

Exploring Innovative Strategies and Services in a Pandemic Era

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The COVID-19 pandemic was an unprecedented crisis for academic libraries. In March 2020, libraries were confronted with the immediate challenge of maintaining access for their users while moving to a fully remote environment. As classes migrated rapidly online, libraries were slower to close.¹ A monthlong spiral of reducing services and hours ended for most in a complete closure of the physical facilities. By March 29, most academic libraries had shut their doors.² Librarians had to reenvision how they would provide specialized services, instruction, research support, and collections in the remote environment.

As 2020 progressed, collective trauma continued. The murder of George Floyd in Minneapolis, Minnesota, triggered demonstrations against police violence and racism across the United States. At the same time, protests erupted worldwide against racial inequities and economic hardships due to the pandemic. The world would never be the same, and many people got their first extended exposure to ongoing and multilayered hardship and global crisis. These events required academic libraries to do a hard reset. They had to reconsider once set-in-stone processes and procedures because it simply was no longer possible to do things the way they had always been done. Responses to the pandemic and antiracism reshaped many library practices by fall 2020. Remote and on-site work, online learning, electronic collections, and more became different in the aftermath. The culture of physically working together in an academic library radically shifted. No longer colocated, academic library faculty and staff invented new ways of gathering remotely, building community, and caring for one another. An even more urgent and always necessary focus on diversity, equity, and inclusion in our organizations confronted and profoundly changed institutional positions and past practices.

In summer 2020, *portal* Editor Marianne Ryan suggested developing a special issue centered on these current crises—the pandemic, racial inequities, and economic challenges—engulfing our world. These upheavals offered librarians a chance to question their traditional practices and perspectives and adapt to what was possible—and what worked in the moment—within individual institutions and the profession. With that in



mind, this issue of *portal: Libraries and the Academy* explores and accentuates positive possibilities—the unique opportunities, creative strategies, and innovative responses—that emerged in academic libraries because of or in spite of these challenges. This double special issue is the sixth in *portal*'s 20-year history.

Our fall 2020 call for proposals yielded a landslide of unique and thoughtful abstracts—nearly 80 submissions from academic librarians at a wide range of institutions, including large universities, private colleges, and community colleges across the United States. Novice authors, as well as those sharing diverse perspectives, were encouraged to suggest ideas. From these proposals, we began to see themes emerge around teaching and learning, inventive access to collections, and diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility initiatives. The articles featured in this special issue encapsulate areas of focused innovation that developed throughout academic libraries in the United States. Every article acknowledges the existence of twin pandemics—COVID-19 and the plague of racial violence and social inequity. These combined crises mandated a thoughtful focus on how our institutions could continue to teach and provide resources to our core populations while increasing efforts to offer equitable access and a culture of compassionate care.

Inventive Provision of Services]

New services emerged as a result of pandemic-specific needs. In “Bridging the Digital Divide: WiFi Hot Spots as a Means of Digital Equity,” Meghan Salsbury and Mary Anne Hansen detail the development of a project to provide wireless access to their rural students. Confronting the digital divide inherent in sparsely populated Montana, the authors obtained a grant to purchase and lend wireless hot spots to students and faculty members as long-term circulating items. The article shares a theme that recurred through many in our issue: libraries and librarians understanding and meeting critical basic needs on campus. Similarly, Sarah Fancher and Sarah Mabee confronted an emerging challenge for their students at Ozarks Technical Community College in Missouri. They realized that students would benefit from facilitated access to resources on specific subjects and in response developed the Research Concierge Service, which provided information curated by librarians on requested student topics. This hands-on approach sidestepped students’ anxiety over accessing and searching for library resources in a remote environment and provided an opportunity for positive personal interactions with reference librarians. In her article “Library Mood: Re-Creating the Library Experience from Home,” Megan Hodge explored a less-considered aspect of studying remotely—the loss of the aural and visual affective components of on-site library use. These features of the library—the sounds of the in-house coffee shop, announcements from the library’s public address system, seeing books and other collections on-site, and more—were lost to users during the pandemic. The article describes resources in this area and explains the benefits of ambient noise for productivity and maximized concentration. Taken together, these papers share creative approaches to solving problems that simply did not exist pre-pandemic.



Responsive Information Literacy

Teaching and learning strategies grew and developed in the remote learning environment. Several articles discuss the impact of this time on pedagogy. In “Privacy Literacy: From Doomscrolling to Digital Wellness,” Alexandria Chisholm and Sarah Hartman-Caverly dive deep into the social implications of the pandemic for students. Specifically, they explore how students can achieve digital well-being even in a life lived almost entirely online. Privacy literacy concepts related to digital wellness were embedded in a workshop to help students understand how technology impacts their well-being and intrudes on their personal lives. The authors end their article with a call for an ethic of care and opportunities to help cultivate digital wellness in students. Elisabeth’s White’s article “A Compassionate Approach to IL Instruction: What We Can Learn from the COVID-19 Pandemic” explores a similar ethic of care within information literacy instruction. White discusses the pedagogy of compassionate teaching in an emergency remote education modality and shares her own reflection on the personal impact of implementing affectively focused teaching practices online. Carol Leibiger and Alan Aldrich also describe interpersonally centered pedagogy in “‘Making It Happen’: Building Relational Teaching into the Online World of COVID-19.” Using social network theory as a guide, the authors embedded new practices in their remote instruction that maximized the power of social relationships in teaching students. In “Keep Teaching: Leveraging Disruption as a Catalyst for Change,” Rachel Gammons, Suzanne Wilson, Lindsay Inge Carpenter, and Benjamin Shaw emphasize the positive possibilities presented by the rapid turn to remote instruction. Calling it “innovation under pressure,” their case study highlights two professional development initiatives—one for current library instructors and one for MLIS students—and the rapid transition of their instruction in the university’s academic writing program to online delivery. Throughout all these teaching-focused articles, the opportunities presented by new approaches to serving students shine through.

Remote Teaching

In March 2020, librarians moved their teaching to fully online and frequently asynchronous modes of instruction, often with little time to prepare for the transition. This shift required flexibility, innovation, and to some, what felt like a leap into thin air without a parachute. Instruction that previously seemed as though it could only happen face-to-face was forcibly moved online. Library workshops, instruction sessions, consultations, and orientations had to be reconsidered and adapted to new modalities. Librarians realized that their students were stressed and overwhelmed and sought new ways to teach and gently challenge them while providing safe emotional and digital spaces. In “Primary Source Literacy in the Era of COVID-19 and Beyond,” Heidi Craig and Kevin O’Sullivan reimaged student experiences with primary source materials in the humanities to help students engage with both physical and digital works. While advancing digital source literacy both by design and of necessity, Craig and O’Sullivan concurrently provided at-home experience with physical materials for an entire semester, supporting students’ development of both artifactual literacy and archival intelligence. Responding to the pandemic through the lens of trauma-informed teaching led Katherine Nelsen, Kate



Peterson, Lacie McMillin, and Kimberly Clarke to changes designed to decrease students' cognitive load and increase their engagement with the university and one another. The modifications discussed in "Imperfect and Flexible: Using Trauma-Informed Practice to Guide Instruction" impacted library workshops, online instruction, and student orientation to the library. Librarians even designed an innovative choose-your-own-adventure book for first-year students to stand in for an on-site tour of the humanities and social science library. As teaching that formerly happened in person was required to shift to remote delivery, new possibilities and techniques emerged and were embraced.

Building Campus Connections

The COVID-19 pandemic and temporary cessation of in-person classes inspired innovative partnerships to tackle both old and new problems. In the early days of the disease, the Johns Hopkins University Global COVID-19 Dashboard quickly became one of the best-known and most trusted resources for worldwide statistics about the spread of the virus. Mara Blake, Reina Murray, Jason Williams, Jeff Gara, Derek Belrose, and Sayeed Choudhury describe the Johns Hopkins Library's early, essential, and ongoing collaboration in the development of the dashboard. Their article, "A Role for the Library in Public Research: The Global COVID-19 Dashboard," provides context for the larger role that libraries assume in research for the public interest. They describe how libraries use geographic information systems (GIS) and data management services to map not only the viral pandemic but also social ills, such as racism and police brutality.

Acting on their institution's imperative to optimize access and affordability for Seattle University students, Doug Eriksen and Sarah Barbara Watstein formed broader and more robust partnerships across campus to accomplish their goal. "Collaborating to Remove Barriers to Success" describes their efforts to provide additional technological and financial support for students during the pandemic while enhancing library engagement with new and established campus partners. Elizabeth Blackwood volunteered to mentor an undergraduate intern online, redesigning the experience with library intern (and now LIS student) Damaris Juarez. In their cowritten article "Virtual Undergraduate Internships: One COVID-19 Side Effect That Academic Libraries Should Keep," Blackwood and Juarez transform a dearth of on-site undergraduate internship opportunities into an exploration of academic librarianship, proposing their strategy as a positive means for recruiting diverse candidates for librarianship.

Strategies for Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Accessibility

While calling out both the COVID-19 and racial pandemics, most articles focused on social equity, enhanced access and affordability, and the provision of inclusive digital and emotional space for students. The critical changes in the conditions in which library staff had to perform their jobs accentuated the need for greater support and understanding for employees working in a crisis. Many staff members also experienced stress in their nonworking lives because of the pandemic and social upheaval. In their article "Exploring New Narratives to Overcome Historical Assumptions," Chantelle Swaren, Chapel Cowden, and Wes Smith describe the difficult but necessary task of examining



long-held assumptions and finding them no longer useful. The viral pandemic brought their institution a new determination to center users' voices and needs even when they upset the status quo. In addition, staff and faculty support became critically important as the pandemic disrupted working conditions and the daily interactions of the workplace, while demanding more and different efforts from librarians. In an article that touches again on the critical place of GIS as a service of academic libraries, Méch Frazier and Kelsey Rydland examine how to extend its reach beyond the academy and into the community. In "Reexamining Geospatial Instruction through the 'Digital Place,'" they explore the library as a virtual space or "digital place," building on sociologist Ray Oldenburg's concept of libraries and other public gathering places as welcoming "third spaces."³ The shift to online GIS services highlighted the need to intentionally establish professional relationships that had formerly occurred organically in face-to-face interaction, in addition to emphasizing equity by seeking open solutions for wider usage and increased collaboration with the surrounding community.

As the pandemic continues, we see it not as a crisis with a beginning and an end but as an era that will change many aspects of our lives for decades to come.⁴ Substantive practical changes occurred forcibly in our profession, and this issue highlights and embraces positive outcomes. The pandemic presented a critical opportunity for academic library faculty and staff to find and implement policies that provided flexibility and resilience in a time of crisis. Without the emergencies navigated in 2020 and 2021, such important practices as trauma-informed and compassionate teaching, new ways of providing remote access to collections and services, and efforts to build community in online spaces might not have developed with such intention. As we move forward in this pandemic era, an important takeaway is to continue thinking about the responses that have developed over the past two years, assess how they are changing, and consider what is needed next. We must also continue to build upon trends and innovations that emerged during this time: the academic library as a safe digital third space; the increased importance of GIS and mapping pandemics and social and economic crises; opening up and sharing access to resources, including making research freely available to the public; outreach and community building in online spaces; and adapting reference and instruction services for students who are stressed and overwhelmed. In many areas of social justice and equity, the pandemic lent momentum to critically important progress that academic libraries should strive to maintain, such as a positive focus on practical care for the physical and mental health of students, staff, and faculty, and a fresh and deeply needed urgency to confront racial injustice in our profession and police violence in our society at large.

In the articles in this issue, the current situation mandated and informed the development of new and necessary efforts. Now is the time to continue encouraging and enriching this responsive, user-centered mindset in our organizations. Ongoing assessment and dialogue with our users and with those directly serving core user populations will help our services, collections, and teaching efforts develop in a responsive manner, stay resilient, and move forward after the pandemic ends.

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Notes

1. Lisa Janicke Hinchliffe and Christine Wolff-Eisenberg, "Academic Library Response to COVID19," *Ithaka S+R* (blog), March 13, 2020, <https://sr.ithaka.org/blog/academic-library-response-to-covid19/>.
2. Lisa Janicke Hinchliffe (@lisalibrarian), "US ACADEMIC LIBRARIES CONTINUE CLOSING PHYSICAL LOCATIONS: Early on, majority were reporting open or modified hours/locations. Now, we see the vast majority reporting fully closed," Twitter, March 29, 2020, <https://twitter.com/lisalibrarian/status/1244300216733499398>.
3. Ray Oldenburg, *The Great Good Place: Cafés, Coffee Shops, Community Centers, Beauty Parlors, General Stores, Bars, Hangouts, and How They Get You through the Day* (New York: Paragon House, 1989).
4. Gina Kolata, "Past Pandemics Remind Us Covid Will Be an Era, Not a Crisis That Fades," *New York Times*, October 12, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/10/12/health/when-will-covid-end.html>.