Supporting Research in Modern Languages and Literature

Johns Hopkins University Sheridan Libraries with IthakaS+R

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Introduction

The invitation to participate in this study with IthakaS+R came at a timely moment for Johns Hopkins University Sheridan Libraries. During the upcoming modernization of the Milton S. Eisenhower Library there will be disruptions to our services, and understanding the core needs of our primary onsite faculty users, the humanists, is a top priority so we can minimize the impact on their research and teaching as much as possible.

Additionally, we have a vacancy in the liaison librarian position for German and Romance Languages and Literature and Comparative Thought and Literature, two of the four departments that this study targeted. The study gave us a chance to better understand how faculty in these departments conduct research to help inform how we structure the job and who we hire.

This report details our findings from semi-structured interviews with ten faculty members in Modern Languages and Literature fields about their research and scholarly outputs, with a focus on library services and tools.

Key Findings

- Bibliographic research remains the primary methodology
- Publishing in top-tier print journals is still a primary benchmark for tenure review
- The most-frequently cited challenge was the difficulty in staying current with new research as platforms have proliferated
- There is an awareness of, and active interest in, the role of the scholar as public humanist

Methodology

Our team is comprised of three people, Margaret Burri (PI), Assistant Director for Academic Liaison and Special Collections, Heidi Herr, Librarian for English and Philosophy, and Jessica Keyes, User Experience Analyst. We conducted 10 interviews with faculty representing many facets of the Modern Languages and Literature area of studies at Johns Hopkins University.

Recruitment

We started by creating a spreadsheet of all the faculty who met the study criteria. The liaison librarian for the departments contacted each faculty member individually to invite them to participate. After the first round of replies, we followed up by email with individuals who filled gaps in representation of the following categories.

Faculty Representation

Rank

- Associate Professor (1)
- Assistant Professor (2)
- Professor (7)

Department

- Africana Studies (1 second department for one participant)
- English (2)

- German and Romance Language and Literature (6)
- Writing Seminars (2)

Research Area

- Cultural Studies (8)
- Writing Studies (2)

Interviews

Members of the team conducted semi-structured interviews with each faculty member that lasted for 45 minutes to one hour (see Appendix I for interview guide). In one instance, the recording device did not work and a different interviewer repeated the interview with the participant.

Findings

Research Methods

While broad searching to get a sense of the landscape of available material on a topic commonly begins with Google and sometimes general library catalog searches, interviewees consistently spoke about the primacy of traditional bibliographic research wherein they follow a path to identify relevant secondary and primary sources by reading the bibliographies of other relevant sources, continuing down the line until they feel they have acquired a comprehensive set of materials on their topic. For example, one person stated, "I read everything I can find and then I look at the bibliography and I see if there's anything that I've missed."

After identifying desired sources, interviewees go to online databases and the library catalog to find them. Interviewees described performing known-item searches rather than keyword searches. Several expressed an expectation that keyword searches would not return any useful results because their research is so specific.

"I'm not a keyword search person in searchable databases... the training I received was contextualized close readings, which means knowing the primary text well and being able to see how it fits into its period, the various social formations around it, the relative position of the author with respect to his or her peers in the literary field, things like that."

Building the research bibliography was not without its challenges. The challenge that was most consistently noted related to keeping up with current research. Interviewees mentioned several factors related to this issue, including the proliferation of sources for research and the fact that with online publishing it is theoretically possible to find everything that is being written on a subject.

"[When I was in college] it was pre-Internet, so it basically meant that the limits of knowledge coincided with the limits of the library of available knowledge. Sure, you could do interlibrary loan, but for the most part in a liberal arts college you didn't need to go beyond the holdings of a decent library... The real challenge I think for learners today and budding researchers is the

fact that there is ostensibly no limit insofar as it's not only what's coming out, but also the quasi-totality... of the archive."

Several people also spoke about the difficulty of following recent scholarship online compared to the time when they would have an individual subscription to a scholarly journal and be able to easily browse the table of contents when each issue arrived. Additionally, more than one person spoke of the challenges of keeping up with changing library technology over the course of their career, which further hampers efforts to keep up with current research.

"I don't think that I, myself, have really kept pace with what has happened with library technology. I just reached a point and coasted from there. And I don't know if that happens to everybody. That when you've been in the profession for so long, you don't develop new skills any longer."

There were some mentions of the research challenges introduced by search technology, and the lack of transparency around how search tools reveal and rank results. This was mentioned both in terms of personal research and with regards to teaching students who expect search in library tools to operate like Google, when they don't.

"The question is always ranking... what's on the first three pages? There's 50 pages of listings and if it's not on the first three pages most people aren't going to have the stamina to go through all those listings to find out that this is actually—if you look at the full title and if you look at the contributors—this is the resource you want to use."

There is a strong emphasis placed on the importance of access to materials. Interviewees showed a preference for quick and easy digital access for secondary sources, but there were differing opinions on the value of digital access to primary sources. Some interviewees find digitized primary content useful more for teaching and reference than for research. One person said of eBooks versus print books: "When I'm working with the text very closely, I want to be able to flip it band and forward, and kind of use it as a codex. And when I'm just reading... I don't really want to do that. I just want to read it, and that's online. That's fine."

Several interviewees mentioned that they value our membership in a borrowing consortium because they can get most materials they need very quickly, "I use [consortium borrowing] a lot. A lot. And it's been really very helpful to me. I'm sometimes surprised that I do end up using it so often, because things that I expect [our institution] to have [I can still get]."

Many interviewees spoke of the value of traveling to institutions that hold primary materials to use them in person. Several interviewees who spoke of using archival materials lamented the paucity of information about archival holdings in digital finding aids, "I feel like sometimes—I would say often—I have trouble using or accessing finding aids that are really that helpful. They might be very minimal."

Working with Archives and Special Collections

"Go get your hands dirty in the archive," a sentiment championed by one faculty member, could easily be the rallying cry among the majority of literary scholars interviewed. Be it a 17th century annotated edition of a book by Milton or an archive of films located in a gallery in Paris, faculty rely on physical

access to primary sources, the expertise of librarians and curators, and their own scholarly instincts to make discoveries pertinent to their lines of inquiry. Emotion also comes into play: "Well, part of what motivates me to work with rare materials is the tremendous excitement and surprise I get in opening up a text and seeing something I hadn't seen before or wasn't expecting."

American archives and special collections in particular are prized for their ease of use and democratic modes of access, especially in comparison to European libraries in which "the hurdles are many and kind of intentionally so." One professor recalled a recent visit to a library in France in which they had "to have a series of authorizations, you really have to cultivate the people there to be able to get access" to the material you need. Conversely, many faculty members appreciate the opportunities afforded them and their students to make use of the rare materials at Hopkins for classroom instruction at the undergraduate and graduate level, as well as the knowledge of the librarians and curators about their collections.

While there are era-agnostic challenges in researching at archives or utilizing special collections materials, such as mastering the myriad access policies at libraries, faculty studying 20th century literary studies face additional hurdles in order to access primary sources and publish their research. These hurdles include understanding issues of audience and authorship for new multimedia genres such as the blog novel, applying for freedom of information requests, determining issues of copyright, and receiving permission from the author's heirs or the managers of literary estates. While discussing their own personal research problems, one professor spoke of "those things that the author has chosen not to publish, the family often can be quite protective of the privacy of letters, diaries, other incidental papers, and things like that." A researcher of modern and contemporary authors, then, must learn to have realistic expectations regarding access to sensitive materials and patience while awaiting answers to their requests.

While faculty preference is largely to study the physical object itself, increasingly, faculty are relying on search engines like Google Books and specialized library databases to discover and explore old or obscure texts. Most faculty interviewed utilize both the real thing and its digital surrogate, but one professor is exalted by the ease with which technology has enabled discovery of rare resources: "I've been so spoiled by Google, and you know, there are so many rare books you can find online . . . I haven't set foot in an archive ever." Faculty, however, who identify as historic materialists note that they cannot rely solely on scanned copies of books and historic documents: "Typically, what happens in digitization is some copies will be digitized, some may not be digitized well enough, some copies will have been edited by the person, by the group that's digitizing so that they miss out [on]... all the para-text." Therefore, a digitized copy does not preclude research travel to view the printed book in person.

Another professor mused on how certain languages are privileged within an institutional structure, thus making it very easy to find materials, say, on a German or French author. However, "people who work on less frequently taught languages are much more reliant on virtual communities and on digital technology" and need to develop strong research skills to discover existing copies and historic collections.

This is particularly true of languages that are taught less frequently, or do not have a defined geographic home:

"A language like Yiddish, for instance, it's not the national language of any country. You don't go to that one place. All of the books are rescued books that exist in far-flung places. They've all been displaced themselves... I think that requires a set of library skills I've never had to develop."

It is also widely believed that the digitization has brought about a decrease in subject specialization at special collections facilities: "with the advent of digitization, I think there has been some serious loss of local knowledge about particular collections" thereby making it difficult for researchers to communicate their research needs with curators and librarians, as well as learn about collections that are in cataloging backlogs. The unique cataloging workflows across institutions also make it daunting even for more seasoned researchers to find rare materials online; catalog records for rare books often lack the metadata that scholars seek, and archival inventories can be confusing or incomplete. Furthermore, younger scholars who rely on internet browsing to find primary sources are not learning the traditional research methodology to find materials that perhaps haven't yet been digitized, such as consulting handbooks, bibliographies, and other reference works.

One participant whose research is heavily focused on primary texts held by archives spoke of the need for more training on how to safely handle old books and for more aggressive conservation efforts, "I wish libraries would spend more on conservation... I can't believe how many books I've come across that are in terrible condition." This person also spoke about a challenge that is particularly difficult for scholars working with archival materials is that they may be catalogued with inconsistent metadata.

"One of the challenges is materials from the early modern period don't have the same titles as often they are given in catalogs. Like that wouldn't be called The Bible. That would be called The Holy Scriptures and it would have a different name. Authors from my period often have a Latin name and a regular name. If it's a German name or a Latin name, those are challenges."

Several people spoke of the challenges introduced by inconsistency in how and to what extent different archives have documented their holdings.

"I feel like sometimes—I would say often—I have trouble using or accessing finding aids that are really that helpful. They might be very minimal. I don't know much about this from the library perspective of compiling them and how that works, but from the perspective of the researcher I feel like sometimes it's not designed in a way that's extremely helpful for me."

Working with Secondary Content

Finding and accessing secondary content is critical to framing the research question. Modern language scholars' work is increasingly interdisciplinary, as noted by one scholar, who is working on deindustrialization and the end of work:

"I began reading widely in urban history, and the history of suburbanization, town planning, [and the] history of transportation—a lot of ancillary things that might not seem to be directly relevant."

Stack browsing, and mining footnotes and bibliographies remain fundamental to identifying secondary content. Two faculty described stack browsing as both a physical and virtual activity, including Google

Books and Amazon in their browsing descriptions. The virtual aspect has the added value of full text searching, even if the full text is not immediately available through Google or Amazon. It is a useful tool to help them decide to borrow or ask the library to purchase the book.

All interviewees stressed the importance of consortium borrowing for accessing secondary content. One interviewee mentioned that a possible downside is that traditional ILL takes longer, but realized after describing a particular instance, that there may have been other factors at play: the holidays, and the fact that the item was coming from a small, overseas library.

Indeed, getting foreign language materials, while improved by consortium borrowing, remains a challenge if the only holding library is not in the US. One interviewee mused that perhaps traditional ILL just seem longer since she receives fewer things that way; nevertheless, these are items that are critical to understanding scholarly arguments in the target language.

Faculty noted the importance of surrounding themselves with secondary content in their offices, either borrowed or purchased. They often pull materials out to share with students, or for their own quick reference or deeper reading.

Scholarly Communications

Promotion and Tenure

While interviewees clearly understood that good scholarship is appearing in newer journals that only have an on-line presence, all acknowledged that the traditional print journals, particularly PMLA, reign supreme in issues of promotion and tenure. As one noted, "This is the irony—even if nobody gets the print journal, even if we only get in on-line, it's still considered, in people's mind, print."

Even in the area of creative writing, which one interviewee noted has a longer tradition of online-only journals, and a preponderance of original work appearing in journal, not book form, tenure and promotion committees look for "[the] bricks and mortar traditionally published book, with a traditional print run."

Three interviewees noted that Europe is taking the lead in establishing peer-reviewed, online- only journals. Two attributed this to the relative strength of American university presses versus their European counterparts. One went so far as to assert that "young scholars [in France] who have launched some of the newer journals purely on-line are now setting the agenda. There are some really excellent things about contemporary French fiction that are fully peer-reviewed."

Dissemination of Scholarship

Everyone noted the importance of sharing their work through conferences, particularly the MLA meeting. Attending MLA, as well as serving on groups like its executive forum board and organizing conference panels, remains a key way to connect with colleagues, stay abreast of research trends, and interact with journal and book publishers. Indeed, the presence of publishers at the meeting was noted as the best way to find out about new scholarship by a majority of those interviewed.

Social networks like Academia.edu were on their radar; one noted that a call for papers for that she had posted there had extended the reach of a small, boutique meeting. "We've had about 750 people who have downloaded this silly call for papers [from] 2 years ago which was only going to involve 12 people."

Open Access and Digital Scholarship

While there was some confusion about "online" and "open access," those faculty who did understand open access made some interesting observations. In the area of creative work, open access literary journals hold stong appeal since they provide the widest exposure possible for the writer. Another noted that publishers have taken the notion of prestige away from the scholar, and felt that open access could help the academy regain that prestige through wider dissemination.

While none of the faculty had worked on a digital scholarship project, they did discuss several that they thought were useful, and moved beyond being "a glorified book edition with very nice images and some footnotes." Mapping the Republic of Letters and the Digital Dante came up as exemplars. They noted, however, that younger scholars had less freedom to work in this space until they had gotten tenure.

Evaluating Impact

Most faculty focused on publications and conference presentations as indicators of their work's impact. About half, however, also discussed the important of their work reaching a broader audience, and two noted that they consider themselves "public humanists," specifically writing for outlets such as the New York Times and the Atlantic. One had recently completed a book tour promoting his recent book in defense of the humanities. Another noted that one his books, which was reviewed in non-scholarly outlets, is still the most read.

Only one faculty brought up scholarly metrics. She gave a compelling overview of why things like the H-index, which is more widely used in Europe, is irrelevant for humanists.

Research Training

Faculty emphasize the importance of training and mentoring graduate students regarding all aspects of scholarly work, from how to develop a research project to selecting the right publication for a particular article or essay. Perhaps the most important lesson to impart, despite its connotation of existential dread, is that "the research never ends." There is also a legacy component to the adviser/advisee relationship: "you end up kind of producing graduate students that look like the faculty in some ways" in terms of how research is conducted and disseminated.

A solid relationship between advisor and advisee is essential since they are "developing a project together and talking through it and then seeing what the hurdles might be" and judging if the core of the research idea is feasible. Furthermore, as one faculty member remarked upon their roles as both a mentor and mentee, "mentorship is really what kind of made my career," so there is a responsibility to "instill that confidence and that skill set" with students. However, successful advising is an art, and it can take time for junior faculty to figure out the best approaches to motivate graduate students and tailor mentoring to their individual needs.

The library plays a role in the training as well by offering workshops, instructional support, and other modes of research support to faculty and graduate students alike. The library's outreach is well-received by faculty. However, one faculty member mentioned that a visit from teaching support staff was unwelcomed because the staff did not do any research on how graduate students were trained by faculty for instruction. Overall, upon recalling their own experiences with using libraries as graduate

students, faculty discussed how their advisors encouraged them to research at libraries, talk to librarians, and learn how to navigate a variety of library systems. Such activities were described by one professor as "developing the muscles" for research.

In addition to providing guidance in how to conduct research, several faculty members also mentioned that graduate student training should encourage the development of strong interpersonal skills. As one professor noted, managing a research project is not an insular activity; "a lot of it has to do with relationships." Learning how to negotiate one's needs with the concerns of literary estates, the various regulations surrounding access to archives, and the standards of professionalism within ones' field of study are essential skills to master.

Furthermore, there is an acknowledgement that graduate students should understand how academic bureaucracy functions, both within a particular department and the larger academic ecosystem. Indeed, one professor, while appreciative of the mentoring he received "wish[ed] I would have had a better sense, let's say, as a graduate student, of how universities function." Such an understanding is crucial for success within the profession as it helps a young academic learn how priorities are set, what the roles of faculty senates or department deans are, and why projects are approved or declined.

While there is overwhelming support among faculty for providing research methodology training and mentoring to graduate students, there are nonetheless several challenges that impede implementation. The challenges include staffing issues, a lack of an introductory methodology curriculum across literary studies disciplines, and the extreme specificity or interdisciplinarity of student research. In short, there is no one-size fits all methodology that will apply to the majority of literature students.

Generational shifts are also at play, especially in terms of how resources are browsed and read. Such shifts in how research is conducted can make for less successful opportunities in research training. One professor expressed that students "are not as canonical in their preparation" while another is concerned that students no longer "read a book for its argument and arc." There is fear that the divide cannot be successfully breached between more seasoned faculty and tech-savvy students. One faculty member was rather blunt in their assessment of adapting their skills to changes in how research is published, indexed, and discovered: "when you've been in the profession for so long, you don't develop new skills any longer."

Literature faculty in languages other than English have an additional challenge in research training and mentoring, centering largely on the decline of foreign language instruction at the secondary and collegiate level: students learn languages "in different and more unconventional ways and have tremendous insight and tremendous talent, but have not had that rigorous" studying associated with a typical four-year degree in languages. Standard or traditional methods of research training that presupposed a particular language pedagogy no longer apply. Faculty, then, must craft new training techniques and opportunities, but do not necessarily have the time or departmental support to forge ahead. As one member of the faculty lamented, "we simply have not had the capacity to sort of sit down and think about how we really want to redesign the program."

Relationship-Building

There appears to be a strong preference for individual research and publishing as most interviewees spoke of collaboration with colleagues either within or outside of our institution. However, some interviewees spoke of working with the estates of their research subjects and with archivists who oversee the papers of their research subjects. Several noted the value of building strong relationships with these people, for example "the fact that if you're doing research in which the vast majority of the primary sources that you're dealing with are controlled by a single entity, which in this case is the literary estate, you have to be sure you're on good terms with them."

And with regards to archivists, "It's always great to have people working there who really know the material well and can kind of guide to you toward certain things. And if you tell them that you're interested in *X*, they say, 'Oh, there's also *Y* that might be of interest to you."

There were a few mentions of the value of mentorship and collaboration with graduate students, both as an instructor and as a former student, "Ultimately it comes down to the advisor/advisee thing is very important; the human—developing a project together and talking through it and then seeing what the hurdles might be and is this feasible." These relationships were mentioned primarily in regards to skill-building and learning how to effectively conduct research.

Several participants mentioned their liaison librarians by name, and how much they valued the support they receive from librarians. Primarily the scholars rely on these relationships for acquiring materials, and sometimes for assistance in finding materials. Multiple participants also spoke about using our teaching support and reserves services.

Conclusions

This study uncovered several ways in which we can better support faculty in Modern Languages and Literature fields. Interestingly, while the introduction of continual enhancements to online library products has changed how scholars get access to materials, changes in library technology have not significantly changed the core of how MLL research is conducted or how scholarly output is evaluated.

We are fortunate that we have, in addition to the work on this project, a strong base of qualitative data on how our faculty conduct research going back almost 10 years. We propose to do more intensive mining of the past data, compare it with these findings, and continue a series of conversations with faculty as we implement next steps. Our humanities liaison librarians are in close contact with faculty, so we can individually assess impact through our regular conversations.

Next steps

- Partner with our Scholarly Communications Librarian to develop a deeper understanding of open access and how it affects promotion and tenure.
- Set up meetings with faculty to discuss whether the library can provide a research training curriculum for new students joining their departments.
- Collaborate with literature faculty to create workshops or other library learning opportunities to address faculty skills-building needs.

- Consult with Special Collections staff to discuss the pain points faculty have with finding rare materials outside of the institution.
- Work with our Library Applications team to develop or implement tools and a workflow targeted at helping scholars to stay apprised of current research in their fields.

Appendices

Appendix I: Semi-Structured Interview Guide

Research Focus and Methods

Describe the research project(s) you are currently working on.

- Tell me a bit more about the research for the project has unfolded step-by-step [choose one
 project if multiple were listed above] E.g. developing the topic, identifying and working with the
 information needed for the research, plans for sharing the results]
- How does this project and process of researching relate to how you've done work in the past?
- How does this project relate to the work typically done in your department(s) and field(s) you are affiliated with?

Working with Archives and Other Special Collections

Do you typically rely on material collected in archives or other special collections? [E.g. rare books, unpublished documents, museum artifacts]. If so,

- How do you find this information? How did you learn how to do this? Does anyone ever help you?
- Where do you access this information? [e.g. on-site, digitally]
- How and when do you work with this information? [e.g. do you use any specific approaches or tools?]
- Have you encountered any challenges in the process of finding, accessing or working with this kind of information? If so, describe.
- To what extent do you understand and/or think it is important to understand how the tools that help you find and access this information work? [E.g. finding aides, online museum catalogues "do you understand how database x decides which content surfaces first in your searches," and, "do you care to understand?"]
- Are there any resources, services or other supports that would help you more effectively work with this kind of information?

Working with Secondary Content

What kinds of secondary source content to do you typically rely on do your research? [E.g. scholarly articles or monographs]

- How do you find this information? How did you learn to do this? Does anyone ever help you?
- Where do you access this information? [e.g. on-site, digitally]
- How and when do you work with this information? [e.g. do you use any specific approaches or tools?]
- Have you encountered any challenges in the process of finding, accessing or working with secondary sources? If so, describe.
- To what extent do you understand and/or think it is important to understand how the tools that help you find and access this information work? [E.g. algorithmic bias, processes for creating and applying keywords, "do you understand how google scholar decides which articles surface first in your searches," and, "do you care to understand?"]

• Are there any resources, services or other supports that would help you more effectively locate or work with secondary sources?

Scholarly Communications and Evaluating Impact

How are your scholarly outputs [e.g. books, peer reviewed journal articles] evaluated by your institution and to what ends? [E.g. tenure and promotion process, frequency of evaluations]

- Have you observed any trends and/or changes over time in how scholarly outputs are being evaluated? [E.g. shift in emphasis between books vs. articles, shift in emphasis in the extent to which the prestige or impact factor of a publication is considered]
- Beyond tenure and promotion, does your institution evaluate your scholarly outputs towards any other ends? [E.g. benchmarking your/your departments performance using analytics software] If so, how, and to what ends?
- What have been your experiences being evaluated in this way?
- Have you observed these kinds of processes having a larger effect on your department and/or institutional culture?
- To what extent do you engage with or have interest in any mechanisms for sharing your work beyond traditional publishing in peer reviewed journals or monographs? To what ends? [E.g. posting in pre-print archives to share with peers, creating digital maps or timelines for students, creating outputs for wider audiences]
- Do you engage with any forms of social networking, including academic social networking, as a mechanism for sharing and/or engaging with other scholars? If no, why not? If so,
- Describe the platform(s) you currently use and how.
- What do you like best about the platform(s) you currently use and what do you like least?
- Are there any other ways the platform(s) could be improved to best meet your needs?
- Beyond the information you have already shared about your scholarly communications activities and needs, is there anything else you think would be helpful for me to know about your experiences?

Research Training and Wrapping Up

Looking back at your experiences as a researcher, are there any forms of training that was particularly useful? Conversely, are there any forms of training you wish you had gotten and/or would still like to get? Why?

Considering evolving trends in how research is conducted and evaluated, is there any form of training that would be most beneficial to graduate students and/or scholars more widely?

Is there anything else from your experiences and perspectives as a researcher or on the topic of research more broadly that you think would be helpful to share with me that has not yet been discussed in this conversation?



Informed Consent Form

Project title: Research support of scholars in literature and writing studies

Reason for the study: This study seeks to examine the research practices of faculty in literature in all languages, culture (e.g. folklore, performance studies, and literary history) and writing studies in order to articulate the best resources and services that faculty at Johns Hopkins need to be successful in their work.

What you will be asked to do: Your participation in the study involves a 60 minute audio-recorded interview about your research practices. Your participation is completely voluntary. You are free to withdraw consent and discontinue participation in the interview at any time for any reason.

Benefits and Risks: There are no known risks associated with participating in this study. You may experience benefit in the form of increased insight and awareness into your research practices and support needs.

How your confidentiality will be maintained: Research data will be de-identified and stored on an encrypted local server indefinitely.

Questions? You may contact the researchers at any time if you have additional questions about the study, or, if you have any questions about your rights as an interviewee, you may contact Homewood IRB at 410-516-6580.

I	understand and consent to participate in the study
as described above including:	• • •
being interviewed and being	audio-recorded during the interview
Participant Signature:	Date:
Interviewer Signature:	Date: