COVID-19 IMPACT ON INFORMATION ORGANIZATION: DELIVERING INFORMATION AND LIBRARY SERVICES DURING A PANDEMIC

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ABSTRACT

The COVID-19 pandemic has had a profound and far-reaching impact on how we live and work all over the world. The year 2020 and the first part of 2021 were characterized with fear, uncertainty, and rapid change as society took shelter from the menacing pandemic. Yet, during the same time, we witnessed unprecedented transformation as various businesses and enterprises reinvented themselves to combat not only the deadly effects of the pandemic, but also the disruption it was causing in all sectors of life. Within higher education, libraries featured prominently among units rethinking their operations to effectively support the continuity of research, teaching, and learning in their respective institutions. As a result, creative ways of organizing, accessing, and delivering services and information despite the constraints of the pandemic emerged. We saw the birth of curbside services, the enhancement of electronic access to collections, the increase of digitization on demand, and the emphasis of virtual library services such as chat reference and online library classes.

This paper is based on the UW-Madison Libraries' experience in planning and delivering services throughout the pandemic and making necessary adjustments as the pandemic circumstances changed. The paper discusses lessons learned and some key insights gained from the planning efforts as well as some of the pitfalls encountered. The paper emphasizes the importance of preparedness and encourages libraries to develop plans for continuity of operations as an integral component of organizing and delivering library services and information. The importance of a strong web presence is highlighted as fundamental to a library's organization of information as it serves as a portal to library resources and would be the place all library patrons would depend on to search for information when the physical library is inaccessible due to an ongoing pandemic or other similar circumstances.

INTRODUCTION

The COVID-19 pandemic has been global in scope, catastrophic in nature, rapid in progression, and impacted every sector of human endeavors. Higher education was among the areas impacted profoundly. Within higher education, academic libraries were among the impacted units because of their central role in the supporting research and scholarship. The continuity of research, teaching, and learning were paramount in all academic institutions.

As key partners in support of institutional academic missions, academic libraries found themselves grappling with challenges to continue to deliver services and support for their patrons during the ongoing pandemic. Fortunately, within the professional landscape, there were opportunities for academic libraries and related institutions to share information and strategies for dealing with the challenges. Many librarians shared experiences and learned from one another throughout the pandemic.

UW-MADISON'S PANDEMIC-DRIVEN LIBRARY TRANSFORMATION

At the University of Wisconsin-Madison (UW-Madison), libraries played a major role in enabling the university to pivot to remote learning in a two-week timeframe. This was accomplished through instructional designers in UW-Madison's Teaching and Learning Programs unit. As the university pivoted to remote learning, delivery of library instruction was all conducted online, with liaisons and instruction librarians developing numerous course guides, LibGuides, micro-courses, and other learning objects for online delivery.

The recent creation of a library hub within Canvas, the campus's Learning Management System, facilitated the seamless integration of eLearning objects and other instructive content created for online delivery into the curriculum. Access to print collections were facilitated through digitization by our ILL department. Through this service, patrons could request chapters of books to be digitized and sent to them. Furthermore, many liaison librarians also purchased eBooks on demand for their respective constituencies (even when they might have had the print version of a book already in our collections). This helped increase patron access to content.

Users were also supported through consultations and the chat service. The University's chat service saw an exponential increase in usage and was used by many to inquire about the status of various services.

At UW-Madison, new ways of organizing, accessing, and delivering services and information were created. All services emphasized virtual support since most staff were working remotely, and safety measures required physical distancing. However, a limited number of staff continued to work onsite to facilitate digitization of requested material, interlibrary loan, and curbside pickup services, similar to what was being offered in the stores.

In the later part of 2020, the Library gradually began to open up physical spaces, with very strict protocols in place to ensure that both staff and patrons were safe. The gradual reopening of physical spaces was welcomed by faculty, particularly those in the humanistic disciplines who have greater dependence on print collections. Library staff were redeployed according to prioritized services. This meant that at times staff members were working in a different unit from their regular unit in order to support the prioritized services. The Library's strategy was to utilize staff where they were most needed.

One of the main challenges was the continual changes and adjustments that needed to be made as pandemic guidelines changed. Therefore, the planning committees had to continually revise protocols in order to keep up with safety guidelines and mandates.

In particular, aligning with campus, state, and national mandates, while also actively communicating with staff, patrons, and partners, was challenging at times. Some of the pitfalls encountered during the planning process included the uncertainties resulting from the lack of clarity of guidelines, coupled with the rapid pace of changes occurring.

INFORMATION SERVICES & ORGANIZATION

Success in delivering library services during the pandemic depended on the following factors:

- Having a strong virtual presence;
- Having clear organization of the website, as it serves as a portal to library services and resources, and would be the place that all library patrons would depend on to search for information when the physical library is inaccessible;
- Chat and email services are critical for communication with users;
- Portals for specialized support should also be made available whenever possible, and
- It was also important to place announcements and updates in a visible or prominent place on the library website for easy access to users

Other success factors in delivering services during the pandemic at UW-Madison were:

- Prioritization of services (staff couldn't do everything, so the Library carefully determined what services were most important to deliver) and focused on those;
- Strong support for staff– keeping in mind that the pandemic was a frightening situation and staff was dealing with various situations at home and at work, it was of utmost importance to ensure that they were well supported;

Collaboration – for example, at UW-Madison librarians leveraged partnerships in seeking solutions for access to research content. For example, through hathitrust, librarians were able to gain access to electronic content during the time that the library buildings were closed to patron access due to the pandemic.

LESSONS FOR THE FUTURE

Some of the key takeaways in ensuring preparedness for a similar future event is to:

- Have a COOP (continuity of operations plan) – it is useful to review that document periodically and update it as needed;
- Optimize your web presence, it is the critical gateway to services and support;

Review your library's performance during the COVID-19 pandemic. Apply any lessons learned. Some of the questions to consider are:

- What did we learn from this experience?
- What were the key challenges and how did we overcome them?
- What were the positive outcomes of our service delivery?
- How would we handle a similar situation in the future?

And finally:

- Retain documentation from the COVID-19 library experience that might be useful in the future;
- Don't forget to survey users about their experience during the pandemic as these will translate to useful insights for your services in the future;
- At UW-Madison, the Graduate School surveyed graduate students about their experience during the pandemic. Feedback received from graduate students were useful and that information is now being used to plan services and adjust some policies.