I keep the subject of my inquiry constantly before me, and wait till the first dawning opens gradually, by little and little, into a full and clear light.  

Sir Isaac Newton
LIKE EVERYONE ELSE, I’ve spent a great deal of time this year thinking about the economy, trying to put a lot of downbeat news and events in perspective.

Looking back, I’m glad to say the last ten years have been good ones for the Washington University Libraries. We’ve made remarkable improvements to our facilities, collections, and services. We opened two new libraries—the Kranzberg Art & Architecture Library and the Betten Earth & Planetary Sciences Library—and underwent a major renovation of Olin Library, which increased the number of people coming to the library by 50 percent almost overnight.

We expanded our collections across all disciplines and created new unique and distinctive collections—the Film & Media Archive and the Modern Graphic History Library—that are already generating fascinating research.

We established a digital library program that is supporting new methods of scholarship, won grants to support innovative activities, and increased our ability to provide seamless digital access to information in all formats, any time of day or night. In short, we’ve had some pretty good times!

But the global economy has forced organizations of all shapes and sizes to adjust, and libraries are no different. Although we’ve been confident of our ability to weather the storm, we’re far from exempt from the consequences of failing banks, widespread cutbacks, and a jittery stock market.

Even so, at times like these our job is more important than ever. When the economy is down, communities have always turned to—and depended on—their libraries. That’s true for the academic community as well.

From books and online resources to technological workshops and cheap entertainment, libraries are the world’s great information equalizers—the only place you can find and use such a diversity of resources, along with the expert guidance of librarians.

That’s why we’re devoting part of this issue to the role of libraries in tough economic times. These days, we’re all taking a close look at how we spend our resources, but your ability to get information shouldn’t depend on your ability to pay for it. The free flow of information that libraries represent is one of our greatest common assets. It’s also one of our greatest competitive strengths in the global marketplace.

Just as communities depend on their libraries, so do libraries depend on their communities. (We can’t live on love alone!) The University Libraries benefit from the generous support of our friends, students, faculty, and alumni. A number of them are featured in these pages. We continue to be good stewards of our funding—whether from gifts or University sources. We strive to spend our budget wisely to provide the scholarly resources expected of a top-tier research institution.

As we look to the year ahead, the future of the world economy is far from certain. But I think it’s safe to say that libraries—and those who make the most of them—are going to be part of the solution.
In February and March, an exhibition of two libraries and two campuses explored history and architecture in one of the world’s most architecturally significant cities. Paris — From the Commune of 1871 to the Exposition of 1900: Images from the world’s most architectural city was on display in Olin Library and the West Campus Library. The exhibition featured photographs of palaces, schools, libraries, churches, and other buildings that were displayed in a case in point: "Eat food. Not too much. Mostly plants." That is Michael Pollan’s message, which he has been promoting since the publication of his book, In Defense of Food: An Eater’s Manifesto, which was a challenge and an inspiration for the individual food shopper or restaurant goer.

Readers of Pollan’s books often want to read more. His book The Omnivore’s Dilemma: A Natural History of Four Meals was named one of the ten best books of the year by both The New York Times and the Washington Post. It won the James Beard Award for best food writing and was a finalist for the National Book Critics Circle Award. The Botany of Desire: A Plant’s Eye View of the World won the Borders Original Voices Award for best non-fiction work of 2000 and was named a best book of the year by the American Booksellers Association and Amazon. His other books are A Place of My Own and Second Nature: A Gardener’s Education.

Pollan teaches journalism as a public intellectual and an influential writer and teacher whose brilliant work challenges the status quo and contributes to the greater good. Michael Pollan is the ideal candidate for this award and a great example for students who seek to make a difference in the world.”

In introducing Pollan that evening, Dean Shirley E. Baker said, “Michael Pollan’s work is original and deeply researched. His writing is compelling, clear, and often surprisingly humorous. And his conclusions can be startlingly direct, brief, and profound. Here’s a case in point:

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Putting Knowledge to Work:

THE ROLE OF LIBRARIES IN TOUGH ECONOMIC TIMES

BY AARON WELBORN

It’s a bright, crisp February morning, and Anna Teekell Hays, a Ph.D. candidate in English at Washington University, is at the library.

So is everyone else, you would think, to look around.

It’s ten o’clock, rush hour in Olin Library, and the traffic is picking up. Groups of students file through the doors after morning classes. Shedding coats and scarves, they plop down in chairs, boot up laptops, plug in earphones, crack open books, and settle in. Beneath the building’s glass atrium, Whispers Café (a misnomer if ever there was one) echoes with the sounds of coffee lovers getting their fix.

March is coming, midterms are around the corner, and the library is abuzz with activity. On a TV in the café, the continuous scroll of headlines from CNN is an ever-present reminder of the global financial turmoil that continues to drag on. Markets are down. Foreclosures are up. Who can say when this bleak economic winter will end?

But here inside the library, the business of learning goes on, as it always has in both good times and bad. Inside, there is room to step back for a moment and think.

What is Anna thinking about? On this particular day, she happens to be thinking about the state of the Irish novel since 1922. “That was a significant year,” she says. “Ireland gained its independence, and James Joyce published Ulysses,” a book that would fundamentally change the way people think about novels (not just Irish ones).

In the dissertation she’s writing, Anna is exploring the work of four post-independence Irish novelists: Elizabeth Bowen, Flann O’Brien, John McGahern, and Samuel Beckett. Her research has already taken her to the University of Texas in Austin to examine the definitive collection of Elizabeth Bowen’s papers. In April, she’ll fly to Galway to peruse John McGahern’s archive at the National University of Ireland. As for Beckett, she’s already sitting in one of the world’s foremost repositories of his manuscripts.

“I haven’t started writing the chapter on Beckett yet, but when I do, I’ll be spending a lot of time in Special Collections,” she says.

This is a far cry from the world of Wall Street that’s been dominating the news lately, but it’s precisely what brought Anna to Washington University four years ago. Like any of the 15,000 graduate and undergraduate students who come here every year, she wanted to delve into a subject that fascinated her to no end—and, ultimately, to contribute something to the world of knowledge. And when you get her talking about it, that fascination is still easy to see. In fact, it’s always there, whether the Dow Jones Industrial Average is having a good day or not.
The same is true for students and researchers across the academic spectrum. The current economic climate may have shaken consumer confidence, but it has not dampened the interest in—and need for—higher education. If anything, the reverse is true. During economic downturns, people flock to colleges and universities to improve their prospects and sharpen their skills and expertise. Whether their goal is to be the next expert in Irish literature, economics, environmental engineering, or heart surgery, people choose Washington University for any number of reasons. But they all have one thing in common: At some point, like Anna, they all end up at the library.

**Usage is up**

“A library is not a luxury but one of the necessities of life,” the social reformer Henry Ward Beecher once said. Naturally, a lot of librarians would agree with that assessment. But you don’t have to be an information expert to appreciate the value of one of the world’s oldest and most enduring human institutions. It’s a well-known phenomenon that in times of economic hardship, libraries experience a surge in usage. The trend is perhaps most visible in this country’s 16,500 public libraries, which offer a broad range of free services for people of all ages, including internet access, financial literacy seminars, job search assistance, and resources to help small businesses. Not to mention, of course, tons of books, CDs, and DVDs.

According to the American Library Association, Americans visited their libraries nearly 1.3 billion times last year and checked out more than 2 billion items, an increase of more than 10 percent in both check-out items and library visits compared to the last economic downturn in 2001.

What does the average taxpayerv pay for this remarkable range of public services? About $50 a year, roughly the price of one hardcover book.

The same spade in demand can be observed in academic and research libraries, which offer many of the same kinds of resources and services to the academic community—plus much more. In addition to extensive collections of scholarly resources, historical documents, artifacts, databases, and other specialized resources that aren’t freely available online, Washington University’s 14 libraries offer the latest best-sellers, movies, music, and journals that are available in stores.

Even the rare student who never checks out a book still uses the library. Need a certain article for that paper you’re up writing at 2 a.m.? Here you go. Looking for accurate, up-to-the-minute statistics on something? Take it with you. As the Libraries have increased online access to databases, journal articles, and other e-resources, our walls have become increasingly transparent. You may not realize how you’re getting that article on brain chemistry from your dorm room—you’re getting it through the Libraries.

Of course, this kind of resources and services is nothing new. But they are experiencing heavier use. When times get tough, people don’t just go back to school—they also rediscover their libraries.

Just ask Anna. “One of my resolutions for 2009 is to buy fewer books and check out more from the library,” she says. Usually she’s able to find what she needs. If not, the Libraries can typically get it for her in a few days. “I’ve been surprised,” she says, “because I put in some pretty strange interlibrary loan requests—things like obscure Irish literary journals from the 1940s, which can be difficult to track down.

Other times, Anna works with her subject librarian, Kris Helbling, to locate books and articles. “Earlier this year I needed a book that had just been published. No library in the state seemed to have it. So I talked to Kris, and it was in my hands the next week.”

In an average week, Anna spends four to six hours doing research on the University Libraries’ website and another 20 hours working in the library itself. (Her favorite spot: Olin Library, third floor, southwest corner, right by the window, where she has an inspiring view of Graham Chapel.) Although it often feels like it, she doesn’t actually live and breathe dissertation

**Faculty Footnotes:**

Researchers explore the science of an engaging read

Jeff Zacks is an associate professor of psychology at Washington University and director of the department’s Dynamic Cognition Lab. He’s also one of the co-authors of a forthcoming article in Psychological Science that offers scientific evidence of something book lovers everywhere (and librarians) have suspected all along—namely, that reading is no more passive activity.

Rather the study suggests that while we read, our body may be at rest, but our mind is engaged in elaborate simulations of what’s happening on the page, activating regions of the brain that process similar experiences in real life. In other words, it’s almost as if we were actually there, witnessing the events.

Participants in the study were asked to read short passages while inside an fMRI (functional magnetic resonance imaging) machine. While the participants read, researchers took pictures of their brains. What they found was striking. The regions of the brain that showed increased activity while reading were the same regions known to control actions and situations like those in the text.

Zacks describes it this way: “When you read a sentence like, ‘The boy grabbed the ball,’ your brain isn’t simply decoding the letters like a computer and translating them into an image. You’re mulling that sentence with all of your past experiences of grabbing something—that it looks like to grab a ball, what it feels like in your hands and arms. The regions of your brain that control those motor functions help to simulate the experience in your mind.”

In other words, says Zacks, “Reading itself is a powerful kind of virtual reality.” The passages chosen for the experiment were taken from one boy’s perspective; an account of the activities of seven-year-old Raymond Birch (not his real name) during a single day in the late 1940s. A team of 2 researchers recorded Raymond’s activities at one-minute intervals from morning to night. Although the book is a play-by-play account of an ordinary day, the descriptions are eloquent and often touching: “It’s an extremely significant document,” says Zacks. “It reads more like a collection of stories than a list of everything this one kid did on a particular day.”

The study is one of a series in which Zacks and his research associates use fMRI technology to track brain activity during the reading process.

Nicole Speer, the lead author of the study, is a former graduate student who worked under Zacks in the Dynamic Cognition Lab. The study emerged out of her dissertation research. Speer is now a research and technical assistant with the Mental Health Program at the Western Interstate Commission for Higher Education (WICHE) in Boulder, Colorado.

As Zacks points out, he and his brain at the Dynamic Cognition Lab are only a few people at Washington University doing interesting research on reading. Some of his colleagues in psychology and neurology—in particular, professors Rebecca Treiman, Steven Petersen, David Balota, and Bradley Schlaggar—have 10 of their own labs investigating similar questions as how children learn to spell, how language skills are developed in different cultures, and what neural mechanisms underlie language and memory.

“The research on reading being done here on campus goes from basic word recognition all the way to how we visualize narratives in the brain,” Zacks says. Ultimately, their discoveries contribute to the larger story of how we read—a story that’s often engaging in more ways than one.
Academic libraries represent a relatively small proportion of all libraries in the U.S. (about 3,600 out of 123,000 total). However, they do account for a large percentage of library resources in terms of assets, budgets, and the number of users they serve.

According to the Association of Research Libraries, the largest 123 academic library systems in North America (including the Washington University Libraries) spent more than $9 billion in 2006-2007. To put that figure in context, that’s more than all Americans spent on running shoes, golf equipment, or firearms during the same period.

Want to get the most out of your higher education investment? Take a look at these numbers and see what kind of economic impact the Washington University Libraries have on you.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Source</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Amount</th>
<th>Percentage Increase</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>U.S. Statistical Abstract</td>
<td>Average cost of a trade paperback novel</td>
<td>$5.70</td>
<td>8% increase</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Average cost of an academic book</td>
<td>$62.05</td>
<td>25% increase</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Number of books Washington University Libraries purchased in the 2007-2008 academic year</td>
<td>260,055</td>
<td>11% increase</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Print and electronic journals Washington University Libraries subscribed to in the 2007-2008 academic year</td>
<td>60,077</td>
<td>25% increase</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Public computers in the Washington University Libraries</td>
<td>52</td>
<td>10% increase</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Sample business plans you can find in the complete Business Plans Handbook series (available through the Business Library’s website), explaining how to start your own organic farm, art gallery, litigation services company, retail clothing store, ethanol facility, airline, or other entrepreneurial venture</td>
<td>377</td>
<td>25% increase</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Average cost of subscribing to a general interest magazine 25 years ago</td>
<td>$3.29</td>
<td>42% increase</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Average cost of checking them out from Olin Library</td>
<td>$0</td>
<td>100% increase</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Business Plans Handbook

The number of times “Shakespeare” appears in the Libraries’ catalog | 12,049 | 5% increase |

Number of times “Carl Neureuther” appears there | 1,779 | 10% increase |

Number of times “Six Feet Under” appears in the Libraries’ catalog | 277 | 5% increase |

Number of times “Sex and the City” appears in the Libraries’ catalog | 35 | 25% increase |

Number of times “Business Plans Handbook” appears in the Libraries’ catalog | 52 | 10% increase |

Number of times “OmniPage Pro software programs” appears in the Libraries’ catalog | 5 | 20% increase |

Number of times “Microsoft Office Suite 2007” appears in the Libraries’ catalog | 4 | 10% increase |

Number of times “Dreamweaver, etc.” appears in the Libraries’ catalog | 4 | 10% increase |

Number of times “Illustrator, InDesign, etc.” appears in the Libraries’ catalog | 4 | 10% increase |

Number of times “American higher education system” appears in the Libraries’ catalog | 35 | 5% increase |

Number of times “Business, made a major gift to the Libraries to stimulate good reading” appears in the Libraries’ catalog | 3,000 | 5% increase |

Number of times “Books purchased with his funds—mostly popular fiction, poetry, and nonfiction—are identified by his bookplate” appears in the Libraries’ catalog | 3,000 | 5% increase |

Number of times “The Reader” appears in the Libraries’ catalog | 2,000 | 5% increase |

Number of times “Reading Rainbow” appears in the Libraries’ catalog | 1,500 | 5% increase |

Number of times “Business Plans Handbook” appears in the Libraries’ catalog | 1,000 | 5% increase |

Number of times “Six Feet Under” appears in the Libraries’ catalog | 500 | 5% increase |

Number of times “Sex and the City” appears in the Libraries’ catalog | 250 | 5% increase |

Number of times “Dreamweaver, etc.” appears in the Libraries’ catalog | 200 | 5% increase |

Number of times “Illustrator, InDesign, etc.” appears in the Libraries’ catalog | 150 | 5% increase |

Number of times “American higher education system” appears in the Libraries’ catalog | 100 | 5% increase |
1. Spare your poor bookshelves. As addictions go, the reading habit won’t kill you, but you can’t be too careful. Even used books add up if you read a lot. Whether it’s scholarly works or current bestsellers, cookbooks, or audiobooks, chances are good the library has what you’re looking for and you can usually get it for no more than a few dollars.

2. Try it before you buy it. Still can’t kick the book habit? Neither can we. So why not “test-drive” our copy to see if it’s worth your hard-earned money? The same goes for movies, music, and even software. (See the Arc website at library.wustl.edu/units/arc for more than 40 different programs you can try out.)

3. Pick up some skills. The Libraries regularly offer workshops and tutorials on a variety of computer programs, including Photoshop, PowerPoint, Excel and RefWorks, as well as crash courses on popular web programs like Facebook, LinkedIn, and Flickr. For Announcements and more information, keep an eye on the Libraries’ blog at wubbly.typepad.com/whatwub.

4. Let us entertain you. Check out an exhibit. Meet an author. Hear a talk. The Libraries organize events and exhibitions year-round, almost always free and open to the public. Who says a fun night out has to be expensive?

5. Meet up or hide out. Washington University has 14 libraries, but you’ve probably only been inside a few of them. You might be missing out on the perfect spot for that important meeting from group studies to classrooms to the coziest nooks and crannies on campus, we have spaces to accommodate you, whether you’re in a group or on your own.

6. Find an expert. Whatever your area of academic interest, the Libraries have someone who specializes in navigating your field. From tracking down obscure facts to personalized course support for faculty and instructors, our subject specialists are happy to help. We even have experts in copyright and intellectual property to assist you at the public service desk.

7. Shelve your economic anxiety. We have an entire library devoted to just selling books! Although some resources are restricted to Business School students and faculty, many of them are available to the entire campus community. Want to be a smarter consumer, manager, or entrepreneur? Invest some time here.

8. Make something out of nothing. The Libraries are experts in preserving historical manuscripts, artifacts, and other cultural treasures. But we also have books, DVDs, and online resources to help you learn how to care for your own home libraries and treasures. Concerned about that fading quilt inherited? Thinking about digitizing some old black-and-white photos? Consult your local conservator or the list of titles recommended by the Institute of Museum and Library Services, search for “Connecting to Collections” in the Libraries’ catalog.

9. Conserve, preserve, protect. Tough economic times have a way of making us appreciate things that last. Librarians specialize in preserving historical manuscripts, artifacts, and other cultural treasures. But we also have books, DVDs, and online resources to help you learn how to care for your own home libraries and treasures. Concerned about that fading quilt inherited? Thinking about digitizing some old black-and-white photos? Consult your local conservator or the list of titles recommended by the Institute of Museum and Library Services, search for “Connecting to Collections” in the Libraries’ catalog.

10. Ask for it. Librarians are good listeners. We go to great pains to figure out what our users want. Letting us know directly is the best way to get results. A complaint or suggestion from a user carries a lot of weight with library decision-makers. If you want it, but we don’t have it, speak up! You will be heard.
Earning and Learning: STUDENTS KEEP THE LIBRARIES WORKING

Walk into any library at Washington University and the first face you’re likely to see, ready to help, will be a student’s.

From checking out books to scanning documents, troubleshooting computers, shelving journals, arranging exhibits, and answering patron questions, students assist in almost every aspect of the Libraries’ day-to-day operations. They serve in the front lines as well as behind the scenes, and the work they do is essential to running the largest student employer on campus, and we’re known as a good place to work. With some 160 student workers, the Libraries’ ranks. Their jobs are varied: helping users with computers, scanners, and software; troubleshooting printer problems; checking out headphones and laptops to borrowers; assisting patrons with the microfilm collection; and helping them log on to the University’s wireless network. Alex manages all this on top of a full load of classes and two other jobs—-in addition to working in the Arc, Alex does technical production work for Edison Theatre and assists the music department with managing rehearsal spaces for students and performance groups.

Not insignificantly, they also offer valuable feedback and advice on improving library services for the campus community. Whenever we add new tools and features to our website, who do we try them out on first? Our biggest online users, of course—-our students!

The following are just a few of the student workers in the Libraries’ ranks. Their jobs are different as their personalities, but they all contribute to meeting the teaching and research needs of the Washington University community, day in and day out.

JOYCE KARIUKI
Graduate Student, Social Work
Hometown: Nairobi, Kenya
Where She Works: West Campus Library

Joyce is completing her first year of study at the George Warren Brown School of Social Work. It’s also her first year living in the United States. Originally from Kenya, she earned an undergraduate degree in social work from the University of Nairobi, after which she worked for a nonprofit agency that seeks to empower Kenya’s youth and children through health education and life skills training. She’s passionate about working with families, youth, and children, and she was thrilled to find out about Washington University’s Social Work program when a minister friend back home suggested she apply.

At the West Campus Library, Joyce works at the checkout desk, retrieving books from the stacks for patrons, processing ILLIUS loans to other libraries, and reshelving books that have been checked in. “Joyce always brings a cheerful, compassionate outlook to the West Campus Library,” says her supervisor, David Stright. “It’s an attitude that’s appreciated by both patrons and staff.”

One of her favorite duties, Joyce says, is tracking down books that have been reported as missing. The Libraries keep a list of such books, and it requires a combination of luck and Sherlock Holmesian sleuthing to replace them to their proper place.

“Sometimes the discovery can be deeply satisfying. Sometimes I think about how nice life would be if we all organized our lives like a library. We all have things that we’ve misplaced, both real and emotional things. Imagine how much happier we would be if we took the time to hunt those things down and find them!”

ALEX GORDON
Junior, Architecture Major
Hometown: China, Texas
Where He Works: Arc Technology Lab, Olin Library

Alex is a junior majoring in architecture, with a minor in modern dance. He’s one of about 20 student workers who staff the Arc Technology Lab in Olin Library, and he often works on weekends.

More than anything, working in the Arc means multi-tasking: helping users with computers, scanners, and software; troubleshooting printer problems; checking out headphones and laptops to borrowers; assisting patrons with the microfilm collection; and helping them log on to the University’s wireless network. Alex manages all this on top of a full load of classes and two other jobs—-in addition to working in the Arc, Alex does technical production work for Edison Theatre and assists the music department with managing rehearsal spaces for students and performance groups.

Perhaps not surprisingly, Alex says working in the Arc helps him unwind. “Washington University can be pretty stressful sometimes, with what feels like hundreds of things I need to get done at one time. It’s nice to have somewhere to work that is quiet and requires different sorts of troubleshooting. People come to us with all sorts of technology issues, but when I’m helping someone, I can just focus on their problem or what they are trying to accomplish.”

“Students keep the libraries working,” says Steven Vance, Arc technical assistant. “I like many of our student staff he not only brings great skills to the Arc, but is always looking for ways to learn more and to better assist our patrons.”

JILL STORM
Graduate Student, History
Hometown: Birmingham, Alabama
Where She Works: Original and Adaptive Cataloging Unit, West Campus Library

Jill is a doctoral candidate studying Jewish history at Washington University. She also earned her undergraduate degree here, in German, and worked for the University Archives. Now she works for the Original and Adaptive Cataloging Unit and divides her time between the West Campus Library and Olin Library’s Department of Special Collections.

Jill’s job is unique and highly specialized. She spends most of her time cataloging a single collection. The Bism trom Collection in Jewish history at the Libraries in 1972. It contains more than 5,000 volumes, many of them extremely old and rare, pertaining to Jewish history, religion, and bibliography.

For years, processing the Bism trom Collection proved to be challenging, due to the time and language skills it required. Not only are the materials written in different languages, but the peculiarities of Jewish authorship require a cataloger to resolve discrepancies in dating (Hebrew calendar versus Latin calendar), author name (pseudonym versus real name), and other puzzles. Depending on the complexity of the text, cataloging a single book can take anywhere from 10 minutes to over an hour.

Luckily, Jill reads Hebrew, Yiddish, German, French, and other languages. With a little training in library cataloging, she has cataloged hundreds of titles and added them to the Libraries’ circulating collection. As a bonus, she’s also found a few things to use in her research.

This spring, in collaboration with her supervisor, Shelli Kastin, and Debrah Katz, the librarian for Jewish and Near Eastern Studies, Jill has been working on an exhibit highlighting the Bism trom Collection that will be on display in the library near the end of the semester.
display in the Olin Library Congio Reading Room from April 6 to June 28, 2009. She selected most of the items on display, prepared labels for the exhibit materials and wrote a history of the collection.

“We’ve been extremely fortunate to have someone like Jill to work on this project,” says Shelli Kadin. “Her special language skills and subject knowledge are truly invaluable.”

“Working with the Brisman Collection has been a great experience,” says Jill. “I feel fortunate to have found a part-time job in my field. I have enjoyed the work so much that I’ve even considered the possibility of becoming a curator of Jewish books.”

George Lyle IV
Graduate Student, Law
Hometown: Indianapolis, Indiana
Where He Works: Library Web Services

George is a first-year law student, but his background is in broadcasting and media production. After graduating from Indiana University with a degree in journalism, he worked for National Public Radio as an editorial assistant for All Things Considered. He researched stories for hosts, wrote scripts, booked guests, and did some field reporting. He also helped launch a new show, Tell Me More.

These days, when he’s not studying case histories, George works in the Library Web Services office, where he wears a number of hats. Occasionally he develops audio slideshows and other multimedia content for the Libraries’ website. Other days, he does some of the groundwork for print and online communications, interviewing library staff and taking photos of library buildings and events; in fact, several of his photos appear in this magazine!

“George was a real find,” says Gail Wright, Library Web Services architect. “When we first met him to talk about a student position, we weren’t sure how we would use his talents, but knew he was too good to let get away. He’s a wonderful communicator with experience all over the board, from writing to radio to photography. We’re hoping to retain him as long as he’s at Wash U!”

For his part, George enjoys the opportunity to keep up his photography and media production skills. “I like working here, because it reminds me I’m not just a law student. I’ve always wanted to go to law school, but it’s always good to know how to do more than one thing.”

ERIN BARTUSKA
Senior, Double Major in Ancient Studies and Women & Gender Studies
Hometown: Orlando, Florida
Where She Works: Help Desk, Olin Library

Erin has been working for the Libraries for most of her undergraduate career. She started in 2005 as a shelver in Olin Library, and in 2006 she moved to the Help Desk on the library’s main floor, where she has worked ever since.

At the Help Desk, Erin serves on the front lines of customer service. She checks out books, helps users locate items when they’re having trouble, retrieves and shelves DVDs and reserve materials, processes MOBILUS books, and answers lots of questions.

Uberta Rochele, Circulation Services supervisor, calls Erin one of her favorite student workers. “She always displays a positive spirit, and she stands out from the crowd as her own person, not someone influenced by others.”

As a senior, Erin will finish her studies this spring, and she is currently applying to graduate programs in women and gender studies. However, she also considers further library work. “It’s been a fun job,” she says about her experience in the Libraries. “But it’s also dangerous because I really like books. At any given time, I usually have about 50 of them checked out. It used to be even worse when I was working in Shelving and processing new books as they came in. Then I was taking home about five new books every day!”

One of my favorite evaluation methods is usability testing. It’s all about making our electronic resources and websites easy to use.

Keeping the library website vital and glanceable is a complex balancing act. We rely on a steady stream of students who are willing to sit in front of the computer and give us feedback. Our largest project supported the redesign of the Libraries’ main page, but in recent months we’ve also run tests on new catalog products, web chat services, and even the Libraries’ Facebook page. (Fans welcome!) As you have probably guessed, I don’t do this alone. In one sense, assessment is part of every job in the library. There is, however, a group of 12 individuals at the core of our efforts, the Assessment Team. These library staffers perform the function of a clearinghouse and provide consultation on potential assessment projects.

Their excellent skills and enthusiasm set the bar high for the whole organization.

There’s another important chunk of my job that most people don’t see. I spend about half of my time as an internal consultant, identifying areas where data is needed to make effective management decisions. Last fall, I began meeting with the heads of the Libraries’ service areas. Our objective was to discuss key services, identify target levels of service, and determine how to measure our progress. Our intent was to identify ways to use the results for continuous improvement. This consulting role meshes well with my own background. With master’s degrees in business and library and information science, and about 25 years of business/marketing experience, I’m no stranger to listening to customers, analyzing data, and delivering outcomes.

One of my favorite assessment quotations is from Albert Einstein: “Not everything that can be counted counts, and not everything that counts can be counted.” The fun part of this job is figuring out when to count, and how to make the counting worthwhile. Yikes, maybe I am the numbers police!
In Praise of the Liberal Arts:
A CONVERSATION WITH DONALD AND LAURA SHINDLER

EDITOR’S NOTE: Donald and Laura Shindler’s birthdays are only 11 days apart. In 2006, the year they both turned 60, the couple decided to establish an endowment for the Washington University Libraries to support the study of American culture west of the Mississippi.

Neither Laura nor Don is from the West. She was born and raised in New Orleans. But they grew up in Highland Park, Illinois, and he had a grand time at Washington University—hall. After that, we ran in the same crowd, but he is a real estate lawyer and handles the finance and administrative of Catering accountant and handles the finance and the uses of a liberal arts education.

Laura: I think the biggest differences between them and now are the manner in which students access information electronically, and the emphasis on collaborative learning spaces. When we were students, collaboration was mostly social, and learning was almost independent. As a history major, I don’t think I ever worked on a collaborative academic project with anybody. But technology and newer teaching styles have changed all that.

Laura: The Shindlers’ daughter and son-in-law, Susie and Cliff have two sons, Hayden (3) and Wyatt (1). Manufacturing equipment. Susie and Cliff have a range of fields. They have gone in different directions, mostly social, and learning was almost independent. As a history major, I don’t think I ever worked on a collaborative academic project with anybody. But technology and newer teaching styles have changed all that.

Q: in 2006, you set up a library endowment in honor of your 60th birthdays. How do you decide on that as a fitting way to celebrate?

Don: We started receiving information about the Libraries from the University development office, which is how we learned about endowment opportunities. It just sounded like a fun thing to do—to have an endowment—and we thought our birthdays would be an appropriate time to put it in place. Also, I had received Olin scholarships for two years in college, and I am pleased to contribute to the library which has been funded by the Olin family.

Q: how did you decide to focus the endowment on american culture west of the Mississippi?

Laura: We are both interested in the history of the West. We have a place in Colorado, and of course St. Louis is the “Gateway to the West.” So we were initially thinking of focusing on books about 19th-century western history. But it adds something to one’s world view and broadens one’s way of thinking, no matter what one goes on to do. For instance, both of our children have undergraduate degrees in philosophy, and they have gone in entirely different directions professionally. But the critical thinking skills they developed in school serve them well throughout their professional, personal, and community lives. So we feel our fund can enable people to think broadly, helping them to act nimbly across a range of fields.

Q: laura, you’re on the libraries’ national council. What do you see as the big issues facing academic libraries today? and why should ordinary people care?

Laura: I think all people like libraries! However, I don’t think there’s a general awareness of the technological and financial intricacies facing academic libraries today. Since I’ve been on the Libraries’ National Council, we’ve gone through a strategic planning process that has challenged the Libraries’ leadership to evaluate its short- and long-range priorities, even as it adjusts to the fast-changing world of information technology. Some of the big issues, as I see them, involve sharing electronic content among academic institutions, collaborating with publishers to make information available regardless of financial resources, ending special collections, providing complementary use of physical library space, and reconciling the interests of undergraduates, graduate students, and faculty. Assuming one appreciates the library’s role in higher education as an avenue to achieving proficiency and excellence in diverse disciplines, one needs to understand these issues in order to make libraries viable today.

Since 2006, Laura has also been a member of the Libraries’ National Council. The Shindlers’ daughter and son-in-law, Susan and Cliff Bockard, live in Duxbury, Massachusetts. Susan is a client services specialist at RelayHealth, an internet communications provider for the healthcare industry, and Cliff is president and chief operating officer of Global Automation, a supplier of electronics manufacturing equipment. Susie and Cliff have two sons, Hayden (3) and Wyatt (1).

Off the shelf recently caught up with Laura and Don Shindler to discuss libraries, birthday, and the uses of a liberal arts education.

Q: you both attended Washington University as undergraduates and met while you were students here. What are your memories like from that time?

Laura: We actually met before classes began freshman year, on the steps that led to the weekly linen exchange in the basement of Lee Hall. After that, we ran in the same crowd, but we did not start going out until junior year. We had a grand time at Washington University—living in somewhat of a bubble during the 1960s. Donnie was the diligent student (no one called him “Don”) until he entered the Navy Judge Advocate General’s Corps after law school, whereas I took more of a laidback approach to school work. Nonetheless, we both received a great education, and made some wonderful friends with whom we are still in contact today.

Don: I came to Washington University because of its academic reputation, and I received scholarships that helped make attending possible. Additionally, I thought it might be interesting to attend school with Yankees. And I certainly thought it would be interesting to attend school with girls, after attending an all-boys high school. We’ve maintained a relationship with the University since we graduated. It’s a mutual interest for us, having graduated the same year and having many friends in common. We were co-chairs of our 25th and our 40th reunions, and I served on the Alumni Board of Governors for a term. I also have three cousins who were undergraduates at the University, and a brother who attended the law school. We enjoy staying in contact with the school, because our years here were a pivotal time in our lives, both individually and together. We’re very proud to be alumni of this university.

Q: olin library opened in 1962, a few years before you arrived. Did you spend a lot of time in the library as students? how would you compare it to the library today?

Don: We did spend a lot of time in Olin. The fourth floor [now Level 2] reading room was the “social room,” and the second floor [now Level A] was where one could concentrate on school work. We were aware then that Olin, with its open stacks, was a seismic leap from the earlier closed stacks in Ridgley Library [now Holmes Lounge].

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Family Tradition: 

DOROTHY MOOG’S LIVING LEGACY

A ROOM OF HER OWN

The spot for Bookmark Society reading groups, her personalized meeting space Mrs. Moog established at the Wizard, a local furniture store on Forsyth Boulevard, she supported the Scholars Bookstore. In 1988, she became a member of the Libraries’ Honorary Eliot Society and the Library Association’s President’s Circle. The room is named in honor of his mother, Dorothy Moog. Jim Moog is the second of Dorothy and Hubert’s three children. Like her mother before him, a member of the Libraries’ National Council. His wife, Mary, is an alumna of the University, with a bachelor’s degree in Psychology (1975) and a master’s in Social Work (1979). She also holds a law degree from Saint Louis University.

A DETERMINED LIFE

Jim Moog is the second of Dorothy and Hubert’s three children. Like his mother before him, he is a member of the Libraries’ National Council. His wife, Mary, is an alumna of the University, with a bachelor’s degree in Psychology (1975) and a master’s in Social Work (1979). She also holds a law degree from Saint Louis University.

According to Jim, his mother understood the importance of giving back from an early age. Born in Chicago, Dorothy Moog (née Ross) contracted polio when she was 12 years old. Although it weakened her physically, the illness revealed Dorothy’s considerable inner strength. Her parents sent Dorothy to Warm Springs, Georgia, for treatment. At that time, Warm Springs served as an informal presidential summer retreat for Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt. At the facility there, Dorothy benefited from the latest therapies and became part of a close-knit community of polio patients, presided over by the President and First Lady.

Polio left Dorothy with a loss of strength in one leg. However, she compensated for this limitation in such a fashion that most casual acquaintances were unaware of it. She rarely spoke about the disease or her time in Warm Springs, even to friends, although she framed an invitation to a party held there—hosted by the Roosevelts—and kept it on a wall for many years. “It was one of the things she was most proud of,” says Jim.

Following treatment, Dorothy resumed her education and eventually went to college. In 1939 her family moved from Chicago to St. Louis, where her father opened a wholesale tire business. After a brief stint at Sophie Work (1979). She also holds a law degree from Saint Louis University.

The Moog Automotive. When Dorothy’s brother became engaged to Hub’s first cousin, the connection was made. Hub served in the Army during World War II. In 1944, a year before his discharge, he and Dorothy were married. After the war, Hub resumed his work with the business, eventually becoming president of the company. Under his leadership, the firm expanded and prospered, becoming one of the leading designers and manufacturers of replacement parts for steering and suspension systems. Hub and Dorothy built a house in Ladue, where they raised a daughter, Donna, and two sons, Jim and Tom.

The Moogs played an active role in the St. Louis community. Hub served on the boards of numerous business, civic, and charitable organizations, including the Better Business Bureau, St. Louis Community Foundation, the Urological Research Foundation, the Regional Commerce and Growth Association, Jewish Hospital, and John Burroughs School. Dorothy became a board member of the Opera Theatre of St. Louis and took leadership positions within other arts organizations, including the Symphony and the Repertory Theatre, both of which were the auxiliaries of the Jewish Hospital and Children’s Hospital. Both were lifetime members of the Eliot Society at Washington University.

“My mother was interested in a lot of different things,” says Jim. “For most of the organizations she was involved with, she supported them not for big intellectual reasons, but because she simple took pleasure in what they did or stood for. She wasn’t an art aficionado or expert in classical music. But she loved art and music.”

She also loved to read, a passion that she passed on to her three children. She took classes in drama and literature through Washington University’s Lifelong Learning Institute, and she organized a reading group through the Libraries’ Bookmarks. The Libraries announced plans to expand into the West Campus facility, Dorothy Moog saw another opportunity to help. “She said, ‘They really need to fix that up!’” according to Mary. “That’s the kind of person she was. If she saw the need for something, she would make it happen.”

And gladly would she do so.

GENERATIONS OF SUPPORT

Today, Jim and Mary Moog live in the same house in Ladue that his parents built almost 60 years ago. The family’s connection to Washington University, and its Libraries, continues to be strong. Both of the Moog’s children—Molly, a freshman, and Jamie, a senior—are currently enrolled as students here.

In 2003, Jim and Mary Moog established an endowment for library materials in the field of Romance Languages, partly in recognition of their close family friend, Joseph Schraibman, professor of Spanish in Washington University’s department of Romance Languages and Literatures. Their endowment has added a weight of books and other materials to the Libraries’ collection, which Professor Schraibman has augmented with donations from his personal library.

Over the years, Jim and Mary Moog have seen the University, and its Libraries, undergo a lot of changes—physically, technologically, and organizationally. But their generous support, following the example set by Dorothy Moog, demonstrates how families can help good institutions become great ones, generation after generation.
This spring, the Film & Media Archive launched MAVISweb, a public web interface that allows anyone to search the Archive’s holdings and view selected digital materials online. The need for such a system is evident in the Archive’s two biggest collections, featuring the complete works of renowned filmmakers Henry Hampton (Eyes on the Prize) and William Miles (I Remember Harlem). Largely related to African-American history, the Hampton and Miles collections came with thousands of hours of film and video footage, interview outtakes, photographs, correspondence, treatments, business records, books, CDs, and much more. Taken together, they represent an invaluable resource to scholarship of social justice in America.

Confronted by the complexity of organizing such a variety of materials and formats, Archive staff decided not to force them into a cataloging system meant for more traditional library collections. What was needed was a more sophisticated system designed specifically for handling all the interrelated elements that go into making a film. MAVISweb was the answer. MAVISweb is an extension of MAVIS (Merged AudioVisual Integrated Systems), a media asset management system currently maintained and developed by Feenyx Pty. Limited of Canberra, Australia. Washington University is the first university anywhere to adopt the system, which is used by only a handful of major film and media archives, including the Library of Congress, the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, the National Library of Norway, the National Film and Sound Archive of Australia, and the Bundesarchiv in Germany.

Although it looks and functions like a simplified library catalog, MAVISweb is much more. It tracks and organizes a wide variety of analog and digital formats (including paper, photographs, audio tape, video tape, film, objects, and digital materials) and brings those formats together in a single record. For example, a record for an interview used in an episode of Eyes on the Prize is linked to the paper transcript, the audio recording, the original film negative, and so forth.

MAVISweb also expresses relationships existing between the Archive’s materials. A single photograph may be grouped with other photos that are thematically related, leading the researcher to additional results. These features enhance the user’s experience by broadening the opportunity for discovery. In addition, MAVISweb offers instant access to the Archive’s digitized material. Still in the development stages, this feature links digital assets (text, photographs, audio, and video) to their respective records, widening the collections reach. Currently, transcripts of 115 interviews conducted for Eyes on the Prize I are available using this feature.

It’s one more example of how the Libraries are changing, Jim says. “Just as our society is becoming more media-oriented, so are teaching and learning. It’s not just about books anymore. Students today are very media-savvy, and they’re interested in drawing on all kinds of resources, not just the printed word, to do their research.”

The Archive where Jim works is a multimedia treasure trove. It contains some 7000 film and audio reels, 4,000 audio-cassettes and CDs, 3,000 photographs, 16,000 videos, and 10,000 manuscripts—all of it in a variety of shapes, sizes, and formats. Any way you cut it, that’s a lot of information. But much of it would be irretrievable without some way of migrating from the old state-of-the-art to the new.

That’s where Jim comes in. He has over 20 years of experience in media production, preservation, and digitization, including years at CBS in New York. The ultimate goal, he says, is to digitize most of the Archive’s holdings and present them in stable digital formats. Of course, that would take multiple lifetimes, so for now he’s concentrating on one project at a time.

One project he’s currently working on involves the so-called “Blackside School” recordings from the Henry Hampton School System film library. Blackside was the film production company Hampton started in 1968, and for every documentary he produced he and his team devoted weeks to extend the back-ground research before they ever touched a camera. They read books, watched films, brought in speakers, conducted phone interviews, and generally immersed themselves in their subject. They went back to school, in other words, and learned as much as they could before they started.

Eventually, Hampton and his crew started recording these background sessions in order to preserve a record of their process. Long before every movie on DVD is released with a “Making of...” mini-documentary, Blackside was pioneering the genre. “Today these recordings stand as valuable documents themselves—all the more so when they can be placed within a collection and accompanied by a few keystrokes of historians, producers, scholars, students, and filmmakers working on their own documentaries. The potential user base is enormous, Jim says. “The demand for materials like these is only growing,” he says. “As the technology improves, so do the possibilities.”
Fryman Promoted to Head of Library Systems

BILL FRYMAN, who has served the Libraries for several years as manager of Systems and Operation Support, was promoted to head of Library Systems, effective November 1, 2008. This promotion reflects Bill’s increasing responsibilities over the past several years. As the Libraries’ reliance on technology has grown, the size and complexity of our Systems staff and physical infrastructure have grown to meet those needs. Bill has played a leading role in planning and implementing this growth, overseeing the operations of the Systems staff and, increasingly, representing the library in technical meetings with colleagues across the University.

Foster Honored by the Black Caucus of the American Library Association

Washington University librarian MAKIBA FOSTER was featured in the March/April newsletter of the Black Caucus of the American Library Association (BCALA). An article entitled “Meet Six of BCALA’s Dynamic Women” profiled African American librarians who have “worked tirelessly in the dedicated commitment to their profession and to their professional growth and development.”

In 2008, Makiba joined the Washington University Libraries as subject librarian for American History and Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies. When asked to describe a major contribution that she has made to librarianship, Makiba answered, “My presence within the profession is a type of contribution. Efforts to diversify librarianship continue to be an ongoing struggle, but I am proud to be counted among my fellow librarians of color. I also feel that my presence within the library profession provides young African Americans with an example of an alternative career path other than those traditionally emphasized within the African American community.”

Makiba believes that today’s financial crisis is “a great time for libraries to actively promote our services as a free alternative to rising costs in these uncertain economic times. We can meet the needs of our users through exciting programming, services, and acquisitions. Yes, we can!”

To read the complete article, visit the BCALA website at www.bcala.org and click on the March/April newsletter.

Atkins Appointed Committee Chair of the Greater Western Library Alliance

In January 2009, the Greater Western Library Alliance (GWLA) Board of Directors appointed STEPHANIE ATKINS as the new chairperson of the Resource Sharing and Document Delivery Committee. Stephanie is Washington University Libraries’ head of Access Services. Her term began immediately and will last through 2010. GWLA is a consortium of 32 research libraries located across 17 Midwestern and western states, with common interests in scholarly communications, interlibrary loan, shared electronic resources, cooperative collection development, digital libraries, staff development, and continuing education. In her new role, Stephanie coordinated many of the details for the April 2009 annual meeting of GWLA, a three-day event hosted this year by the Washington University Libraries and held on the Danforth Campus.

Joslin Named Access Services Technical Assistant

ERIC JOSLIN, formerly the shelving coordinator in Olin Library, was promoted to the new position of Access Services technical assistant in March. Eric provides technology support for Access Services, maintaining web pages, documenting policies and practices, and exploring how new technologies can be used to improve customer service or streamline workflows. Eric trains department staff in new technical implementations. He also collects department statistics and explores new ways to measure the department’s activities.

Lacerte Wins Electronic Resources Award

SKYE LACERTE, curator for the Modern Graphic History Library in Special Collections, was recently recognized at the annual conference of the Art Libraries Society of North America, held this April in Indianapolis. Lacerte and two of her colleagues shared the Worldwide Books Award for Electronic Resources, which recognizes outstanding electronic publications in librarianship or visual resources curatorship. The award was given for their work on the online exhibition archive of The Museum of Contemporary Art in Los Angeles (moca.org/archive). The online archive contains a record of the museum’s exhibitions dating back to 1983, complete with project descriptions, images, correspondence with artists, and descriptions of archival holdings. Skye worked on the project before she joined the Libraries as curator of the Modern Graphic History Library in 2008. The Art Libraries Society of North America is a professional organization devoted to fostering excellence in art and design librarianship and image management.

Toliver Vice Chairs Literary Awards Committee

Each year, the Black Caucus of the American Library Association (BCALA) recognizes excellence in adult fiction and non-fiction by African American authors of books published the prior year. VIRGINIA DOWSING TOLIVER, associate dean for Administration at Washington University Libraries, served as vice chair of the awards’ selection committee this year and will remain on the committee through 2010. She earlier served a six-year term on the committee (from 2000-2006) and was vice chair for four of those years.

The winners for this year have been announced, and awards will be presented at the American Library Association conference, held in Chicago this July. Winners are selected by a committee of librarians from academic and public libraries across the country. Committee members receive books throughout the year and review approximately 150 books each year. To read about this year’s winners, visit the BCALA’s website at www.bcala.org and click on the March/April newsletter.
Kristen Dattoli
EVENING MANAGER, BUSINESS LIBRARY
In November 2008, Kristen Dattoli became the new evening manager for the Business Library, where she provides research assistance, handles circulation and reserve services, hires and supervises student assistants, and is responsible for other miscellaneous duties. She previously worked in the access services unit of Webster University’s Emerson Library. Kristen earned a B.A. in Social Science with a certificate in Women’s Studies from Webster University, graduating sum laude.

Maria Efimova
ART & ARCHITECTURE LIBRARY ASSISTANT; MODERN GRAPHIC HISTORY LIBRARY ASSISTANT
Maria Efimova joined the staff as a library assistant in January, splitting her time equally between the Art & Architecture Library and the Modern Graphic History Library. Maria works with library users, answering questions and locating resources. She helps organize archival and course materials; performs basic preservation work; and handles various other tasks, including digitizing materials and helping prepare exhibits. Maria is a recent graduate of Washington University, with a B.F.A. in painting and a B.A. in Comparative Literature. As an undergraduate, she was a student assistant in the Art & Architecture Library.

Denise Hannibal
LIBRARY TECHNICAL ASSISTANT, ACQUISITIONS UNIT
Denise Hannibal began working as a technical assistant in the Acquisitions unit in January. Denise’s many duties include placing and receiving orders; verifying bibliographic information; and creating records in the Libraries’ automated catalog. She acts as a liaison between subject librarians and vendors. Denise earned a B.A. in Spanish Language and Culture and in East Asian Language and Culture at the University of Kansas. She earned an M.S. in Library and Information Science from the University of Illinois at Champaign-Urbana.

Ryan Christine Wallace
EARTH & PLANETARY SCIENCES LIBRARY ASSISTANT
As the library assistant in the Earth & Planetary Sciences Library since late 2008, Ryan Christine Wallace is involved in all day-to-day operations of that library. In addition to handling circulation, reserves, and binding, she assists with the provision of reference services and the training and supervision of student assistants. She previously was a cataloging assistant at St. Louis University’s Pius XII Library. Ryan graduated from Washington University in 2005, with a major in Earth & Planetary Sciences.

Azusa Tanaka
JAPANESE CATALOG & SUBJECT LIBRARIAN
Azusa Tanaka joined the Libraries as Japanese catalog and subject librarian in early 2009. She handles outreach, reference, instruction, and collection development, cataloging, and management in Japanese studies. She develops and maintains electronic resources. She decided to become a librarian after working at Columbia University’s East Asian library, as an archivist assistant processing visual materials on Japanese puppet theater. Since March 2007, Azusa has been working for the National Diet Library of Japan, translating their articles about developments in Japanese libraries into English. She earned an M.S. in Library and Information Science degree from Syracuse University; a B.A. in English from Doshisha Women’s College (Japan); and an M.A. in International Studies (Korean studies) from the University of Washington.

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In March, lexicographer ERIN MCKEAN spent a day at Washington University speaking to librarians, undergraduate honors fellows, faculty members, and others about her love of dictionaries, the future of lexicography, and all things wild and wooly.

McKeen, a self-styled “dictionary evangelist” (who also writes a blog by that name), is one of the youngest editors of a major English language dictionary. She was most recently chief consulting editor for American Dictionaries at Oxford University Press and served as editor-in-chief of the New Oxford American Dictionary, 2nd edition.

McKeen’s lecture—“Dictionaries Are Broken (So Let’s Fix Them)—was sponsored by the Undergraduate Honors Fellowship program in Arts & Sciences. Having a “soft spot” for libraries, McKean also toured Olle Library and met with library staff for an informal Q&A session earlier in the day.

Her love of language goes back to her childhood. McKean said, when she realized at a young age that she wanted to write dictionaries. Her quest to break into this highly specific and unusual field eventually led her to study linguistics at the University of Chicago. It was there that she made her first foray into lexicography when she applied for a summer internship at Scott Foresman, publisher of children’s dictionaries.

The internship was open only to minorities, but McKean’s request was so impassioned and unusual that the publisher stretched the definition to include her, because “people who want to write dictionaries are in a minority.” This led to the first of many “defining” job experiences. McKean has written several books for aspiring vocabulary virtuosos, including Words of Power, Totally Wild and Wonderful Words, and That’s Amore: The Language of Love for Lovers of Language. She also edits the journal VERBATIM: The Language Quarterly and serves on the advisory board of the Wordnik Foundation.

McKeen’s most recent project, coming soon to a computer screen near you, is a newfangled name—Wordnik. Based on the premise that the best way to learn a word is to see how other people use it, Wordnik relies less on authoritative definitions and more on written examples of words in context.

The ultimate goal, McKean says, is to show how dictionaries can function better, adapt faster, and reach further than print technology allows by harnessing the power of the internet.

Although the site is still in beta mode at the time of this writing, readers interested in trying it may request a password by visiting wordnik.com.

For more about McKean, visit her blog at dicti-naryevangelist.com. As a sidenote, she also writes about dresses and fashion at the blog A Dress A Day.