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# “Flip This House”: “Back of the House” Library Staff Engaging the Wider Campus Community

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## Abstract

Procuring and describing content for discoverability are as important now as they ever have been, but we suggest that a successful organization should expect more from faculty and staff members. As technical skill sets become more in demand, “back of the house” staff need to step to the front. In this article we explore how two Grand Valley State University Libraries back of the house departments have partnered with other organizations on campus. Collaboration has reenergized the staff, raised the Libraries’s profile, and contributed to the Libraries’s overall success.

Traditionally “back of the house” staff work exclusively behind the scenes to grow and support the collections of the library. Even the term itself indicates, “back of the house” staff should remain behind closed doors, working on tasks that, while important, are not easily identifiable to library users. Procuring and describing content for discoverability are as important now as it they ever have been, but a successful organization should expect faculty and staff to do more. As technical skill sets become more in demand campus-wide, the “back of the house” staff are presented with opportunities to step to the front. Two Grand Valley State University (GVSU) Libraries departments typically considered back of the house have partnered with other entities on campus, providing services that are otherwise unavailable. The experiences of these staff members have demonstrated a growing need for back of the house staff to engage with the campus community. Flipping the house by getting these staff members more widely involved has reenergized the staff, raised the Libraries’s profile, and contributed to the Libraries’s overall success.

Having back of the house staff spend time on outreach isn’t a new idea. A 2011 article from Toce and Schofield discusses the value of all library departments providing services that integrate them into the wider campus community and help make the library indispensable. They point out that outreach is traditionally the responsibility of public services departments and

instruction librarians, but that technical services departments have unique skills that can lend themselves to other areas on campus. GVSU Libraries firmly believe that Toce and Schofield were correct in their thinking that all library departments can provide service. Through both deliberate partnerships and chance encounters the GVSU Libraries have taken advantage of outreach opportunities. At the GVSU Libraries the Research and Instruction division is primarily responsible for outreach to both faculty and students. They do an excellent job working with the campus community and have done noteworthy work in showcasing the importance of the Libraries. The Knowledge Access and Resource Management Department (KARMS; formerly the Technical Services Department) and the Systems and Technology Department have also begun reaching out and providing services to the campus. This not only has increased the profile of the Libraries, but also has provided additional support around campus for library-provided services.

If Toce and Schofield got it right in 2011, why, in 2015, are so many back of the house departments still solely focused on library-centric tasks? GVSU Libraries found themselves asking these questions in 2012. This thinking led the entire Technology and Information Services (TIS) division to rethink its workflows and approach to providing services. Carlos Rodriguez, Associate Dean of TIS, challenged every staff member in the division to

reexamine their workloads, shifting the focus from task to reason. Why do we catalog material? Why do we have circulation limits. Who is the primary user of our library tools? The resulting changes weren't sweeping, and the division is still responsible for all traditional back of the house functions. The impact was a shift in focus from the task to the patron. Through this focus on the patron it began to become clear that TIS had some services they could offer to other departments at GVSU.

One of the early attempts at tweaking the KARMS team was to add more direct contact with the University community. This was accomplished by a cross-training program with the Operations and User Services team. GVSU Libraries have one service point in the library, handling circulation, reference, and general questions of all kinds. The service point is primarily staffed by student workers, but at all times there is a staff member at the "perching station." This station is within sightline of the service point, and the staff person there is responsible for overseeing the service point and stepping in for more complex requests. The staff member at the perching station also answers chat questions as they come into the library. Six members of the KARMS team began working the service point between two and four hours each week.

There are quite a few benefits to this arrangement. The main benefit has been allowing back of the house staff direct contact with our patrons. When you spend the majority of your time cataloging books, tracking down rush acquisitions, and maintaining and troubleshooting electronic resources, it can be easy to forget the why behind any of those tasks. You can easily begin to focus on the task at hand and lose sight of the reason we do any of that work: supporting the needs of our patrons. Interacting with the patrons just a few hours a week keeps the "why" fresh in their minds. Dealing with patrons face to face and seeing how KARMS work impacts these patrons and keeps the staff motivated to do the best job they can.

Quite a few other benefits also come from this arrangement. While the KARMS team covers between 10 and 20 hours a week of perch station

time, the operations team is able to get some work of their own done, further removed from the hustle and bustle, focusing on jobs that require less distraction to do well. The KARMS team members get a change of pace for that little bit of time each day. We have worked really hard for our teams to not be isolated, but still the majority of our work is behind closed doors, focused intently on the computer. Benefits that we didn't anticipate became clear early on. Two of the KARMS team members working the service point are responsible for electronic resource management. While working, they quickly realized as electronic resource questions came to the desk that student employees around would hear them answer questions and frequently say things like "Oh . . . I didn't know that." The same is true for our cataloger, government document specialist, and journal specialist. There are questions that come up where the KARMS team is the most qualified in the organization to answer. We have learned that having them at the service desk creates teachable moments for the student workers.

Other examples of encouraging the KARMS staff to get involved follow similar lines. Two members of the teams are inclusion advocates at GVSU. This roll requires training from Human Resources, and every search committee on campus must have an inclusion advocate. Inclusion advocates are part of a search committee with the added roll of making sure that GVSU creates an environment that values differences across all dimensions of diversity. The KARMS inclusion advocates are therefore on multiple search committees, bringing that expertise to the process, but also exposing them to all types of jobs that the Libraries hire for.

GVSU has received a lot of press in recent years for the Mary Idema Pew Library Learning and Information Commons, which opened in June 2013. This state of the art library is beautiful and unique. Over two years into the new building we still have requests for tours on a regular basis. Several members of the KARMS team have undergone our internal training and serve as tour guides at special events. This is yet another opportunity to get out of the back of the house and interact directly with patrons of the Libraries.

These types of opportunities have benefited the Libraries in a number of ways. The KARMS team is noticeably more comfortable interacting directly with our students, faculty, and staff at GVSU. They bring a very unique set of skills out and about with them, being able to offer their knowledge to better the campus community.

Not all of the services provided by the traditional technical services teams are new ideas, or even new workflows. GVSU, like many academic institutions, has many small departmental libraries. These libraries aren't managed by the Libraries, and these collections are often housed in specific departmental locations across the campus. By simply incorporating this material into standing workflows, the back of the house staff can increase the discoverability of this material exponentially. The KARMS team at GVSU Libraries works with the Office of Undergraduate Research and Scholarship, the Women's Center, the LGBT Resource Center, the Faculty Teaching and Learning Center, the Office of Student life, and the Annis Water Resource Institute. Services offered to these units easily fit into the day-to-day work of the KARMS department. Each departmental library received a location code in the Library Management System (LMS) and then each department collection was cataloged into the LMS. Material included traditional monographs and serials, but also more unique items such as poster tubes and sound recorders have been added to the library catalog. Each location was able to work with the Libraries to determine if they would loan their material and what those loan rules would be. In more than one case the Libraries installed a version of its LMS on a departmental computer, allowing for circulation. With a relatively small outlay of time needed to get the initial collections ingested, the workload has settled into routine. Each department sends over materials as they acquire them, everything from one book at a time to a box of journals at the end of the semester. The KARMS staff processes the material into the collection and returns the material to the specific department. Now these collections can be searched as part of the Libraries collection as well as limited to each location. Furthermore, this material is included in the information sent to the Libraries discovery service.

For example, a patron can limit a search using the Libraries's discovery service to just find material owned and located at the LGBT Resource Center.

Possibly the biggest single example of outreach has been the development and hiring of the Metadata and Digital Curation Librarian. GVSU added this new position to the KARMS team about five years ago. Looking at the job description, one sees responsibilities that they would expect from a Cataloging Librarian:

- Tracks developments in metadata schemas and leads the ongoing development and implementation of metadata standards and best practices within the Libraries and across the University.
- Develops best practices for authority control for access points and provides resolution for heading conflicts in the Libraries' catalog (Sierra), institutional repository (Digital Commons), and digital collection management and preservation system (Preservica).

But the intention of this position was to be much more than a standard cataloging position. This position also

- Assists in setting policies, priorities, and practices for the production, management, and preservation of digital content.
- Collaborates with the Scholarly Communications Outreach Coordinator, Digital Initiatives Librarian, Liaison Librarians, and faculty and academic units outside of the library to determine faculty data service needs; and provides advice on the organization and description of research data produced.
- Collaborates with the Scholarly Communications Outreach Coordinator, Digital Initiatives Librarian, Liaison Librarians, and faculty and academic units outside of the library to assist in writing data management plans for grant applications to ensure usability, preservation, and access.

More than five years ago Carlos Rodriguez, associate dean of technology and information services, recognized that researchers on campus were frequently being required to make long-term preservation and access plans for the data collected during research. The University didn't have a department providing the knowledge and support to assist these researchers with data management plans. Today the metadata and digital curation librarian spends a good deal of time consulting with departments and researchers about their data management needs. While still providing the cataloging expertise to the library, this position doesn't have daily cataloging responsibilities, spending more and more time working outside of the Libraries.

Outreach opportunities also exist for Libraries systems departments. Traditionally these departments have focused on supporting Libraries software, managing the content on the Libraries website, and providing technical support to Libraries faculty and staff. While GVSU's systems and technology department's primary responsibilities are internal to the Libraries, we've also begun to work with those outside of the Libraries to provide services and support. This has affected every member of the team and has really impacted how the Libraries are viewed by external departments.

Sometimes opportunities are the result of initiatives started within the systems department. Our digital initiatives librarian was interested in developing a quest based game that could help introduce students to the new library. This started with small discussions within the department and was eventually funded through the Libraries's emerging technology fund, as a pilot. Partnering with a local development company, YETi CGI, a mobile platform was developed that allowed users to complete quests that introduced them to library services, taught them how to find materials, and oriented them to physical spaces in the new library. This was a new role for the systems department as working directly with students is usually left to the public services department and the liaison librarians. After running a successful pilot test, it was decided to work with YETi to further develop LibraryQuest to

include more features. More importantly, it was also decided to try and work some information literacy skills into some of the quests. This is very much outside of the scope of our department and required the formation of an internal partnership with the research & instruction division. This group helps inform and develop appropriate information literacy focused tasks for users to complete. This has been very beneficial in helping us better understand the work each department does, which is crucial as we work to support and collaborate with each other.

Another opportunity came about through the building of the new Mary Idema Pew Library. During the planning phase of the library all agreed on the idea that the library should be a place where discovery and creations should both occur. As a result it was determined that the library needed a space where the newest tools and technologies could be available to help students create. Through a partnership with the information technology department, the Atomic Object Technology Showcase was built. Eric Kunnen, the associate director of e-learning and emerging technologies, describes the Technology Showcase as "an immersive and engaging environment for faculty, staff, and students to interact, discover, learn, and share how innovative emerging technologies can enhance teaching and improve student learning" (2015). Though managed and primarily funded by the IT department, the library plays a key role in the Technology Showcase. One of the key technologies in the Technology Showcase is 3D printing, which the library funds, providing free campus-wide access. 3D printing and the other resources available allow us to reach a different group of students than we would through traditional methods. In addition, this has also strengthened our working relationship with the IT department and has allowed us to explore more opportunities to work together.

Another outreach opportunity that arose because of needed expertise is our assistance in website critiques. The GVSU Libraries is always focused on improving our online presence. This is something the Libraries can do but many departments cannot do, as they don't have the staff to do it.

The majority of departments have administrative assistants, support staff, or even student employees manage the content on their websites as part of their jobs; the Libraries are fortunate enough to have a full-time faculty member focus solely on web interfaces. In 2010 the GVSU Libraries hired a new web services librarian who brought a real passion for user experience and usability. Immediately a website usability testing program was implemented and gradual changes that responded to user needs were made. This user-friendly website has caught the attention of other departments on campus. One of the departments that noticed the improvement on the Libraries website was the institutional marketing department. This department oversees all campus websites, built GVSU's content management system, and works with departments to improve their websites. One way they do this is through sessions with departmental website managers, to come and get their websites critiqued. As they noticed the Libraries's website improve, they asked our web services librarian to begin to partner with them at these website critiques. This provided opportunities to showcase the Libraries's expertise, meet and network with other departments, and help students. This also strengthened our relationship with institutional marketing, which in turn has given us more freedom on our website and has also allowed us to influence website policies on campus, such as the move to responsive web design.

Providing services to students no matter their location is something that the Libraries have always done. Whether this means reference services over the phone, e-mail, or online chat, the Libraries are always looking for ways to meet student needs. In the past few years GVSU has seen an influx of nontraditional students and an increase in the number of online courses. The result is that departments that have traditionally served students in a face-to-face capacity are now looking for ways to provide virtual services. In 2013 the Libraries were contacted by the registrar's office about what service we used to provide chat reference. After a brief discussion on who provided our service, the Libraries agreed to contact the vendor and see what it would cost to add another department. If the registrar wanted

the full suite of services it would cost them the same as the initial instance has cost the library Libraries. If they were willing to just have a separate chat widget and no additional functionality, it would cost them nothing and the registrar could be added to the Libraries's instance. This was great news to the registrar's office, as they just wanted a trial of the service. The Libraries agreed to help the registrar's office set up the service, train them on some best practices regarding chat services, and provide usage reports at the end of each semester. After the first semester the registrar's office declared the trial a success and expanded the number of staff they had monitoring chat as their virtual questions began to increase and in person visits began to decrease. Shortly after the end of the registrar's trial period the College of Health Professions contacted us about chat services as well. They had spoken with the registrar's office about the service and were wondering if it could be expanded to their office as well. We agreed to provide the same services. The introduction of chat to these departments has been beneficial to all parties involved. The departments get training, reports, and so on without a new system to manage and can reach their students in a new way. The Libraries get to determine which interface is used, giving us control of the look and feel of the interface. In addition, students now have the same user experience with chat service across multiple departments.

Another outreach opportunity to highlight is the Hack Your Campus event that the Libraries hosted and coplanned with various departments on campus. This event was similar to other events held around university campuses where students are asked to submit ideas on how to improve the student experience. The top ideas, selected by judges, were invited to present on their idea and show a plan for how the idea could be implemented. The Libraries's role in this event was coordinating and planning the event, hosting the event, and providing some of the prize money. That's a lot of involvement in something that we really have no expertise in. What we are interested in is innovation and helping students generate, develop, and implement ideas. For this event our digital initiatives librarian worked with

the Libraries' liaison to the School of Business, the Center for Entrepreneurship and Innovation, campus dining, university promotions, the provost's office, and others to put on an event that encouraged students to think creatively. This improved the image of the Libraries among the students who participated and helped us create partnerships with other departments. The relationships built during the experience have already resulted in smoother communication when working on other programs and promotions.

Outreach and campus engagement are increasingly important for keeping the Libraries relevant moving forward. The public services arm of the Libraries is already great at doing this,

especially as related to library services, instruction, and work with the classroom faculty. The growth opportunity is in back of the house departments finding ways to contribute as well. Our technical skills and ability to manage, describe, and organize large sets of data are not common in most departments on campus, showing the larger campus community and, more importantly, the campus administration our value is vital as budgets continue to get tighter. Many staff are very open to this idea of working with others, but the Libraries need to find a way to allow them to work it into their normal workflows. Supporting the collections and systems of the Libraries will always be the focus of back of the house teams, but outreach and collaboration should also be a priority.

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