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September, 2010

Picas to Pixels: An interview with Jean-Gabriel Bankier, President and CEO of bepress

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Serials Review

From Picas to Pixels

An Interview with Jean-Gabriel Bankier, President and CEO of bepress☆

Chad Hutchens, Column Editor

In the second part of a two-part series showcasing institutional repository software applications, "From Picas to Pixels" editor Chad Hutchens interviews president and CEO of bepress, Jean-Gabriel Bankier. Bankier discusses bepress' hosted institutional repository Digital Commons and addresses customization, capabilities, and trends at successful institutions. He also presents concrete examples of how numerous institutions are using Digital Commons to promote conferences, capture campus events, host non-traditional publications, as well as traditional peer-reviewed publications. Serials Review 2010; xx:xxx–xxx.
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Chad Hutchens (CH): Thank you very much for agreeing to speak with me Jean-Gabriel Bankier. You're the president and CEO of the Berkeley Electronic Press (or bepress for short), founders of the Digital Commons hosted Institutional Repository (IR).[1] Tell me how long you've been with bepress and a little about your background.

Jean-Gabriel Bankier (JG): I've been with bepress for six years. Prior to bepress I was a strategic marketing consultant. After eight years of helping technology companies better understand customers and markets, I came to believe strongly in the unique advantages of software as a service (SAAS). I looked around for a company with a compelling SAAS offering and a mission that I believed in; bepress fit the bill beautifully. As a flexible IR and scholarly publishing solution, Digital Commons helps users lower barriers to access. That is a cause I believe in.

CH: Tell me about bepress as a company. How long have you been in business? How many people do you employ? Is Digital Commons your company's sole focus or do you market other products or services?

JG: Bepress was started in 1999 by four faculty members from the University of California Berkeley. We now have fifty-three employees. In addition to Digital Commons, bepress publishes scholarly journals crossing the disciplines of education, health and medicine, law, policy, science and technology, and statistics. We started with a few titles in economics, and now we publish about sixty. Our journals are known for fast and high-quality peer review, a liberal best access policy, and prices that libraries can easily afford.

CH: What is the relationship with the University of California Press, or is there one?

JG: There is no relationship with the University of California Press.

CH: The Digital Commons product used to be marketed by ProQuest LLC. Can you shed some light on when that transition back to bepress occurred and why?

JG: Our first customer was the California Digital Library. In fact, we worked closely with them to build Digital Commons. We built the hosted IR in 2001 and launched in 2002. We licensed the software to just a few more customers before deciding to partner with ProQuest LLC, a well-recognized company with a large sales force. We decided in 2007 that Digital Commons was a core business for bepress and that it was time for it to come home.

CH: Off the top of your head, do you know how many institutions use Digital Commons as their IR? Also, I'm assuming you have institutions outside of the U.S. using your product?

JG: We have 130 organizations worldwide using Digital Commons; 25 percent of those are outside the US. The thing that I find most striking is that our sweet spot seems to be the large libraries (members of the Association of Research Libraries) and other large PhD-granting institutions. We serve more of those institutions than Masters-granting and BA-granting institutions.

CH: Bepress has some very good visibility out there as well as name recognition for Digital Commons, a hosted and proprietary solution. Since the other leading IR solutions are all open source you must surely get a lot of questions about control. What sorts of customization can be made to Digital Commons implementations? Are there any unique features or things about Digital Commons that give institutions flexibility?

JG: There are many ways to think about control. I'd like to start with control over the content because ultimately IR managers are

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in the academic business, not the IR business. We have designed a decentralized model that empowers the IR manager to grant control to stakeholders on campus. What I mean by this is that an IR manager starts with complete control over the design, the organization, and the content but can choose to grant departments control of their own series within the repository. He or she can also grant individual faculty members control over their Web presence. The decentralized model of content control supports successful and vibrant repositories.

Do the IR managers have control over the product? Well, the answer to that question is both yes and no. Yes, in the sense that the IR manager gives direction, but no, in the sense that they don't have to physically do all of the technical work and implementation. We have more than a dozen client services representatives who spend the bulk of their time customizing on behalf of subscribing institutions. The advantage to this approach is that it frees the IR manager to focus outward on populating the IR and engaging faculty and other stakeholders. We think it is a terrific model.

Is Digital Commons, the product, flexible? The answer is yes. Not only is it flexible but we encourage our community of subscribers to push the envelope with Digital Commons. Believe it or not, that's how we get some of our best new features for the community as a whole. One good example is the image gallery feature. Bond University in Australia wanted to include a series of images within their repository. Trust me, we had to do a great deal of work to create a customized solution that worked for them. A second school asked for something similar, but not quite the same, and then a third school did so too. Drawing from elements of each of the three uniquely customized image galleries, we developed a roadmap for an image gallery feature that we later rolled out to everyone.

The story of our events-handling functionality is similar. There was a demand for showcasing conferences. We had one, then two, then three custom examples. We took the best attributes of what we designed for each institution and then rolled out an event feature to everyone. We now build an average of six image galleries and eight conferences each month across our subscriber base. A new monograph feature is coming next.

To give you and your readers an idea of what I'm talking about, let's look at a few live examples from across the Digital Commons community. We can start with image galleries and then look at monographs and video. In this first example we're looking at an image gallery which is part of the DigitalCollections@SIT IR. You'll notice that it has a slide show option as well as a geolocation browsing view that utilizes Google Maps' API (application programming interface) (see figure 1).[2]

If you click on an individual image, it will not only give you the metadata but also show you the specific geographic location (see figure 2).

Let's look at a monograph collection now. The University of Massachusetts-Amherst has some impressive monograph collections that are part of its Digital Commons implementation, called ScholarWorks@UMass-Amherst.[3] The first example is the index page which is a listing of the available monographs in their collection (see figure 3).

The individual monograph records offer a breakdown of the monograph by chapter (see figure 4).

I would also note that any institution is offered a number of customization options on these displays, such as where the abstract is placed and the breakdown of chapters and even topics within each chapter can be customized.

I think embedding video within a repository is really exciting. It's one example of a feature that allows a university to develop a unique collection of content associated with a record. The University of Georgia School of Law is an institution that has a

Figure 1. Digital Collections@SIT World Learning Photo Contest Winners Image Gallery Index Page. http://digitalcollections.sit.edu/photocontest.

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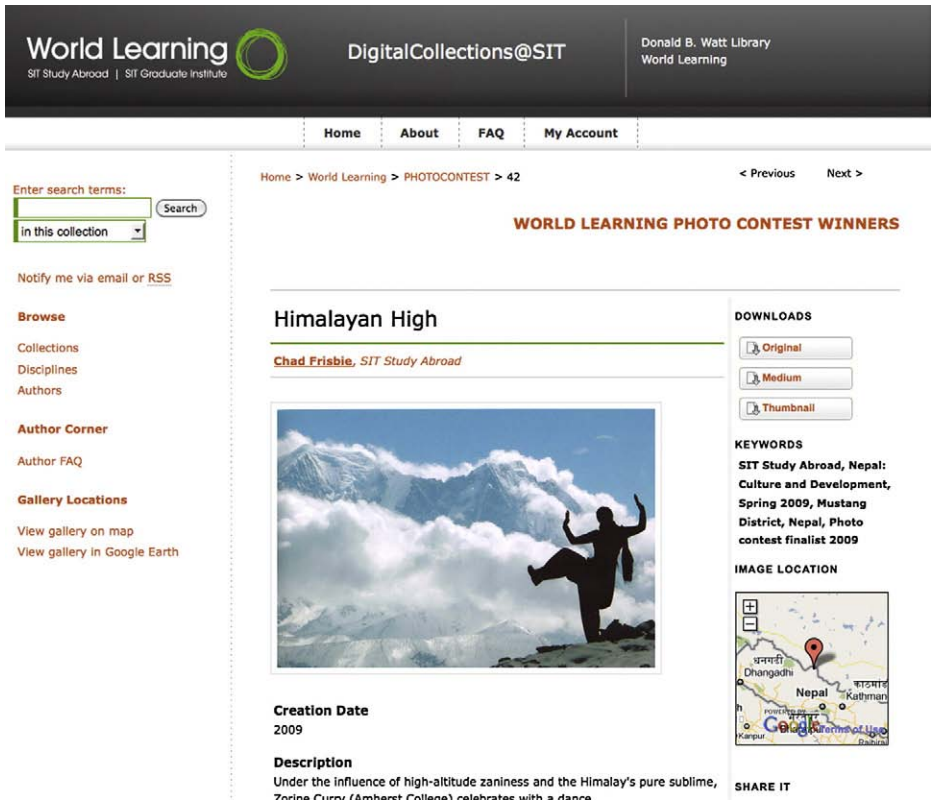

Figure 2. Digital Collections@SIT World Learning Photo Contest Winners Image Gallery Photo Record Page. http://digitalcollections.sit.edu/photocontest/42/.

Figure 3. Monographic collections from ScholarWorks@Umass-Amherst. http://scholarworks.umass.edu/umpress/.

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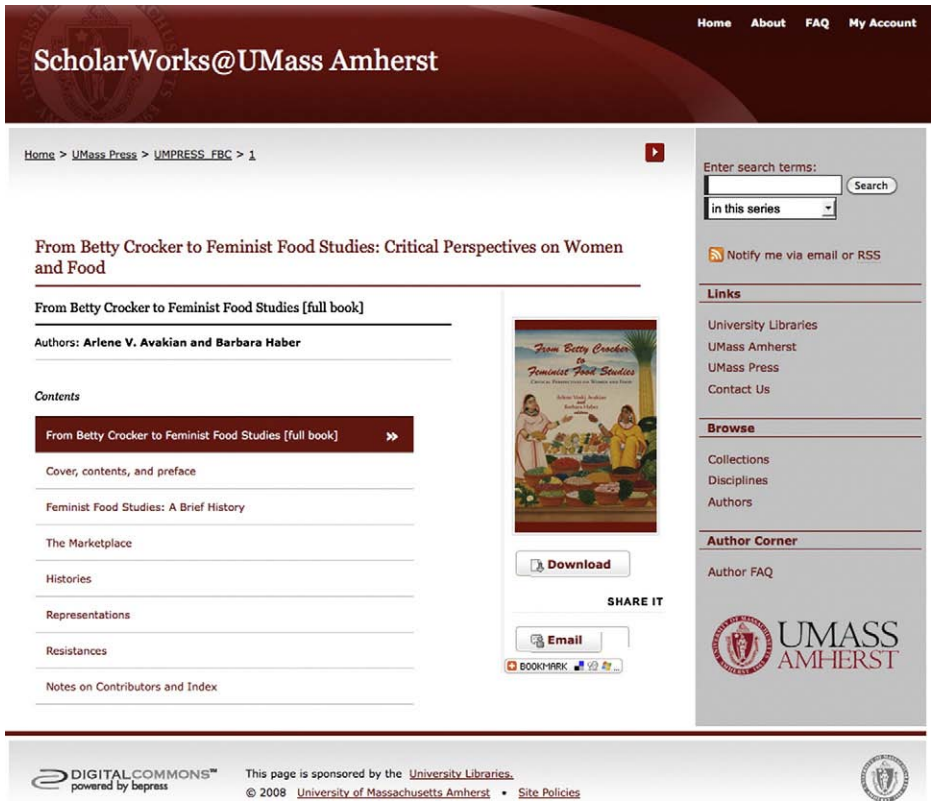

Figure 4. Individual monographic record from ScholarWorks@Umass-Amherst. http://scholarworks.umass.edu/umpress_fbc/1/.

fair amount of video content discoverable through its Digital Commons IR.[4] In 2008, the School of Law recorded a roundtable discussion with the past five US Secretaries of State, and they've uploaded this video along with other related files, such as campus promotion materials that advertised the event (see figures 5 and 6).

So to get back to your original questions about control, there are really lots of ways individual institutions can control the look and feel of Digital Commons. I'd re-emphasize that this notion of control goes far beyond the open source vs. proprietary issue; it's more about what you can actually do with the application, not who pushes the buttons or tweaks the code.

CH: Those are really good concrete examples of how bepress can suit a variety of needs. Thanks for taking the time to show me all of them. Let's shift gears from these concrete examples to some bigger picture questions. What would you say are the key considerations that any institution needs to consider before implementing an IR? How long does it typically take to implement Digital Commons from set-up to the point where an institution is ready to start populating it? How about migrations from other platforms? Have you worked with institutions that are migrating from another institutional repository to Digital Commons and how are cases like that handled?

JG: As far as key considerations, I think it comes down to goals and resources. Have you allocated the resources you need to work toward your goals? With regard to goals, I would say an institution must ascertain what it wants to accomplish and what it wants the focus of the repository to be. On the resources side, institutions should look at how many people they have and how much funding they have available for the program. Those are two key areas to consider before implementing an institutional repository. In terms of time to implement, three weeks is the fastest I've seen a repository launch; two months is typical.

We've handled a number of data migrations from other institutional repository platforms to Digital Commons, and we're well equipped to do so. We provide tools that allow repository administrators to batch upload records via either XML or a simple delimited flat file (that most spreadsheet programs can output). The batch upload tool really simplifies the process and enables an easy migration of a large number of objects. On occasion we have provided migration services including migration of old user logs so that download counts are preserved.

CH: While there are numerous examples of very successful IR implementations, there are surely many that are unsuccessful in garnering faculty participation. Have you noticed any trends at successful Digital Commons sites? At unsuccessful sites?

JG: The biggest trend among successful repositories is a clear understanding and belief in the goals and the purpose of the IR. Having institutional buy-in also matters a great deal. For instance, if the repository manager is working on his/her own and doesn't have the support of the library director or the provost, success can be challenging. Also, librarians who interact with the broader campus seem to be more successful. Those librarians tend to have an open mind about the repository and have a clear understanding of how to take advantage of it. You know, the people that seem to be really successful are the ones that just take a leap-they go out and try. The institutions that are less successful usually do not have institutional buy-in. The IR manager lacks the support to just try.

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Figure 5. Individual video record from DigitalCommons@University of Georgia School of Law. http://digitalcommons.law.uga.edu/conf_coll_symp_symposia/48/#.

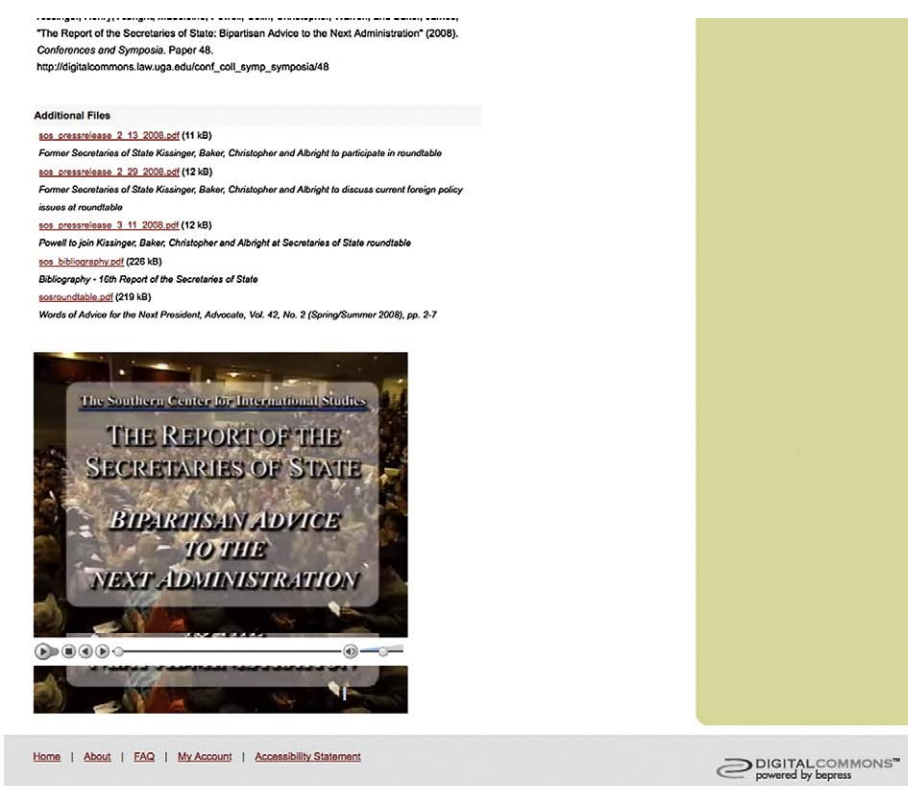

Figure 6. Individual video record detail showing embedded video from DigitalCommons@University of Georgia School of Law. http://digitalcommons.law.uga.edu/conf_coll_symp_symposia/48/#.

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Broad individual exposure (to the repository) is also key. Only after a scholar has seen his/her monthly readership download report on the materials that they have authored and uploaded into the repository does he/she understand the value of participating. There's a positive feedback that has to be created. Go ahead and beg those faculty members to put just one paper in. He/she will come back with more for the repository. You are likely to be able to create champions who will encourage others to participate.

The last thing I'd say about successful repositories is that they typically have an inclusive collection policy. They're not necessarily worried about whether or not content is "scholarly enough." I'm always struck by how much content engaged librarians can find on their campuses. If it means that you upload an annual report for the engineering department because that's what the chairperson needs, then that's what you put in the IR. Every department has content that would benefit from greater exposure and being openly available. Later on, once that department chair sees that people are downloading the content that he or she wanted in the repository, more content will come your way.

CH: Peer review, and where digital publishing falls in that arena, is something that is often of interest to many faculty members. Can you tell me how Digital Commons handles peer-review publishing of journals? Also, I read that your system allows for usage feedback. Can you elaborate on that?

Along similar lines, many scholars are interested in how many times their work(s) have been cited. Now I know that can sometimes be tricky, but one way for scholars to show the value of their work in an IR is by tracking downloads. Does Digital Commons offer institutions the capability to do this? In a broader sense, what other sorts of usage data can be extracted from Digital Commons?

JG: Every month authors receive a monthly usage report that lets them know how many times their content has been downloaded. It's an automated system so a library doesn't have to do this on their own to show that the content in their IR is being used.

This usage feedback is very simple, but it's also really valuable in creating a positive feedback loop for scholars. It encourages them to become more vested in the repository and to put more content into it. In my opinion, it aids in creating the loop required for getting faculty and administrators on campus to discover the benefits of open access, and of being discoverable through Google and other search engines.

CH: Peer review and where digital publishing falls in that arena is something that is often of interest to many faculty members. Can you tell me how Digital Commons handles peer-reviewed publishing of journals?

JG: When Digital Commons was built, and much of this credit should go to the California Digital Library when they chose to partner with bepress for their IR, it was built on top of a full editorial management system we call EdiKit. Bepress journals run on EdiKit. So a peer-reviewed journal or series can easily be created within Digital Commons. What that means is that libraries can provide fully operational peer-reviewed journal publishing services to faculty and campus departments. We launch more than ten new journals every month at Digital Commons sites.

CH: More than ten journals a month? That's impressive. Are these open access journals then?

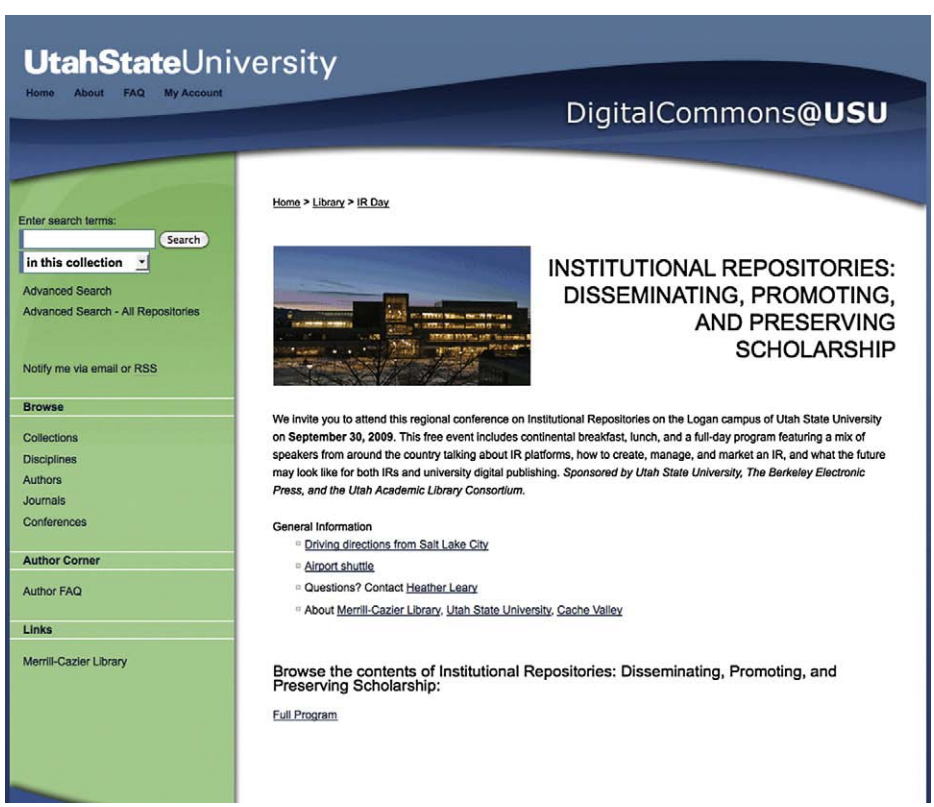

Figure 7. DigitalCommons@USU Institutional Repositories Conference 2009 home page. http://digitalcommons.usu.edu/irday/.

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Figure 8. Embedded conference presentation video from DigitalCommons@USU Institutional Repositories Conference 2009. http://digitalcommons.usu.edu/irday/program/sessions/12/.

JG: Yes, more than ten new journals every month! They are by and large open access, but a handful of them have set some access controls.

CH: What other sorts of usage data can be extracted from Digital Commons?

JG: There are a number of reports that Digital Commons administrators can run. Those reports include number of downloads, referral sites, search terms. We also support Google Analytics so it's very easy and interesting to see where IR visitors are coming from, how they are navigating to your site and how long they are staying, where they come from and where they go. The global distribution of visitors and the amount of local traffic are both always impressive and useful to institutions in demonstrating the value of the repository.

CH: In the white paper posted on your Web site, there is a section about libraries working "upstream" vs. "downstream."[5] Can you elaborate on what that is and how Digital Commons allows for "upstream" work?

JG: We've already talked a little bit about the peer-review capabilities of Digital Commons. Those capabilities are very flexible and can be used in a variety of ways. I'll give you an example of an "upstream." If an institution were hosting a conference, they can announce that conference using Digital Commons, accept submissions with Digital Commons, and then publish the accepted submissions at the time of the conference. Essentially, they can handle the life cycle of the scholarship associated with that conference from first call through to presentation and publication. It takes the headache out of retrospective collection and copyright clearance, that's for sure. Imagine the benefits of having all of the papers you want to publish as part of the conference proceedings, as well as the rights to publish those papers, in hand from the get-go.

If you want to take a look at an example of this, check out Utah State University's repository. The library has used Digital Commons to do just what I've described.[6] You can even watch the video recordings of the presentations at their IR day, through the repository (see figures 7 and 8).

CH: Jean-Gabriel, thank you so much for spending the time to speak with me today about Digital Commons.

Notes

1. The Berkeley Electronic Press, "The Berkeley Electronic Press," http://www.bepress.com/ (accessed April 28, 2010).
2. SIT Graduate Institute, "World Learning Photo Contest Winners," http://digitalcollections.sit.edu/photocontest (accessed April 24, 2010).
3. University of Massachusetts Amherst, "ScholarWorks@UMass Amherst," http://scholarworks.umass.edu/umpress/ (accessed April 24, 2010).
4. University of Georgia School of Law, "DigitalCommons@University of Georgia School of Law-Henry Kissinger, Madeleine Albright, Colin Powell, Warren Christopher, and James Baker: The Report of the Secretaries of State: Bipartisan Advice to the Next Administration," http://digitalcommons.law.uga.edu/conf_coll_symp_symposia/48/# (accessed April 24, 2010).
5. Jean-Gabriel Bankier and Courtney Smith, "Digital Repositories at a Crossroads: Achieving Sustainable Success through Campus-wide Engagement," *VALA 2010 Conference Proceedings*, http://www.vala.org.au/vala2010-proceedings/vala2010-session-6-bankier (accessed June 5, 2010).
6. Utah State University, "DigitalCommons@USU," http://digitalcommons.usu.edu/irday/ (accessed May 9, 2010).

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