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**Rescoping research through student-librarian collaboration:
Lessons from the Fondren Fellows program**

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Academic library professionals increasingly see student workers as full coparticipants in the design and delivery of library resources and services. For some librarians, this perspective grows out of a commitment to critical and feminist pedagogy,¹ while for others, greater reliance on student workers in the face of flat or contracting budgets has led to the pragmatic realization that “the skills of student workers could be leveraged to advance the library in unexpected and invaluable ways.”² This article examines how collaboration with students can take librarian-initiated research in new directions, drawing on the experiences of the coauthors (a library staff member and a graduate student) as part of the Fondren Fellows program at Rice University’s Fondren Library.

Modeled after a similar program at Vanderbilt University, the Fondren Fellows program supports student research that stands to benefit both the library and the broader scholarly community. Students are selected as Fellows through a competitive application process and, over the course of a semester, work on a specific project initially proposed by a library staff mentor. Since the program’s inception in 2016, Fellows have produced deliverables including a digital map of an underutilized archival collection, a white paper

on campus research data management needs, and a set of actionable recommendations around the adoption of library exercise desks. In the process, the Fellows learned new skills and got to apply them in a previously unfamiliar domain, all while being paid a substantial hourly wage.

In the case of the project described in this article, however, the very parameters of the research endeavor were renegotiated over the course of the collaboration. By reopening the question of the form that an appropriate deliverable would need to take, the student called attention to the taken-for-granted assumptions that had shaped the original framing of the research problem. This article describes the process of revising those assumptions and rescoping the research toward more productive ends. It affirms the substantial contributions that students can make to practice-driven research in the academic library, especially when their areas of disciplinary expertise are relevant to the project. Yet it also underscores the importance of curiosity, humility, and trust as professional values without which true collaboration between students and librarians will be stymied from the start.

Shannon Kipphut-Smith: The project as conceived

As Fondren Library's Scholarly Communications Liaison, I work on a number of different projects that cover a wide range of issues related to scholarly publishing. In addition to managing the implementation of Rice's [End Page 20] institutional open-access policy, I collaborate with stakeholders across campus to address priorities from new publishing models to increasing the visibility of research.

When I started at Fondren in 2012, I was new to both academic librarianship and scholarly communication, so I spent much of my time learning about the hot topics. One that I identified was author rights, which refers to the rights that researchers have as the creators of and (at least initially) copyright holders for their written work. When researchers publish their writing, they generally sign agreements that define the terms under which the published work can be distributed. Often, these agreements serve as a mechanism for transferring copyright of the work from the researcher to the publisher. By the late 1990s, though, this blanket transfer of copyright was being called into question. By arranging to retain some of the rights that they had formerly signed away, researchers would (it was thought) give libraries greater bargaining power with publishers and support the creation of alternative channels for the dissemination of scholarly research.

One of the most important strategies for retaining author rights, I learned, was the author addendum, pioneered by the MIT Libraries in January 2006 and boosted to prominence by the Scholarly Publishing and Academic Resources Coalition (SPARC) later that year. As I perused the websites of libraries at Rice's peer institutions to see how they addressed the issue of author rights, it appeared that most had an online research guide or similar resource, which either linked to or incorporated language from SPARC's author rights brochure.³ So I followed suit, adding information to an existing (now defunct) LibGuide on scholarly communication and adding an author support page to the Open Access at Rice website.

Unfortunately, I struggled to find the time to further develop these resources. The websites were not widely promoted or used and were full of library jargon that I suspected was not easily understood by users. I knew that these resources did not present

information in an accessible way and that more could be done to meet users at their point of need. Thus, when writing my proposal for the Fondren Fellows program, I envisioned a project that would both improve on these resources and encourage a student to hone his or her resource assessment skills. My proposal outlined a project in which the Fellow would evaluate the library's existing author rights resources, in collaboration with our User Experience Office, and also update my previous scan of resources at other institutions. By the end of the project, I expected the student to develop a knowledge of trends in author rights resources and programming, as well as a basic familiarity with library usability testing. This research would inform a set of recommendations to the library regarding the development of future author rights initiatives.

Fortunately for me and for the library, one of the applicants for the position was not afraid to suggest modifications to my original proposal. As a result of our ensuing collaboration, I have found myself reflecting on how I approach new projects. Although I have a self-proclaimed hatred of LibGuides, collaborating with Marcel LaFlamme helped me to realize that I still default to the curation of text-based resources when an issue lands in my lap. While there is certainly a place for curated content, our Fondren Fellows project reminded me that many of the challenges academic libraries face demand dynamic, service-based solutions rather than just the provision of information. It stoked a desire in me to better understand the needs of the users our library serves and to meet them in novel ways.

Marcel LaFlamme: The project as carried out

When I saw the list of opportunities for the Fondren Fellows program, I was immediately drawn to Shannon Kipphut-Smith's author rights project: as a graduate student at Rice, I had started learning about copyright and licensing issues in my role as managing editor for the journal *Cultural Anthropology*, and I liked the idea of putting that knowledge to use while also learning more. As I [End Page 21] started working on my application, though, I struggled with a sense that the project proposal was pulling in two different directions. It called for the Fellow to conduct a usability study of the library's existing author rights resources, but also to "observe where Rice authors look for information about author rights, if not through the library." How, I wondered, would we go about observing this information-seeking behavior? And did it really make sense for us to conduct a usability study before we knew what our users were looking for?

During my interview, I worked up the courage to ask Shannon how committed she was to the usability portion of the project. This definitely felt like a risk: I didn't want to sound as though I was criticizing her proposed research design, and frankly I needed the job as my departmental stipend was about to run out. Yet, having looked over the existing resources, I had a difficult time imagining a Rice author seeking them out in the first place, however usable they might have been. My skepticism was not as thoughtfully formulated as that of Alison Hicks, who has critiqued online research guides for being organized around "librarian-defined notions of value and authority."⁴ If anything, it stemmed from a decidedly unempirical hunch that few library users love such guides as much as the librarians who create them do.

To my relief (and to her considerable credit), Shannon did not take umbrage at the question. "I'm not that committed to it," I remember her saying. "What would you do

instead?” Drawing on my training in anthropological methods, I suggested that we imaginatively reconstruct the scene in which a researcher receives an author agreement that she is meant to sign. What reading practices would she bring to bear on this document? How much time would she spend reviewing it? And if, practically speaking, we were unlikely to be sitting in her office when the agreement showed up in her inbox, then how could we elicit rich and reliable data about her engagement with it? This encounter between reader and text, I suggested, marked both the author’s point of greatest need for information and the library’s window of greatest opportunity for crafting an intervention.

After I was selected as a Fellow, Shannon and I worked together to operationalize these questions in a new research design. We recast the project as an interview-based study of tenure-stream Rice faculty, focused on how participants had navigated questions of author rights with their most recent publication. I would track down and review the relevant author agreement before each interview, so that I could compare the participant’s perceptions of its contents with my own assessment. Once approval from Rice’s Institutional Review Board was granted, I started scheduling interviews with participants from across Rice’s seven tenure-granting schools, meeting with Shannon every couple of weeks to share preliminary findings and talk through any difficulties. Since I had already conducted a year of ethnographic fieldwork for my dissertation, I was used to working independently and was grateful that Shannon trusted me to do so on this project.

So what did we learn? While disciplinary differences were evident, junior faculty were generally reluctant to propose changes to an author agreement for fear of delaying an already lengthy publication process. By the time she has an agreement in hand, one

social scientist laughingly explained, “I’ll sign anything.” Senior faculty, in contrast, tended to dismiss the terms of such agreements as unimportant. “I’ve just never heard of anybody ever getting in real trouble for breaking any of these publishing things,” a professor at the business school reflected. Most participants were cool to the idea of consulting an online guide to author rights: “I would never read through something like that,” one stated flatly. Instead, their responses converged around the idea of an agreement review service provided by a knowledgeable team of library staff. Such a model would depart from the responsabilizing rhetoric found in documents like the SPARC brochure, which emphasizes that author rights are “up to you.” Instead, it **[End Page 22]** would locate the management of author rights in an ongoing relationship between researchers and librarians.

Conclusion

Although this project formally concluded with the submission of LaFlamme’s final report, it has gone on to have a number of afterlives. Kipphut-Smith has started conversations with colleagues at Fondren about working with her on the proposed agreement review service. LaFlamme had the chance to give a presentation on his role in the project as part of a panel at the 2017 spring meeting of the Coalition for Networked Information.

Perhaps most significantly, both of us have continued to reflect on the research design phase of the project, which was in some ways the most exciting. It called on us to develop what a recent workshop at the University of California, Irvine’s Center for

Ethnography described as “collaborative analytics,”⁵ shared understandings of the problem at hand that transcended our formal institutional roles. As the initial assumptions behind the project were melted down and transmuted into something new, the object of our research became not only the attitudes of our study participants but also the grounds of our own collaboration.

Notes

¹ Kayo Denda and Jennifer Hunter, “Building Twenty-First-Century Skills and Creating Communities: A Team-Based Engagement Framework for Student Employment in Academic Libraries,” *Journal of Library Administration* 56, no. 3 (2016): 251–65.

² Firouzeh Logan, “Student Workers: Essential Partners in the Twenty-First Century Academic Library,” *Public Services Quarterly* 8, no. 4 (2012): 316–25.

³ Scholarly Publishing and Academic Research Coalition (SPARC), “Author Rights” brochure (2006). <https://sparcopen.org/our-work/author-rights/brochure-html>.

⁴ Alison Hicks, “LibGuides: Pedagogy to Oppress?,” *Hybrid Pedagogy*, April 16, 2015. <http://www.digitalpedagogylab.com/hybridped/libguides-pedagogy-to-oppress>.

⁵ Dominic Boyer and George E. Marcus, “Collaborative Analytics,” Theorizing the Contemporary series, *Cultural Anthropology* website, July 27, 2017. <https://culanth.org/fieldsights/1180-collaborative-analytics>.