consultation. The consultants work independently; librarians and professional staff are not present in the Knowledge Market. Professional support staff are available behind the service desk, but because the Knowledge Market is intended to be a safe space where students can feel vulnerable improving their discourse, there is no intrusive presence from librarians or professional staff by design.

Though consultants offer reference assistance, they do not replace librarians, both in the theoretical context mentioned previously and a practical one. Research consultants and librarians do not compete, for they are entirely different kinds of student support, and students manage their own learning experience by deciding what kind of support to request each time they seek it. Librarians offer targeted instruction and expert assistance in consultations, a fundamentally different kind of interaction than a peer conversation. The two kinds of assistance are complimentary and fluid; library services are designed so students can never make the wrong choice. A student can ask anyone—UX students, research consultants, librarians, and any other library staff—for help, and that person will find the resources the student needs. Sometimes those resources are other people.

Librarians work closely with the research consultants, mentoring them and providing a variety of training opportunities which, in turn, leads to referrals from research consultants. In fact, the number of librarian consultations has gone up since the research consultant program began in the

fall of 2012. We do not currently have a way to track whether students who meet with consultants and librarians overlap, but we suspect the consultants are acting as a gateway to library services for students who would be unlikely to request a meeting with a librarian. It is possible that consultants are easing such interactions by offering low-pressure consultations and referring to librarians regularly.

As part of the Instructional Services department of the library, research consultants are supervised by the Library Research Consultant Manager, who oversees the program and collaborates with directors of the Writing Center, Speech Lab, and newly-created Data Inquiry Lab. Successful administration of the programs requires harmony and consistency among the services. Knowledge Market consultants regularly pull in consultants from other services to assist when questions veer outside the scope of their work, so a unified vision and collaboration, including some shared trainings, are paramount to the Knowledge Market's successful operation. The consultants enjoy working together closely, and the collaboration reflects to students the recursive nature of the work happening in the Knowledge Market.

UX Students

The term *user experience* has become increasingly popular in libraries as well as the corporate sector and can be interpreted in a variety of ways. One definition is that user experience characterizes how a person feels about using a product, system, or service.[15] Aaron Schmidt and Amanda Etches state that "Ideally, all of your library's touch points—the places where your users come into contact with your library—will be aligned and well-designed. This means that creating a holistic and positive user experience includes designing great print materials, signs, customer service, facilities, reference workflows, programs, collections, and services."[16] We recognize that user experience should be holistic, and many faculty and staff within University Libraries are involved in some type of user experience-related work. Our User Experience Team, however, specifically focuses on frontline customer service and experiences within the physical library space.

Our Operations and User Services Department is the area traditionally known as Access Services. The department is split into two teams—the User Experience (UX) Team and the Access and Delivery (A&D) Team.

UX focuses on "front-of-the-house" services while A&D focuses on the "back-of-the-house" processes. The UX Team is led by the User Experience Librarian and is composed of four full-time support staff and twenty-five UX students. UX students report directly to one of the UX staff, and this staff member and the UX Librarian work collaboratively on student employee program elements. All UX staff and most of the A&D staff work regularly scheduled shifts at the "Perch," an area behind the service desk. When staff work at the Perch, they oversee the services provided by UX students and are available to help with difficult questions and situations, assist with training initiatives, answer telephone calls, and respond to text and chat questions. The service desk is open and staffed with UX students during all open library hours; currently, the library is open until 2:00 a.m. Sunday through Thursday and until 9:00 p.m. on Fridays and Saturdays. At least two staff members from the Operations and User Services Department are also typically in the building during all open library hours.

The primary function of the UX students is to staff the single service desk. They welcome patrons and answer a variety of directional, circulation, basic reference, and technology questions. At the service desk, they often serve as an entry point to library research services, answering basic reference questions and showing students how to get started searching, but also by promoting and referring students to research consultants or liaison librarians whenever it benefits the end-user.

The UX students also roam the library each hour, assisting patrons who may need help at the point of need, checking that everything in the building is running smoothly from an operational standpoint, and collecting data on how students are using library space. Additionally, UX students conduct building tours, often for high-profile visitors from educational institutions and corporations from around the world. UX students also occasionally assist with user experience research techniques. For example, two UX students assisted with conducting wayfinding usability tests that were implemented in order to better understand how our digital displays were being used by students. Another UX student worked with the User Experience Librarian to conduct ethnographic touchpoint tours aimed at understanding student perception of library space.

By helping fellow students with their various needs at the service desk, UX students engage in peer learning. Whether it involves demonstrating how to print, how to search for a particular article, or how to find a book

in the stacks, UX students often share knowledge with their peers. UX students who have worked for multiple semesters are also involved with various components of the training plan, giving them opportunities to help orient, train, and informally mentor new UX students.[17]

Recruitment and Hiring

Setting high expectations for our student employees begins with the recruitment process. Job advertisements and interviews are as much a time for prospective student employees to learn about the work and library culture as they are a time for employers to evaluate candidates. We think carefully about what we want to convey to candidates in our job advertisements and interview questions and devise them accordingly. Unlike many libraries, GVSU is not limited to hiring only work-study students, and typically only a small percentage of UX students and research consultants have awards. Regardless of any library's applicant pool, a deliberate hiring and recruitment process can benefit both the library and prospective hires.

To begin setting high expectations, the research consultant's job application is rigorous. Modeled after the GVSU Writing Center's application, it requires responses to scenario questions, two writing samples with research, and a faculty recommendation. The time and energy investment needed to complete the application filters those who are not motivated, and the rigor makes it clear that we are looking for academically focused students who are serious about research. Similarly, the UX students also go through an elevated application process, including an application with scenario questions and a required letter of recommendation.[18]

We also involve the UX students and research consultants in the hiring process which, in addition to being a learning opportunity for the student employees themselves, demonstrates to candidates that we regard the student employees as professionals with valuable perspectives. Hiring managers and student employees use rubrics to evaluate applications, and the research consultants also complete training on inclusive hiring practices before participating. Because student employees have a different perspective than program managers, their input has been quite helpful.

Student employees also participate in candidate interviews. The research consultants review and assist with revising the interview questions each year, and they also ask half of the questions during the interviews.

They complete an evaluation sheet during every interview, and their comments and recommendations for hire are weighted heavily by the Library Research Consultant Manager when making hiring decisions. The UX Team uses a similar process, and former UX students have indicated that participating in the interviews was a valuable experience. For candidates, learning about the jobs from student employees during the interviews introduces the concept of peer learning and the value we place on peer mentoring relationships. This method also conveys that student employees have some ownership of the work: student employees help to shape the programs and are invested in their success and future as a result.

Being thoughtful about what messages our application materials convey and how we utilize student employees during the hiring process ensures that we are selecting highly motivated, serious students with the potential to become leaders on campus. The rigor and behavior modeled by student employees during the process also sets expectations of professionalism for candidates selected for hire, changing our work during orientation from setting expectations to reinforcing them, a more manageable objective.

Contributions to the Library

The library has benefited greatly from having students play a leadership role as the front face of library services. Empowering student employees has given them a feeling of ownership toward the library, making them natural ambassadors among their peers. Their work has also helped the library demonstrate its value to the campus in new ways and has created extra time for faculty and staff, resulting in new library endeavors and, ultimately, positive publicity for the university.

Student patrons view the library as their space, and the visibility of student employees appears to have contributed to this perspective. The library has become an extremely popular place on campus; more than one million people visit the library per academic year, and 600–900 students are often in the building at once. Students are empowered here: they regularly move furniture and modify the environment to fit their own needs. While this is undoubtedly due to a number of factors, it seems that putting students in highly visible leadership roles has made an impact. "From the beginning, we intended that the building would be theirs," Dean VanOrsdel said. "We wanted both the building and its programs to be radically student-cen-

tered, and we have been true to our word. I don't know how we can get much more radical than to put students in charge of our main services on the floor of the library. I think that speaks volumes about our confidence in their ability, their need to manage their own learning environments, their ability to help one another, and the social nature of learning."[19]

One unexpected result of implementing this service model is that these students serve as a built-in marketing tool. Our student employees are wonderful ambassadors of the library to their fellow students, and they frequently promote the library and library services as they go about their own campus experiences. We have often witnessed the power of peer-to-peer endorsements. For example, student patrons have commented during focus groups that they learned about the library through their friends and often through connections with library student employees. Employing a greater number of students, empowering student workers so that they have a sense of pride in their work and in the library, and ensuring that their training includes a deep understanding of library services and resources helps promote positive messages about the library to the rest of the campus community.

In addition to serving the library by promoting the library among their peer groups, UX students are in a position to provide valuable feedback on library policies, services, and spaces. They are constantly observing what is happening in the building, and they routinely share what they think works well and what could be improved. Their perspectives and experiences as students are different from those of library employees, and they often provide unique and valuable insights on a wide range of issues.

We can also demonstrate to the campus community that the library directly impacts student learning in an unexpected way: these student employment opportunities themselves are learning experiences that help our students gain professional skills that they are unlikely to learn in the classroom. Sharing these insights with campus faculty and administrators can be useful for library advocacy efforts.

The data we gather from research consultations is also used to demonstrate the impact that the library has on students. In addition to the obvious benefits of students talking through their research process, data recorded during consultations suggests that students are reassured by their interactions with research consultants. Each consultation ends with a short survey asking whether students felt comfortable, found the consultation helpful,

and feel more confident going forward. The data indicates that 98 percent of students feel more confident about completing their assignment after working with a research consultant. This measure is a specific way that the library can demonstrate its relevance and value to the campus community.

The campus has also noticed that the library is engaged in new kinds of interesting work, which is only possible because the work of student employees has allowed library faculty and staff to focus their time on other initiatives. Since moving away from the reference desk, liaison librarians now have more time for instructional sessions and to support faculty in their areas of responsibility. The Operations and User Services staff members also have time to devote to new projects and initiatives as a result of the work of the UX students at the service desk. For example, the Mary Idema Pew Library includes event space, and UX staff started coordinating and assisting with event support when the new library opened. The team assists with approximately 200 educational events each academic year. These events support campus-wide values and would not be possible without UX staff being able to devote some of their time to this type of work.

Our UX students have also helped us understand how students use the library by collecting space usage data on their hourly roams. This information has been valuable for a variety of purposes, including policy decisions, decisions on when and where events and special activities should be hosted within the library, and in helping to determine how to best utilize space. UX students staffing the service desk has also given staff the time necessary to implement various research techniques aimed at better understanding how students perceive library space. For example, we recently conducted cognitive mapping with student patrons, during which we asked students to draw maps of the library and then explain their maps. We gained valuable insights pertaining to how students describe library space, their familiarity with individual spaces and services, and why they tend to gravitate to particular areas. This also helped us to identify possible marketing opportunities. If our UX staff spent all of their time at the service desk, projects like this would not be possible.

One risk of experimenting with such a radical service model is that we could not guarantee that this model would positively impact satisfaction among library users. However, anecdotal as well as quantitative data indicate that the campus community is more satisfied than ever before with library services. Students, faculty, staff, and community members alike

have made many positive comments about the service they have received from student employees, and their service has even been highlighted in the student newspaper. Additionally, the library conducted the national LibQUAL+ Lite survey[*] in 2015 and received higher scores in the Affect of Service dimension than in previous surveys when professional staff were at the service desk. In particular, we scored higher in the "Employees with knowledge to answer questions" category, indicating that our UX students are answering questions satisfactorily. While there could be a number of factors involved in these scores, we view this as a preliminary positive affirmation that the model is working.

Finally, our approach to student employment has also helped the library earn awards which have ultimately resulted in positive publicity for the university. For example, University Libraries received the Michigan State Librarian's Excellence Award in 2014, which is an award for a library of any type that exemplifies excellence in customer service. In the award application, we highlighted our approach to student employment and, specifically, our research consultants and UX students. Our student workers were undoubtedly part of the reason that University Libraries won this award, and the university received positive publicity as a result.

Benefits to Student Employees

Empowered student employees become better students and are more prepared for life after graduation. The information they learn and skills they develop while working front and center in the library go beyond what student employees gain from traditional roles in academic libraries. In addition to the skills they could learn at any job—punctuality, honesty, time management—empowered library student employees develop transferable skill sets in addition to professional poise.

Research consultants and UX student assistants have an advantage as students on campus. Because their work involves helping others with research and answering questions about campus resources, they have a solid grasp of information that we struggle to share with every individual student on campus. Library student employees know about opportunities for undergraduate research, who to ask for assistance with fellowship appli-

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[*] "LibQUAL+," *Association of Research Libraries*, accessed January 8, 2016, https://www .libqual.org/home.

cations, resources provided by the Office of Multicultural Affairs and the LGBT Resource Center, and numerous campus events that could expand their worldview outside of their own discipline. They are also trained and practiced in reference interviews and search strategies, and they have an awareness of library collections that many students lack. A significant portion of their work is informing others, and the foundation of knowledge required to do that benefits student employees academically.

Complex work provides an opportunity for student employees to develop skills that will transfer to any career. For research consultants, learning how to ask strategic questions to solve miscommunications is a skill useful in any future position. Consultants also hone the skill to apply familiar methodology to unfamiliar disciplines and bridge communication gaps. Consultants learn how to read others and gain strategies to help those feeling disappointment, embarrassment, and apprehension. They also practice turning emotional conversations into productive ones, a skill that has the potential to be useful in a variety of future endeavors.

UX students develop a slightly different skill set, gaining customer service skills and valuable experience in a fast-paced service environment. The user-centered philosophy that the department advocates is applicable in a variety of settings. UX students cultivate observational skills and get practice offering solutions for the pain points that they discover. They are also involved in UX research, such as usability testing, and practicing methodical research and analysis teaches them useful problem solving skills. UX students also have regular opportunities to interact with highly accomplished professionals, giving tours to senators, CEOs, and government officials from other countries. Dean VanOrsdel recalled an anecdote about a student employee who answered questions in a meeting with officials from the Russian Ministry of Education. She noted, "The student didn't hesitate to make a comment. He didn't blink. We've seen students do that over and over again. We're either just hiring really poised students, or we're hiring good students whom we have given a chance to become poised in the face of interest in the building."[20]

The student employees also recognize the benefits of these experiences. At the end of their employment, UX students are given an anonymous exit survey that asks them to reflect upon their employment and how they see their experiences being relevant to their future careers. Students often indicate that their face-to-face communication skills have improved as a result

of their employment. One student wrote, "Working with executives when giving tours has benefited me in so many ways. Being able to communicate and carry myself in a professional manner is truly a remarkable experience and characteristic to possess." The level of professionalism that UX students are expected to maintain will likely benefit them in any future profession.

Research consultants offer similar comments when asked about what they have gained while working for the University Libraries. One consultant encourages other students to apply for the job by saying, "Not only do you get to help fellow students feel better about their research abilities, you also continuously hone your own skills and become much more effective with research, communication, and collaboration." The consultants understand the impact they have on students and they see how their contributions affect the library, but they sometimes struggle to fully connect their activities to graduate work or future employment in different fields. To guide them through this thought process, consultants participate in a résumé workshop each year so they can break down what they have learned on the job and how those skills can translate to their future endeavors.

Conclusion

Although we felt confident about some aspects of this new student employment model during the design phase, in many ways it was an experiment that we are still adjusting and evaluating. Broad support for these student employment groups did not happen overnight, but developed over time as library faculty and staff observed the tangible benefits of this approach. Throughout our journey, we have made a few large changes, such as the administrative structure of the research consultant program, and we have made slight modifications to the daily work of our students, our recruiting and hiring methods, training plans, and our communication strategies. We anticipate that this work will never be finished. We will continue to identify ways to improve this service model, and we must be vigilant and responsive to changing needs on campus.

What we believe to be most successful is the abandonment of our preconceived ideas about what student employees are capable of accomplishing. Being imaginative about new ways to approach student learning and keeping an open mind about the possibilities of what roles could be given to students allowed us to push beyond the limits of tradition. We put our

faith in the students, trusting that they would meet our raised expectations. They have.

We are not advocating for all libraries to replicate our model. These particular student employment groups will not work everywhere; in fact, we use a different service desk model at two other library locations because they serve different student populations with unique needs and, frankly, this model is a costly way of doing business. However, we do believe that thinking intentionally about student employees as leaders has value in every academic library. The possibilities for student contributions extend far beyond the boundaries of what are traditionally seen as the role of student employees.

Reflective Activity

While adopting GVSU's particular model of student employment may not make sense for many institutions, reconsidering the role of student employees and moving to a model that emphasizes student learning and leadership can benefit all academic libraries. To begin thinking about potential roles for your student employees, consider the following questions:

- Why does your library exist?
- Why do you employ students?
- What do your student employees learn throughout their employment experience?
- What are the current campus needs that your library could meet?
- How could student employees help the library to meet those needs?

Whether you have identified opportunities for a new student employment group or want to enhance existing student roles and practices, consider the following questions:

- What do you want prospective student employees to know about your library and the position?
- What skills do you need to identify throughout the hiring process?
- What will new student employees need to learn to accomplish their work?
- What elements could be included in a comprehensive training plan?
- What other learning opportunities could students be given along the way?
- How could you assess your training plan?
- How could you measure success for this student employment group?

Notes

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3. Pete Daly, "Newsmaker of the Year: GVSU Adds to its Facilities in Allendale and Downtown," *Grand Rapids Business Journal* (Grand Rapids, MI), Jan 17, 2012.
4. Lee VanOrsdel in interview with authors.
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7. Harris, *College English*, 36–40.
8. Ibid., 38.
9. Bruffee, "Collaborative Learning and the 'Conversation of Mankind,'" 211–213.
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12. Sheehan, "Re-Inventing Reference," 385.
13. Mary O'Kelly, *portal: Libraries and the Academy*, 165.
14. Mary O'Kelly, "Research Consultants at Grand Valley State University: Developing Intentional Peer Support," in *Training Research Consultants: A Guide for Academic Libraries*, ed. Mary O'Kelly (Chicago, IL: Association of College and Research Libraries, forthcoming).
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16. Ibid., 2.
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18. Ibid.
19. Lee VanOrsdel in interview with authors.
20. Lee VanOrsdel in interview with authors.

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