Chapter 4

Reflection

The Academic Library during the Pandemic: Reflections at the End of the Road

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I never expected to spend my last year as an academic librarian worrying about how long we should quarantine books when they are returned to the library. I did not expect to throw copyright caution to the wind as we began scanning large sections of library books to make them available online, with little or no thought given to copyright. I did not expect not to be able to mark the retirement of three staff members, whose total years of service at the institution exceed 120 years, with no more than an email. After a career of planning library spaces to encourage collaborative learning, I did not expect to be moving furniture around so that no one sits too close to anyone else.

And yet, as I entered my last year of professional work, that was where I found myself. Like all of my colleagues around the country, I spent the spring and summer of 2020 trying to figure out how to deliver library services during a pandemic. This essay offers a look back at the decisions my staff and I made and the plans we put in place for moving forward.

The Library as a Great Good Place

Most of my career as a chief library administrator has been focused on ways to make the library building a place that students want to use. My vision of the ideal academic library building has long been one that embodies the ideals of sociologist Ray Oldenburg’s Great Good Place. Oldenburg devoted his academic career to exploring the idea of “those happy gathering places that a community may contain, those ‘homes away from home’, where unrelated people relate” (Oldenburg, 1999).

Oldenburg (1999) looked at coffeehouses, beer gardens, cafes, beauty salons, and other places where people gather. These are places that are not the home, and they are not the workplace. They are, to use Oldenburg’s term, “Third Places.” These are the places we go to be with people other than our families and coworkers, where we can discuss ideas, share our stories, and be a part of our communities.

For the last couple of decades, library construction and renovation has moved from the “box for books” model of the past to incorporate the ideas of the Learning Commons. Scott Bennet (2008) argued that the Learning Commons had replaced the card catalog as the thing that defined academic library spaces. The Learning Commons was characterized as a space where students and faculty can encounter each other, where collaboration was encouraged,
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and where furniture could be moved easily to meet the needs of the moment. These were technology-rich spaces, with flexible and comfortable seating, and they were meant to be centered on the students who used them.

Susan Montgomery and Jonathan Miller of Rollins College (2011) described this type of space using Oldenburg’s frame. They argue that academic libraries need to focus on creating opportunities and spaces for community and collaboration. By providing collaborative spaces, a variety of seating, student-centered services, and a welcoming environment, academic libraries can become the Great Good Place on their campuses (Montgomery & Miller, 2011).

Simpson Library at the University of Mary Washington opened in January 1989. Its design follows more traditional library models, with most of the space being devoted to stacks for books. A great deal of the furniture is heavy and immobile; service desks are barriers, separating staff from patrons. Most of the study spaces for students were designed for individuals, not groups.

Renovation remains a dream for the future, but we have done what we can to make Simpson Library more welcoming. We have rearranged furniture to create conversational and collaborative areas, and, when funds allowed, we invested in newer, more comfortable furniture. Slowly but surely, we were becoming a Great Good Place.

The COVID Pivot

Our first hint that our lives were about to change dramatically came in early March, when UMW, like most other institutions, began talking about COVID-19. The first meeting I attended on the subject, and one of the last face-to-face meetings I had, was on Monday, March 9. This was our first day back from Spring Break, and students had just returned to campus. During the meeting, we were told to plan for multiple contingencies – from continuing business as usual to moving classes fully online. By March 18, the decision was made to send all students home and to move all classes online.

Through the following weeks, we in the library tried to cope with uncertain circumstances, limited information, and a rapidly changing situation. At first, we hoped to be able to keep the building open with limited hours so that students would have a place they could go to for reliable internet and computer access. Within a week, we decided that this was neither feasible nor safe, and we closed the library on March 23.

Our goal was to do whatever we could to support students and faculty to the end of the semester. We began an aggressive program of scanning textbooks and library reserve items for faculty and students, along with providing scanned materials through interlibrary loan. We worked with faculty to find electronic editions of textbooks and other required readings. Reference services switched to chat, email, and phone instead of in person. Most staff transitioned to working from home, although a few staff members were present in the library each day.

Our efforts to scan print materials to make them available to students and faculty were aggressive. Our decisions regarding copyright were based on the Public Statement of Library Copyright Specialists: Fair Use & Emergency Remote Teaching & Research, issued on March 13, 2020. This document asserts that, in a time of crisis, making resources available so that students can continue to have access to learning resources, is within the scope of fair use. We encouraged faculty to use Canvas and to give students access to scanned materials, since Canvas limited access to students enrolled in a course.
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As the semester ended, it was clear to all of us that we were going to have to remain closed through the summer, and that the ability to have in-person classes in the fall was uncertain. At the same time, the university announced that significant budget cuts would have to be made, and the governor of Virginia froze all hiring in state departments and institutions.

Planning for Fall 2020

Across the university, focus shifted from surviving the spring to planning for the fall. The President appointed a Task Force to develop a plan for repopulating the campus. At the same time, the library, like all other units, was asked to submit a plan for the fall. We were all working with limited information, unclear and often contradictory advice from state and federal authorities, and the lack of clear communication across the institution. I felt that I spent most of every meeting with my staff answering their questions with “I don’t know.”

At this point, I made what I consider to be one of the wisest decisions I have made in three decades of library administration. I asked a member of the staff to serve as a sort of ombudsperson. I asked staff to send her any questions and concerns they had about our reopening plans as these developed. She would remove any identifying information from these comments, and then pass them along to me. This allowed me to hear where the staff’s concerns lay while also allowing individuals to be anonymous. I have always tried to be the kind of administrator who listened to her staff, but I know that in any organization, there are people who do not want to speak out in public, even when “public” is a Zoom meeting.

Throughout the long, hot, and frustrating summer, one of the things that kept me moving forward with reasonably good humor was the work of VIVA, our statewide library consortium. Every two weeks, the VIVA Executive Director would arrange for a Zoom meeting of all the directors of the member institutions. VIVA serves public and independent institutions, from two-year institutions to doctoral universities. These meetings allowed us to share our concerns with each other, hear what others were planning, and to offer each other moral support. As VIVA members developed reopening plans, VIVA served as a repository for them. The strength of academic libraries in the United States is our ability to cooperate with each other across boundaries of size and type, and the regular communications with my VIVA colleagues helped me find the fortitude I needed to take the next step.

Another bright spot over the summer was the opportunity that the switch to online education gave us to promote open and affordable educational resources. When students moved away from campus in March, they lost access to the print textbooks on reserve in Simpson Library. This brought home to faculty the fact that having an easily accessible open textbook allowed students working online to continue their coursework without interruption. My colleagues and I offered two workshops for faculty on finding OER and other ways to incorporate library resources into online courses over the summer. Thirty-one courses are marked in the university’s course schedule as having incorporated OER, and we are continuing to field requests for help in locating open resources.

Looking Ahead

We will be digesting the lessons learned through this pandemic for many years to come. I do not know what the next iteration of the academic library will be, but there are, I believe, reasons to hope. We are grounded in a long tradition of service to our communities, we are committed to providing equal access to all our users, and we have proven that we can adapt even in the most challenging of circumstances.
References


