

# What I Learned from my Summer Research Scholar:

## The Transformative Impact of Undergraduate Research Mentorship on the Liaison Librarian Narrative

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### Introduction

In 2017, the University Libraries of Grand Valley State University (GVSU) began a partnership with GVSU's Office of Undergraduate Research and Scholarship (OURS) which extended the OURS Scholars Summer Program to include the Library Scholars Summer Program. The goal of the Library Scholars Summer Program is to "provide students with the opportunity to have an intensive research experience using the library's resources and collections."<sup>1</sup> Students are mentored or co-mentored by library faculty and receive a \$2,000 stipend for twenty hours of commitment per week for ten weeks, culminating with a product that enhances the library for other users and contributes to the Grand Valley library mission and goals.

The Library Scholars Summer Program is one of the rigorous and robust OURS Scholar & Fellowship Programs. Running concurrently with the Student Summer Scholars and Beckman Scholars program, the library scholars are required to attend several training sessions hosted by OURS prior to and during the program. Mandatory training included completing an online certificate course on responsible conduct of research, participating in an on-campus all-day research orientation, and completing an Individual Development Plan (IDP). In addition to the OURS-required components, the library scholars were expected to participate in weekly cohort readings and discussions, individual meetings with their mentors (which may include additional readings), and maintain a research journal that is shared with their mentor for formative feedback. Amongst all the required meetings, each scholar must narrow or hone the scope of their initial project proposal, implement the project, and present the final product to the entire OURS summer scholars community.

In the summer of 2018, four student scholars were accepted into the program. These students were respectively majoring in Geography; Photography; Women, Gender, and Sexuality Studies; and Psychology/Economics. Erica Millspaugh, Liaison Librarian to Legal Studies, Criminal Justice, and Hospitality & Tourism Management, was chosen to mentor the Psychology/Economics major, and Barbara Harvey, Liaison Librarian to Nursing, Public Health, Clinical Dietetics, and Diagnostic & Imaging Sciences (and previous liaison to several science departments), was selected to mentor the Geography major. There were no librarians available whose subject areas or educational background matched either of these two students. Erica and Barbara each have a

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second master's degree (in addition to a Library & Information Science master's); Erica's second master's is an MFA in visual arts, and Barbara's is in biology. Because the main focus of the library scholars' projects are library resources, the authors and other faculty mentors in the program thought Erica and Barbara possessed the knowledge and skills to effectively mentor these students.

In this paper, each liaison will summarize their experience mentoring a library scholar, highlighting the benefits gained and challenges encountered. A literature review summarizes current practices of librarian involvement with undergraduate research, which indicates that GVSU's Library Scholars Summer Program is unique in several ways. While the authors acknowledge that there is a wealth of literature about the benefits to students of engaging in "high impact" practices, including undergraduate research, the focus of this contributed paper is on the experience of the liaison librarian as the primary mentor of an undergraduate student research project.<sup>2</sup>

## Literature Review

There is a dearth of literature discussing the role of librarians as undergraduate research mentors. In his highly-cited 2009 paper on the role of academic libraries in undergraduate research Stamatoplos states: "Based solely on the LIS literature, therefore, one would not know of the existence and nature of independent mentored undergraduate research or of examples of library engagement with it."<sup>3</sup> One explanation, according to Hayes-Bohanan, is "The lack of literature may be related to the fact that Library Science is not typically an undergraduate field of study. Moreover, even those students who might pursue a project in Library Science would probably look to an LIS faculty member before seeking the mentorship of a practicing librarian."<sup>4</sup> This is because there are few librarians who take on the role of a primary mentor in an undergraduate research project, even at academic institutions in which librarians have faculty status.<sup>5</sup> The percentage of academic librarians with faculty status is not definitively known, but multiple surveys indicate that fewer than 40 percent of academic librarians are considered tenure-track faculty.<sup>6</sup> Regardless of faculty status, there may be reluctance to have student research overseen by a mentor without a doctoral degree or second master's degree (other than the master of Library Science or its equivalent). The American Library Association's Member Demographics Study of 2017 shows that fewer than 26 percent of librarians have a second master's degree and only 4.5 percent have a PhD.<sup>7</sup>

Perhaps based on a perceived lack of subject expertise, there are few published papers indicating that librarians are the primary mentor in an undergraduate research project. The role of librarians in undergraduate research described in some papers is well outside of the mentoring relationship. Jones, Canuel, and Mueller describe typical library involvement with an undergraduate research program: librarians creating an information literacy workshop series for student researchers.<sup>8</sup> Similarly, Wiebe describes current library support for undergraduate research at Hope College, including information literacy instruction, reference consultations, and simply providing space in the library for student research.<sup>9</sup>

Several articles describe programs in which librarians collaborate with non-library faculty either as co-mentors or an equally involved collaborative role. For example, the Michigan State University (MSU) Social Work Undergraduate Research Experience (URE) program pairs a faculty mentor with a small group of librarians.<sup>10</sup> In the MSU program, the librarians, selected for their specific roles in the library, and the faculty member mentor a group of undergraduate researchers for an academic year. In this program, the primary focus of the librarians is on data management.<sup>11</sup> Rowland and Knapp, a sociology professor and a librarian, describe several ways in which librarians can play a role in "engaged scholarship" (includes undergraduate research), including the passive role of organizing and managing research data or providing information literacy instruction, either in a single "one-shot" session or in multiple sessions as a librarian "embedded" in a course throughout the semester.<sup>12</sup> In another paper, Knapp describes being embedded in a social sciences research lab course, teaching and lead-

ing students alongside of two faculty members.<sup>13</sup> Knapp argues that his value in this role stems from the fact that students are choosing their own research projects: “Many professors simply have students do the next step of their own research, and thus believe themselves fully capable of guiding students to all needed resources and through all issues of disciplinary practice. But when students are driving the research agenda, no professor feels immediately confident enough to address the many research topics involved, making the librarian a valuable asset. The librarian teaches the students to become independent learners: learning how to recognize when they need information; how to access it; and when to incorporate it into their own knowledge.”<sup>14</sup>

More recently, articles have been published about library-led undergraduate research programs that approach a similar mentoring structure to GVSU’s Library Scholars Summer Program. In 2016, the Gettysburg College Musselman Library “piloted a student-focused, library-led initiative designed to promote creative undergraduate research: The Digital Scholarship Summer Fellowship (DSSF).”<sup>15</sup> This program is similar to GVSU’s Library Scholars program by offering a paid intensive summer research opportunity for undergraduates, although Gettysburg’s program included housing for the fellows and paid a little more. A key difference between the two programs is that all the projects in the DSSF program centered on materials from the library’s special collections. The DSSF program “wanted students to have the freedom to choose any type of project on any topic, we also knew some students would thrive with more guidance. Consequently, we identified some primary source collections in our Special Collections and College Archives that were already digitized and ready to be used and interpreted in digital scholarship projects.”<sup>16</sup> In GVSU’s program, students could choose a project that incorporated any aspect of the library.

Another project described in the same book as Wertsberger and Miessler’s chapter was a mentoring partnership facilitated by the University of Iowa’s Iowa Center for Research by Undergraduates (ICRU) and described by Hildreth Chen and Ross in “Mentoring a Peer: A Feminist Ethic for Directing Undergraduate Humanities Research.”<sup>17</sup> This collaboration was similar to our experience because Hildreth Chen has a terminal degree, a PhD in English, but the project she mentored was not based on the English discipline. In our case, Erica holds a terminal degree in visual arts, but her mentee’s project did not involve art. Barbara holds a second MA in Biology, but her mentee’s project involved Geography and GIS mapping.

Based on this search of LIS and related literature on mentoring undergraduate research, GVSU University Libraries’ Library Scholar Summer Program has several unique features. The most striking unique feature is that the librarian is the primary mentor. Students may consult professors in their major discipline, but it is not a required part of the program. In the next two sections, the authors will discuss their experiences as primary mentors, challenges faced, and benefits gained by themselves, the University Libraries, and the student scholars.

## **Librarian Narrative #1: Erica’s Perspective**

I work in the Professional Programs department of GVSU Libraries as the liaison librarian to Criminal Justice, Hospitality and Tourism Management, and Legal Studies. My office is on the downtown urban campus of GVSU, while OURS and the main library, which houses the undergraduate research programs, are located about fifteen miles west of downtown on the main GVSU campus. My educational background includes an MFA in visual arts, an MA in information science and learning technology, and one year of law school. Before entering the field of academic librarianship, I worked in the federal courts system as a legal research librarian which has ultimately led to a lot of my work as an academic liaison librarian being functionally focused on law and legal research in a number of diverse settings across the university and its many colleges. When I volunteered to mentor for the Library Scholars program, I expected that I would be paired with a mentee that was a student in one of my liaison subject areas, or possibly a visual arts or film student because I hold a terminal degree in visual arts.

Instead, I was asked by the Library Scholars program director if I would be interested in mentoring Maureen, an honors college student who was double majoring in Psychology and Economics, because she had an interest in learning more about legal research and was possibly interested in applying to law school. By chance, when I began working with Maureen, I learned that we had another connection, which is that we both have experience working with children with autism and an interest in special education advocacy.

Ultimately, while I did mentor Maureen through a library-centric research project in a manner very similar to the mentorship librarian Doreen Harwood discusses in her article “Growing Our Own: Mentoring Undergraduate Students,” a lot of my role as a mentor turned out to be unexpectedly centered on serving as a career coach for Maureen.<sup>18</sup> This turn towards career coaching happened because the OURS office, for the first time, began requiring all summer scholars to complete an Individual Development Plan (IDP) and follow up with their mentors about their progress on the plan throughout the summer. The IDP focused heavily on planning for graduate school, and thus Maureen and I focused more on her future career than we were likely to have done without the IDP requirement. While Maureen did have an interest in law, I learned it arose out of a passion for advocating for the rights of special education students, and that she was also considering going to graduate school for school psychology. I personally had experiences in undergraduate school in which mentors pushed me to follow their exact career paths, rather than spend time figuring out what was really the best fit for me, and I wanted to make sure I did not do that to Maureen. Instead, I tried to provide my mentee with the training and context to make an informed decision for herself about which graduate program would be the best fit for her personal and professional goals. I helped and encouraged her to research both law and school counseling using the tools of librarianship (because learning about libraries and librarianship was also a goal of the program). Ultimately, Maureen decided to pursue graduate programs in school counseling, rather than law school, which meant I was mentoring her through a career process in a discipline that I didn’t have any firsthand experience with. However, the process of applying to graduate school is similar enough across disciplines that I think I was a valuable support for Maureen as she began to study for the GRE and think about her application strategy, even though I did not have specific knowledge about school psychology education. Our mentoring relationship continued into the fall at which time I wrote Maureen recommendation letters for several graduate school applications, and she recently contacted me to let me know she had been accepted to at least one Ph.D. program in school psychology and had some additional interviews lined up at other schools. While it was certainly a different and unexpected experience to advise a student regarding career choices and graduate school in a discipline I have never myself studied, I felt I had enough life experience to be a sound resource to my mentee, and I ultimately felt relatively comfortable in that role. In reflecting back upon the situation now, it occurs to me that some of my younger colleagues with less life experience or less diverse education and career histories, may not have been comfortable serving in that role. Therefore, my advice is that librarians considering mentoring undergraduate research should be aware that they might end up serving as career coaches. Prospective mentors should be prepared to give career advice, or alternatively, be prepared to seek out assistance if they are not comfortable serving as a career coach—especially in the event that a student mentee is seeking graduate education in a field outside of librarianship.

Lack of adequate time in my work schedule, and the effect of traveling between our university’s multiple locations on my time, was the biggest challenge I experienced as a mentor. I felt I did not have enough time to be the truly engaged mentor I wished my mentee could have, and my office being located fifteen miles away from the home base for the program on our main campus, which is where Maureen lived as well, exacerbated the disconnect I felt. This location challenge is not necessarily particular to mentoring, as the additional time it takes to participate in activities and meetings located on two different campuses with a significant commute between

them is a struggle that I have heard most of the librarians who work on our satellite campuses express at one time or another. However, the location challenge felt a bit more pointed in this case. While I wasn't necessarily expected to be present for all twenty hours of Maureen's work week at the main campus library, mentors were expected to be readily available to answer questions. The librarian mentors that had offices on the main campus were more accessible to their mentees, while my mentee had to contact me to set up a meeting time to travel to my downtown office, or for me to travel to the main campus, which ultimately meant we were not able to have spur of the moment or accidental coaching sessions. I would hesitate to participate as a mentor for a program based on another campus again, because I feel that our mentoring relationship suffered because of the barriers that location issues created. Ideally, I would have liked to be present in a location readily available to Maureen for drop-ins during all twenty hours of her weekly work. I would encourage librarians considering mentorship to think about locations, demands on their schedule and the mentee's schedule, and the room within those circumstances for a supportive mentoring relationship that can be reinforced by daily interactions.

As her culminating work, Maureen created a LibGuide entitled "Research Help! From a Student for a Student," which was intended to serve as a point-of-need guide for students who have never done research before, and was particularly based in Maureen's experiences as a Resident Advisor (RA).<sup>19</sup> As an RA, Maureen often fielded research questions from students late at night when the library was no longer open. The LibGuide Maureen created was viewed over 400 times during the Fall 2018 semester and was well received by the libraries' peer research consultants and user experience staff. Because our libraries do not have traditional reference desks, the front of the house staff can always use more tools to help students with last minute research needs. Maureen also used her position as a resident advisor to disseminate the research information and the link to the LibGuide using bulletin boards and programing in the residence halls. Maureen's project expertly represented her abilities to spot a student need or gap in services, perform research about the best solution to that problem, and to implement a plan to address the problem. That ability to recognize and meet a need, particularly in an educational setting, is a skill that will serve Maureen well as a school counselor, and thus I feel her project bridged the worlds of school counseling and librarianship well. The project was an immediate asset to GVSU libraries and the students we serve and provided an excellent experience and product for Maureen's resume moving forward. While my mentee and I found that our disciplinary worlds blended seamlessly for this project, some of the other librarian mentors expressed having a more difficult time linking their mentees projects to the work of librarianship which is a requirement of our program. Thus, especially given the extensive time commitment discussed in the previous paragraph, I would encourage librarians considering undergraduate research mentoring to consider whether or not the mentees should be students considering a career in librarianship, or if the student is preparing to take another career path, how the work undertaken by the mentee will make an important impact to both the mission of the library and the student's educational and career goals.

## **Librarian Narrative #2: Barbara's Perspective**

Librarianship is a second career for me. Before earning an MA in library and information science and ultimately finding a niche as a liaison at GVSU, I was an Associate Professor of Biology at a community college. With fifteen years of teaching experience in addition to six years as a science liaison librarian, I felt confident that I could successfully mentor a student in the Library Scholars Summer Program. As with any new undertaking, I encountered challenges navigating through this new experience, but I also gained valuable insight about student research practices that can help me continue to develop as a student-centered liaison librarian. Reflection on my participation in the program also allowed me to identify a few practical tips I can share with other librarians who wish to mentor undergraduate student research.



In the winter semester of 2018, shortly after I had agreed to mentor a student in the upcoming Library Scholars program, I took advantage of an opportunity to transfer liaison roles from a science liaison on our main campus in Allendale, Michigan, to a health sciences liaison position at our downtown Grand Rapids campus. I was asked to serve on the search committee for my replacement for the science liaison and agreed to provide liaison services for both positions until my replacement was hired. This led to the first challenge I encountered as a Library Scholars mentor: time constraints. Mentoring a student in this intensive summer program is a time challenge for a librarian with one position on one campus, but I was faced with juggling the demands of building relationships with stakeholders in my new liaison departments, which included scheduling individual research consultations with dozens of Doctor of Nursing Practice students, meeting the needs of my current departments which were fifteen miles away in Allendale, screening and interviewing candidates for the science liaison position, and preparing for and participating in all the meetings and activities of the Library Scholars program! These were just the most pressing requirements for my job; there were also service obligations, collection work, and professional development activities previously agreed to. Obviously, something had to give, and my golf game suffered. More seriously, some aspects of my mentoring were impacted. Because I had already registered and paid for a four-day workshop on systematic reviews and a three-day science “boot camp” conference, I had to miss a couple of the weekly cohort meetings, so I missed some of the students’ insightful discussion of the readings. In our program, each mentor essentially functioned as a supervisor of the student’s work and the students were expected to contribute twenty hours a week working on their project, primarily on campus. Mentors were expected to be available for consultations with their mentees, and there were times my mentee and I could only discuss issues via text or email. There are more ways my work was impacted by my over-committed schedule, but the main takeaway is that mentoring an undergraduate research project is a time-consuming activity, and anyone planning to do so should look carefully at their calendar and obligations during the scheduled time.

Another challenge I faced was the “supervisory” aspect of the Library Scholars program. This is a paid position for the students (mentors received a small stipend), and the expectation was that they would devote twenty hours each week to the project. The students were granted quite a bit of autonomy; there was no time sheet to be completed and submitted. Mentors were expected to somewhat subjectively determine if the scholars were staying on track. This was done through the weekly cohort meetings, individual check-ins, and journal logs. My mentee, Aaron, created a Google Doc for his journal and granted me editing access. But he created the journal during one of the times I was out of town for a workshop, and the link he sent did not grant me access. After a few back-and-forth emails, I was eventually able to view and edit the journal file. Throughout the summer there was a lag time between postings and a lag time between my formative feedback. Although the intention was to allow the scholars to exercise their creativity by not specifying a format for the journal, if I were to mentor another library scholar, I would create a template in Google Docs (or similar collaborative platform) and invite the student to access it. The student could still create on-the-fly entries in a handwritten journal, or through video recordings, photographs, or sketches, and upload them, but a weekly summary would benefit the scholar as well as the mentor.

The supervisory role itself is an issue. In her co-authored chapter with Katie Ross, “*Mentoring a Peer: A Feminist Ethic for Directing Undergraduate Humanities Research*,” Amy Hildreth Chen focuses on the power dynamics that exist in most academic mentor/mentee relationships.<sup>20</sup> In her case, Amy was “not a faculty member, so Katie was never her student. Amy oversaw Katie’s research as an academic librarian who holds a PhD, not an MLIS. As a result, Amy simultaneously inhabited the role of a faculty member and a librarian.”<sup>21</sup> But Amy approached the mentoring role from a feminist view of pedagogy, which emphasizes egalitarian relationships. Rather than meeting in Amy’s office, the pair met in other spaces in the library and on campus in order to deemphasize the faculty/student roles.

In my role as a liaison, I am a faculty member, but I do not supervise any other employees. As mentioned, I have a lot of teaching experience and have supervised many students in classrooms and labs, but as a librarian I am not the “instructor of record” for any course, I do not issue student grades, nor do I sign any time sheets. As a mentor, I was expected to in some way account for the work of my mentee. This posed some frustration early in the program when I hadn’t heard from my mentee for a few days and could not access the online journal he created. I contacted the coordinator of the Library Scholars program to express concern that I hadn’t heard from my mentee and sought advice on how to proceed. The program coordinator offered to contact him or have the OURS office contact him if I still hadn’t heard from him in a few days. Luckily, I received an email from him the next day explaining that he’d been on a family camping trip and didn’t have phone or internet access for a few days. We were able to get back on track quickly and didn’t have any related issues for the rest of the summer. As one who does not normally supervise others, I was not prepared for dealing with accountability issues. In the future, I would establish clear expectations from the beginning. In this case, I was reluctant to exercise authority initially because I wanted Aaron to see me as more of a peer and didn’t want him to resent my authority. I also didn’t have the time to micromanage another person; it was imperative that the student be able to work independently, and that worked fine for Aaron and me. But some undergraduates are more reliant on supervision to stay on task, and accountability expectations need to be established early in the mentoring process. If the mentoring involves course credit, this could also contribute to a power differential. I would encourage other librarians considering mentoring students to think carefully about the power dynamics and decide if specific rules regarding accountability need to be established.

A final challenge I identified is more academic than personal. The scholar I mentored was a geography major, and his project involved using GIS software to create a StoryMap of the library based on occupancy and noise levels.<sup>22</sup> As mentioned, I do not have a background in geography, and I had never used GIS software. Aaron transferred to GVSU as a rising junior from a local community college and had only completed one year at GVSU as a geography major when he applied for the Library Scholars program. I mention this because Aaron did not have much time to establish relationships with his professors in the Geography Department when he was selected as a Library Scholar. The application for the program required a letter of recommendation from a faculty member in the student’s major department. The faculty member who wrote Aaron’s letter of recommendation was out of the country all summer and essentially unreachable if we wanted to consult his professor. The Geography Department at GVSU is small, and very few faculty were available on campus in the summer. If mentoring again, I would establish a line of communication with a disciplinary faculty member for consultations as needed.

Despite the challenges, there were benefits gained from this experience. First, I was able to work more closely with students than I do in the course of my regular liaison duties. Most of the instruction I do is “one-shot” classes, a single session within a course, and I seldom learn students’ names. With Aaron, we had many conversations over the summer and we developed a solid professional relationship. In fact, I got to know all four of the Library Scholars—their research interests and future goals, etc. A benefit of this for my librarian role is that I gained insight into how undergraduates at my institution approach research, and how they use and perceive the library. For example, the mentors learned that most students do not know anything about library staff organization, nor the role of a faculty librarian. They assumed anyone working in the library must be a librarian. Many students and even other faculty members on campus are unaware that librarians are faculty, too, and we have subject expertise and a good understanding of scholarly communication issues. So, librarians are often overlooked as experts who can assist with a wide range of research. This reinforces the fact that liaisons must “sell” their services across campus. We shouldn’t assume that others know what we do and are choosing to ignore us! Another surprising insight learned from working closely with a small group of students is that many students

feel embarrassed to be seen reading signage in public. In a discussion about the spaces in our library this topic came up. GVSU's libraries use very little signage, relying on the architectural design and colors incorporated into the furniture and building to guide students, and this seems to work for the majority. I had never heard of anyone being reluctant to read a directional sign, but this group of students, who didn't know each other before this program, all agreed they would rather wander around and hope to find what they were looking for rather than stop and read a sign.

Other aspects of the student research process came to light as well. Most of our students don't like to use databases if they aren't required to. Our Library Scholars were juniors and seniors, but a couple of them admitted that they never searched individual databases, preferring the discovery layer search on the library's home page. For in-depth research, the discovery service pales in comparison to specific databases. Although I have always highlighted specific databases on the subject guides I create and my lesson plans revolve around specific databases, this fact is a good reminder that when discussing information literacy instruction with other faculty, I can suggest they consider requiring students to use specific databases for some assignments in order to build better information literacy skills for the students.

Additionally, mentoring in this program bolstered my leadership skills. I gained more confidence over the summer not only in supervising student work, but by having mentors in our cohort each take the lead of the cohort meetings a few times over the summer, we guided other mentors as well through chosen readings and discussion questions.

The final benefit I will discuss stems from one of the challenges: I gained disciplinary knowledge in geography. The fact that I don't have a degree in geography (and have never taken a geography course) may cause some academics to question my ability to successfully mentor a student in a geography-related project. But my student taught me about the field, especially applying GIS technology to library spaces. After reading an article I had assigned him about a library space use study, Aaron said: "This is really a geography study, but geography isn't mentioned!" We discovered that the geography literature and the LIS literature seldom overlapped, but the two fields have more in common and more to learn from each other than the current literature indicates. Aaron showed me how the ArcGIS software worked, and I had never seen that before. He introduced me to StoryMaps, which I had also never heard of, but has promise for library use.<sup>23</sup> In exchange, I introduced Aaron to several geography-specific databases and resources, and together we were able to discover relevant research for his project. Because the purpose of the Library Scholars Summer Program is to "provide students with the opportunity to have an intensive research experience using the library's resources and collections," as mentioned earlier, I was able to effectively mentor this student by leveraging my expertise in information literacy.

## Conclusion

As we stated in the introduction, while there has been research about librarians supporting undergraduate research programs, there has been little research about librarians as primary mentors in undergraduate research programs. If librarians are acting as primary mentors, more scholarship is needed to document the practice so that observations and patterns can be identified. Challenges we experienced as primary mentors included location and time constraints, adjusting to supervisory roles, and leading in-depth research in unfamiliar disciplines. Benefits and positive outcomes we experienced as mentors included being able to work more closely with students than in our daily work, improving our leadership skills, and recognizing hidden strengths in areas such as career coaching. The cohort meetings allowed us to gain new insights into student research preferences and perceptions of libraries, and the one-on-one mentoring gave us new knowledge and skills pertaining to the individual projects and their related disciplines. At the end of the program the mentors and the program director



met to discuss successes, challenges, and ideas for improvement to the program. The program director has used that feedback to implement changes for next summer's Library Scholars Summer Program. Currently, information about the GVSU Library Scholars program can be found on the GVSU OURS website (<https://www.gvsu.edu/ours/ssp/gvsu-library-scholars-summer-program-385.htm>).

## Endnotes

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