Self-Publishing and Collection Development

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In the Age of Print, publishing was like a walled garden—authors gained admission if others (editorial boards, peer reviewers) judged their work to be worthy. If not, authors were kept outside and only then considered self-publishing, which was not considered very respectable. In the Digital Age, those walls are crumbling, and the garden becomes a wilderness. Print publishers see their economies of scale erode, and self-publishing is losing its stigma. Today, librarians will not necessarily find the best new scholarship laid out in an orderly manner. Some of the most exciting and innovative scholarship being done today, especially under the general rubric of the digital humanities, is specifically designed to leverage the unique attributes of networked data files and online interactive multimedia. Digital authoring and electronic scholarship thus point toward future models of library collection development and research support services that are still undergoing formative flux.

BACKGROUND AND OVERVIEW
While digital authoring has exploded since 2000, its academic roots date back to the introduction of personal computing in the mid-1980s; some would argue even earlier. Theorist Ted Nelson coined the term “hyper-text” in 1965 and, in the 1980s, had begun circulating an early version of *Literary Machines* (Nelson, 1987), which influenced theorists like George Landow, Stuart Moulthrop, Jay David Bolter, and Michael Joyce. Michael Joyce, novelist and hypertext theorist, is credited with authoring the first
true self-published hypertext novel, *Afternoon: A Story* (Joyce, 1990); and Bolter soon after authored one of the first academic books to examine and analyze this new digital genre (Bolter, 1991). Because mainstream publishers were expressing little interest in hypertext fiction at that time, Joyce and Bolter co-founded Eastgate Systems and collaborated to develop the first major software tool for hypertext self-publishing, Storyspace (Bolter, Joyce, Smith, & Eastgate Systems, 1993). Even as Storyspace was being introduced in academic writing and media labs on campuses such as Vassar College and Brown University, its lasting impact would largely be felt in the genres of self-published fiction and poetry. Digital authoring and self-publishing of nonfiction, especially for humanities computing projects, was more diffuse in the early days until Apple’s development of HyperCard provided a high-profile platform for innovative digital scholarship such as the Blake Multimedia Project at California Polytechnic State University (Marx & Smith, 1994). HyperCard would be swiftly superseded, of course, by the tidal wave of change instigated by HTML and the emergence of the World Wide Web.

Although I never used Storyspace as an author, I had followed its development closely as I had known Michael Joyce since 1975–1976 when he taught at Jackson Community College (JCC) in Michigan at the time I was guest teaching a writing workshop there. By the 1980s, after I had left Michigan to work in public libraries in the Carolinas, the introduction of Apple’s early personal computers, especially the revolutionary Macintosh, launched each of us independently into explorations of this new technology and its potential impacts on writing, learning, and libraries. Joyce established the Center for Narrative and Technology at JCC, served as a Visiting Fellow at the Yale University Artificial Intelligence Project (1984–1985), and then teamed with Jay David Bolter to develop Storyspace. Meanwhile, I was authoring early articles exploring potential impacts on libraries from both a theoretical perspective (Beagle, 1988) and a practical perspective (Beagle, 1989). I also taught an experimental writers’ self-publishing workshop through Duke University’s Office of Continuing Education where I drew upon a monologue/dialogue/discourse model proposed in the 1970s by psycholinguist Josephine Harris—a workshop I held not in a classroom, but in Duke’s East Campus Library (the Lilly Library), where we experimented with an early Macintosh app for student creation, revision, and annotation of texts that I had developed myself in HyperCard.
After sharing my articles with Joyce, he introduced me to Bolter (J. Bolter, personal communication, May 9, 1991) and invited me to consult on a proposal for an Apple Library of Tomorrow Grant (ALOT) to create a new type of library-based writing/learning space for JCC. This initial ALOT proposal became a very early articulation of what would later come to be generally described throughout the library community as a “Learning Commons.” It was not funded but paved the way for my successful 1995 ALOT grant for the Charleston Multimedia Project (CMP), a pioneering digital humanities project (Charleston County Library, 1996) that was featured in the book *Great American Websites* published by Osborne McGraw-Hill (Renehan, 1997). The CMP remained online and was actively being used as recently as early 2014. Its two-decade tenure online demonstrates the potential value of the library’s playing the role of facilitator for digital self-publishing to benefit independent scholars. Such scholars, many of whom belong to the increasingly large population of seminomadic adjunct faculty, often feel marginalized from the colleges and universities where they teach and may lack access to departmental resources in support of their own scholarship. Libraries, academic and public, can help fill this void and give them access to platforms for digital authoring. A good example within CMP can be found in the online essay, “The Charleston Single House” (Beagle, 1995). This relatively brief essay examines various theories about the origin and development of an architectural style native and unique to the city of Charleston. While technically authored by me, it combines the theories and viewpoints of local independent scholars alongside those of mainstream architectural historians. The CMP was my own first foray into digital authoring and electronic scholarship and propelled me mid-career from public to academic libraries.

Even with the CMP successfully online, I still felt the need to establish my academic credentials by running the gauntlet of traditional publishing with two books, one through a trade press, the other academic. Both were successful—a point I make to stress that my own move to self-publishing is being driven by new opportunities, not old frustrations. My self-publishing projects thus far include a third book through print on demand and a fourth through Amazon’s Kindle e-book channel, now properly known as Kindle Direct Publishing (KDP). I will briefly compare these four experiences, and—more importantly—describe why the different nature of each project dictated varying routes to publication. Then, I will offer thoughts about future scenarios.
The Charleston Single House

Acknowledgements

Photo: Single Houses on Ashley Ave.

From its settlement in 1670 until 1783, Charleston's development was almost entirely English, perhaps explaining why Charleston is not a "typical" Southern city, from either a social or architectural standpoint. From the simple austerity of the John Lining House, possibly pre-1700, to the Chippendale-influenced grandeur of the Miles Brewton House c. 1765, one can easily glimpse the strands of both social and architectural refinement.

In spite of the fact that Charleston's early architecture is highly English in flavor, there were certain local conditions that influenced its design. Most visitors are immediately fascinated by the numerous tall, slender houses with many-tiered piazzas—all seemingly too close for comfort. What they are seeing is the Charleston "Single House," which in fact is comfortable and habitable during hot and humid summers.

Colonial Charles Town actually saw a diverse array of architecture in keeping with the broad transatlantic English tradition of provincial ports and market towns, including row houses and large Georgian town houses. The Single House first appeared in the early 18th century, and gradually became the prevalent floor plan for the historic houses of antebellum Charleston. It proved remarkably adaptable in its own right. One sees very small Single Houses with plain facades directly fronting the street (as in 29 Archdale St. shown on left), as well as massive multi-level Single Houses with piazzas above the level of nearby trees (as shown in 45 East Bay St. below right).

Figure 5.1. Screen print of "The Charleston Single House," an online essay written by the author and posted as part of the Charleston Multimedia Project (1995). Created with the support of an Apple Library of Tomorrow Grant. Photographs by Donald Beagle.
TRADE PRESS: THE INFORMATION COMMONS HANDBOOK
(ALA/NEAL-SCHUMAN, 2006)

This project grew out of articles I had written for the *Journal of Academic Librarianship*, published in the 1990s by JAI Press. Positive reaction prompted JAI to offer me a book contract in 1999. But print publishing was already churning, and the monograph division of JAI Press was soon swallowed by Ablex Publishing. Even as I revised the draft for Ablex, it was swallowed by a bigger fish named Elsevier, with yet another editorial slant. After further revisions, I found this an uncomfortable fit and withdrew. The project languished until 2004 when Neal-Schuman’s editors saw growing momentum in support of the Information Commons (IC).

Publication through a trade press often involves incorporating (or responding to) reactions to the manuscript from one or more anonymous peer reviewers. In my case, two of the three peer reviewers were fortunately very favorable to both my book and the underlying IC concept. These two readers also offered constructive suggestions for improvement, which I rapidly incorporated. But the third reviewer was relentlessly hostile to the point of heaping sarcastic disdain on any notion that the Information Commons concept had any viable future in academic libraries. Fortunately for my book, the two favorable reviewers carried the day. But unfortunately, that single unfavorable reviewer forced me into a defensive posture of having to water down some of my more innovative and forward-looking content, including (ironically) my vision that the Information Commons was only the first stage of a developmental process that could lead to further enhancements such as a Learning Commons (LC), a pedagogical sandbox, and a Research Commons (RC), as a platform for digital authoring and electronic scholarship. The final published text was thus somewhat compromised and only mentioned these eventualities in a rather limited way. These anticipated developments have, of course, since proven to be resoundingly accurate over the years since 2006. Still, with contributions by colleagues D. Russell Bailey and Barbara Tierney, *The Information Commons Handbook* finally made its tortuous way to publication in October 2006.

Online media played a crucial role in the title’s rapid acceptance. The book was announced on the INFOCOMMONS-L discussion list. More importantly, it was mentioned in Stephen Abram’s high-profile blog. In a widely read blog at OCLC, Lorcan Dempsey described attending a workshop
where two experienced IC managers endorsed the book. Traditional media also played a key part: after receiving a “starred” review in *Library Journal*, the *Handbook* received positive reviews in seven professional journals worldwide. A WorldCat search now indicates that, of the 42 titles issued by Neal-Schuman in 2006, the *Handbook* currently ranks fourth in the number of catalogued library holdings. In 2014, the online posting of favorable Commons’ assessments on campuses where the *Handbook* was used in IC development continues to drive sales. Google Scholar indicates the book has been cited 135 times—definitely an undercount—but still valid as a benchmark in comparison to Google Scholar counts for other monographs on the same topic.

This success has prompted numerous e-mail requests from faculty across the United States and around the world for a revised and updated second edition. While long anxious to proceed, I have no interest in taking the risk of exposing my work to any more hostile and uninformed peer readers whose influence might yet again compromise the quality of the *Handbook*’s content. In response to my request, ALA Publishing has
therefore kindly transferred back to me all rights to future editions of *The Information Commons Handbook* (J. M. Jeffers, personal communication, April 3, 2013). With these rights in hand, I am now developing the revised and updated second edition to be published as an e-book with active links to online interactive multimedia resource files. Doing so will facilitate future Commons research and development across a wide spectrum of institutional environments in ways to best facilitate their use as platforms for innovative pedagogies. This edition will likely appear on Apple’s iBook development platform as will be further discussed below.

**ACADEMIC PRESS: POET OF THE LOST CAUSE (UNIVERSITY OF TENNESSEE PRESS, 2008)**

While the *Handbook* met an emerging need, my second book addressed a long-standing gap in the scholarly record. Abram J. Ryan had been a battlefield chaplain in the Civil War, an important newspaper editor, and a poet, whose volume of verse became one of the best-selling collections in U.S. history since it went through 47 editions by the 1930s. Academics on numerous campuses had tried to write his biography but failed due to extraordinary difficulties researching Ryan’s fragmented archival record. By the 1990s, Ryan was the most significant 19th-century U.S. poet without a biography.

In 2000, I discovered an important archive of Ryan papers, including wartime letters to his family from the battlefront. Further Ryaniana emerged via digitization projects such as READEX historical newspapers and Google Books. These proved critical not only in reconstructing Ryan’s narrative, but also in documenting his cultural importance as a reason why his biography should be published. Ryan’s fame during his lifetime (and for three decades after) was legendary. President McKinley recited his verses in the White House, for example; and Margaret Mitchell gave him a cameo role in *Gone with the Wind*. Today, his cultural impact has become occluded. With co-author Bryan Giemza, I unearthed findings that surprised historians: an interview from the *New York Times*; a poem in the *Saturday Evening Post*; praise by period critics in journals like *The Dial*, *New Eclectic*, and *Southern Literary Messenger*. Unlike the three peer readers who reviewed my trade press publication for Neal-Schuman, my manuscript submission to the University of Tennessee Press underwent extended examination and
review by a full academic press editorial board. This was a highly demanding process that included one full rewrite; but it also resulted in a much-improved book that set the stage, I believe, for the highly favorable reviews it later received in nine scholarly journals.

*Poet of the Lost Cause* appeared in April 2008. Even though its topic seemed less amenable to digital publicity than the *Handbook*, online reactions were important. Professor Michael Pasquier, at Harvard on a fellowship from the American Academy of Arts and Letters, gave the book favorable comment in a highly regarded blog. On the popular side, newspapers that no longer included book reviews in their downsized paper editions gave it notice online. The scholarly print record was even more generous as the book received positive reviews in nine academic journals during a period when many deserving titles received only one or two reviews (if any). It was certainly not a best seller as it was issued into the fierce headwind of the 2008 economic collapse and subsequent budget cuts. But again, a WorldCat search indicates that of the 44 titles published in 2008 by University

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**Figure 5.3.** Statue of the Civil War poet and Confederate chaplain Fr. Abram J. Ryan. The statue, still standing in Mobile, Alabama, was partly funded by a bequest from Joseph Pulitzer in recognition of Ryan’s importance as a Southern newspaper editor during Reconstruction. This is one of a series of photographs by Donald Beagle. Another image of the statue from this series appeared as “Figure 29” in *Poet of the Lost Cause* (University of Tennessee Press, 2008).
of Tennessee Press, *Poet of the Lost Cause* ranks sixth best in cataloged library holdings. And in 2014, it was chosen as a title for the highly selective “Essential Civil War Curriculum” compiled by the Virginia Center for Civil War Studies at Virginia Tech University (Hunter, 2014).

**PRINT ON DEMAND: THE LIFE AND ART OF RALPH RAY, JR. (XLIBRIS, 2009)**

Given these positive experiences, why turn to self-publishing? Print publishing entails financial risk to any institutional publisher. This risk weighs against acceptance of monographs that treat topics of regional or limited topical interest as in the following book on artist/illustrator Ralph Ray, Jr. This title also “illustrates” the cost factor of risk as publishers weigh expense versus likely demand. Any title requiring illustrations—color in particular—is at a significant disadvantage.

Ralph Ray, Jr. was an artistic prodigy who grew up during the 1930s in North Carolina and went on to become a successful illustrator of more than 50 young adult books issued by New York publishers through the 1950s. Ray also did remarkable watercolors of wildlife and illustrated two classic bird books in the 1940s for Oxford University Press (OUP) (Hall & Ray, 1946). In 2005, faculty colleague Robert Tompkins and I began roaming the southeast with a digital camera to document scattered originals in museums, galleries, and private collections. But the prospects for a biography remained dim. We felt the book might be a fit for OUP, but OUP expressed no interest. Fortunately, two foundations with ties to western North Carolina gave us production grants, which we used to underwrite self-publication through XLibris.

This book has been successful, but primarily through our own promotional efforts aimed at Ray’s regional appeal. We gathered works from Ray’s relatives for an exhibit at the Schiele Museum of Natural History, Gastonia, North Carolina, which included a well-attended reception and book signing. We submitted the book for scholarly recognition and received the Willie Parker Peace Award from the Society of North Carolina Historians. We underestimated, however, the demands of promotion on our own limited time and energy. Our efforts to reach libraries beyond the Carolinas had little success. For instance, my online search revealed a “Ralph Ray Jr. Collection” in the University of Minnesota’s Children’s
Literature Research Collections (CLRC), including original Ray sketches. But my e-mail to CLRC announcing our book brought no response, one of numerous cases where further follow-up seemed not worth the time and energy.

Neither Tompkins nor I were on Facebook in 2009. Were we to issue such a book now, we feel that Facebook could offer a promising channel. A number of authors I befriended in college writing seminars now use Facebook (and LinkedIn) to promote titles. Anne Serling, for example, linked her personal Facebook page to an auxiliary page promoting her newly released memoir about her father, screenwriter Rod Serling of *Twilight Zone* fame (Serling, 2013). As this is written, Facebook has announced the beta release of its new Graph Search app—a tool that, with future refinement, may offer users (and librarians) new ways to trace patterns of “likes” and endorsements across the social network. Were a similar app designed for the academic blogosphere, with appropriate metadata, we might have a tool to make visible what used to be nicknamed the “invisible college” with associated article and book recommendations (Beagle, 1999).
While Ralph Ray had become a neglected and largely forgotten artist by 2009 (at least beyond his native town of Gastonia, North Carolina), his work had been mainstream in concept and content and thus successful and recognized at least during his lifetime. But scholars and critics have become increasingly aware of a varied group of visual artists whose work has been marginalized from the start because it has failed to fit comfortably into mainstream commercial or academic genres. The work of such artists has been given the general label “outsider art,” which signifies art that either remains deeply rooted in folk traditions (such as the work of Grandma Moses) or uses unorthodox and innovative media and techniques that mainstream gallery owners and museum curators have difficulties incorporating into exhibitions and sometimes do not recognize as having intrinsic aesthetic value. In one important sense, such outsider artists experience a marginalization comparable to that experienced by adjunct faculty and independent scholars.

I discovered such an outsider artist in my own explorations of the native art scene in the gallery crawls periodically held in Charlotte’s celebrated “NoDa” arts district. Meredith Joy Merritt was a faculty member at the University of North Carolina–Charlotte, who had become intensely drawn to visual arts as an expressive medium even though her academic training and career had formally taken a different direction. Her vision and creative works were unorthodox from the start, although clearly influenced by recognized artists such as Jackson Pollock and Mark Rothko. Even as she was beginning to find an audience in a number of NoDa district galleries, Merritt began experiencing neuromuscular symptoms of what would soon be diagnosed as multiple sclerosis (MS). As the MS increasingly degraded her ability to do finely controlled brushwork over the following years, Merritt battled back by adopting new media, such as collage and 3-D assemblages, and by developing a highly individualized technique of “flung pigment” using nail polish on sandpaper. Because I found that her art was quietly attracting the attention and respect of serious local art critics and academics, I decided to document her accumulated body of work with my digital camera, even as her MS was gradually bringing her creative endeavors to a halt. Eventually she left her faculty position at UNC–Charlotte to
go on disability leave. My decision to self-publish a photographic record of Merritt’s body of work using Amazon’s e-book channel of Kindle Direct Publishing (KDP) was very much influenced by the artist’s personal preferences. She wanted to make her work visible and available as inexpensively as possible to a wide swath of fellow artists, extended family, and former colleagues. This resulted in the June 2014 release of my KDP title, *The Outsider Art of Meredith Joy Merritt*.

My work on this e-book has revealed that, while KDP now offers perhaps the most high-profile and easily accessed channel for digital self-publishing available today, it is not a channel well suited to serious academic scholarship in general or to image-intensive publications in particular. KDP offers a platform optimized for simple narrative text, most often uploaded by way of direct conversion from original documents in Microsoft Word. Amazon’s conversion utility works reasonably well for such basic flowing text but is rife with unexpected formatting pitfalls for large image collections. Such simple format actions as hard returns and page break inserts in MS Word originals cause ripple effects in uploaded KDP files that result in a self-published e-book displaying itself very differently through the various free apps Amazon

![Figure 5.5. An image selected from The Outsider Art of Meredith Joy Merritt (Kindle Direct Publishing, 2014). Title: Early or Late? (medium: collage). Photograph by Donald Beagle (original in color).](image-url)
has devised for e-book distribution beyond its own Kindle e-reader tablets. This includes its apps for Windows, IOS, and Android operating systems.

My KDP e-book of Merritt’s art, as a result, displays very well on a Kindle Fire color tablet with one image per screen. The images are somewhat small, but color rendition and resolution are excellent. When the same file is accessed through Amazon’s Kindle app for Windows on a laptop, by contrast, the images are larger (which is good); but blank screens appear between many of the images that cause readers to wonder whether images might be missing (none are actually missing). And when the same published file is displayed though an IOS device, such as my iPhone 6 or iPad 2, some sections of the book have blank screens between images while other sections display two images per screen. These results are especially disappointing given that the KDP upload utility includes a “preview” function that supposedly emulates the final format and appearance of any e-book contents in the context of these respective apps before publication is finalized. My e-book previewed perfectly in this visual preview emulation phase in each app emulation, showing one large image per screen with no blank screens. This proved to be highly misleading when applied to the final result over multiple platforms. For these reasons, I plan no further self-publishing through KDP and will be focusing my own future digital scholarship self-publishing though Apple’s iBook development software.

APPLE iBOOK IN PROGRESS:

THE LIFE AND COLLECTED WORKS OF FR. ABRAM J. RYAN

Research on the Ryan biography uncovered a remarkable number of poems and essays never before published or published in fugitive outlets. These are extremely important but did not fit into the biography. When I received a formal invitation to deliver a presentation in Richmond for the Civil War Sesquicentennial, I felt my topic (“Fr. Abram Ryan and the Civil War Chaplains”) would make late 2015 an ideal time to release a major new collection of Ryan’s writings, along with a biographical supplement to incorporate research discoveries made since 2008. While the University of Tennessee Press has been wonderful in supporting the 2008 biography, I have decided to pursue this as an Apple iBook. This gives me production flexibility, along with the capacity for interactive multimedia that can be creatively used to at last convey the full scale and scope of Ryan’s extraordinary 19th-century cultural impact.
The Ryan iBook project, in other words, will demonstrate the “flip side” of the motivation to pursue digital self-publishing. Instead of providing a publishing venue of last resort for works that lack alternate mainstream outlets, Apple’s iBook platform is designed to help even widely published academic authors create *enhanced* works of scholarship that engage readers in visual, auditory, and networked multimedia dimensions quite beyond the expressive capabilities of traditional print publishing. Scholar Jacob L. Wright recently described his own enhanced iBook project (on King David) as

... a game changer. Now we can much more easily disseminate our work in art history, archaeology, and many other scholarly fields that have presented high hurdles to print publishing. A fully enhanced e-book can do the work of two or more traditional print volumes: Authors can address the general reading public and lower-level students in the main body of the text, while treating technical matters for advanced readers in more detail by providing electronic links to extensive pullout or pop-up windows. (Wright, 2014)

Readers can also click on icons to pull up supplementary material, primary sources, photographs, maps, video clips, animations, and publishers’ Web sites. Wright’s enhanced e-book is, however, not an exercise in purely defined self-publishing as it was undertaken in conjunction with Cambridge University Press.

**CONCLUSION: FUTURE STRATEGIES**

As librarians, we need to track developments across a number of social media fronts beyond established channels like Pinterest and Goodreads: future refinements to Google Analytics and Alerts, Facebook’s aforementioned Graph Search app, and federated knowledge discovery keyed to what Lederman terms the “deep web” (Lederman, 2009). What might librarians do with access to reader analytics as discussed in the *Wall Street Journal* article “Your E-Book Is Reading You” (Alter, 2012)? Crowd-source collection development? For now, the low-hanging fruit, in my view, is still in the blogosphere. My first two books clearly benefited from its impact. As a librarian, I am consequently more attuned to seeking influential blogs in disciplines where I might find mention of authors and titles. Blogging has
clearly become a typical first rung on the self-publishing ladder. Dissertation research by Carolyn Hank supports digital curation of academic blogs and reveals that 80% of scholar bloggers believe their blogs should be preserved for future access (Hank, 2011). The best deserve to be archived for their own worth, perhaps using a curatorial tool like BlogForever (BlogForever, 2013). Tracking disciplinary aggregators like Researchblogging.org can yield blogged references to articles and monographs. For instance, a study posted at altmetrics.org explores preferences among science bloggers for articles in certain subcategories of journals (Shema & Bar-Ilan, 2011). By early 2016, I will definitely be seeking opportunities to post mention of my Apple iBook within Civil War–related academic and popular blogs.

On the public library front, on June 24, 2014, Library Journal (LJ) and BiblioBoard announced the launch of beta versions of the LJ SELF-e platform and curation service at public library systems in Los Angeles, San Diego, Cuyahoga County (Ohio), the Arizona State Library, and through the statewide Massachusetts eBook Project. LJ’s SELF-e connects self-published authors with public libraries and their patrons. Through the SELF-e submission portal,

. . . authors in the beta libraries’ communities can submit their self-published eBook(s) for display and patron access across that state. Additionally, they have the opportunity to opt-in to allow LJ to evaluate and select titles for inclusion in curated genre collections that participating public libraries will make available to their patrons all over the United States. SELF-e submissions will be accepted on a rolling basis, with the first collections set to be released later this year. . . . SELF-e, a royalty-free service, appeals to writers looking for the next-generation discovery service for [self-published] eBooks in libraries. (Books News Desk, 2014)

On the academic front, while both open-access e-journals and self-archived institutional repositories are proliferating, we are likely to see scholarly self-publishing become respectable more rapidly within management frameworks that incorporate some process of preview opportunity for scholarly examination even in advance of formal peer review. The classic example, of course, is the preprint server arXiv, where mathematicians,
physicists, and computer scientists have uploaded over a million academic papers since 1991. Those academic libraries that do decide to adopt an active role as publishers of digital journals and/or monographs would be well advised to incorporate some of the functional lessons of arXiv, while also seeking opportunities for cross-institutional collaboration.

REFERENCES


