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Ruth N. Bolton: Autobiographical reflections

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# Ruth N. Bolton: Autobiographical reflections

Ruth N. Bolton

*Department of Marketing, Arizona State University, Tempe, Arizona, USA*

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## Abstract

**Purpose** – My goal is to describe my life in marketing over more than 36 years and to help readers better understand (from my personal perspective) the history of marketing. I also aim to lift the curtain on some aspects of service within the marketing community.

**Design/methodology/approach** – This paper is an autobiographical sketch. It describes some key moments in my career, as well as describing how my most cited articles came to be written. It emphasizes the contextual factors at work in different periods, so readers can better understand how and why my research evolved in certain ways. I aim to convey the nature and variety of career experiences that were (and are) open to marketing academics. I discuss my experiences at the *Journal of Marketing* and the Marketing Science Institute.

**Findings** – Marketing changed rapidly between 1974 and 2017. Although change can be uncomfortable, I urge marketers to seek exposure to new ideas and practices; they are essential to learning and growth. Unexpected opportunities will come along and an alert individual can learn much from them. My time in industry was a learning experience for me. There are many kinds of interesting and successful careers.

**Practical implications** – The marketing field advances, not by the work of a single individual, but from the accumulated work of the entire marketing community. Everyone has a role to play. I encourage each individual to look for ways to contribute. I offer thoughts on how to build a research career based on my own experience.

**Social implications** – My thoughts may shed some light on the experiences of a woman academic and the globalization of marketing academia between 1974 and 2017.

**Originality/value** – My hope is that this paper contributes to a better understanding of the history of marketing, when it is considered together with other articles on this topic. It may also be useful to people who are embarking upon a career, as well as those seeking to understand the work of earlier marketing scholars.

**Keywords** Marketing history, Marketing, History of marketing ideas, Autobiography, Journal of Marketing, Marketing Science Institute

**Paper type** Viewpoint

Look on every exit being an entrance somewhere else –Tom Stoppard (1967).

In reflecting on my past experiences, *serendipity* seems to be a good word to describe my life story and career journey. What do I mean by serendipity? I like this definition: “finding valuable or pleasant things that are not looked for”. In other words, serendipity is *happy discovery*. I’ve served on the faculty of nine universities and also worked in the industry, as well as traveled extensively. Exposure to new places, new people and new ideas stimulates me – encouraging happy discoveries. I hope my reflections will encourage others to embark on their own journeys of discovery.

Every marketing professor has a life story and a career journey, but not everyone writes an autobiographical sketch for publication. In reflecting about the past, I’ve realized that – although my experiences are mine alone – they may also reflect the experiences of others in the marketing community. So, I hope readers will recognize some aspects of their story in



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mine and better understand the history of marketing. I also aim to lift the curtain on some aspects of service within the marketing community. Ruth N. Bolton

### **Early years in Canada**

I was born in 1956 in Sault Ste. Marie, Ontario, Canada – the eldest of four children. My father, Edmund James “Ted” Bolton, worked for a large accounting firm for much of his career. He was a chartered accountant specializing in sick and insolvent companies. Acting on behalf of his employer’s client, usually a bank, his job was to restore a company to financial viability or liquidate it (so that its debt could be repaid). He interacted with all different functional areas of the firm and his stories about work were fascinating. Once he brought home a small unlabeled aerosol can that contained hair spray for men. My brothers tried it out and our family talked about whether this new product could be successful. Subsequently, the “Dry Look” became popular for men in the 1970s.

My mother, Lola Olga Bolton (née Hubert), worked as a bookkeeper and secretary for 10-15 years before becoming a full-time homemaker. When I was around 9 or 10, she purchased a carton of soft drinks (a highly unusual purchase in our household). Mysteriously, one of the cans was only partially filled, yet it was correctly sealed! My mother explained that we could write a polite letter to the company about the problem. The company gave us a complimentary carton of soft drinks, so we children were delighted. These two incidents were probably my earliest exposure to marketing topics, new product development and service recovery, respectively!

I had a very happy childhood. We rode our bicycles everywhere, played hide-and-seek, built forts in the woods, made amateur igloos in the winter snow and swam in the summer. I had a paper route – as did my brothers – in the days before adults began delivering newspapers by car. I participated in Brownies and Girl Guides; the Guides in Canada sell cookies as a fund-raiser, just like Girl Scouts in the USA. My parents were very keen on education. When we turned 16, we found summer jobs and started saving money for university. My jobs included working as a cashier, waitress and factory worker on the night shift (where I once watched a machine run amok distributing pretzels everywhere).

When I was a teenager, my father was temporarily running a furniture factory in a small Ontario town. Dad had been chatting with some workers about their children, and later they surprised him with a hope (dowry) chest as a birthday present for me. It was a beautiful English oak chest made out of scrap materials. My parents explained to me the tradition (which had mostly lapsed by then) of creating a storage chest for girls of a marriageable age. I still have the chest today. In these ways, I learned from my parents – and saw firsthand – how firms create products for consumers, jobs for people and support communities. My childhood experiences gave me a favorable impression of business.

My family was active in the local United Church of Canada and community activities. My parents seem to have indirectly influenced all their children’s career choices. My brother Peter is an entrepreneur and small business owner, my brother David is a financial manager and my sister Lisa (after a stint as a biomedical engineer) is a marketing professor in the Smeal College of Business at Pennsylvania State University (Plate 1).

### **Undergraduate studies at Queen’s University in Canada**

A few summers spent cutting chicken with a rotating blade and (later) sealing potato chip bags convinced me that university was an attractive option. When I graduated from high school in 1974, I didn’t have any explicit career goals. I enjoyed English literature (including a lifelong love of theater, especially Shakespeare) and considered pursuing a Bachelor of



**Plate 1.**  
Photo of Bolton  
family in 1978

Arts. However, it didn't offer a direct path to full-time employment. I enrolled in the Bachelor of Commerce program at Queen's University in Kingston, Ontario.

My four years of undergraduate studies gave me a solid foundation in economics and statistics, as well as management. I chose to write an undergraduate thesis. The empirical work applied econometric methods to horse race data; it entailed estimating a rank order multinomial logit model (Bolton and Chapman, 1986). Apparently, I displayed an early talent in this area, picking a winning horse at the race track when I was two years old. (This feat was never repeated because our family didn't frequent the races).

My thesis topic and methodology may seem rather unusual for a BCom (Hons) student in 1978. However, everyone in my cohort learned business statistics (including multivariate techniques), operations research (e.g. linear modeling) and computer programming (FORTRAN). I remember lining up with punch cards to run my programs on an IBM mainframe, being very careful not to drop them!

The Bachelor of Commerce program originated in Britain; the program is somewhat broader than the Bachelor of Business Administration programs in the USA.

Another Queen's Commerce graduate who became a marketing academic was Thomas (Tom) Kinnear (Class of 1966). He served as Editor of the *Journal of Marketing* in 1990-1993 (as I did subsequently in 2003-2005). Recently, we were chatting and agreed that the Queen's Commerce program was excellent preparation for our careers. I returned to Queen's University in 1992 to give an invited presentation at a marketing seminar. The Smith School of Business at Queen's University is still a very special place.

At Queen's, about one-third of my 160 classmates were women (QSB, 2009). I recall only one female instructor: a doctoral student who taught a calculus class. Women's participation in the workforce surged in Canada between my mother's era and mine. It was 25 per cent in the 1950s and 50 per cent by the 1970s (Statistics Canada, 2017). My female classmates and I were focused on our future careers. Although we had worn mini-skirts and hot pants in the 1960s, we now dressed for job interviews in severe suits with broad shoulders! Thankfully, women professionals have more options today.

As graduation approached, I considered combining my commerce degree with a subsequent law degree or perhaps taking the accountancy exam like my father. However,

my professors opened a new door by encouraging me to pursue a doctorate in business – it would never have occurred to me otherwise. Three of my professors had been awarded doctoral degrees from Carnegie Mellon University (CMU). All three encouraged me to apply there. Ram Rao, who had taught my first marketing class, was one of them. So, it is not entirely surprising that – when I was admitted to three American doctoral programs and offered scholarships – I chose to enroll at CMU.

My parents weren't entirely happy that I planned to study in the USA. The big television news stories of the 1970s didn't always paint an attractive picture of the USA (crime, civil rights clashes, Vietnam, Watergate), although some stories were appealing (Skylab, the first Star Wars movie). However, there were more opportunities in the USA at this time. While writing this article, I looked up PhD production in the USA and Canada ([Chiswick et al., 2010](#)). In 1978, Canadian universities were awarding (annually) less than 2,000 PhDs across all disciplines, whereas American universities were awarding more than 30,000.

### Doctoral studies at Carnegie Mellon University

CMU, formerly the Carnegie Institute of Technology, had been part of the Ford Foundation's initiative to reform business education and was a leader in management science ([Tadajewski, 2006](#), p. 11; [Wilkie and Moore, 2003](#)). The Graduate School of Industrial Administration (GSIA, now the Tepper Business School) is renowned for its brilliant faculty and nine Nobel Laureates (e.g. Herbert Simon). When I arrived on campus in the fall of 1978, CMU had an enrollment of about 4,000 students – mostly graduate students. GSIA offered a Doctor of Philosophy in Industrial Administration. Doctoral students began by taking required courses (e.g. economics) and then concentrated their studies in a functional area, such as marketing. Altogether, there were 50 or 60 faculty, including professors, visiting professors and instructors.

There were three marketing faculty – Richard (Rick) Staelin, Andrew (Andy) Mitchell and Robert (Bob) Meyer – and about eight doctoral students, including Julie Edell, Merrie Brucks, Krishna Doraiswamy and Rajiv Lal. Owing to the smallness of the group, CMU didn't offer multiple marketing courses. Instead, there was a weekly seminar of 3-4 hours duration that all faculty and doctoral students attended. Upon arriving on campus, each doctoral student joined the seminar and then continued to attend, year-round, throughout their time there. This seminar was wide-ranging and rigorous ([Staelin 2005](#), p. 11). In addition to required courses, marketing students were encouraged to take advanced courses in economics, psychology, statistics and so forth – to equip them with theory and tools for their research. I discovered an early liking for econometrics and took a four-course, doctoral-level sequence.

Some students entered the doctoral program with a master's degree, so I had to do extra work to catch up. Doctoral students worked in their carrels on the weekends, which created a comradery. Professors also worked on weekends. I remember encountering Lars Hansen, a future Nobel Prize winner, roaming the hallways deep in thought. Some readers may have heard about CMU's intense intellectual environment. Standards were very high. Any presenter at a research seminar – an eminent visiting scholar or a new doctoral student – could expect tough questions. The goal was to carry out the best possible work – getting the theory, methodology and substantive implications exactly right.

I attended the American Marketing Association–Sheth Foundation Doctoral Consortium at Pennsylvania State University in 1980. The Consortium Faculty were impressive and their presentations inspiring. There were also opportunities for the (roughly) 50 Fellows to interact informally with marketing luminaries, including a picnic on the grass. I especially remember Erin Anderson asking questions and making insightful comments in the

sessions. Also, Linda Price stands out in my mind; our paths have crossed repeatedly over the years. At the Consortium, I was pleased that I could keep up with presentations and discussion – and I began to realize how well CMU was preparing me for research. Nevertheless, I was a little surprised to learn that other universities offered multiple doctoral-level marketing courses!

I suppose most doctoral students aspire to emulate their professors and I am no exception. Rick Staelin became my dissertation chair and my role model. His influence on my work has endured to this day. Rick is intellectually curious about diverse research problems that connect to real-world phenomena. He is attracted to complex problems that cut across boundaries and he uses a variety of theoretical paradigms and approaches to study them (Staelin, 2005). He taught me to appreciate and understand different approaches to marketing problems.

In an early doctoral seminar, we studied Kent Monroe's research. I began focusing on consumer price sensitivity as my dissertation topic. I hoped to analyze optical scanner data from supermarkets, the 1970s version of "big data". There were few sources because only 29 per cent of supermarkets had scanners (Basker, 2012). My professors were using their connections to look for data, but I began to worry as time marched on. Rick Staelin was visiting at the Australian Graduate School of Management during 1980-1981. As email between academic institutions didn't exist yet, Rick sent me a brief telegram of encouragement. At long last, another door opened when I flew to Chicago and visited Information Resources Incorporated (IRI). Gerry Eskin and Penny Baron, IRI co-founders and University of Iowa professors, gave me a magnetic tape of store-level supermarket data. My dissertation, entitled "Market Context Variables Affecting Consumer Price Sensitivity", could now move forward.

### Getting started in Canada

My empirical work was underway and it was time to look for a job. I had always intended to return home to Canada after I finished my studies. I also felt gratitude to my native country for my Social Sciences and Humanities Research Council of Canada Doctoral Fellowship (in addition to support from CMU). Yet, I respected my faculty advisors' advice about opportunities in the USA, so I pursued a broad search strategy. The job search process in marketing academia was much the same then as now, but the marketing community was much smaller.

Some readers may be curious about what it was like for a woman to attend university and search for a job during the 1970s and 1980s, so I will briefly recount my experiences. (See *The Journal of Historical Research in Marketing* for a scholarly perspective (Tadajewski and Maclaran, 2013)). About 10 per cent of the GSIA faculty were women in 1980 – this percentage is probably typical. Men and women were being admitted to American universities in equal numbers, but faculty were primarily male. At the Consortium, about 20 per cent of the Fellows were female. Job interviews could be awkward because recruiters had seldom encountered women professionals. At the American Marketing Association (AMA) Summer Educators' Conference, I was interviewed in a small hotel room by five men – some lounging on the bed! When women moved into academic leadership positions, they advocated for professional interview settings. Yet, when I served on AMA Academic Council in 2001-2004, we were still pushing recruiters to comply with the new arrangements. In addition, there was (and is) a lack of diversity in race and ethnicity in marketing. Thankfully, *The PhD Project* was founded in 1994, with the mission of increasing the diversity of business faculty. Yet, as I write this article, more progress is still required to overcome systemic injustice.

I was lucky that demand for assistant professors of marketing was strong in 1981, judging by the number of universities interviewing at the AMA Conference. I interviewed with about 20 schools, made ten campus visits and received five job offers. It was an enjoyable (but grueling) experience to intensively engage with so many marketing scholars over a relatively brief period. I met many people I admired, such as Frank Bass (then at Purdue) and Rich Lutz. I chose the University of British Columbia (UBC) and moved to Vancouver in December 1981.

The marketing department at UBC included many fine academics, such as Gerald (Gerry) J. Gorn, Richard (Rick) W. Pollay, Charles (Chuck) B. Weinberg and Doyle L. Weiss. They were very kind to me and helped me make a good start. Vancouver was an amazing city; my office had a view of the ocean and the mountains. My professional life was happy and busy. I began teaching at UBC's School of Business (now the Sauder School) while trying to finish my dissertation. However, my personal life had introduced a complication. I had married Randall (Randy) G. Chapman in June 1981. He was a visiting marketing professor at the University of Chicago – 1,773 miles away.

Randy and I hoped a university would hire both of us, but a married couple who were both marketing professors was uncommon at this time. To my surprise, CMU faculty offered me a visiting assistant professor position for the 1982-1983 academic year. I decided to return to CMU; my new colleagues at UBC were very gracious about my decision. I defended my dissertation while at CMU in April 1983. Randy and I began new jobs at the University of Alberta in Edmonton, Canada, in July 1983.

### Getting my dissertation published

The University of Alberta (U of A) was thriving owing to the Alberta Heritage Savings Trust Fund (generated by oil revenues). Our colleagues included Stuart McPadyen (an economist), Adam Finn (a fellow attendee of the 1980 Consortium), Ric Johnson and Jordan Louviere. We had a shared set of academic values – similar tastes for what constitutes an interesting research problem and aim for scientific rigor – and launched a doctoral program. Colleen Collins (now at Simon Fraser University) was among its early graduates. Randy and I bought a condo within walking distance of our offices. We spent time with his daughters, Kris and Michelle (then 12 and 13 years old), who lived an hour away. We also enjoyed curling, a sport that entails hurling a 42-pound stone down a sheet of ice to land on a bullseye. In Edmonton, the winter is long and daylight hours are short – which may explain the popularity of curling to Canadians there.

Although I had published other papers, I hadn't submitted my dissertation research to a journal. My dissertation had been written in a book format, one large integrated piece rather than a suite of papers. So, I had to break it into article-length chunks and extend certain analyses. This process took time because I had to learn (as I had for each job switch) a new mainframe computer operating system and a new statistical software package. (Specialized econometric software was less standardized than it is now). On the plus side, Randy and I had a heavy, portable Compaq computer and a car phone – high tech by most people's standards – bearing in mind that overhead transparencies were considered classroom technology.

Word processing software was a major boon. I had typed (and re-typed) my dissertation on an IBM Selectric, switching the golfball (typeball) when I needed a different font for mathematical notation. Now, preparing and revising papers was much easier. Eventually, three papers based on my dissertation were published in 1989 (Bolton, 1989a, 1989b, 1989c), as well as a related paper (Russell and Bolton, 1988). The same pattern has repeated throughout my career: an extended period working on a project and moving papers through the review process, followed by a burst

of publications. My preference is to tackle big projects, but this approach can be risky; it requires persistence and only pays off in the long run.

As I was working in my office one day, I unexpectedly received a call from Smith Hanley, a recruitment agency for professionals in the data sciences. Would I be interested in analyzing supermarket scanner data for a company in Chicago? Nothing could have been further from my mind, but this conversation led to another door opening. Learning that my husband had a recent job offer in Boston, the headhunter called back within a few days about a job at a global telecommunications company. I had been very content at the U of A, but I agreed to fly to Boston for a visit. Events proceeded very rapidly, as they often do in industry. By September 1987, Randy had joined the marketing faculty at Boston University and I was working at GTE Laboratories in Waltham Massachusetts.

### **Eight years in the industry**

GTE Labs was the research and development arm of GTE Corporation (now Verizon). I walked through the door of GTE Labs on my first day of work without a clear idea of what I'd be doing. However, I was open to anything new and different! After [Guadagni and Little's \(1983\)](#) landmark paper, a deluge of papers had been presented and published, all analyzing optical scanner data from supermarkets (often using the same few panel data sets). There seemed to be progressively fewer novel ideas, suggesting (to me) that it was time to move on to greener pastures.

My office was next door to James H. (Jim) Drew, the statistician who led our project. Several economists were located nearby: Greg Duncan, Roger Tobin and David Salant. Not long after I arrived, Jim casually asked if I would like to look at GTE survey data measuring consumer perceptions of local telephone service quality – maybe there was something interesting to a marketer. We ran some analyses and talked about them. (By this time, I had an IBM and a Macintosh computer sitting side-by-side on my desk). I plunged into reading about service quality, customer satisfaction and survey research methodology. From this unwitting start, Jim and I joined an extensive community focused on service research.

Jim was a super smart, super nice guy and a great research partner. Until then, many of my papers had been single-authored. Now, I enjoyed being part of a team (albeit a very small one!) that tackled diverse research problems. The telecom industry was readying for immense change owing to new technologies, such as speech recognition, video-on-demand, mobile and data-driven services ([Kupfer, 1997](#)). There was also intense competition owing to deregulation and companies were down-sizing. Hence, GTE executives were wrestling with fundamental questions about customers, service design and operations, pricing and new products. Their questions were compiled annually and shaped the long-run projects at the Labs.

The theme of our project was understanding customer assessments and behavior. Our project identified key research questions, selected the best research design and worked to deliver useful and actionable findings to managers. There were many opportunities to learn, which I find deeply enjoyable. For example, I was sent to Europe when GTE was evaluating customers' willingness to pay in the newly open East German telecom market. We used almost every kind of research design and tool: qualitative research, survey programs, field experiments, Wizard of Oz lab experiments, conjoint and discrete choice models, behavioral data and so on.

Some studies were very complex and others had multiple phases. For example, GTE simulated advanced services, such as video-on-demand, that didn't yet exist in the marketplace and then studied customers' use of them in a laboratory setting. Jim and I worked closely with our counterparts in management (e.g. Michael English, Theresa Barnes

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and Susan Prince), studying both consumer and business markets. Based on these experiences, I developed a strong preference for conducting qualitative research prior to any quantitative research. (I teach my doctoral students to do the same).

Ruth N. Bolton

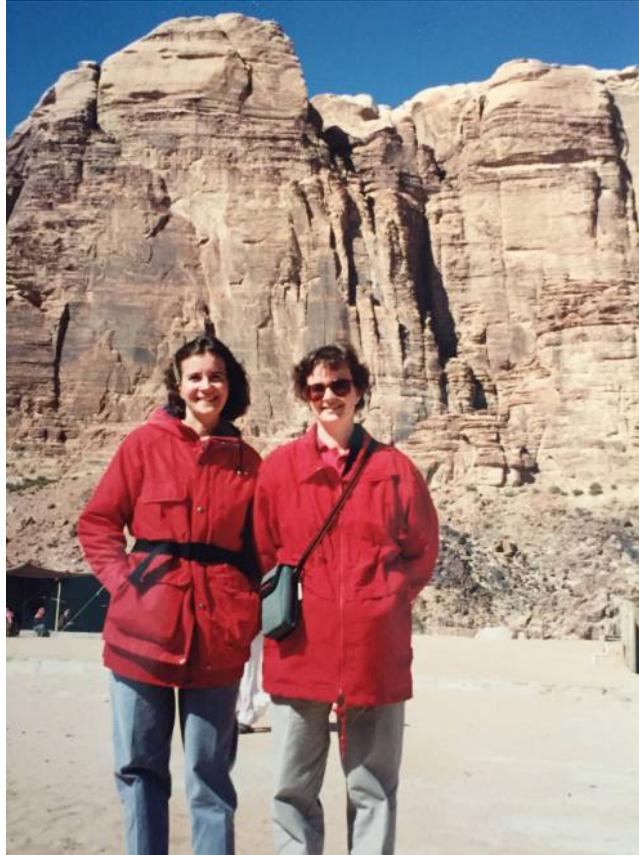
At the time, GTE's surveys were state-of-the-art. It wasn't uncommon to conduct longitudinal surveys or interview four key informants per firm. For a marketing scientist, it was like playing in a toy box! Moreover, our work entailed collaboration with managers and sometimes research suppliers (e.g. Walker Research and Total Research). To keep up with the latest academic findings, we presented at conferences and interacted with leading scholars in marketing (e.g. Keith Hunt, Richard L. "Rich" Oliver and A. "Parsu" Parasuraman), survey research (e.g. Norbert Schwarz and Seymour Sudman) and methodological areas (e.g. Robert Groves and Moshe Ben-Akiva). I also served as the industry representative (a position that was later discontinued) on the Association for Consumer Research (ACR) Advisory Council during 1993-1996.

There was little incentive at GTE Labs to publish in peer-reviewed academic journals – let alone top-ranked journals. Researchers were expected to produce internal technical reports and make presentations to managers in GTE's strategic business units. One reason was that any research focusing on new products or processes was proprietary and confidential. Nevertheless, Jim and I wrote articles for publication when we could make the time. There was a small bonus (\$400) that co-authors shared when a paper was published. Jim and I joked that our goal was to take our respective spouses out to dinner on the proceeds, after tax. I believe the real reason we persevered at publishing was that we were both intrinsically motivated to achieve high standards; peer review kept us up to the mark! During this period, half my published articles (8/16) were co-authored with Jim (Bolton and Drew, 1991a; 1991b).

Some work was highly confidential and couldn't be published, yet it was very rewarding. One time, GTE was beta-testing technology that enabled new mobile services in consumer and business markets. Its primary goal was to make sure the services would work before commercialization. However, GTE also needed to know (specifically) which services to offer and what customers would be willing to pay, as well as likely market penetration rates in different regions. At a meeting in GTE Mobile's headquarters in Atlanta, the vice-president surprised me by asking what I would recommend if US\$2m (about 10 per cent of what was being spent on the beta tests) was allocated to market research. I picked up a marker and (off the top of my head) jotted down a rough budget, explaining how each proposed study would address GTE's information requirements. I ended up being on a small team (with managers) that oversaw the research suppliers and consultants who implemented these studies. Some of the technical work was beyond anything that had been published (yet) in marketing journals. These kinds of experiences were very satisfying: I learned a lot and was exposed to many new ideas (Plate 2).

### **An interlude of travel**

In 1990, my sister Lisa and I made a pact to travel around the world together. We would plan and save for two years, then quit our jobs and start out. Our wanderlust wasn't new. Our family had camped in a tent across most of the Canadian provinces during vacations – sometimes bringing along a Mirror dinghy (a small sailboat) that my father and brothers had built. When I finished my undergraduate degree in 1978, I had saved enough money from my summer jobs to travel in Europe for a month. (It was my first trip outside Canada, just before I left for CMU). My sister, who is 10 years younger than me, had traveled to Europe mid-way through her undergraduate studies. Since then, we had traveled (both



**Plate 2.**  
Ruth and Lisa Bolton  
in Jordan in 1993

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separately and together) during vacations each year. However, vacations are short and the world is large; we longed to do more.

The internet was much more rudimentary at this time, so our planning was mostly carried out the old-fashioned way: working with an adventure travel agency and making bookings by snail mail (which was just called mail then). Randy had grown up in the city and had no interest in roughing it as our budget required. However, he and some of our friends promised to meet us at various points along the way. Our itinerary grew quite complex. Finally, Lisa and I left on our trip in November 1992. We visited New Zealand, Australia, Thailand, India, Jordan, Egypt, Israel, Spain, Portugal, France, The Netherlands and the UK. Everything was absolutely wonderful! We traveled slowly within each country and explored smaller places, in ways that aren't possible on brief vacations. Sometimes we were in very remote places, so we communicated via mail picked up at American Express offices. It was over all too soon. By August 1993, I was home and – having quit GTE before I left – it was time to look for a job.

Tina Bronkhorst (a friend and coauthor) invited me to a casual lunch at GTE Labs so I could catch up with my former coworkers. Serendipity was at work again. I don't remember the specifics, but my boss rehired me to work on the same project! Before I left, I had helped

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launch a longitudinal study of customer churn: designing the sampling plan and the survey. Now, one of my tasks was to analyze the data that had accumulated during my absence (Bolton, 1998). Ruth N. Bolton

### **Return to academia**

By early 1995, I was contemplating a return to the academia. GTE Labs had been a great place to work, but I was no longer encountering new and interesting marketing problems. It seemed likely that my research would become more focused on narrow and applied telecommunications issues. This future didn't play to my strengths or interests. In the back of my mind, I had always known this day might arrive. As Randy had left Boston University to become an independent consultant, there were no geographic constraints on my job search. I applied for different advertised positions and visited several campuses. To my surprise, some people liked my unusual background, so new doors were opening!

I accepted a tenured, associate professor position in the College of Business at the University of Maryland (UMD) and we moved in August 1995. I was really looking forward to starting some new research – on almost any marketing topic. My colleagues in the marketing department included Richard (Dick) Durand, P.K. Kannan, Bob Krapfel, Bill Nickels, Brian Ratchford, Venky Shankar and Janet Wagner. Dick (our department chair) fostered a collegial environment. Marketing faculty were located along one long hallway, so we interacted frequently. I was soon working with Venky on a pricing project and PK on a study of customer loyalty programs (Bolton and Shankar, 2003; Bolton *et al.*, 2000; Shankar and Bolton, 2004). However, the person at UMD who kept me firmly on the path of service research was Amy Smith, a doctoral student.

Amy came by frequently to talk about her ideas on service failure and recovery. I responded by asking her to write a two-page memo. (I still use this approach with doctoral students today; it can be a crucible for theory development). Remarkably, her memo was written, re-written, extended and moved rapidly toward a dissertation research proposal. Yet, I didn't feel ready to chair a dissertation. I was still learning the academic ropes at UMD and teaching new courses after eight years away from the classroom. Luckily, Janet Wagner, who was also interested in service research, was willing to co-chair with me. Our collaborations were very productive (Smith and Bolton, 1998; Smith *et al.*, 1999).

### **Research and grants**

My research focus was shifting from customers' perceived service quality and satisfaction to modeling customers' usage of services and their purchase behavior. While at GTE, I had been invited to join a services steering group at the Marketing Science Institute (MSI) and learned about its research priorities. [GTE had been a member of MSI and cooperated in Parasuraman *et al.*'s (1985, 1988) seminal work.] My co-authors and I successfully applied to MSI for two (different) small grants that helped move our projects forward during 1996-1997. My research has often required the painstaking assembly of longitudinal data from different sources – a unique data set is the payoff.

Indirectly, MSI gave me entrée to a new collaboration. In 1997, I was invited to make a presentation about customer churn at an MSI Board meeting. Afterwards, I shared (by chance) a taxi to the airport with a fellow attendee. Her company was very interested in customer loyalty. Would I be willing to visit Hewlett-Packard (HP) headquarters in Palo Alto and make a presentation? Subsequently, HP supported my research with a \$100,000 grant and access to customer data. I used the grant money to hire Matt Bramlett for a few years. He was a doctoral student in sociology with great programming skills.

With HP's support, I anticipated writing several papers about how customer–firm relationships change over time. The scope of this work would be large, so I needed a co-author. I invited Katherine (Kay) Lemon to join me on the project. We shared the same academic DNA; she was a former doctoral student of Russ Winer (who was a former CMU doctoral student of Rick Staelin). Kay and I were already working together on a paper about service usage (Bolton and Lemon, 1999). We thought about modeling customer–firm relationships in a similar way (e.g. incorporating customers' comparisons with expectations). By coincidence (serendipity?), Harvard Business School had invited each of us (separately) to visit during 1998-1999, which would make the collaboration easier. In roughly 2000, I met Peter Verhoef and later invited him to join us on some of the work.

This period of my life was very fruitful, producing articles on B2B relationships, customer retention, upgrade decisions and global pricing (Bolton *et al.*, 2004; Bolton *et al.*, 2006; Bolton *et al.*, 2008). These papers appeared several years later owing to my *modus operandi*. My relationship with a company is a partnership, not a consulting relationship. We collaborate in structuring the data collection process (which they administer and support). Our academic research team analyzes the data and shares its findings with the company prior to publication. In this instance, I traveled to several countries during qualitative and quantitative data collection and also made multiple presentations to executives.

#### **Editor of the *Journal of Marketing***

By this time, I knew many marketing academics owing to my participation in the AMA, ACR and INFORMS. These institutions are vital to academic life, so I've always tried to "pay it forward" by serving on committees and in leadership roles, as well as reviewing papers. A colleague who I respected encouraged me to apply for the editorship at the *Journal of Marketing (JM)*. I was only an associate professor, so I wasn't surprised when I didn't get the job. My attention was focused on my research, which was now expanding to consider the customer as an asset of the firm (Srivastava *et al.*, 1998).

Although I hadn't intended it, some schools interpreted my visit at Harvard as a signal that I was moveable and contacted me. I accepted Rod Evans' offer to become the Ruby K. Powell Professor at the University of Oklahoma in June 1999. I served on the new building committee and co-authored papers with Matthew (Matt) Myers and Elten Briggs (Berger *et al.*, 2002; Bolton and Myers, 2003). Another door unexpectedly opened when Vanderbilt University contacted me about a job. William (Bill) Christie and I had been students together at Queen's. At this time, he was the Dean of the Owen Graduate School of Management. This personal connection was influential in my decision to accept a position there in January 2002. By 2003-2004, I was serving as Marketing Area Chair.

I was reviewing about 60 manuscripts each year for various journals. I considered it part of my job – plus, I learned a great deal from the manuscripts. (Even a terrible manuscript may contain unfamiliar citations or evoke a new research idea for the reader). I was encouraged to apply (again) for the editorship of *JM*. Vanderbilt was very supportive of my application. Beyond providing office space, an editorial assistant and a teaching reduction, it was willing to fund *JM*'s move to an online manuscript submission process and the creation of a SQL server (i.e. relational) database to support it. Journals in other fields were starting to move online, but the AMA wasn't willing to fund a similar move for *JM*, so Vanderbilt's support was crucial. The *JM* application process required a 20-page essay; mine described my vision for the journal and Vanderbilt's promised support. (Bolton (2003) is based partially on my application).

I was thrilled and honored when the selection committee chose me as the next editor (2002-2005). Their decision opened a new door for me and also for other women academics – because I would be the first female editor of a marketing journal. *JM* is marketing's leading journal, so it was also a great responsibility. I prepared extensively during 2002. Google Scholar wasn't launched until 2004, so I created (with research assistance) a large database so I could search for expert reviewers on almost any topic. I also met with David Stewart (then *JM* editor) to prepare for the handover. He was wise and generous in his advice (Plate 3).

*JM* was in a rather unusual situation. Manuscript flow had peaked in (about) 1995 and then fallen somewhat. Dave had been working to increase quality submissions. However, *JM* published only four issues each year and the AMA imposed a strict page limit. If manuscript flow were to increase, articles would be pushed to future (paper) issues. (At this time, articles weren't published online as they were accepted). Naturally, authors were keen to get their work out as soon as possible; any delay might lead them to choose another publication outlet.

A solution to this dilemma came in a request from Donald R. (Don) Lehmann, who was then serving as Executive Director of MSI (July 2001 to June 2002). MSI was interested in sponsoring a special section on an important new topic: "Linking Marketing to Financial Performance and Firm Value". Its financial support primarily paid for printing the additional pages of the special section. The articles had to meet *JM* standards, so no one could forecast how many articles – or pages – might be submitted. In my view (not shared by everyone), this initiative benefited all potential authors because *JM* might otherwise have published papers on this topic (as they met *JM* standards) in its regular pages. By creating the special section, there



**Notes:** Standing: Xiucheng Fan (Fudan University), Guoqun Fu (Peking University), Shi Zhang (University of California, Los Angeles), Jagdish Sheth (Emory University), David Tse (University of Hong Kong), Yi Liu (Shanghai Jiaotong University). Seated: Ruth Bolton, Xiongwen Lu (Dean, Management School, Fudan University), David Stewart (University of Southern California)

was room for papers on other topics in the regular pages. After hashing it out, the AMA and MSI negotiated an agreement and the special section appeared in October 2004. (See [Lehmann \(2004\)](#) for details on how we adhered to *JM*'s standard editorial practices).

Subsequently, Rick Staelin proposed a special section sponsored by the Teradata Center for Customer Relationship Management at Duke University. The AMA and the Center negotiated an agreement and this special section was published in October 2005. (See [Boulding et al. \(2005\)](#) for details). It was highly unusual for *JM* to publish one special section, let alone two, so I was sensitive to marketers' concerns that the journal's quality might be diluted. I worked closely with Don Lehmann, Rick Staelin and Bill Boulding. Time has shown that their work as consulting editors enhanced the quality of *JM* and I am very grateful.

Each published article needs special care and attention. Certain articles, such as [Vargo and Lusch's \(2004\)](#) seminal contribution on service-dominant logic, require extra effort. *JM* didn't have a hierarchical structure with area or associate editors. Instead, a single editor carried a heavy workload (roughly 340 manuscripts per year during my time). A flat structure gives the editor the opportunity to leverage a certain kind of "horizontal vision" that connects disparate research ideas, as well as probes deeply ([Bolton, 2011a](#); [Brown et al., 2005](#)). In my opinion, *JM* benefited when an editor could exercise horizontal vision because of its central positioning among marketing journals (unlike specialty journals).

An editor's primary work is intellectual; it requires matching reviewers to papers, assessing input from reviewers and authors and much careful thought. Most work takes place behind the scenes. The best reviewers see the potential in papers, offer constructive criticism and advocate for papers they feel are worthy. I especially remember Joseph (Joe) Alba, George Day, John Lynch and Valarie Zeithaml for their insights on specific papers. My entire editorial board (too many to mention) was marvelous. The marketing field was increasingly global and my editorial work put me in touch with eminent marketing scholars around the world, such as Tor Andreassen (Norway), Rod Brodie (New Zealand), Anders Gustafsson (Sweden), Oliver Heil (Germany), Peter Leeflang (The Netherlands), Adrian Payne (the UK), John Roberts (Australia and London) and David Tse (China). I traveled frequently throughout the USA, Europe and Asia-Pacific to make presentations and encourage submissions. Unlike backpacking, this travel was hard work!

There was a major downside to being *JM* editor. The acceptance rate was about 10 per cent, so I rejected close to 300 manuscripts each year. Each manuscript usually has multiple co-authors, so I was a messenger of bad news to 600-900 people each year – people with hopes, dreams and feelings. I don't like it when my papers are rejected; no one does. Some people react badly. Once, my editorial assistant confessed to saving one particular individual's many vitriolic emails for the FBI, in case something terrible happened to me! Even authors of accepted manuscripts aren't necessarily happy. To cope with *JM*'s page limit, I aimed to condense each article by one journal-page – thereby enabling one more article per issue. An extra article increased *JM*'s contribution to science and practice. It might also mean career advancement for the author. However, it was painful for accepted authors to tighten up their papers.

When my period of stewardship ended in July 2005, I was happy and relieved that the journal was in good shape. *JM* was publishing many more articles each year – and quality was high. The new editor, Roland Rust, was (and is) an outstanding scholar and astute editor. (He had founded the *Journal of Service Research* in 1999). New circumstances and times would call for new editorial policies and practices at *JM*.

### **A global community of service researchers**

By 2004, my research had focused on service topics, especially customer–firm relationships, for about 17 years. My ties to the large, global community of service researchers were

strong, facilitated by many conferences (e.g. *Frontiers in Service* and the *International Research Symposium on Service Excellence in Management* known as *QUIS*), journals (e.g. *Journal of Service Research*) and *SERVSIG* (an AMA special interest group). As there are many articles about this community (Fisk *et al.*, 1993), I will simply say that I have always found it to be a true fellowship, sharing common interests and goals and consistently generous and supportive.

The Center for Service Leadership (CSL) at Arizona State University (founded in 1985) is an important hub in the global network of service researchers and practitioners. Hence, when I was recruited for the W.P. Carey Chair in Marketing at Arizona State University (ASU) in 2004, it seemed a perfect fit with my skills and capabilities. CSL was ably led by Stephen W. (Steve) Brown and Mary Jo Bitner; it had earned a global reputation. ASU's marketing department was very large, with a surprising percentage of women (and too many faculty to list here). Regrettably, my immersion in editorial duties and MBA teaching had left little time to collaborate on new research with my colleagues (Rich Oliver, Donna Hoffman and Tom Novak), so I hadn't developed strong ties at Vanderbilt.

Every move seems to energize me. At ASU, there were academic experts in every area – plus a talented and hardworking group of doctoral students. Exposure to new ideas happened organically in hallway conversations. The department chair, Michael (Mike) Mokwa, fostered a very constructive culture. He thought strategically about the marketing faculty as a portfolio of talent. As the group was large, each individual was recognized and encouraged to contribute according to his or her unique capabilities. He also encouraged teamwork, which was the key to our success in hosting the AMA–Sheth Foundation Doctoral Consortium in 2007. That same year, I was honored to receive the Christopher Lovelock Career Contributions Award. By this time, I was also serving on the AMA Board of Directors (2005-2008).

Soon, I was leading a doctoral seminar and serving on multiple doctoral dissertation committees (which immediately linked me with many colleagues). Happily, some doctoral students were interested in topics that closely matched my own service research interests: customer–firm identification (Paul Fombelle), customer–firm attachments (Martin Mende), customer portfolio management (Crina Tarasi) and interactive services (Shruti Saxena-Iyer). Their dissertations yielded multiple leading journal articles – several award-winning – which appeared in 2009-2013 (Bolton and Saxena-Iyer, 2009; Mende and Bolton, 2011; Mende *et al.*, 2013; Tarasi *et al.*, 2011; Tarasi *et al.*, 2013).

I left ASU in 2008, intending an early retirement (Plate 4). The reason was our grandchildren, Benjamin and Kayla, who lived 2,000 miles away in Florida. Randy and I didn't want to miss their childhood. My colleagues and students were surprised, but understanding; they gave me a lovely retirement party. Then the unexpected happened: Russ Winer called within days of my arrival in Florida. Would I be willing to become the 2009-2011 Executive Director of MSI? I had served on MSI's Board of Academic Trustees for three years (2005-2008), so I knew the position had always been part-time. An Executive Director (ED) typically splits their time between MSI and their university appointment. This opportunity was a way to stay active in my profession and spend time with family. Thus, my exit to early retirement lasted only one year; another entrance was imminent.

### **MSI 50: years ahead**

I became ED of MSI in July 2009. MSI has played an exceptional role in linking marketing practitioners and academia, yet it is a small organization with about ten full-time staff members. I was enthusiastic about my new role and began to prepare: shadowing Russ, consulting people for advice and attending some MSI events and activities. I knew I'd be



**Plate 4.**

With former ASU  
doctoral students at  
2008 “retirement”  
party

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**Notes:** Scott Thompson, Maura Scott, Martin Mende, Kate Loveland, Shruti Saxena-Iyer, Paul Fombelle, Ruth Bolton, Iana Castro, Christine Ringler, Nancy Sirianni, James Loveland, Katerina Hellen

working closely with Ross Rizley (MSI’s Research Director), whom I knew from his time at Boston University and his regular attendance at academic events.

There are always surprises with a new job and MSI was no exception. First, the workload was immense; it was really a full-time job. Fortunately, some activities could be handled remotely. Second, the 2008 financial crisis threatened MSI’s budget because it was entirely funded by member companies’ fees. Nevertheless, we managed to increase membership numbers by delivering new benefits, including Joe Alba’s (2011) excellent consumer insights book, business roundtables on shopper marketing and a new *FastForward* series. Third, at a casual lunch, Stephen Greyser (a past ED) pointed out that MSI would be celebrating its 50th anniversary in 2011. I had some inkling that the first two issues might arise from past EDs, but the anniversary had not been on my horizon!

MSI’s 50th anniversary was an opportunity to deliver a compelling message about MSI’s mission to its members, academics and the business public. Our theme was “MSI 50: Years Ahead” and it was intentionally forward-looking. Key ideas about MSI’s mission were woven into every activity. This brand-building effort created new tasks and added a layer of complexity to everyone’s job. It had considerable impact on our website, digital communications, publications and events. A 50th anniversary micro-website was launched, featuring a time-line with photos and videos; special content and materials were produced.

The climax of our anniversary celebrations was an extraordinary Board of Trustees Meeting in April 2011. There were outstanding speakers on topics for which MSI had been (and continues to be) a thought leader. George Low made a presentation about the impact of MSI on knowledge generation in marketing. Afterwards, there was a gala dinner. In addition to Trustees, academics and practitioners who had special relationships with MSI were invited, such as William L. (Bill) Wilkie. It was a special evening!

Marni Clippinger, Earl Taylor, Ross Rizley and Susan Keane were MSI veterans. Much of the anniversary preparation rested in their capable hands. As ED, I was especially

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determined to bring MSI's story to a new generation of marketers. We reached out to Gordon Wyner, editor of *Marketing Management*, who agreed to publish a series linked to the anniversary. Leading scholars agreed to write thought leadership articles: George Day, John Deighton, Rohit Deshpande, Donna Hoffman, Kevin Keller and Donald Lehmann. (See Bolton (2011b) for details).

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The globalization of the marketing community was continuing, so special sessions were held at academic conferences throughout the world: the Australian & New Zealand Marketing Academy Conference (Perth), the Forum on Marketing Science Applications in China (Hangzhou), the Marketing Scholar Forum IX (Peking University), the European Marketing Academy (Ljubljana, Slovenia), the North American Society FOR Marketing Education in India (NASMEI) Conference (Chennai, India), the Korea Marketing Association (Seoul) and multiple conferences in the USA (ACR, Winter AMA, INFORMS and the Academy of Marketing Science). I attended as many events as possible to represent MSI. I am truly grateful to the past EDs and to the current and former Academic Trustees who led these events. They did a marvelous job communicating MSI's mission and arranging special speakers on different topics relevant to their audiences. Many more academics – too many to name – collaborated on regular MSI activities in the USA and abroad during my tenure (e.g. competitions, conferences and publications).

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### **Return to Arizona State University**

My two years at MSI passed quickly. In July 2011, it was time to pass the baton to John Deighton, incoming ED. Dean Amy Hillman opened another door by inviting me to return to the Carey School at ASU. The university had a new, flexible policy, whereby tenured faculty could work half-time; it was perfect for me. I could split my time between Arizona and Florida. I returned and began to lead a doctoral seminar, teach in ASU's China EMBA program and collaborate on research with old and new colleagues. I was surprised and honored to receive the AMA/Irwin/McGraw Hill Marketing Educator's Award in 2016.

As I write this article, I am once more immersed in a couple large projects, with (I hope) a burst of publications down the road. I recently wrote a book (Bolton, 2016), which was a new experience for me. I probably work too much and – despite 36 years in academia – I have never had a sabbatical. However, I enjoy family life, theater, participating in church and community activities – and travel! David (Dave) Montgomery, a past MSI ED, has traveled to 95 countries. I've spent time in more than 80 countries – and I would like to catch up with him!

### **Reflections**

I began this article by noting the role of serendipity in my life: three faculty mentors from CMU, IRI's gift of a magnetic tape, a headhunter call, doctoral students on my doorstep, a taxi-ride with an HP executive, a connection with a Queen's classmate and my unexpected roles at *JM* and MSI. Moreover, as the opening quotation suggests, exits and entries are a hallmark of my career. I enjoy novel situations and don't mind moving outside my comfort zone. Naturally, I have experienced losses and setbacks, but change stimulates me to learn and grow. I am usually looking forward to new discoveries, not backwards. We see what we look for, so it's important to view the world through the correct lens – and there are many lenses.

There has been tremendous change during my career, as indicated by the increase in women in marketing and the shift from mainframe computers in 1974 to the Internet of Things today. What will the future bring? Many marketing academics are concerned

that there is an increasing divergence between marketing science and practice (Reibstein *et al.*, 2009). Others are equally concerned about the decline in conceptual articles that build indigenous marketing theory (Yadav, 2010). Certainly, our discipline is increasingly fragmented. I feel that scholars should always strive for research that is rigorous and relevant, broad and deep; they are not necessarily incompatible. We may fall short of the mark, but both should be our aim.

After 36 years, I have developed a mental map of the contours and landmarks of the marketing discipline. This map helps me be more effective and efficient in all my endeavors. Yet, although I aim for breadth and depth, there will always be gaps in my knowledge. I love to read, but my time at *JM* and *MSI* taught me that sometimes the smartest thing you can do is ask for help. There is a treasury of expertise available today in our networked marketing community. Treat people with kindness and respect; you will find that there is a tremendous reservoir of goodwill to draw upon.

I am grateful for the opportunities and benefits of a life in marketing. Many marketers feel the same way and give back to others. Two women who I especially admire are Valarie Zeithaml and Leigh McAlister. They are path-breakers who generously guided and encouraged other women. Two men who I especially admire are Jagdish (Jag) Sheth and Leonard (Len) Berry. They have consistently emphasized the importance of generosity and modeled it in practical ways (Berry and Seltman, 2009; Sheth and Yow, 2014).

I have served on the Board of Directors of the Sheth Foundation for about seven years. We work with many leaders in marketing organizations. In my experience, the best people in our field are generous. I've mentioned some of them in this article. Sometimes I see people attracted to shiny things: a hot research topic, a "quick hit" paper, the prestige of an award or the presumed power of a leadership position. However, the people who are most successful seem (to me) to be intrinsically motivated to generate and disseminate new marketing knowledge – contributing to our community, rather than seeking self-advancement.

There are so many rewarding marketing careers, in both business and academia. I remember the University of Connecticut hosted the AMA–Sheth Foundation Doctoral Consortium in 2005. It convened a panel entitled, "Reflections by the 1980 (25th Anniversary) Consortium Fellows". The panelists were Linda Price, Denise Smart, Wagner Kamakura and me. Wagner reported on the surprising diversity of the 1980 Fellows' subsequent careers: marketing managers, policy makers, deans, teachers and researchers. I believe that's how our field advances – not by the work of a single individual, but from the accumulated work of the entire marketing community.

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### About the author

Ruth N. Bolton is a Professor of Marketing at the W.P. Carey School of Business, Arizona State University. She is the recipient of the 2016 American Marketing Association/Irwin/McGraw-Hill Distinguished Marketing Educator Award and the 2007 recipient of the Christopher Lovelock Career Contributions to Service Award. She served as 2009-2011 Executive Director of the Marketing Science Institute and 2003-2005 Editor of the *Journal of Marketing*. Dr Bolton's research studies how organizations can improve business performance over time by creating, maintaining and enhancing relationships with customers. She has worked in industry and academia. Ruth N. Bolton can be contacted at: [ruth.bolton@asu.edu](mailto:ruth.bolton@asu.edu)

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