

» “The most important asset of any library goes home at night – the library staff.”

-TIMOTHY HEALY

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The State of Academic Librarian Spaces

» Results from a survey that looked into how work spatial environments affect librarians' happiness.*

BY BRYAN IRWIN AND ALIZA LEVENTHAL

How happy are librarians with their work spaces? We asked ourselves the same question last year and were surprised to find little discussion on this topic within library and design publications. Since library and architecture professionals often place heavy emphasis on patron spaces to ensure that academic libraries remain dynamic and engaging places, it's understandable that individual librarian's workspaces are less of a focus.

Still, this lack of information prompted us to explore the topics of changing librarians' roles and spaces. To gather information, we disseminated a survey through several American Library Association (ALA) listservs last March. The results of this survey, representing just over 400 respondents from the United States and Canada, provides valu-

able insight into academic librarians' spatial experiences.

The roughly 90-question survey provided significant quantitative data about the types of spaces academic librarians are working in and how well those spaces fit the needs of their work. Most impressive, though, was the significant level of detailed spatial descriptions and sincere observations we received from our respondents.

One of the most remarkable comments, made by several respondents, was how little they've thought about their spaces prior to the prompting of our survey. Comments like these helped us structure our approach to the data analysis to encourage readers to think critically about their own spaces. It is our sincere hope that our initial research facilitates further discussion on the issue of librarians' spatial needs.

BUILDING A COLLECTION FROM THE GROUND UP

Notes from a first attempt at developing a collection for a new master's degree.

DON'T GET MARRIED TO THE RESULTS

Managing library change in the age of metrics.

THE ACADEMIC LIBRARY'S FUTURE IS INSTITUTIONALLY ALIGNED—OR THE ACADEMIC LIBRARY HAS NO FUTURE

An academic library has a duty to align its policies, programs, and priorities with its host institution.

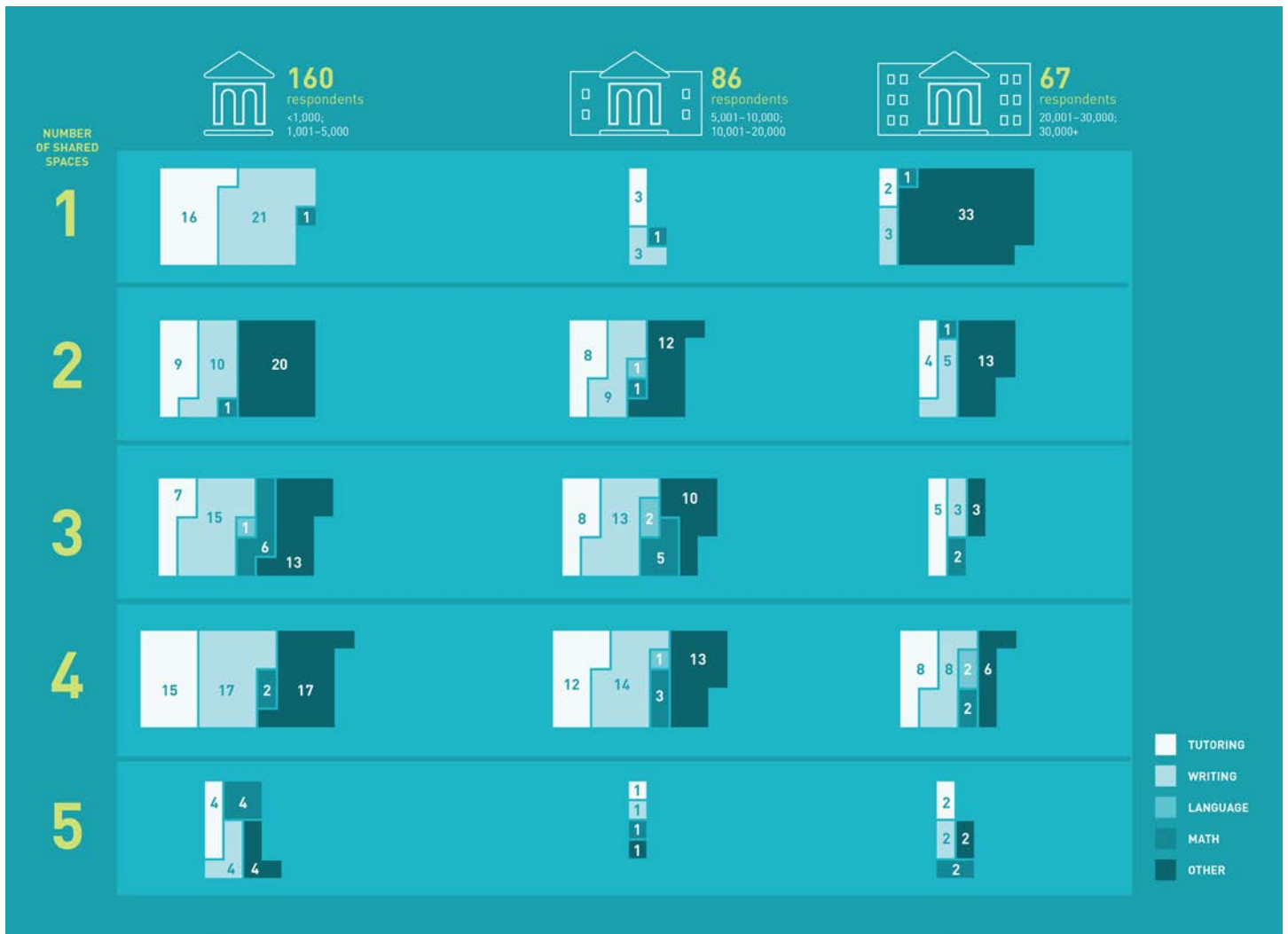


Image 1: Librarians' shared space by institutional size.

SURVEY TOPICS

The survey addressed four topics: changing roles and responsibilities of academic librarians; shared spaces within the library; librarian workspaces broken down between public-facing desks and private workspaces; and recent library renovations.


Changing Roles: To understand changes in the responsibilities of our respondents throughout their career, we asked respondents to indicate responsibilities of the position for which they were originally hired, using a list of twelve professional activities. This question had two follow-ups: first,

respondents were asked to indicate which responsibilities had been added to their original position, and second, they were asked to indicate which responsibilities had been reduced or removed from their original position.

While reference, education and outreach, and collection development were the most prevalent original responsibilities, not all held their dominance over the course of the respondents' tenure. Education and outreach has continued to grow, but reference has experienced the most significant decrease of all original job re-

sponsibilities. Meanwhile, digital collection development, technology development and maintenance, procedures for operational tasks, and communication and management are responsibilities that have experienced the largest increase.

In addition to capturing the fluctuation of responsibilities, we also explored the prevalence of hybrid roles within academic libraries. Hybrid roles are positions that intentionally merge multiple, traditionally separate, responsibilities, such as reference and circulation. While many respondents indicated that they have always had hybrid roles, particular-



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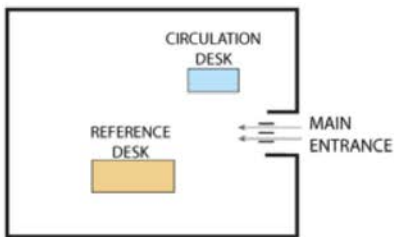
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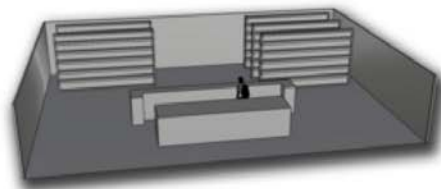
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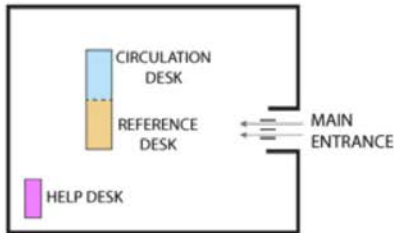
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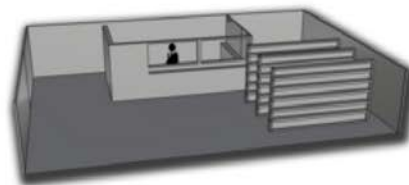
TWO SEPARATE DESKS POSITIONED THROUGHOUT LIBRARY



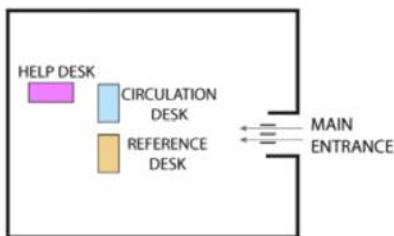
FREE-STANDING DESK WITH REFERENCE STACKS AVAILABLE



TWO DESKS POSITIONED THROUGHOUT LIBRARY, WITH COMBINED CIRCULATION AND REFERENCE DESK



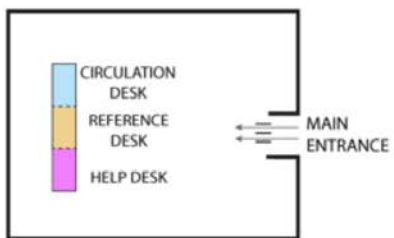
ENCLOSED DESK WITH FRONT OPENING AND REFERENCE STACKS AVAILABLE



THREE SEPARATE DESKS POSITIONED IN CLOSE PROXIMITY



LOW BUILT-IN DESK WITH ADJACENT SHELVING



ONE COMPREHENSIVE DESK FOR ALL PATRON INTERACTIONS

Image 2: The survey provided four desk configuration examples for librarian work spaces.

ly smaller institutions with limited full-time and part-time library staffs, the distinction we sought to make was understanding what responsibilities were intentionally combined, rather than the informal or gradual addition of responsibilities to existing roles.

All told, 44 percent of survey respondents said that hybrid roles had emerged in their library's staff due to changes in technology and the needs of the library. Re-

spondents were then asked to pair responsibilities together that had been merged to create hybrid roles at their libraries. The most popular pairings were circulation and reference, reference and technology, reference and education, and collection and digital library.

Sharing Spaces: The evolution of libraries, as they changed to accommodate the technological and environmental experiences of

patrons, has resulted in dramatic changes to library design over the past few decades. The library has continued to grow as a robust and engaging space—moving from the structure of static and restrictive banks of information, where the librarians serve as resource gatekeepers, to more dynamic and open spaces that include myriad new partnerships and technology within their walls. Many academic libraries have diversified their spaces, providing a mix of quiet and collaborative spaces, cafes, and lounge areas, as well as more formal partnerships with academic departments and enrichment programs.

Our survey focused on how these enrichment programs fit into the existing footprint of the library, asking how many and what types of programs were present within each respondent's library. The responses show that smaller institutions were more likely to share their space with other programs than medium or large institutions. Additionally, campuses serving primarily residential students are more likely to have enrichment programs within the library than those serving primarily commuter campuses. Tutoring centers were the most common type of enrichment program sharing space with libraries, while language labs were the least frequently present (see Image 1).

Librarian Spaces: While library spaces for patrons become more fluid, it is apparent that the same level of fluidity and change has not been actively explored for librarian spaces.

Public desks—To gauge views on both desk configurations and desk types, the survey inquired about the prevalence, staffing, hours of operation, and satisfaction of each desk. As shown in Image 2, the survey provided four desk configuration examples as well as the option to select “none of the above,” where respondents were given space to describe their unique public desk(s) configurations.

The option to describe their unique public desk(s) set-up was the second most selected desk configuration. Of the 111 respondents who selected “none of the above” for their configuration had three or fewer desks, 90 percent indicated that the unique positioning of their desks is critical to understanding their spaces.

The variety of configurations for two and three desks that differ from those provided in the survey may be attributed to the diversification of public desk environments introduced to libraries in the last fifteen to

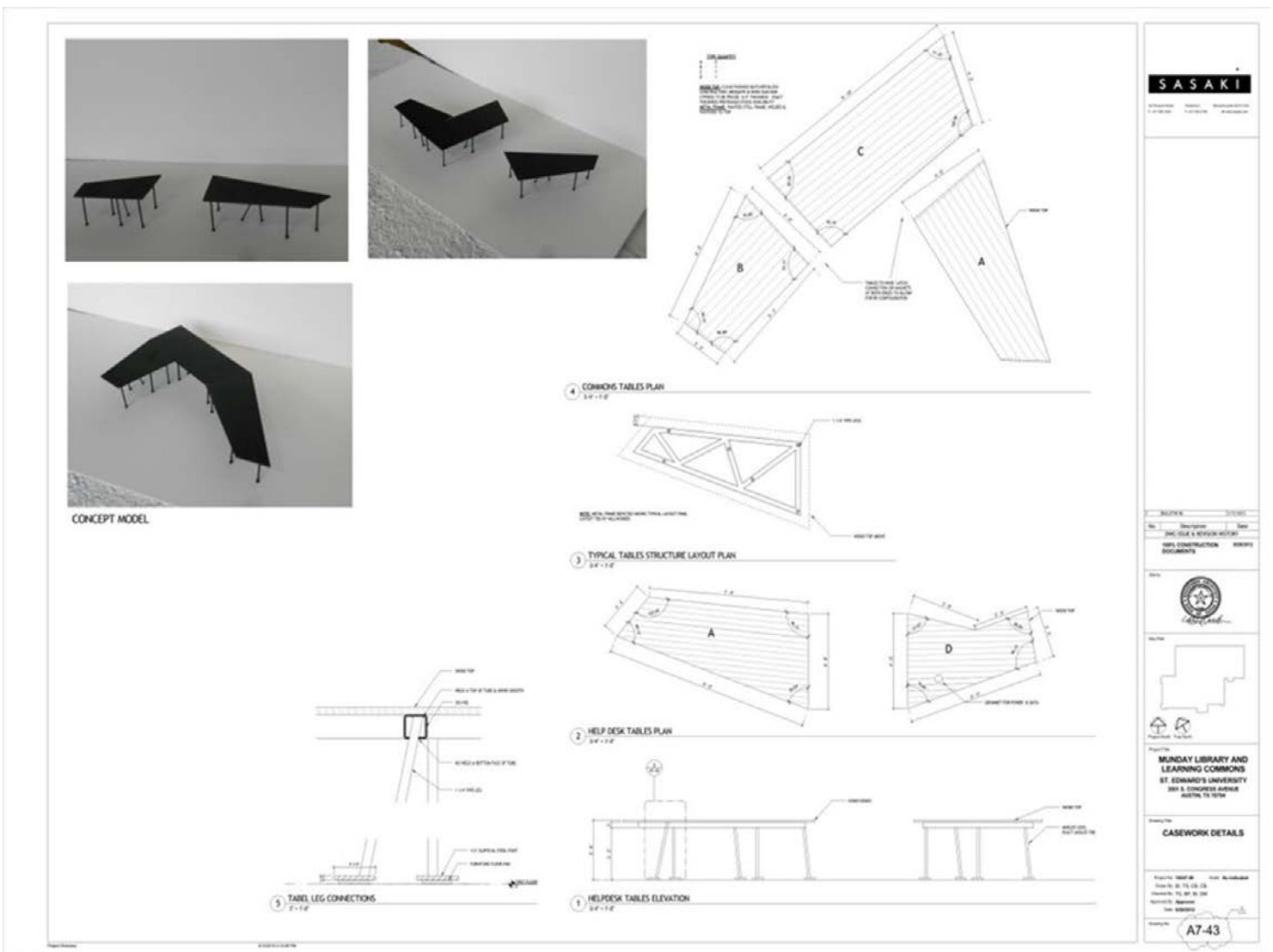


Image 3: Less permanent and more flexible desk models empower librarians to discuss what activities the librarian and patron spaces should support.

twenty years. This diversification signals a shift from the intimidating/foreboding altar-like front desk to more friendly and inviting models, such as concierge, help desk, or peer-to-peer stations.

The proliferation of convenient technology and accessibility of information online has allowed less permanent and more flexible desk models to develop, reducing the need for desks to maintain close proximity to a reference collection. Additionally, designers are becoming less restricted by furniture manufacturers through the small-scale production of affordable customizable furniture—ever increasing the elasticity of public service desks to have exactly the pieces they require. These nearly endless possibilities empower librarians to have more productive conversations about what activities the librarian and patron spaces can and should support (see Image 3).

Private work space—As survey respondents made clear, librarians often require

some privacy to provide the focus their work demands. Librarians' private workspaces were reported, for the most part, as either offices or cubicles. Of the respondents, 59 percent indicated that the private workspaces for librarians are away from the public eye—with the most accessible being open office environments, and the most visibility-limiting being cubicles. Several satisfied respondents noted that their private offices were directly accessible from patron spaces or in close proximity to the public-facing desks, making them both more visible and more inviting.

While the corporate world has done extensive research on shaping spatial environments to maximize productivity and minimize turnover, the library community has not shown nearly the same level of concern about their workspaces. This oversight can be partially explained by the relatively low turnover rate of academic librarians; our respondents indicated about half of the pro-

fessionals in the field for five or more years have spent their entire career at a single institution. However, even though there are some unchanging spatial needs for academic librarians, it is reasonable to assume that spatial needs have already or will soon change to respond to activities associated with technology, education, and outreach.

Renovations: The most recent changes in academic libraries span a broad spectrum from some that are just superficial to others that affect structure and programs. More than 80 percent of survey respondents' libraries have been renovated to some degree; only 32 percent of that group, however, had any changes to librarian spaces. This percentage brings librarian spaces in at 10th place for areas of significant change during our respondents' most recent renovations.

Respondents' most recent space renovations have strong correlations to the activities and responsibilities that have

been added to their original responsibilities. This is most notable for spaces associated with teaching and computers, which were areas of significant change that ranged from 40 percent to 70 percent in prevalence, depending on institution type or size.

The expansion of space in libraries for both education and outreach and technology services is discussed in major news outlets as well as library-oriented publications, but the spatial concerns and interests of librarians has yet to be addressed in depth. Shelving is an example, as most people assume shelving will continue to decrease as more resources are available online or digitally. However, of the 107 respondents who indicated that their shelving was affected during their most recent renovation, 20 percent indicated they had added compact shelving and 14

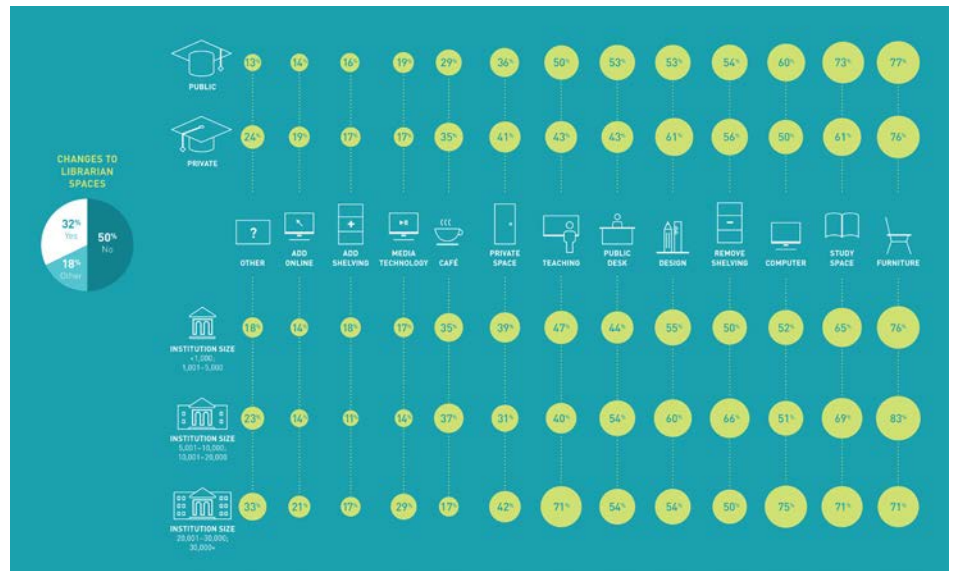


Image 4: Survey respondents identified all areas of significant change in their most recent renovations.



Image 5: When asked how their spaces fulfill their current work needs, 39 percent of respondents said their spaces hinder their current work.

» Librarianship as a profession has long been known its ingenuity and flexibility, requiring solutions to be cobbled together through diligence and accepting that individuals will “wear many hats” and “make it work” no matter what resources are provided.

percent indicated “other,” which included adding or relocating shelving.

The connection between librarian activities and changing spaces is exciting and promising for future conversations between library staff and architects. Now, it is a question of pushing both designers and librarians alike to think beyond the direct patron services librarians provide (see Image 4 on page 5).

LIBRARIAN SATISFACTION

Of central importance to understanding the impact of current workspaces and recent renovations is gauging the librarians’ satisfaction with the functionality of their spaces. Overall, 39 percent of respondents indicated that their current spaces are hindering their current work. Of this number, half reported that their most recent renovation was in the 1980s and slightly more than one third indicated the renovation had taken place in the past 5 years—indicating some design failure during these two periods.

While it is easy to explain away the 1980s renovations as being unaccommodating to massive and rapid technology changes and needs, the failures of the renovations in the 2010s are less readily understood. Of recent renovations, one respondent remarked: “Remember, these are not necessarily POSITIVE changes.” With 54 percent of all recent renovations of our respondents completed in the past five years, we are intrigued by the issues behind

these hindering and unsupportive environments, and look forward to continuing the conversation (see Image 5 on page 5).

QUESTIONS FOR THE FUTURE

Designing the survey and analyzing its responses has been an insightful experience that has shed light on the struggles and successes librarians are experiencing. While the survey’s results showed some public desk configurations or private workspaces to be more satisfactory than others, there is no one-size fits all design solution for libraries—public or academic. The design should be based on a master plan that is strongly connected to the mission of the library and that allows for an incremental implementation plan.

Librarianship as a profession has long been known its ingenuity and flexibility, requiring solutions to be cobbled together through diligence and accepting that individuals will “wear many hats” and “make it work” no matter what resources are provided. The questions in this survey have raised many more questions. Now we would like to ask, “why should librarians continue to work around obstacles?” and “what would design look like if librarians could articulate the spatial environment they would prefer?”

There are plenty of answers to these questions, and we hope that you continue this discussion among your colleagues, peers, and future designers. ■

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Visit www.librarysurvey.sasaki.com to view a digital version of the survey report.

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