

Following the Yik Yak: Using Social Media Observations to Understand Student Needs on College Campuses

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In Brief: *What can social media tell us about our patrons? We look at Yik Yak through the lens of library ethnography, suggesting that anonymous social media can reveal not only complaints and commentary about library services and spaces, but also uncover students' emotional and social experience with research and study space. Looking at social media posts on Yik Yak, we uncover common threads of social dynamics, expectations of quiet space, and frustration with studying, all of which increase our understanding of student experiences in US and international libraries.*

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Image: [<https://www.flickr.com/photos/meadowsaffron/32342037703/>, Parseltongue in the Library, screenshot by Celia Emmelhainz, CC-BY]

Introduction

As librarians, we always want to better understand and connect with our patrons—and to use our understanding to set up more useful spaces and services. In the past 10 years, librarians have moved from relying on [user surveys](#) to working with [anthropologists](#) and [ethnographically-trained librarians](#). These collaborations let us learn not just what our users *say* to our face, but what they actually *do*—and how they live their lives in relation to the library as a space and social place.

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[Ethnographic methods](#) provide librarians with a series of approaches that let us see our libraries in their social context.² These could include things such as inhabiting study spaces and watching the social habits of patrons in our library, observing spatial usage and leading mapping exercises with students, embedding in research methods or capstone seminar courses to observe how library research is taught, and even inviting students to document their own experiences through photos, videos, and research diaries.³ Such ethnographic methods differ from the “interviews and surveys” baseline of qualitative user experience research in libraries, as ethnographic methods can allow us to *embed* over time in our users’ social and virtual spaces. Inhabiting the same world that our students inhabit can lead us to much deeper understanding than just recording their reported experiences through surveys, focus groups, or interviews alone.

In this article, we take another ethnographic angle, that of [digital ethnography](#). By collecting and reflecting on changing social media posts, we as researchers use the internet to observe—in real time—how patrons discuss their engagement with the library. Anonymous, location-based services like Yik Yak let us practice [trace ethnography](#), observing the times, places, and digital traces by which students express their relationship to the library.⁴

One puzzle for us was that whether we run qualitative or quantitative studies, our libraries still find it hard to gain feedback from those who do not currently use our services.⁵ How can we know what people are thinking if they don’t share their thoughts? How can we learn what students need if they don’t darken our revolving doors, use our website, or volunteer for a research study with a side incentive of pizza?

And even when patrons complete an interview or survey, do they realize they’re editing their thoughts—perhaps based on a desire to be polite and helpful to us as librarians?

Using Social Media Apps to Reach Out and Listen to Students

With this in mind, we chose to gain a new angle on our libraries by analyzing anonymous and ephemeral social media posts on Yik Yak. Public, school, and academic librarians already use social media such as Twitter and Facebook to gain feedback from tech-savvy users.⁶ Yet trend-

² Celia Emmelhainz, *Interviews, focus groups, and social media: lessons from collaborative library ethnographies in America and Kazakhstan*, conference paper for IFLA 2016, <http://library.ifla.org/id/eprint/1329>.

³ Nancy Fried Foster and Susan Gibbons, eds., *Studying Students: The Undergraduate Research Project at the University of Rochester* (Chicago: Association of College and Research Libraries, 2007), and Nancy Fried Foster, ed. *Studying Students: a Second Look* (Chicago: Association of College and Research Libraries, 2013).

⁴ R. Stuart Geiger and David Ribes, “Trace ethnography: following coordination through documentary practices,” *44th Hawaii International Conference on System Sciences (HICSS)/IEEE* (2011): 1-10: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1109/HICSS.2011.455> (accessed March 20, 2014).

⁵ Leah Emary, “The why, what and how of using ethnography for designing user experience in libraries (and a few pitfalls to avoid),” in *User Experience in Libraries: Applying Ethnography and Human-Centred Design*, ed. Andy Priestner and Matt Borg (Routledge, 2016, p. 68-93).

⁶ Andy Burkhardt, “Social media: a guide for college and university libraries,” *C&RL* 71, no. 1 (2010): 10-24, <http://crln.acrl.org/content/71/1/10.full.pdf+html>. Elizabeth Price and Rebecca Richardson, “Eavesdropping on the user experience,” *C&RL News*, 78, no. 1 (2017): 16-10, <http://crln.acrl.org/content/78/1/16.full> (accessed February 9, 2017).

responsive patrons are always moving one from one network to another. A prior generation left Tribe, Friendster, and MySpace for Facebook, while today's students may leave shell profiles on Facebook, while using other apps in order to avoid parents, teachers, and corporate advertisers.⁷ One student at UT Austin describes Facebook as "dead to us" and an "awkward family dinner party,"⁸ noting that his friends now enjoy Medium, GroupMe, WhatsApp, Tumblr, and Snapchat instead.

As younger patrons leave networks like Facebook, they move to ephemeral social media such as Snapchat, where messages disappear after viewing;⁹ Instagram, where they curate daily life for a wide audience;¹⁰ Whisper, where they anonymously share their "secrets" with those nearby; and Yik Yak, a source of anonymous chatter on many college campuses.

While Instagram remains strong, though, most apps are ephemeral. They move in and out of popularity, with posts fading out over minutes, hours, or days. In fact, Yik Yak itself announced in April 2017 that it is ceasing operations.¹¹ We argue, though, that capturing these passing streams of student experiences in the library continues to have value. Like culture as a social construct, social discourse on social media apps is both passing and long-lasting in impact. So why pay attention to passing trends, and how can we capture lasting value from these ephemeral posts?

Listening to campus Yaks

At the time we reviewed each of these apps in 2015, Yik Yak was reaching the height of its popularity. Discussions of the pros and cons of social media were appearing regularly in the *Chronicle of Higher Education* and *Inside Higher Ed*. Among those apps existing at the time, we found Yik Yak's comments on campus life to be the most revealing in understanding our patrons.

Started by two graduates of Furman University, Yik Yak was a mobile app that launched in 2013 and gained rapid popularity on and near college campuses, as well as some high schools.¹² It let users within a few miles¹³ share anonymous, wry comments on daily life, and allowed other

⁷ Jillian D'Onofro, "What teens say about facebook, instagram, and snapchat," *Business Insider* (2013), <http://www.businessinsider.com/what-teens-say-about-facebook-instagram-and-snapchat-2013-11> (accessed February 7, 2015).

⁸ Andrew Watts, "A Teenager's View on Social Media," *Medium* (2015), <https://medium.com/backchannel/a-teenagers-view-on-social-media-1df945c09ac6> (accessed February 2, 2015).

⁹ Will Oremus, "Is Snapchat Really Confusing, or Am I Just Old?" *Slate* (2015), http://www.slate.com/articles/technology/technology/2015/01/snapchat_why_teens_favorite_app_makes_the_facebook_generation_feel_old.html (accessed February 7, 2015).

¹⁰ Danielle Salomon, "Moving on from Facebook: Using Instagram to connect with undergraduates and engage in teaching and learning," *C&RL* 78, no. 8 (2013): 408-412, <http://crln.acrl.org/content/74/8/408.full.pdf+html>.

¹¹ Emma Hinchliffe, "It's the End of the Line for Yik Yak," *Mashable*, 29 April 2017, mashable.com/2017/04/29/yik-yak-shuts-down/#4FijzJPoWqqu, accessed 30 May, 2017.

¹² Amy Carlson, "Ignite Session: Outreach, Yik Yak, and Reality TV," *The Scoop*, *American Libraries*, (2015), <http://americanlibrariesmagazine.org/blogs/the-scoop/ignite-session-outreach-yik-yak-and-reality-tv/> (accessed 20 February, 2016).

¹³ Evelyn M. Rusli, "Yik Yak, Big in Schools, is a Hit With Investors Too," *Wall Street Journal* (2014), <http://www.wsj.com/articles/year-old-messaging-app-yik-yak-draws-big-valuation-1416791097> (accessed February

users to upvote or downvote existing posts, as well as add their own responses and commentary. As we found with Yik Yak, anyone with a smartphone or tablet can view campus chatter, from hookup requests and dorm party announcements, to bathroom humor, complaints about homework, and anguish over life and relationships.¹⁴



[\[https://www.flickr.com/photos/meadowsaffron/32312136274,](https://www.flickr.com/photos/meadowsaffron/32312136274)

Bonded With the People Near Me, screenshot by Celia Emmelhainz, CC-BY]

Lessons from Yaks in the Wild

The authors had a unique opportunity for research when we found ourselves snowbound together during ALA Midwinter 2015. As blizzard-like winds blew across Chicago, we ensconced ourselves indoors and surveyed over 10,000 “Yaks” posted at 60 public, private, and religious universities across North America. Using Yik Yak’s “peek” feature to see campuses besides our own, we collected anonymous, public posts by students in the vicinity of major campuses.

Methodological discussions of the ethics of performing ethnography online differ in whether to inform subjects, often depending on the nature of the research, topics of study, and expectations of privacy involved. In this case we determined that the brief nature of comments on the library, full anonymity of users, ephemeral nature of posts, and public availability to any smartphone user worldwide all reduced student expectations of privacy as well as the risk of harm. Further, we found no way to directly contact users, and are now quoting posts not tied to any specific user, and which no longer exist except in our screenshots.¹⁵

8, 2015).

¹⁴ However, as participation is based within a one-mile radius, some distance-education students may be limited to observing without the ability to directly participate, hinting at the unequal access to campus resources and dialogue that they face.

¹⁵ For a further critique of the ethics of online ethnography, see Lisa Sugiura, Rosemary Wiles, and Catherine Pope, “Ethical Challenges in Online Research: Public/Private Perception,” *Research Ethics* (2016), 1-16.

This sample was collected on Sunday, 1 February, 2015 between 5pm-2am EST, and included posts about academic libraries from Hawai'i to London, although primarily in the United States. Because the app lacked a search feature, we scrolled through both the 100 most “recent” Yaks, which last until voted down, and the 100 most popular (liked) Yaks, which last several days until they time out of the system.¹⁶ While users can save images to their phone, most posts disappear within two to three days.

The timing for our survey was excellent: on some campuses, it was the Sunday before midterms; on others students were returning from winter break or anticipating a snow day, and many were balancing studying with parties for the Super Bowl. These varied conditions gave us a wide cross-section of student experiences as they prepared for a coming week on campus.

We searched by name for campuses that would give us a range of insights, and content varied widely. On some campuses we found just one or two Yaks referencing the library among 200 recent and popular posts. At others, the library was not mentioned (and so they are not included in our sample).

In other words, libraries comprise a small slice of youthful online commentary—less popular than hookups and pizza, but important enough to occasionally bubble up in student chatter.

In reviewing sixty library-related Yaks, we found forty that fell into four thematic clusters, including the library as *study space*, the library as *site of suffering*, and the library as *social space*, as well as students commenting in a way that suggested (to us as librarians!) a need for research support and information literacy training.

1. Libraries as a quiet study space

Many students framed their local library as a quiet space in which to study. For example:

- **Pomona:** Shoutout to the people rushing to the library after Super Bowl ends #workhardplayhard
- **Endicott:** Sunday is supposed to be a day to relax and yet it's my busiest and most stressful day
- **Oregon:** The library should have an adderall vending machine
- **Michigan:** Are any libs open tomorrow? Where are we supposed to study if the libraries are closed [for a snow day]?
- **Oberlin:** Is Mudd open? I actually have stuff to prepare for the first day of class and reading Marxian philosophy is really hard with chatter and rap in the background
- **New Mexico:** Where can I get free pizza today? Since I'm stationed in the library today
- **Bates:** The library is nice and quiet. Thanks Super Bowl!

Yet this desire for a focused study space led others to express frustration with patrons who were talking... or breathing loudly.

- **Boston:** please don't breathe so loudly in the library

¹⁶ See our addendum for a list of colleges and more on our sampling methodology.

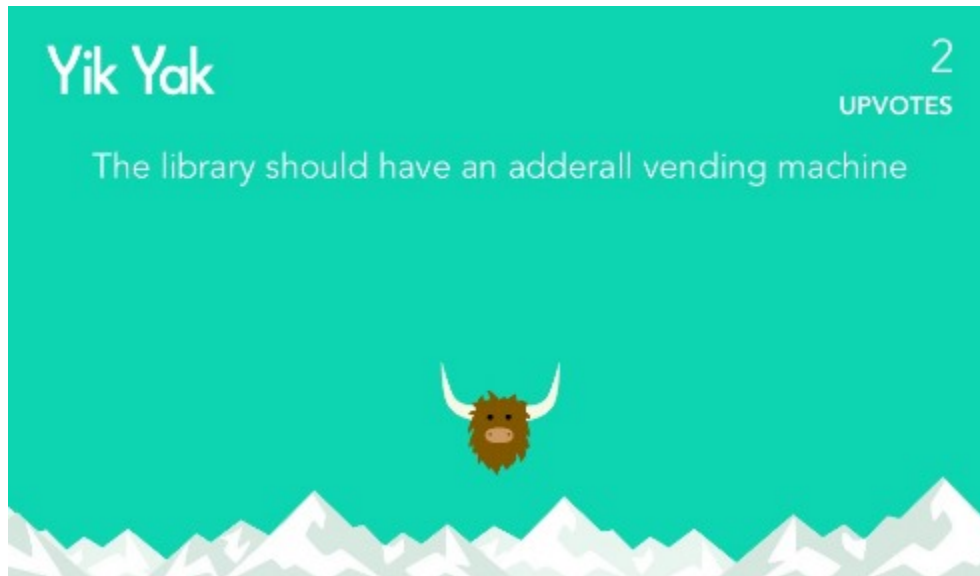
- **British Columbia:** Why are u here, girls that come to koerner to socialize and talk super loud?
- **Bates:** That glare you give when you're in the library and you hear people outside your window having fun
- **Brigham Young:** Since when is it okay to hum in the library?
- **Carleton:** The person behind me on 3rd Libe is panting profusely, wtf?
- **UCL, London:** When the guy next to you is whispering his essay aloud in the library, and it sounds like parseltongue

In other words, in contrast to libraries' attempts to open up interactive study spaces, many students were frustrated by the noise levels and distracting patrons around them. Students' highly emotional responses to these issues online suggests the need for more quiet student study spaces- something that libraries such as Colby College have implemented as the result of library observations, interviews, and ethnographic projects.

2. Libraries as a site of suffering

While students appreciated the library as a quiet study space, they also expressed ambivalent feelings about studying in the context of a university library. Of course, we attempt to make the library a welcoming space, yet students still feel a range of internal affective experiences as they study. Because this momentary experience is not be captured in library surveys, we find social media all the more useful to help us grasp the quiet struggle going on in front of us, in carrels and at tables where students wrestle with the tension between getting work done and wanting to relax:

- **Colby:** Nothing worse than seeing other people from your class leaving Miller while you're stuck there with so much left to do
- **Pittsburgh:** Opens up CourseWeb and sees 25 notifications, closes laptop and cries
- **Oxford, UK:** Hate it when a procession of tourists come through the library. Makes me feel like an exhibit in the world's most boring zoo
- **Charleston College:** I'll be suffering in the library studying for my cellular biology exam tomorrow if you need me
- **Berkeley:** Frustrated guy next to me in the library just threw down his pen and sighed so hard he farted. Me too, bruh
- **Carleton:** Things the Libe doesn't have: heat, wifi. things the Libe does have: books on the origins of hats
- **Ohio State:** The walk to the library is the boulevard of broken dreams
- **Cambridge, UK:** Oh God, the library is getting spooky. No one else is here (I think) and my lack of sleep isn't helping...
- **Georgetown:** Is there anyone still in library?



[\[https://www.flickr.com/photos/meadowsaffron/32342037903/\]](https://www.flickr.com/photos/meadowsaffron/32342037903/)
Adderall Vending Machine, screenshot by Celia Emmelhainz, CC-BY. For example of an actual library vending machine with medications and other supplies, see <https://www.instagram.com/p/BPGyWivB0rF/>

3. Libraries as social space

We also found that many students use Yik Yak to comment on studying in relation to other students. The social aspect of studying in the library is highlighted by the insider language used (“the Libe”) as well as the shared humor and social experience of students sleeping, sighing, or simply being in proximity to each other:

- **Charleston:** Whenever I've been sitting in the same spot in the library for a long time, I always feel like I've bonded with the people near me
- **U Chicago:** Nothing reminds me of the interconnectedness of humanity like realizing that everyone in the Harper chairs naps in the exact same position
- **British Columbia:** When you open your laptop in a library and Beyoncé is still playing (*British Columbia*)
- **Sarah Lawrence:** SLC life: smoothies in the library

Social media posts can also capture how the library is perceived both socially and spatially, at a more granular level than observed with other assessment measures:

- **U Washington:** Library logic: *Sees a table with only one person* *Goes in search of another table*
- **Miami U:** What floor you study on in King says a lot about you. What's your favorite?
- **Texas A&M:** Why do foreign people ALWAYS talk in the library? GTFO

As in the quote from Texas A&M above, we should here note that the anonymity of many social media apps also brings up critical concerns of racism and exclusion, highlighting how our libraries are still not a safe space for everyone. Although we did not encounter other racist or

sexist comments in this brief survey, we have seen them over time on our home campuses. And while most student users quickly down-vote such posts out of existence, their presence still creates a hostile space of social exclusion, and mirrors the microaggressions minority students already experience offline on college campuses.¹⁷ This darker side of student sociality on the web should prompt us to check in with vulnerable populations and make sure we host a safer and more inclusive space in our campus libraries.

4. The ongoing need for study aids and information literacy

Finally, students used Yik Yak to comment on their information habits or seek assistance from others. We wondered, here, if they were either too intimidated to approach a teacher, or didn't realize that a librarian could be of use in helping them access related resources. Whether asking about assignments, offering flashcards, or commenting on how they seek information, these posts hint at ways librarians could improve the cultural relevance of our marketing and services for students:

- **Alabama:** What's the format of Econ 110 tests?
- **Oxford:** The great feeling when you open a journal article and half the pages are references
- **UNC:** Writing a scientific journal article is about as useful as the magic scarf I got three years ago
- **Grinnell:** Anyone in intro sociology that wants pretty comprehensive flashcards? It feels like a shame to waste them.
- **Ohio Dominican:** Can't find study aids anywhere [crying emoticon]

And a few more students raise issues of copyright and intellectual property, grousing about others copying their Yik Yak posts, or asking if they can get away with illegal downloads on their campus:

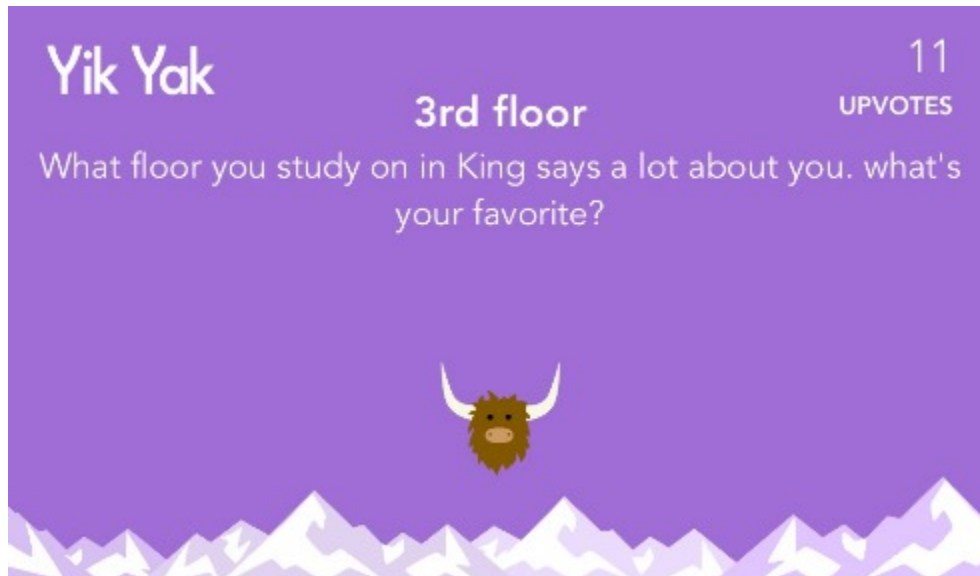
- **Ohio State:** Reposts [of popular Yik Yaks] are academic misconduct
- **Montana:** Can you get in trouble for using Youtube to MP3 on campus?
- **New Mexico:** I read yik yak in the mornings like it's the morning paper
- **Calgary:** An update on my game: 3 weeks and still have not opened a book

Bringing it Home

As librarians, then, we found social media posts eye-opening for the light they shine on our campus and student experiences. In library ethnography, even a small study can be insightful,¹⁸ and these posts gave us one unobtrusive view into students' digital lives.

¹⁷ Scott Jaschik, "Rally at Colby Against Racist Yik Yak Comments," Inside Higher Ed, April 17, 2015. <https://www.insidehighered.com/quicktakes/2015/04/17/rally-colby-against-racist-yik-yak-comments>, accessed 30 May 2015.

¹⁸ Sims Kline, "The librarian as ethnographer: an interview with David Green," *C&RL* 74, no. 9 (2013): 488-491, <http://crln.acrl.org/content/74/9/488.full.pdf+html>.



[\[https://www.flickr.com/photos/meadowsaffron/32342037873/\]](https://www.flickr.com/photos/meadowsaffron/32342037873/)

The Floor You Study On, screenshot by author Celia Emmelhainz, CC-BY]

In talking with others, though, we also found that comments on social media can be used to directly improve our services. At the University of Oregon Libraries, Lesli Larson (Director of Communications and Marketing) used Yik Yak to actually change library outreach, reporting:

"I do monitor Yik Yak to find out what undergrads are saying in raw/unvarnished terms. The key takeaway from Yik Yak for me is how student chatter reinforces wayfinding findings about the library. Students prize quiet study spaces, compete for study spots during finals, and proudly identify themselves as frequent or first time library users."

This student chatter helped Lesli keep displays relevant, and sparked her "program to create a display system for our reservable study rooms." As she wrote to us, "I definitely invoked Yak feedback about the scramble for study spaces" as she planned library improvements. (Her strategy here was to frame improvements as pilot projects or ongoing iterations of existing projects, thus avoiding the need for extensive bureaucratic review before implementation.)

While specific social media services rise and fall, Lesli's experience suggests that attending to these apps helps us see another angle of campus life. However, we have two caveats: first, that reading a hundred posts often resulted in only one about the library (and in Celia's case at Colby College, checking in daily for a semester netted only 100 comments on the library). This suggests social media may be more useful for getting a sense of trends and conversations on campus as a whole, than for learning only about the library.

In addition, we recommend that librarians practice self-care when viewing negative comments, either about campus in general or about the library and vulnerable student populations in particular.

Because Yik Yak is an “offstage” space,¹⁹ we warn you to take it with a grain of salt. Students post cynical comments to win the upvotes of their peers, and not all students are equally represented. We believe it can be a useful inverse of positive encouragements on our library surveys, but it certainly isn’t the whole picture. When students write with an edge, it often does not reflect the deep respect they have for their peers, their campus, and the libraries and librarians who help them in their daily life.

Further, we suggest librarians avoid directly advertising on anonymous social media. Faculty do intervene, as when Colgate University faculty popped up on Yik Yak to encourage students during finals,²⁰ but one-time posts by popular faculty are the exception to the rule. Even Lesli, who used Yik Yak for “stealth communication” and promoting free coffee at finals, chose to communicate as if student-to-student, rather than as an institutional advertiser.



Instead, we recommend you let social media apps spark insight into how students relate to each other, and how they communicate wryly about the library among their peers. In ephemeral online spaces like Yik Yak, we learn best by quietly observing as ethnographers and listening in to learn how patrons relate to their library, their campus, and their world.

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¹⁹ Erving Goffman, *The Presentation of Self in Everyday Life* (New York: Doubleday Anchor Books, 1959).

²⁰ Kaitlin Mulhere, “Yik Yak Take Back: professors turn Yik Yak into happy space,” *Inside Higher Ed* (2014), <https://www.insidehighered.com/news/2014/12/15/professors-turn-yik-yak-happy-space> (accessed 15 February 2015).

Tags: library assessment, academic libraries, social media, library ethnography, user experience

Addendum:

Below is a list of colleges we reviewed, in alphabetical order. Although we did not sample systemically from a list of known colleges, we sought out diversity between urban and rural environments, selective liberal arts colleges, major research universities, and smaller campus environments. We sampled for geographic diversity across both the United States, as well as, in a more limited fashion, Canada and the UK. (We checked several university locations in France but did not find Yik Yak in operation there). This list is not comprehensive, as when we did not find any library-related posts at a college, we did not keep a record of the search.

Bates College	Pomona College
Boston College	Sarah Lawrence College
BYU Hawai'i	Stanford University
Cambridge University (UK)	Texas A&M University
Carleton College	University College London (UK)
Carroll College	University of Alabama
Charleston College	University of British Columbia (Canada)
Colby College	University of Calgary (Canada)
Duke University	University of California Berkeley
Endicott College	University of California Irvine
Georgetown University	University of Chicago
Grinnell College	University of Hawai'i at Hilo
Harvard University	University of Michigan
Lewis and Clark College	University of Montana
Macalester College	University of New Mexico
Miami University (Ohio)	University of North Carolina--Chapel Hill
New York Univeristy	University of Oregon
Oberlin College	University of Pittsburgh
Ohio Dominican University	University of Washington
Ohio State University	
Oxford University (UK)	