

# Library Mood: Re-Creating the Library Experience from Home

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**Megan Hodge**

**abstract:** The loss of a dedicated study area due to the transition to remote instruction during COVID-19 disproportionately affected students who had no place for academic work within the home that was free of distraction. This paper describes the creation of an online guide designed to help students re-create the library experience from home to better focus on schoolwork. It also outlines how other librarians can similarly support distance or commuter students with materials already on hand. These resources include library photographs for use as background images or screen savers on students' devices, audio that can be played as ambient noise, and stress reduction and mindfulness aids.

## Introduction

**B**ecause of the COVID-19 pandemic, many students, faculty, and staff worked and studied from their homes and dorm rooms. In many cases, these work spaces were close to young children playing, to other students participating in virtual K–12 or college classes, or to partners and roommates teleworking and attending Zoom meetings. Such distractions decreased students' ability to focus on schoolwork.

Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU) in Richmond, Virginia, is a large, public university serving many of the student demographics identified as most impacted by the pandemic and the transition to remote learning.<sup>1</sup> As of fall 2019, 31 percent of VCU's first-year students were first-generation, 32 percent were Pell Grant-eligible, and 38 percent identified as minorities underrepresented in higher education.<sup>2</sup> Even before the pandemic, first-year students had long been identified as those at greatest risk of transferring or interrupting their education because they have the least time invested at their institutions.<sup>3</sup> VCU Libraries' Teaching and Learning Department, headed by the author, primarily works with first- and second-year undergraduates. It cooperates

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with other university units that support student success, such as the Writing Center, first-generation programs, and Tutoring Center.

The Teaching and Learning Department heard from first-year students and faculty that students taking classes remotely due to the pandemic missed the library as a place that encouraged an academic mindset. The department also determined that the

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loss of a dedicated study space had disproportionately affected lower-income students, who were more likely to share a single computer or work space with family members. To meet this need, the author created a Web-based resource to help students re-create the library's ambiance at home. This resource includes library photos for use as backgrounds on students' devices or on Zoom, audio from campus coffee shops that can be played as ambient background noise, and

stress reduction and mindfulness aids. VCU Libraries collaborated with other university units to offer additional resources and virtual programming as well: live and on-demand virtual meditation sessions, study tip sheets, and programming on how to feel comfortable talking with faculty while taking online classes. Within its first few weeks of existence, this new resource had hundreds of visitors, some of them faculty and staff working from home and feeling isolated from their colleagues—just as students felt cut off from their classmates.

This article provides a synopsis of research findings regarding the positive effects of ambient noise and meditation on concentration, mental well-being, and productivity; describes the challenges to focus posed by COVID-19; and identifies how the VCU Libraries sought to meet these needs for its students through collaboration with other campus units and the creation and curation of multimedia content. It also offers suggestions for how other libraries can leverage preexisting and freely available resources to meet the needs of their own remote workers and students.

### Challenges Posed by COVID-19

During the pandemic, many students no longer had a dedicated space where they could focus on school assignments, research, or other academic work. Students (and faculty

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and staff) might once have worked at their university or public library, the student commons, or a coffee shop, but these locations were no longer an option for many. Students and employees alike had to cope with multiple possible distractions from roommates and housemates. Further, students' work spaces were, in many cases, mobile devices rather than computers.<sup>4</sup>

Events related to the pandemic had a negative effect on students' ability and desire to concentrate on schoolwork. These events included what some authors called the "cascading collective traumas" of living through COVID-19 for over a year, worries

about finances as family members lost jobs, concern for the safety of friends and relatives working in essential positions, and grief over loved ones lost. Many students also felt anger with the history of systemic racism in the United States.<sup>5</sup>

Additionally, students had to take classes in an online modality that they did not choose themselves. Undergraduates are more likely have difficulty with self-regulation,<sup>6</sup> defined as the ability to monitor and regulate emotions and thought processes, such as paying attention during a lecture. Self-regulation is both a skill and a resource that can be depleted.<sup>7</sup> Students taking classes and interacting with others remotely are more likely to exhaust their reserves of self-regulation.<sup>8</sup> These circumstances resulted in unprecedented demands on students' mental well-being and self-regulation for staying on task with their schoolwork.

### The Positive Effects of Ambient Noise

Researchers in multiple disciplines have investigated the relationship of noise—particularly ambient noise—to productivity and concentration. Ambient noise is distinct from white noise, which generally sounds like a hiss and consists of artificially generated sounds at all frequencies humans can hear. White noise machines are popular for helping infants and adults fall asleep because of the consistent, monotone sounds they generate.<sup>9</sup> Ambient noise, in contrast, consists of the irregular but continual sounds one might hear in a coffee shop or busy neighborhood. Ambient noise varies more than white noise, but the variations are not so irregular or loud as to disrupt concentration.

Noise level is also important: there is an inverted U-shaped relationship between ambient noise and creativity and cognitive processing skills. Moderate levels of noise increase such abilities as imagination, perception, and the formation of knowledge and memory. Silence, low levels of sound, and high levels of sound, on the other hand, either have no effect or decrease these abilities.<sup>10</sup> Ambient noise increases processing disfluency, or interference in processing information.<sup>11</sup>

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Slightly increased difficulty in handling information leads to greater concentration and more abstract or creative thinking.<sup>12</sup> Too much noise, however, and the human brain becomes distracted. This seeming paradox occurs because the parts of the brain that control attention also handle the processes related to creativity and abstract thought.<sup>13</sup>

Ravi Mehta, Rui (Juliet) Zhu, and Amar Cheema conducted a series of five experimental studies on the effects of different ambient noise levels on undergraduates' cognitive processing and creativity.<sup>14</sup> The noise used in the study was recorded in real-life settings such as cafeterias and varied only by volume among treatment groups. The researchers found that participants in the moderate noise group (70 decibels) answered more questions correctly than did undergraduates in the control (no noise), the low (50 decibels), or the high (85 decibels) noise groups. Participants in the moderate noise group also generated more suggestions and ideas that were more creative than those generated by members of the low and high noise groups.



Other, qualitative studies on students' preferences for study spaces have extended these findings. Kirsten Kinsley and her coauthors, for example, conducted an ethnographic study to understand graduate students' space needs. Their findings demonstrate that while some students prefer silence to study, many favor moderate levels of ambient noise.<sup>15</sup>

### The Positive Effects of Meditation and Mindfulness

Meditation may be defined as "a family of practices in which the practitioner trains an individual to consciously calm his/her mind in order to realize some benefit or achieve inner peace or harmony."<sup>16</sup> Mindfulness may be described as "the ability to maintain one's attention in the present moment."<sup>17</sup> Both meditation and mindfulness practices have beneficial effects on concentration and anxiety levels, particularly among undergraduates.<sup>18</sup>

Anxiety often results in breathing abnormalities, such as hyperventilation. Meditation—which emphasizes attention to the breath and breath training—therefore offers an effective mechanism for reducing the biological symptoms of anxiety.<sup>19</sup> Meditation has also been demonstrated to decrease the stress hormones that trigger anxiety.<sup>20</sup> Both mindfulness and meditation can be used to train the brain to turn to helpful rather than destructive coping mechanisms when faced with stressful situations.<sup>21</sup>

Jared Ramsburg and Robert Youmans conducted a series of three experimental studies on the effects of a 6-minute meditation (the intervention) on undergraduates' ability to pay attention to a 35- to 50-minute live or recorded lecture. The students' concentra-

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tion was measured by their performance on a subsequent quiz on material from the lecture.<sup>22</sup> Students were randomly assigned to the meditation group or a comparison group, where they rested instead of following meditation instructions. The authors found that students in

the meditation group had quiz scores 7 to 8 percent higher than those of their peers in the comparison group, which the authors noted was a medium effect size. The intervention was most effective for students in their first year of college, which the authors conjectured was due to first-year undergraduates having the least ability to self-regulate their attention and focus during a long lecture.

### Genesis of VCU Libraries' "Mood: At the Library" Guide

As mentioned earlier in this article, the author heads a library department that supports VCU's first-year experience (FYE) program. This program, like many other FYE programs, is designed to increase the persistence of VCU's first-year students through small, cohort-based classes and instruction designed to improve college writing and study skills.<sup>23</sup> Given the high proportion of first-generation, low-income, and under-represented minority students among VCU's undergraduate population, retention of these students is a focus of the university's FYE mission and curriculum.<sup>24</sup>



When the author interviewed FYE faculty for another research project during the summer of 2020, she heard from many professors how much their students had struggled during the last half of the spring semester. Faculty also expressed concern for how students would fare the following year, given that the pandemic would likely continue through at least the 2020–2021 academic year. Students, unprompted, told their FYE professors that the library building played a key role in helping them shift into an academic mindset on their way to class. Stopping by the library coffee shop, or even just walking past the library building (centrally located on campus) on their way to class, played a heretofore unrealized role in helping students transition from their jobs or personal lives into a learning mode. Many students also shared that they struggled with the lack of a dedicated study area where they could focus on schoolwork, or had to share a work space with roommates or family members.

The author met with coworkers both internal and external to VCU Libraries to brainstorm ideas for meeting these needs. The process began by identifying stakeholders for the project as well as individuals and units who might be interested in this work and have resources to contribute. Colleagues consulted included members of the library's social media team and undergraduate outreach team, its Events and Public Relations Offices, its multimedia instruction department, and Health and Wellness Library staff. The department heads for access services at the James Branch Cabell Library—VCU's general academic library, where the Teaching and Learning Department is based—and the Health Sciences Library became key partners on the project. Access services staff interact most closely and frequently with patrons and enthusiastically contributed ideas and time. Additionally, the author reached out to external units, including the Tutoring Center as well as additional FYE faculty and students.

In these initial conversations, it was determined that the primary need was to help students feel immersed in an academic environment, regardless of where they were—whether at home, in a dorm room, or on a park bench. Replicating the sensory experience of being in the library would therefore require multimedia materials. Many of the audio and visual resources identified by the author's collaborators already existed and simply needed to be gathered into one place. After consulting with the library Web team, the author decided a research guide would be the best organizational solution for collating these resources. The guide was named "Mood: At the Library" to intentionally reference the "current mood" memes often seen on social media.<sup>25</sup>

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### **Re-Creating the Library Experience: Auditory Resources**

Given the importance of ambient noise for concentration and the study environments our students found themselves in, auditory resources were the top priority for this project. Many of the recordings that were ultimately included on the guide's "Library Sounds" page already existed as audio files and merely needed to be placed in a publicly accessible location where users could listen to them; others were freely available on the Internet.

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## Mood: At the Library

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The Cabell and Health Sciences libraries care about you and your academic success!



**Experience VCU Libraries Wherever You Are**

Missing the sounds and spaces of VCU Libraries as you study, write, and research? Re-create the feeling of the library where you are—at home, from your dorm, a park bench, wherever you have chosen to #StudySafer—with the resources on this guide!

**Library Sounds**

Play the sounds of VCU cafes and famous libraries in the background while you study.

- [Cabell Library PA Announcements](#)  
Listen to Cabell Library's building closing and mask-wearing reminder announcements.
- [VCU Health Sciences Library Sounds](#)  
Listen in on the sounds—dropping books, typing keys, paper shredding, and the occasional ringing phone—of VCU's Health Sciences Library!
- [VCU Cafe Sounds](#)  
University Undertones was recorded at the Bleecker St. coffee shop inside VCU's Snead Hall, while Morning Murmurs and Lunchtime Lounge were recorded at Harrison Street Cafe and Urban Farmhouse. Overlap these tracks with music for a dinner-time vibe!  
[more...](#)
- [Hogwarts Library](#)

Figure 1. The “Library Sounds” page of the online guide “Mood: At the Library” provides audio files to re-create the ambient noise of the Virginia Commonwealth University libraries as well as background sounds from other environments to help students focus on schoolwork while studying remotely.

Extant audio files included announcements from Cabell Library’s public address system. These messages played automatically at designated intervals and included building closing announcements and mask-wearing reminders. Staff at the Health Sciences Library made several one- to five-minute recordings of sounds from their circulation desk, which include the printer printing, the cash register drawer closing, and the murmurs of students. These short recordings were turned into a 20-minute audio loop by the library’s multimedia instruction department.

Audio files of other libraries were freely available on the Internet and were included on the “Mood: At the Library” guide to provide additional options. For example, the

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Bodleian Libraries, part of the University of Oxford and the largest library system in the United Kingdom, has made available four looped audio recordings of their reading rooms.<sup>26</sup> In response to the pandemic, the New York Public Library has issued a digital album called “Missing Sounds of New York” to help foster a sense of community during social distancing. The album includes a track called “The Not-Quite-Quiet Library.”<sup>27</sup> Finally, for students who like a more whimsical or escapist option, a recording called

“Hogwarts Library” presents a mix of sounds, such as scratching quills, a roaring fire, a ticking grandfather clock, and students bustling outside.<sup>28</sup>

The website Coffitivity.com was also included on the “Library Sounds” page of the “Mood: At the Library” guide. This website has multiple looped audio recordings of

ambient sounds from cafés; the tracks “Morning Murmur,” “Lunchtime Lounge,” and “University Undertones” were all recorded in VCU campus cafés or in nearby coffee shops.<sup>29</sup> Unique among the audio files linked from the guide, the tracks on this website highlight the sounds of people talking rather than those made by objects such as printers and pens. These café sounds were included for the benefit of students who live alone or who otherwise felt socially isolated and missed casual, everyday human interaction.<sup>30</sup>

For a more textured aural experience, the “Mood: At the Library” guide advises students that they can layer the library and café sounds with their favorite streaming music playlist and listen to both at the same time. Played alone or along with music, these audio resources provide students with a familiar form of academic ambient noise to help them concentrate on their schoolwork.

### Re-Creating the Library Experience: Visual Resources

Audio resources were an important first step but insufficient on their own for an immersive experience. Even with aural distractions mitigated, students’ attention could still be drawn by visual reminders that they were not on campus. Students and faculty had shared that simply walking past the library on the way to class had helped them shift their mindsets from work, family, or their social lives to focus on learning or teaching. A suite of visual and video resources, “Library Views,” was therefore developed to complement the audio recordings.

As with the audio files, most of the visual resources already existed and simply needed to be collated into a single location. The “Library Views” page of the guide offered photographs of the library taken by the university’s and library’s public relations offices. Photographs in both horizontal and vertical orientations were included so they could be used as mobile phone and computer desktop wallpapers or as a background on Zoom. Every floor of Cabell Library was represented among the images. Each has a different feel and acceptable noise level, with the lower levels more collaborative and noisier, while the upper levels become increasingly quiet. Students frequently have a favorite floor where they do most of their studying, so including images of each floor was important for helping students re-create the feeling of being on campus in their favored study location.

Several video resources were included on this page of the guide as well. One was a link to a live webcam trained on Cabell Library’s entrance—one of several such webcams that the university maintains around campus. A 20-minute video loop of images of the library was accompanied by recordings of the library’s evening closing announcements, which are broadcast 20 minutes, 10 minutes, and 5 minutes before the building shuts down, as well as at closing. This video loop became one of the most popular resources on the guide.

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Figure 2. The reading porch at the James Branch Cabell Library at Virginia Commonwealth University appears on the “Library Views” page of the online guide “Mood: At the Library,” which offers photographs of the university libraries to help students envision being in their favorite study locations.

Finally, two external resources were included. One was the WindowSwap website, which was developed as a result of the pandemic and has thousands of 10-minute videos recorded from windows around the world.<sup>31</sup> Some sights are transportive, with views of city skylines, pristine lakes, or lovely countrysides, while others are more quotidian scenes of plant-filled porches or suburban neighborhoods. Videos can be played on loops, with sound or muted, and visitors who create accounts can bookmark their favorite views. Another external resource included on the “Library Views” page of the guide was an animated scene inspired by the Hogwarts Library. While not all the resources depict VCU Libraries and, in the case of WindowSwap, may not relate to libraries at all, each provides a calming, non-distracting background that helps students concentrate while in class or doing their homework.

### Re-Creating the Library Experience: Mental Well-Being

The faculty and students with whom the author consulted were enthusiastic about the proposed audio and visual resources and expressed interest in materials on additional topics, such as stress relief and skills for studying online. Many students (and faculty and staff, for that matter) found it difficult to manage their time when taking classes in an online, often asynchronous format with students working independently in separate spaces. Further, while the audio and visual resources helped students get into an academic mindset before class or while studying, stress interfered with their ability to concentrate. To address these issues, the author sought out additional resources that could be added to the guide.





Many VCU units offered free, live virtual sessions on meditation, mindfulness, and stress relief to students and employees. The units providing resources included Recreational Sports, Human Resources, the Health and Well-Being Center, the Health and Wellness Library, and various disciplinary units. These offerings were advertised piecemeal in university communications, with some sessions promoted in the daily campus newsletter, others in e-mails targeted at groups such as first-generation undergraduates, and some

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posted on units' websites but not otherwise publicized. There was no central place where students could see when the next meditation or stress relief session would be available.

Given the research about the benefits of meditation and mindfulness practices on reducing symptoms of anxiety and increasing the ability to concentrate, these resources aligned with the library's mission of supporting students' academic success. A "Meditation, Mindfulness, and Coping" page was therefore added to the "Mood: At the Library" guide. Its list of upcoming live sessions was kept up to date throughout the school year.

Earlier in the pandemic, VCU Libraries' satellite Health and Wellness Library had pulled together numerous on-demand coping and meditation resources for a COVID-19 consumer health guide. These included wellness videos, guided meditations, and strategies for self-care. With permission, many of these resources were included on the "Mood: At the Library" guide after they were adapted from a public health focus to a primarily academic one.

With these resources added to the "Mood: At the Library" guide, the university community could see in one place the live sessions as well as the on-demand mindfulness aids available to them. Students could therefore take advantage of these resources at key times, such as before a test and in the evening when live sessions were not available.

### **Promotion and Reception of the "Mood: At the Library" Guide**

Once the "Mood: At the Library" guide had been populated with content, the next step was making students aware of it and how it could help them. A multipronged campaign was developed that utilized library and nonlibrary promotion outlets. The guide was linked from VCU Libraries' COVID-19 operations page, which itself had been prominently featured on the library website since the start of the pandemic.<sup>32</sup> The library's Communications Office issued a press release announcing the guide, and the library's social media team posted about it on the library's Twitter and Facebook pages throughout the fall.<sup>33</sup> Liaison librarians promoted the guide in their newsletters to faculty, and the university's first-year experience program also advertised it throughout fall 2020 and spring 2021 in weekly e-mails to students.<sup>34</sup>

Reception of the guide and its resources was very positive. The guide amassed hundreds of views in its first few days and remained popular throughout the 2020–2021 academic year. The most-used resources, as determined by clicks on individual LibGuide

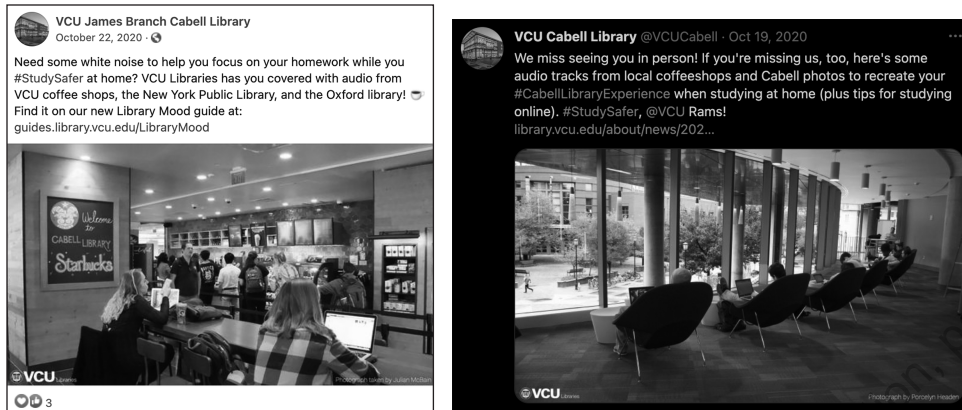


Figure 3. A Facebook post, *left*, and a tweet, *right*, from the libraries at Virginia Commonwealth University promote the online guide “Mood: At the Library,” which provides resources to help students studying remotely concentrate on their schoolwork.

assets, were the VCU campus café sounds, library public address announcements, the sounds of Hogwarts Library, and the sounds of the Health Sciences Library. Overall, 6 of the 10 most popular resources were aural in nature, and the remaining 4 were images of Cabell Library. The popularity of the audio resources aligns with previous research about the beneficial effects of ambient sounds on focus, creativity, and productivity.

Faculty feedback included the following comments:

Just saw the new Library Mood page from the newsletter: looking good! I just started the Cabell Starbucks track playing in the background, and it is surprising me how much I’m enjoying it—and how much it is making me long for pre-pandemic public work spaces.

I’m definitely going to link to this on my daily schedules so my students can check it out. I would imagine that the first year is a really pivotal time for instilling library habits in students—I wonder if access to Library Mood will help students who currently are having a restricted first-year library experience be better able to embrace using the library in a pre-pandemic way when it’s safe to do so.

I really like the Library Mood project, which I think will help students who are fully online this semester feel more connected to the library in future. I personally find things like that particularly useful as I think my students may not develop the kind of productive personal relationship with the library / staff this year as they usually do, which is a thing I’m worried about for them.

While the “Mood: At the Library” guide was designed around meeting students’ needs, the author also heard from faculty and staff—including library employees—that they used the guide’s audio resources to help them feel connected to campus and to colleagues they had not seen in person in over a year. One library coworker commented, “Wow! I’ve been trying tons of background sounds to help me feel less isolated. Hearing Cabell noises would be awesome.” The author also observed that many of her cowork-



ers, even those not employed in the library, used images of the Health Sciences Library and Cabell Library from the guide as their Zoom backgrounds in meetings.

### Future of the “Mood: At the Library” Guide

Students returned to campus for in-person classes in the fall 2021 semester, but they will continue to need resources that help them feel connected to and immersed in their academic library. At Virginia Commonwealth University, the registrar expects that at least 25 percent of course sections will be online going forward. Even before the pandemic, the university actively worked to develop more degrees that could be completed entirely online. Further, many students who take classes in person commute rather than live on campus and cannot study in the library late into the evening. Commuter students will continue to have many of the same distractions faced by most students during the pandemic, such as noisy or shared work spaces.

Resources that help students focus, de-stress, and stay productive will remain relevant in the long term. Ambient sounds and videos—whether of a campus library or a more exotic location—can aid students trying to focus on their schoolwork in noisy work spaces.<sup>35</sup> College students frequently experience anxiety even without a global pandemic: for example, during the transition to college, when they break up with a romantic partner, or if they struggle academically.<sup>36</sup> Mindfulness and meditation have been demonstrated to help undergraduates reduce their stress levels, pay attention longer in class, and make important academic decisions.<sup>37</sup> These effects are particularly pronounced among first-year undergraduates, a population more likely to interrupt their education, transfer, or drop out of college.<sup>38</sup> Resources that guide students through breathing and meditation exercises can therefore be beneficial even without a pandemic and may be most helpful for the students considered academically high-risk.

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The COVID-19 pandemic has forced higher education in general, and academic libraries in particular, to consider the needs of students more holistically. While students' stress from nonacademic causes may have once been considered peripheral to academic libraries, the pandemic has made clear that students' mental well-being and academic success are inextricably intertwined. Further, the pandemic likely accelerated a shift toward more courses and programs in an online or hybrid modality, resulting in more students who would benefit from connecting aurally and visually to their academic library. For these reasons, it behooves academic libraries to envision their approach to students' mental health and to consider partnerships with other campus units who have long focused on student well-being.

### Acknowledgments

The author would like to acknowledge the colleagues and students who contributed content to the “Mood: At the Library” guide and programming, and who helped raise



awareness of the guide through promotion on social media, newsletters, and other outlets. Special thanks to Amber Pearson for the original inspiration for the “Mood: At the Library” guide.

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particularly for low self-regulated learners primarily because these environments require students to exercise a high degree of self-regulation to succeed. Currently few guidelines exist on how college instructors should incorporate self-regulated strategies using web-based pedagogical tools. The scope of this paper is to (a

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