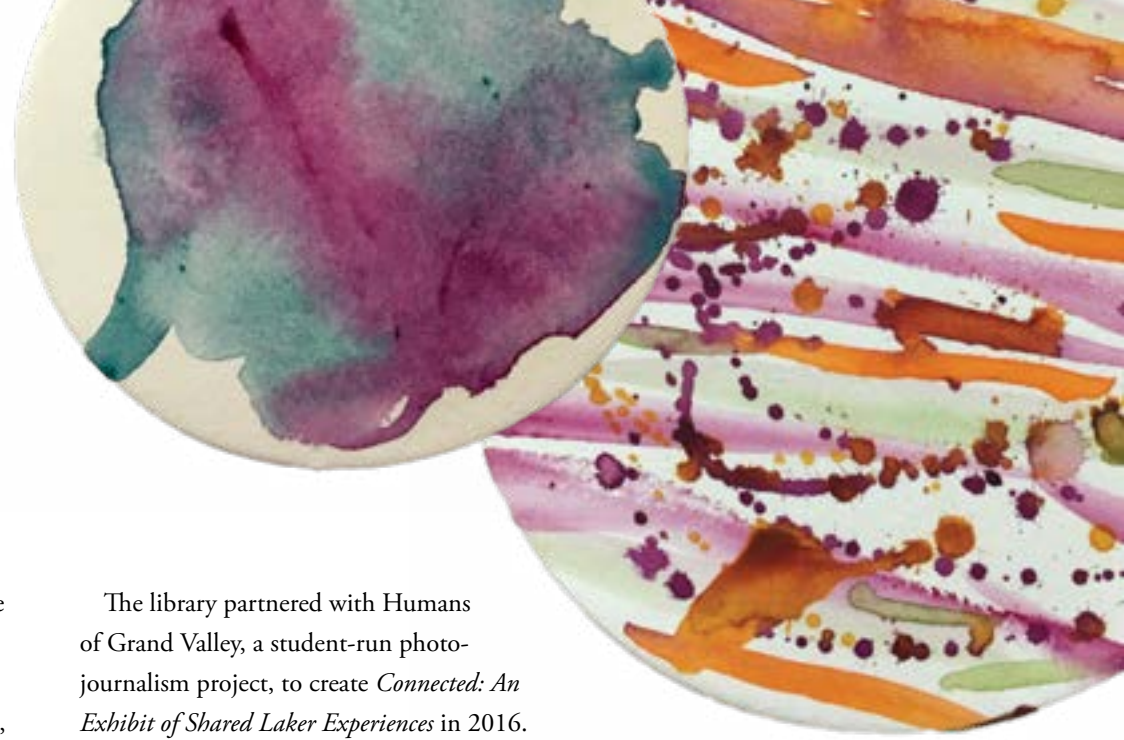


Exhibits Aim to Welcome and Connect New Students to Grand Valley





Each August the Exhibition Space in the Mary Idema Pew Library Learning and Information Commons transforms into a playful and participatory environment, presenting novel exhibits that aim to foster a greater sense of community among students. These exhibits help lessen common feelings of homesickness and loneliness while strengthening the Grand Valley State University family.

In August 2017, *Tied Together* invited students to contribute to a campus-wide string art project. Visitors were asked five different questions: “Who are you?” “How did you get here?” “What motivates you?” “Why Grand Valley?” and “What can we accomplish together?” Participants answered the questions by tying yarn around labeled pegs. With each new contribution, the installation became more complex and colorful. Some of the most popular words included: hope, family, and friend. By the time the exhibit ended, so many students had contributed that the words were mostly obscured by string.

Visitors were also invited to provide feedback by anonymously detailing how the exhibit impacted their observations about themselves and their community. One student said, “Working together creates a world of opportunity.” Another student commented, “Participation is key.” And yet another said, “There is much more that connects us than divides us.”

The library partnered with Humans of Grand Valley, a student-run photo-journalism project, to create *Connected: An Exhibit of Shared Laker Experiences* in 2016. The exhibit showcased authentic student stories in a variety of formats. Humans of Grand Valley collected street-style interviews; Grand Valley State University alumna Ellie Lubbers created captivating watercolor portraits that accompanied the interview text. Ten additional students shared their stories on tape, and visitors could listen to the audio recordings via iPads mounted in the gallery.

The *Connected* exhibit also included a temporary mural. To participate, visitors were invited to paint paper circles with colors that corresponded to the emotions they were feeling at the start of the term. A color wheel assigned specific colors to certain emotions—grateful, overwhelmed, and lonely were a few of the options.

More than three hundred students contributed to the mural, and the response was overwhelmingly positive. A comment box was available for students to provide anonymous feedback. One student said, “Thank you so much for bringing this here. It was a great outlet to silently release my emotions creatively.” Another student commented, “I can’t help but reflect, embrace, and connect with my feelings and the feelings of fellow Lakers. After hours of studying, this was the best way for me

to relax and know there are so many others feeling the same!”

University Libraries’ efforts to positively impact student well-being through participatory exhibits began in 2015. “Take a letter, leave a letter, send a letter” was the tag line for the inaugural exhibit, titled *Letters for Lakers*. Hundreds of envelopes hung on the gallery walls. Each envelope contained a letter written by a Grand Valley faculty, student, or staff member sharing advice or encouragement for new students. Postcards with Laker-themed illustrations were given out so students could write home or send a note to a friend far away. The exhibit also included an activity where students could write a letter to their future self. Approximately 150 students participated in this component of the exhibit. The letters were emailed back to students at the end of the semester.

University Libraries faculty and staff have already begun brainstorming possibilities for the 2018 iteration of this series. The goals remain stable, yet the ways in which the exhibit captivates and involves new students change each year.