Exploring New Narratives to Overcome Historical Assumptions

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abstract: The COVID-19 pandemic peeled back long-held assumptions about what is wanted, needed, and possible within academia. Many academic libraries had failed to fully imagine the potential uses of online and, in short, missed many opportunities to engage and support users. From this oversight have sprung opportunities to better understand and respond to the needs of diverse campus communities. This article explores the creation of new and newly reimagined services at one academic library and the potential that they offer to the post-pandemic library of the future. It also suggests additional questions that should be asked to strive for equal access and opportunity for all campus members.

Introduction

Universal Disruption

In spring 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic swept across the globe, causing organizations and individuals to experience dramatic alterations to everyday life. The authors' institution, the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga (UTC), faced significant challenges when the campus announced, during spring break while most students were off campus, that classes would move online immediately. The university planned a one-week transition period and cancelled classes so that faculty could transition their courses to the online environment. Initially presented as a temporary two-week alteration, this change lasted for the remainder of the semester. While the library scrambled to convert in-person services and programs into online formats and to ensure that the campus had access to essential physical materials, the community also suffered catastrophic tornadoes that affected much of the Chattanooga area. Despite upheaval, the library remained open during the pandemic, adjusting to community needs with new services and programming. Over the next year, how users took advantage of the

library's online services and resources showed that those offerings would also have been valuable prior to the pandemic.

Lost Voices

Some details about the UTC campus and the population served will help to provide context for this paper and highlight the needs of the students who were essentially invisible prior to the pandemic, as well as those who experienced significant challenges when the pandemic hit. UTC is an urban, public institution serving approximately 11,000 students. It has a Carnegie classification of Doctoral/Professional University, one that offers a full range of undergraduate majors, plus masters and doctoral programs. A majority of UTC's noninternational undergraduate students (nearly 93 percent) hail from the state of Tennessee, and 65.4 percent live off campus and commute. Campuswide, 61 percent of students exhibit financial need. The undergraduate population has only 21.3 percent historically minoritized students,[1] compared to 43 percent historically minoritized citizens in the city of Chattanooga.[2]

The university offers several fully online graduate programs at the masters and doctoral levels but only two undergraduate online programs: bachelor's degrees in criminal justice and nursing. In fall 2019, before the pandemic, these programs enrolled a total of 88 students. Nearly 5,500 undergraduate students across many majors registered for at least one fully online or hybrid course in the fall of 2019, however.[3] Even before the pandemic, UTC's undergraduate community showed a predilection for online learning. After the spring 2020 semester, the university deployed several surveys to gauge student challenges and class modality preferences. A September 2020 poll asked students about their course delivery preferences for the spring 2021 semester. Students at all undergraduate levels and in all disciplines preferred asynchronous and face-to-face classes by a wide margin over hybrid and synchronous online courses.

Despite being a predominantly commuter campus whose students strongly preferred online learning opportunities, the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga, like most of academia, privileged in-person interactions. Pre-pandemic, the vast majority of classroom instruction, campus opportunities, and activities took place in person and on campus. The library, too, placed a premium upon in-person interactions, affirmed by its high levels of foot traffic: in the academic year ending in 2019, the library reported an average weekly gate count of 24,278 visits. The library received occasional feedback from campus community members expressing a desire for additional online content, most often for online workshops and events, but it was unclear how many students would benefit from or take advantage of such services.

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Students discovered a pressing need for additional online opportunities with the abrupt shift to virtual learning compelled by COVID-19. They were suddenly forced to study and complete their coursework in environments with uncontrollable factors,

including family members with competing priorities at home, slow or no Internet, or inadequate technology.[4] While much has been written about the digital divide, particularly in regard to community access and school-age children, less is known about the digital divide in higher education. A common belief (and a requirement at some institutions) is that a person who can afford to attend college must also have ready access to the requisite technology. This is an unfortunate and untrue assumption.[5] While this disparity was largely hidden prior to the pandemic, the abrupt turn to online instruction made the inequity of digital resources far more visible.

A Chance to Do Better

As the COVID-19 pandemic continues, it is important and necessary for libraries to reflect upon how altered responses might better fill students' needs and wishes. Libraries must explore how they can further adapt to the pandemic-altered landscape. With the benefit of added time, information, and hindsight, long-held assumptions about user needs and preferences that informed decision-making can be challenged. This work allows libraries to envision unconsidered possibilities and patrons. It is a chance to do better.

For UTC Library to evaluate the efficacy of the short-term changes it implemented with a view to permanently continuing successful initiatives, it must also examine the overlooked needs, preferences, and behaviors of the past. The pandemic has created an opportunity for libraries to ponder maxims that may no longer be relevant or useful, as well as those that may not directly translate from the physical into the virtual realm. One relevant example is the glorification of an academic library's physical building as a "third place," a welcoming place other than home and class or work that the campus community highly values.[6] While the library as "third place" remains important, it cannot be directly translated into the virtual realm. The 2005 collection of essays *Library as Place: Rethinking Roles, Rethinking Space* is intended, its preface says, "to stimulate thinking about the role of the library in the digital age, about the potential—and the imperative—for libraries to meet new needs, and about how these needs will influence the design of physical space."[7] While these are important considerations, plans must reflect the changes in learning environments. Shifting all users online during the early days of the pandemic illustrated existing needs that distance learners and faculty had already experienced. Distance users may never enter the library building, and the support provided to them will differ markedly from that centered on the physical library.

While physical libraries have existed for a long time, virtual spaces are, by comparison, new. As a result, they are less researched, less developed, and potentially less understood. In her 2004 article "Libraries in the USA as Traditional and Virtual 'Third Places,'" Karen Lawson posited that "for many non-commercial Internet users a virtual community is similar to an old-fashioned pre-suburban neighborhood in that it is any virtual space where people come together to get and give information or support."[8] While offering a safe, comfortable, and supportive physical environment is a vital service that an academic library provides,[9] replicating that benefit online is not always possible or desired. Imagining a library completely independent of a physical location will take a radical shift in thinking by library employees and a reallocation of resources by educa-

tional institutions. Although many services will likely return to a physical location when possible, the need for virtual-only support during the pandemic highlighted the gaps in online service that already existed for distance learners. It is unclear what proportion of learning will happen online going forward, but even on-campus learners may expect increased online support.

The pandemic required most libraries to pay immediate attention to underdeveloped digital resources that they had previously offered. The historical errors and omissions of the past provided a singular opportunity for academic libraries to reflect and change. This article seeks to explore some of these oversights, actions taken to remedy them, and considerations for a more inclusive future. Areas identified and critically examined include instruction and outreach, technology and support services, building community with faculty and staff, and assessment. The authors hope that these reflections provide practical, detailed explanations for incorporating change as well as illuminate avenues for further consideration and discussion.

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Instruction and Outreach

The UTC Library has an established instruction program and has developed an outreach program over the last decade. For both, in-person activities have been the main priority and have benefited from the biggest investment of resources. The pandemic forced alterations to modalities and activities, many of which represent improvements over previous practices. This section will examine changes to instruction and outreach.

Instructional Alterations

Typical of the profession, library instruction at UTC had always privileged in-person interactions despite increasing demand for online offerings. Online library instruction was available in a variety of forms, but resources and effort focused upon teaching in-person classes, which comprised the bulk of instruction throughout the library. One factor contributing to this focus was that the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) did not collect separate information for online presentations to groups until its 2015 survey[10] and did not track asynchronous instruction until the 2020 academic year. ACRL also does not report digital learning objects created by instruction librarians. It is unsurprising that online instruction is marginalized when the labor involved in creation is not counted in institutional reports.

Despite this historical marginalization of online instruction, the pandemic uncovered a need for new opportunities. The COVID-19 lockdown spurred an explosion of creativity as library instructors attended virtual conferences and discussion sessions and brought back new ideas. Librarians spent time learning new tools such as Canvas Studio, Kaltura, Google Jamboard, and more. Lesson plans were updated, and new ideas were applied to old classes. Following are some of the necessary alterations implemented at UTC that have staying power and applicability to all institutions.

Workshops

The UTC Library's annual survey results consistently showed a desire for online asynchronous workshops (for example, a tutorial on Microsoft Office productivity software). Online asynchronous workshops never rose to the top of the to-do list before the pandemic, but afterward, they suddenly experienced a priority rush. Several new workshops were either created or updated into fully online tutorial formats. Many faculty have asked to embed them into courses.

Another advancement was the addition of synchronous online versions of formerly in-person workshops. All workshops in the fall of 2020 and spring of 2021 took place online. Attendees frequently noted they could not have attended if the sessions had been in person due to travel or time constraints or just general preference. One student remarked, "It seems like every time there is something that I want to learn more about,

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I look and the library has a workshop for it! I can attend from anywhere I happen to be at the moment."

The proliferation of synchronous workshops across the UTC campus opened up new partnerships for the library. Several librarians collaborated with the university's Walker Center for Teaching and Learning to leverage additional campus connections and faculty. This partnership might not have been created prior to the pandemic, but it will likely continue.

Making the Most of Google Drive

In the fall 2020 semester, the majority of library instruction took place online in a variety of virtual spaces. Asynchronous and synchronous instruction was the norm and presented an opportunity for creativity. Some instructors had used Google-based tools prior to the pandemic, but after it began, they created new activities and honed old ones. For example, many library instructors utilized Google Docs as a collaborative workspace for synchronous class activities, not just to record answers. In one class, a librarian leveraged Google Docs to prompt an activity with Zoom breakout room groups and required students to navigate all directions and activities together as a group, using only the Google document for reference and recording. This made the activity student-centered and required students to take

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control of their own learning. The document also served as a place to brainstorm, make notes, answer questions, and provide feedback, as well as the basis for a class presentation activity after the breakout rooms.

Other librarians switched from PowerPoint to Google Slides to harness the auto-generated captions provided by Google. While captions have been available in Google for a number of years, moving instruction online inspired some instructors (the authors included) to move all presentations to Slides. Captioning provides much-needed accessibility, and switching to Slides years ago would have assisted many learners. To take advantage of the captioning power of Slides, instructors need in-class microphones, which also promote accessible interventions for those with auditory needs.

Library instructors also experimented with Google Jamboard. Jamboards function like whiteboards where students can visualize information in different ways. One of the authors used Jamboard in an environmental art class to provide students an opportunity to visualize search processes and show how they might incorporate the information found into their group projects. Google Slides could be used in a similar fashion, but Jamboard has enhanced usability that allows even first-time users to experience success.

Ask Me Anything Discussion Boards

Ask Me Anything discussion boards and virtual office hours have been used in various ways in libraries.[11] At the UTC Library, the online services librarian pioneered them, and they have gradually gained traction with other library instructors during the pandemic-associated rise in asynchronous courses. Ask Me Anything discussions encourage active engagement from students and often require them not simply to post a comment or question but also to respond to peers' posts and to offer advice, alternative perspectives, and moral support.

Two Ask Me Anything discussion boards conducted by one of the authors illuminated some of the challenges students faced in asynchronous coursework in difficult times. The discussion boards were placed in two freshman composition courses that would have had in-person introductory library instruction before the pandemic. The librarian prefaced the boards with an opening statement and directions for what students should address in their posts. Students were expected to provide detail on their topics of research, successes, struggles, and any lingering questions related to research or the library. They were also required to respond to peer posts by offering suggestions, giving affirmations, or asking additional questions. Each student who contributed received a participation grade and, as it turned out, students excelled at helping and supporting their peers and at asking insightful

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questions about research. A theme that arose from many posts was concern about what the students might be missing by not coming to the library building. They worried that visiting campus might spread COVID-19 infection but also feared that they were missing out on experiences or things they could get from the library. Many voiced worries about the pandemic and their families. Having the opportunity to alleviate at least the library portion of the students' concerns was rewarding, and Ask Me Anything discussions will remain a central component of asynchronous library instruction moving forward.

Online Outreach

Most academic libraries strive to provide outreach programming to bring the campus community together to learn, collaborate, and celebrate. At the UTC Library, in-person events often centered on themes such as Black History Month or campus-specific activities, including Welcome Week and final examinations. The relationships engendered by and strengthened at such events are critical to the sense of belonging that bolsters students' engagement with the university. As these events are meaningful to the campus community, the UTC Library attempted to replicate them in an online environment, to varying degrees of success.

The library reimagined an author visit within an online environment, making the event viewable to the public via a YouTube livestream. Money that would have been spent on food, travel, equipment rental, and other costs for an in-person visit was reallocated to pay a speaker's fee to a *New York Times* best-selling author. This new format necessitated additional work from the author in advance of the event, including a tech-related dry run. The management of sound, lighting, and camera placement became partly the responsibility of the author and the author's team, which afforded them a welcome measure of control but may also represent a new investment. A moderator was assigned to the YouTube chat, and an alternate option for submitting questions via an anonymous survey was created for audience members without a YouTube account since the platform requires users to have an account to post a public comment.

The livestream garnered about the same size audience that an in-person visit would have drawn, but the YouTube recording has subsequently been viewed many times. In-person author visits had previously been recorded and posted online; however, the audio and visual quality is significantly better when born digital. While a virtual event loses the cachet of "meeting" the author and the chance to have a book signed, there are several benefits: closed captioning, unlimited seats, the potential to ask questions in a variety of formats (audibly, textually, or anonymously), and attending from any location. While in-person author appearances will still hold a place in library programming, online visits will also continue. Another viable possibility is a hybrid in-person and online approach which, while more complicated, has the potential to benefit more users and expand the audience. Engaging with users to determine which events should offer a virtual component will be critical to future success.

Another popular on-campus event over the last several years has been therapy dog visits. The library's nonprofit partner organization of therapy dogs discontinued visits with the onset of the pandemic. Although no digital experience can replace stroking a dog, the library provided a virtual introduction to staff members' pets through pictures and write-ups posted to social media. Unsurprisingly, pictures of cute animals were popular.

Library staff also created pictorials introducing themselves to users to encourage consulting the library chat service. While it is impossible to determine whether personalizing the service drove higher chat metrics, the initiative received warm responses and provided a mechanism to create connections. The ability to introduce staff in order to personalize the chat reference service existed prior to the pandemic and likely would have benefited users if it had been carried out then.

While many virtual events were successful, others were not. For instance, drop-in Zoom sessions in lieu of physical library tours during Welcome Week drew a small audience and provided only limited usefulness for the attendees. Similarly, a virtual room to replicate a popular stress relief event failed to attract many visitors on Reading Day, a dedicated study day on which no classes, campus work, assignments, or exams are scheduled. The purpose of the event, stress-relieving study breaks, was replicated in an asynchronous digital format and proved popular, however. As students liked to participate in short activities for relief from the stress of exam preparation, the library offered online activities to accomplish the same goal. In-person activities had traditionally included watching cartoons, coloring pages, playing word games, and crafting keepsakes. New online offerings included digital jigsaw puzzles, links to licensed magazines (via Flipster, a free digital magazine service), curated selections of streaming movies and e-books, short videos of celebrities reading stories, university-themed images for coloring, and word searches. While students missed gathering in a physical location, the benefits remained. The in-person Reading Day event lasted only a few hours and might not have been held at a convenient time or location for all users, but the online offerings made the stress relief available on demand. They will continue to be provided in future years as a supplement to in-person events.

Another unique component of the online stress-relief programming was a livestream of library staff participating in relaxing and interesting activities. The aim was to high-light library staff's personal hobbies to further cement the relationship with users, while soothing stressed students by means of relaxing content à la the beloved television painter Bob Ross. These livestreams were hosted on Reading Days, spanned many hours, and were recorded for future on-demand viewing.

As these initiatives proved, many popular in-person events can be successfully converted into virtual events, and many opportunities exist to develop new digital programs and activities. Factors that influence the success of online programming are user-focused, so it is critical to continually evaluate user behavior and preferences. Success also requires continued investment in the logistical considerations required for online and hybrid events, both of which will now be a mainstay of library event programming.

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Technology and Support Services

Lending Technology

Pre-pandemic, the library and other departments across campus offered a wide array of technology for borrowing in a decentralized system. The items available varied in quality and loan length. With the onset of the pandemic, the university recognized a need for centralized distribution and processing of circulating technology. Campus IT used funds

from the Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Act (CARES Act) of 2020 to purchase an initial stock of technological equipment but soon became overwhelmed with the increased demands.[12] As the primary location on campus for circulating resources, the library was an obvious choice for distribution.

The library's tech circulation evolved over the course of the pandemic to increase efficiency and ensure classes could continue uninterrupted. The library offered Chrome-books and other laptops, portable webcams, microphones, and mobile hot spots, all of which could be borrowed by students or faculty for the entire semester. The new semester-long loans were a departure, as technology loans had previously been only for

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three days maximum. Some users received equipment in newly acquired lockers with touchless pickup, while others had items mailed to their homes.

While semester-long loans for technology were created in direct response to CO-VID-19 restrictions, it became apparent that many users needed a semester-long loan irrespective of the pandemic. Many reasons for borrowing existed independently from COVID-19, such as a student's lack of a functioning computer, sharing a computer with a partner or family member, incompatibility with class-required software or equipment, and the need for a portable computer instead of a desktop machine. Mobile hot spots, not previously offered, were requested by users suddenly forced to work from home as well as by students in campus housing, where high Wi-Fi usage caused slow or inter-rupted connections. The need for webcams was also not a new phenomenon but was newly addressed by the library.

At times, libraries may take for granted that college students have access to the equipment required for their studies. The UTC Library staff had little awareness of the extent of additional equipment needed and the myriad reasons for that need. For years, patrons had returned equipment late because their need for it outweighed the overdue fines incurred. The library had offered an annual survey for well over a decade, persistently asking students, staff, and faculty what new offerings they would like, but additional equipment and longer borrowing times were rarely requested. The reasons may be multifold: shame about lacking access to the equipment or the funds to attain access, lack of awareness about possible solutions, or doubt that the university (or the library) would act upon their requests. A takeaway (lesson learned) is that surveys may fail to provide meaningful results about user needs, especially if equipment requirements and desires are not explicitly solicited. Other indicators, such as overdue fines, wait-lists, and circulation rates, may more accurately tell the story of user needs.

UTC Library Studio

The UTC Library Studio is a dedicated multimedia space to engage students, faculty, and staff with media literacy, media production, and innovative technologies. The studio

addresses the growing technological needs across campus in three distinct ways: space, equipment, and multimedia instruction. The physical space includes a computer lab equipped with design software, a virtual reality room, an audio production room, and a green screen production room. Along with the space, a large collection of technology is available for borrowing, including cameras, tripods, portable screens, projectors, and more. As the studio was developed as a hands-on learning environment, its core services were disproportionately impacted when the campus switched to online learning. The bustling physical space closed to walk-in traffic, but the studio quickly converted the equipment loan process by enabling users to remotely place holds on required technology for socially distanced pickups. The studio's instruction services needed to be reimagined, however, to continue serving the campus community.

Digital Content Creation in Multimedia Instruction

While LibGuides are nearly ubiquitous in traditional library instruction programs, the UTC Library Studio had not utilized them in multimedia instruction. The studio staff had favored hands-on primary teaching with an option for in-person help on demand as supplemental instruction. Users expressed overwhelming satisfaction with this approach, so the studio devoted all resources to it. During the early onset of the pandemic, direct instruction and support were not always possible, so a new approach had to be developed quickly. New LibGuides were created to help students check out equipment for at-home setups. The library also adopted new-to-the-studio methods for providing instructional content, including embedding digital learning objects in the campus learning management system, sharing Google Drive folders with workshop participants, and generally broadening the access to supporting resources.

Finally, the UTC Library Studio added project files, preexisting packages of supporting materials for training sessions, LibGuides, and Canvas. The files gave students and faculty working from home the ability to follow along with the content whether it was delivered synchronously or asynchronously. This service had been neglected before the pandemic because of the premium placed on in-person classes and the limited access to software for students off campus.

Specialty Software Solutions

Effective multimedia instruction relies upon students learning to use required software for designing, creating, and editing projects for classes. The Library Studio provides premium software, such as Adobe (Premiere, Photoshop, and Illustrator), TechSmith (Camtasia), and Apple (iMovie, Final Cut, Logic, and GarageBand), within the studio's physical space. Without access to this space and its software, many planned multimedia projects and instruction sessions faced cancellation during the pandemic. The crisis was averted when the university purchased remote log-in access for all lab setups, giving users all the software necessary for projects and papers. After the library and the studio began accepting a limited number of visitors in person, the studio maintained selected computers for remote access while keeping the remaining computers available for use in the physical studio.

Specialty software represents only a portion of the studio's value; the studio staff are instrumental in helping people understand and properly utilize the software. In the physical space, a studio staff member is always present to answer users' questions. To ensure that remote users could have specialists' help, a dedicated Zoom room was created and staffed for every hour that the UTC Library Studio was open and prominently displayed in a variety of ways. For those without Zoom, the studio's long-offered text and instant chat service remained available.

Remote access computers were an elegant solution to the lack of access to specialty software and afforded a new opportunity for students to work on multimedia projects from off-campus locations. Distance students may not easily visit the Library Studio to use the specialty software, nor may on-campus students use the physical resources except during the prescribed hours the studio is open. Remote access has potential to help libraries reach more users in new, and newly imagined, ways.

Building Community with Faculty and Staff

Faculty and staff on the university campus experienced their own set of challenges and difficulties when the majority of them shifted to working from home.[13] Classes formerly taught in person moved online (including physical science lab courses and art studio sessions), introducing the need for alternative class materials, simulations, and software knowledge. Campus employees experienced high levels of stress and alteration to work environments. The library

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rallied to update or create support options to meet campus-wide needs, including those of its own employees. The new offerings filled gaps that had existed in library support for staff and faculty prior to the pandemic.

Liaison Support

The UTC Library re-created its liaison program several years ago with the intent to provide an equitable level of service to all academic departments. Library liaisons support assigned departments in a variety of ways, including assistance with creating online content, advising faculty on instructional methods, purchasing and using software, and accessing, acquiring, and using a variety of resources. Liaisons serve as intermediaries between the library and the academic departments and are encouraged to build relationships.

Unsurprisingly, the pandemic uncovered areas for improvement in the library's support of academic departments. During times of steady coordination and oversight, a coordinator collected library messages to faculty and communicated them through the liaisons. This system had lapsed about a year prior to the pandemic, however. Often, liaisons were neither consulted nor copied on messages to faculty. The issue

was exacerbated when the pandemic hit. Individual liaisons were unclear about how and whether to communicate urgent library-related messages to faculty, even as many more critical communications arrived from campus administration, health services, and safety management. Lack of coordination resulted in duplicate, missed, and untimely communications with faculty and, in some instances, damaged departmental relationships. Looking toward the future, many opportunities exist to mend relationships and improve service.

Faculty Social Groups

One of the authors is the cofounder of a campus-wide faculty group that provides special topic talks, research mixers, and social events. The group has traditionally enjoyed robust participation from faculty all over campus, but it particularly aims to attract new faculty members who may especially benefit from meeting seasoned academics. Collegial social interaction, "real talk" about the new workplace environment, and the formation of research partnerships are hallmarks of the group's work.

The group historically met in person for events, including a popular end-of-semester pub crawl at bars adjacent to campus. Since such gatherings became impossible during the pandemic and the need to socialize with colleagues remained as great as ever, the group organizers quickly redeveloped the event into a virtual pub crawl just six weeks after the campus transitioned to online learning. The organizers developed topics for virtual breakout rooms, such as "Working from Home," "Bingewatching 101," "Student Stories," "Choose Your Own Adventure," and more. Over 20 faculty members attended, comparable to in-person events. Though it was an undeniably different experience than an in-person pub crawl, this format offered advantages, including that attendees could imbibe at home without risk of impaired driving. Zoom also offers clearer audibility than a pub environment and enables participants to talk with the entire group. The virtual setting also allowed faculty members to participate without having to arrange childcare. While the physical pub will undoubtedly remain a gathering point, the group is considering a virtual social event as well as livestreaming other special topic events on an ongoing basis.

Maintaining Library Relationships

One of the key elements lost during COVID-19 was the sense of camaraderie engendered by working in close proximity on a daily basis. To combat the lack of serendipitous interactions, the library's Staff & Student Development Committee organized a series of virtual staff outings during the spring and summer of 2020. Social sessions were designed around Zoom breakout rooms where employees could play online card games such as poker and gin rummy or newer video games like Jackbox Party, or could just catch up in chat rooms. These sessions were popular, and employees appreciated the opportunity to get together.

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Another area where pre-pandemic practices were improved and relationships strengthened involved staff meetings. Prior to COVID-19, neither remote attendance nor recorded meetings were available, even though the need and desire existed. The single-mode approach of in-person meetings resulted in some library staff members being unrepresented or underrepresented because of scheduling conflicts, work commitments, or personal discomfort communicating in large groups. Online meetings offered a new way to engage via text chat or reaction features within the software, so attendees could participate even if they felt uncomfortable voicing their opinions aloud. Recordings helped keep staff abreast of decisions and changes. The library will likely continue to offer virtual attendance and recordings in addition to physical meetings as a way to increase employee engagement.

While virtual meeting attendance was an improvement, it became difficult for all employees to have a say during meetings. In response, the library created a set of guidelines called Meetings Best Practices, which greatly improved meetings in many ways. Best practices include providing agendas and reading material well in advance of the meeting, honoring the agenda's start and end times, raising hands before speaking to avoid interruptions, attendees being mindful of how often they speak to ensure that others can contribute, and leaders successfully concluding meetings by resolving discussion or assigning actions and deadlines for follow-up.

Assessment

Assessment initiatives are thoughtfully planned at the outset of any new endeavor. Many planned programs and events were shelved indefinitely or cancelled outright when COVID-19 began, negatively impacting many planned assessment initiatives. For example, the library typically surveys the campus at the end of each spring semester, with a 9 to 14 percent response rate over each of the last five years. The 2020 survey instrument was ready to deploy but was cancelled when the pandemic struck.

Library operations continued in a markedly different fashion over the months, which rendered year-on-year comparisons impossible or of little use. For key comparison metrics in the profession, ACRL preemptively addressed this problem in its 2019–2020 Academic Library Trends and Statistics Survey by ending the reporting date range before the pandemic hit North America.[14] This change will aid in comparing libraries who report; however, the longitudinal data are severely impacted.

A new set of variables resulting from the pandemic altered the ways in which users needed and used libraries. Countless new demands and concerns overwhelmed people's lives. For many, coursework and scholarship received reduced time and attention, which led to a corresponding reduction in need for academic library resources and services. While this global shift in priorities occurred, libraries scrambled to ensure continued access to resources and services without time to thoughtfully plan and with limited data to make decisions based on user needs and preferences.

The UTC Library saw a pronounced alteration in how users took advantage of services and resources. One immediate change was a precipitous drop in usage as the library remained closed. Library website visits and online reference services did not see a corresponding increase. Patrons returned to visiting the library as scholarly activities resumed, but ongoing capacity restrictions kept visitation numbers low.

It is imperative that academic libraries revise their assessment strategies. In this pandemic-affected environment, a reasonable approach to assessing usage and engagement must consider the current context. For instance, gate counts should be viewed in relation to campus traffic patterns, rather than counts from previous years. In an effort to limit capacity and preserve social distancing protocols, the UTC Library restricted entrance to current students, staff, and faculty, drastically reducing the numbers physically entering the building. Gate counts should be viewed and evaluated within this context. This same contextualized approach should be applied to all services and resources offered.

There are also new services to measure that will have no historical data but may have external reference points for comparison. Many new online services cannot reasonably be compared to an in-person equivalent because the market served, constraints, and options may be entirely different. The most appropriate measurement will be whether the service met the intended goal. Even services hurriedly implemented in reaction to COVID-19 restrictions were chosen for a reason; therefore, the relevant evaluation will be whether the service satisfies the need. In this way, assessment has not fundamentally changed because of the pandemic. With many competing priorities and urgent tasks, it is tempting to hold off on evaluation, but the critical directive is to continue to assess. Some libraries may wait for a "return to normal" before evaluating, but that is inadvisable as many library operations have irrevocably changed due to newly realized user preferences. Understanding those preferences, needs, and characteristics will be essential moving forward.

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While operations continue to evolve to meet users' needs and preferences, libraries may have more time and reference points to implement change in a planned and coordinated way. Assessment can be baked into plans from the outset and will provide relevant and informative data on which to measure success. It is imperative to avoid complacency when deciding which new and existing services merit resource investment. Libraries have a long history of evaluating user preferences and should adjust questions, options, and channels to the new landscape.

Moving Forward (Conclusions)

Libraries have experienced significant changes as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Change has been a constant companion to the library field, however, and librarians are well-equipped to rethink, re-create, and rebrand. All librarians should reflect upon the positive and negative aspects of the pandemic environment and seek areas of change accordingly. Libraries are presented with a two-fold opportunity: to differentiate the user needs and preferences for each distinct environment (physical and virtual) in which they serve and to assign a proportionate level of resources and creative thinking to each.

The many potential implications and considerations for research or exploration that might be undertaken include:

1. Campus population needs are not homogenous, especially in terms of the technology necessary for full participation in the academic arena.
2. Ethical considerations abound and must be carefully examined as new services are put into place.
3. Virtual services can be personalized to potentially increase engagement with patrons who receive nearly all library services virtually.
4. Consistent key performance indicator ratios should be identified and used for annual library evaluation as well as across libraries.
5. Critical examination of campus perceptions of the library's role during the pandemic should be gathered and thoughtfully considered.

The pandemic has permanently changed usage patterns and trends. Rather than approaching this change reluctantly with a yearning to return to "normal," libraries will be rewarded by enthusiastically approaching opportunities to engage new users as well as existing patrons in novel ways. These opportunities should be developed as alternatives to core offerings, or as supplements in some cases. Academic libraries will benefit from focusing on developing services and offering resources that best meet the needs of their campus community, regardless of format. As user preferences have unalterably adapted during the pandemic, so too should academic libraries.

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