

## Transitioning and Sustaining Community Connection During COVID

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**Abstract:** Entering a higher education institution as a new library employee often means identifying your role, allies, and methods to reach the community served. Identifying and reaching out becomes even more challenging when employee attrition results in a large loss of institutional knowledge. When the COVID-19 pandemic forced an academic library to shut down physical services, traditional means of establishing relationships with the community were further complicated. This case study explores this library's successes and failures in reaching out to a community during the high-stress, remote teaching and learning situation brought on by the pandemic. The authors conclude that successful community-building should emphasize people and synchronous social interaction for the greatest impact.

**Keywords:** COVID-19, outreach, remote work, online, community-building

### Introduction

Library outreach plays a vital role in library advocacy. Outreach efforts help develop and rally a library's community for the crucial moments that arise when advocacy is essential. Libraries—even academic libraries—work to serve their communities, and they often begin that relationship-building through various means of outreach. Every sector across the world felt the impact of COVID-19 throughout 2020, and libraries were no exception. As university campuses had to send students home and shift academics online,

academic libraries had to similarly transition their offerings to the online environment. Library community relationships that may at one time have been largely dependent on physical space and presence on campus, as well as face-to-face interactions with faculty and students, were suddenly ripped away. In the world and the library community, new methods of engagement emerged to allow for the continuation of outreach and advocacy online.

In the chaos of expedience, those who were unexpectedly placed in online-only environments may have overlooked some best practices in online learning and communications. For instance, in online engagement it is important not to focus just on the online tools available, but on “our shared humanity and community” in navigating the world while online (Bessette, 2020, p. 9). This article seeks to describe one academic library’s journey establishing its humanity in an online world not only in the context of a global pandemic but also with an almost entirely new staff. Just as the pandemic began on a campus that had relied on face-to-face communications, the community could not engage with the new faces behind the library’s curtain of operations, creating unique hurdles for library employees in charge of library outreach and advocacy.

The pandemic marketing response at this library can be broken down into two phases. The first phase began when the crisis emerged, and it was defined by a rapid response to COVID-19, crisis communication, and organizational shifts in communication. As the library and its staff began to find its footing, methods of library marketing and outreach shifted to focus on meaningful community engagement that emphasized human interaction.

## **Institutional Context**

This case study of library marketing during COVID-19 takes place at the University of Cincinnati (UC) Clermont, which is a rural, regional college of a larger institution in the Midwest region of the United States. The college is bound by the decisions of the institution and benefits from the structure and resources that the institution provides. However, the college is much different from its home institution. While the college primarily grants associate degrees through an open-access mission in a rural setting, the parent institution offers competitive degrees up to doctorates in an urban setting. These differences are noteworthy because audience is an important consideration when crafting

messaging and services for marketing. The college library has the freedom to work with its college community independent of the University of Cincinnati Libraries, but it will be clear that it was advantageous to have wider institutional support during the pandemic.

Another important note is to understand the makeup of the college library. The UC Clermont library consists of three to four employees: two to three library faculty and one staff member. One library faculty is also the library director. COVID-19 demanded that the college shift to remote operations beginning March 16, 2020. At that time, there were just three library employees: the operations manager, who began in August 2019; the instruction librarian, who began in August 2018; and the library director, who began March 2, 2020. A fourth member, the Reference Librarian, would join the library in April 2020. However, the instruction librarian also resigned from her position in April 2020. This left very little institutional knowledge of the library, college, and university at the end of spring 2020. In normal circumstances, this would provide a marketing crisis for a library, but it presented even more unique challenges during a mostly remote work year due to the pandemic.

### **Crisis Emerges**

As COVID-19 cases began to rise nationwide, many schools, universities, and college leaders responded by closing campuses, canceling commencements, and moving all educational and other associated activities online. Early on “a rapid response from leadership was essential for crisis management, and it sent a clear message to all stakeholders that leadership understand that the coronavirus represented a significant problem, and they were taking it seriously, and were taking the steps necessary to address it” (Fernandez and Shaw, 2020, p. 40). UC Clermont relied heavily on the university’s COVID-19 preventive action and messaging while also tailoring the policies and procedures to meet its campus size and commuter student population. Frequent emails updated the campus community in addition to a new university Web page with relevant resources for students, staff, and faculty. A phased plan was developed by the Return to Campus Task Force (RTC), in compliance with directives issued by the state’s Department of Health. Each college, including the regionals at the University of Cincinnati,

implemented the RTC safety protocols and submitted a RTC Assessment Tool for COVID-19 Office Space Safety Guidance and Smart Practices.

To create a unified library response, the University Libraries and regional libraries worked together to enable services for patrons across the system. Early on, a new online chat service was launched that allowed for synchronous, on-the-spot help to patrons. Later, a new method was introduced for patrons to retrieve collection materials without spending prolonged time inside library facilities. Based on these collaborative changes, the regional campuses modified their services to accommodate their local users' unique informational needs, which differed from those of the parent institution. The shared IT infrastructure and implementation of these new services were beneficial to the regional campus libraries because they reduced the labor and knowledge needed within the local library. The University Libraries were able to adapt systemwide library branding concepts to allow for easy local promotion of services.

Due to the pivot to remote teaching and learning, the onboarding process of new faculty librarians was complicated. There was little opportunity for introductions to teaching faculty, which typically happened at college-wide faculty meetings or at in-person meet-and-greets with the community. Key community relationships in this context were with students, instructors, and staff within the college. In addition, because there was little opportunity to tour the campus and library, all orientation, day-to-day operations, and personnel meetings had to occur online. This disconnect may have caused a hardship for new librarians in developing community and familiarizing themselves with their new work and colleagues, particularly early in the pandemic when many were still not accustomed to online meetings and business interactions. Learning communities became one way to help adjust. Banas and Wartalski (2019) state that "learning communities are made up of people, purpose and a process that ultimately leads to reflection and transformation" (p. 8). Therefore, the new library employees quickly had to find online allies to help build institutional learning and connections.

Developing rapport online with faculty, staff, and students in non-pandemic times poses obstacles for the library due to the loss of informal conversation and social cues often found in face-to-face interactions. Despite the emergence of virtual materials and services in contemporary academic

libraries, there is still a reliance on creating and maintaining relationships within the university community through face-to-face interactions. When COVID-19 shifted most operations to a remote setting, the librarians had not yet formed strong campus networks due to their lack of opportunity to spend time on campus. These employees lacked social capital that many librarians could likely rely on to maintain relationships during COVID-19.

Social capital refers to the networks that one constructs from social ties and the social norms that form as a result. Without social capital, there is no mutual trust in a relationship (Suh & Shin, 2010). Communication needs to happen first to lay the foundation for trust. During the pandemic, communication through blog posts, email notifications, newsletter announcements, and website updates served as notifications to the community of the library's online activities and services. Online outreach events served as another way to publicize online library services and an opportunity for the librarians, staff, faculty, and students to get to know one another. These activities foster a level of community formation where "community conferment occurs, and learners feel a sense of membership and kinship" (Banas & Wartalski, 2019, p. 10). Initially, many of these activities were impersonal and asynchronous, based only on one-way communication.

Adjusting to a new job remotely posed a difficulty since there was a lack of foundational knowledge about campus operations as well as institutional culture and memory within the library. Because the librarians lacked familiarity and connections to the campus community, it was vital to create that in an online environment. The librarians at UC Clermont used emails and blogs to introduce themselves to their community. Passive library updates and introductions alone were not going to be enough to develop rapport with faculty and to engage students. Organized events, both formal and informal, foster social connection and, according to Suh and Shin (2010), help build online social ties that lead to the sharing of individual knowledge. These types of events serve to increase "the strength of social ties, which eventually develop into a close, dense and cohesive network" (Suh and Shin, 2010, p. 446). Therefore, the library's efforts needed to reach beyond static online content into engaging interactions with people to create two-way communications and relationships.

## **Crisis Communication**

Being new on campus and trying to learn a job amid a crisis posed many challenges. Malozzi (1994) outlines four stages of crisis communication: “1) crisis preparedness, 2) initial response, 3) maintain ongoing corrective actions and reactions during the course of the crisis, and 4) evaluation and follow-up” (p. 34). This framework created a strategy for how the library proceeded in internal communication as well as communicating to the campus and college administrators. Most of the documents that librarians wrote early in the pandemic guided library procedure and kept college administration updated on daily functions. In order to provide continuity of the most essential library services—reference, instruction and material delivery—librarians had to be agile and find creative solutions. Before exploring how new policies and procedures were communicated, it is worthwhile to define different emergency situations and structured phases of response.

Frequently, academic libraries use the word “crisis” to refer to the ongoing serials crisis where shrinking library materials budgets cause the cancellation of databases or journals, but this was a quite different kind of crisis. Soehner et al. (2017) provide a clear delineation to describe the difference between a crisis, a disaster, and an emergency by stating that “a crisis is a turning point in a developing state of affairs. A disaster is an unfortunate sudden and unexpected event of any origin. An emergency is an unforeseen occurrence requiring urgent action” (Brody, 1991, p. 197). The current COVID-19 pandemic constitutes a crisis according to Brody’s definition since it is an ongoing event and continues to evolve in a way that is similar to the serials crisis. The status of COVID case numbers on a state, county, or local level at any given time determined if libraries had to reduce the number of employees working in their buildings and/or shift operations and services online.

The university’s guidance informed how the library tailored its services. It was an unprecedented time for college libraries since the pandemic spread throughout the country. Typically, making decisions and acting during a crisis requires “managers to draw from organizational memory, experience, or intuition to recombine and apply organizational routines and knowledge in creative ways” (Yang and Hsieh, 2013, p. 408). However, this was not a decision-making process available to UC Clermont due to the recent hire dates of all of the staff. Instead, collaborative problem-solving filled this void by drawing on the employees’ diverse experiences at other colleges and

institutions. This collaborative work resulted in the asynchronous outreach methods previously discussed. These efforts were a collage of activities each employee had implemented elsewhere, which were transformed for use online at this new institution.

Early on, the university was vigilant and provided daily communication to its campuses about how to keep students, staff, and faculty healthy as well as about the transition to online learning and campus services. With the move to remote working, teaching, and learning, library reference and instruction continued exclusively online, whether synchronously or asynchronously. At the beginning, there were few requests for instruction because many teaching faculty were busy trying to maintain course continuity while transitioning their courses online. At the library, online drop-in office hours via WebEx and an appointment scheduler for one-to-one consults replaced the physical reference desk. The conversion of these services to online format was again communicated on the library's website, blog, and faculty newsletter. Because of the low number of transactions, the challenge moving forward was how to harness unearned social capital to bring audiences back into the library, but in a virtual context.

### **Finding Footing**

The first portions of this paper were defined by crisis communication and organizational learning within the pandemic. While those components never ceased, fall semester 2020 brought new projects. More faculty and students were actively engaged in college affairs than in the summer semester, and the initial panic of spring had simmered. While the summer provided the needed time to break from constant crisis communication and focus more on organizational learning, the fall semester became a time for the new library faculty to connect with the people who belonged to their institution. Therefore, as the fall semester approached, the team needed to establish a new focus. Making human connections was the primary desire for librarians to get to know the community that had been hardly introduced either before or during the remote instruction of the spring semester.

### **Communities and Human Interaction**

Making human connections is an important piece of online working and learning in order to create and define community. A community enables all humans ‘to find security, identity, shared values, and people who care about us and about whom we care’ (Wlodkowski & Ginsberg, 2017, p. 149). When working or learning remotely, isolation (social or cultural) can easily occur, but if human interactions become a focus, it can be avoided while helping improve motivation (Hoang, 2019; Wlodkowski & Ginsberg, 2017). Students in an online academic setting have expressed that without this human-to-human interaction, their motivation to learn declines (Kim, 2009). However, this concept can easily translate to a new employee’s desire to continue working for an institution or a new student’s desire to interface with an academic service such as the library.

Libraries that had a more established workforce began their pandemic response with this view, such as the University of Dayton’s people-first promotion (Beis et al., 2020). Its pandemic strategy was to connect students and faculty with librarians (rather than the building or named service) during the crisis. This allowed them to work within their means, bring value to library work, and connect to others even while remote (Beis et al., 2020). University of Dayton sought to bring librarians to the front of the library’s promotional resources, and UC Clermont wanted to do the same. However, the motivating factors at UC Clermont may have been different as the desire was to establish a connection rather than maintain an existing one. The new library faculty needed to develop their online community, just like students in online learning theory who may be new to each other in every class and need to define and establish their online course community.

The practices from the previous semester-and-a-half did not end, but new, innovative ideas were introduced. There are a few ways to make remote learning and working successful. Human interaction is one way and was the new focus of the fall semester. Continuing those past practices was essential to ensure consistency and to assure users of what they could expect from the library and librarians (Reinhard, 2020). The librarians were cognizant that this was needed even more so during a pandemic that left patrons with a limited cognitive load for new and changing information. Therefore, activities such as offering an asynchronous trivia challenge would be offered once again. However, the challenge of finding footing in the fall semester was how to establish more human-to-human interaction safely during the pandemic.

Once the college established mostly online parameters for teaching and learning for the semester, it was clear that library activities and communication would have to be online. To establish online social ties, frequency of interactions and purpose of the interactions must be carefully considered. Suh and Shin (2010) found “frequency and centrality of online interaction positively influenced norms of reciprocity” (p. 457) that also allowed for the development of trust in virtual teams (Tugrul et al., 2012). Trust can be maintained within a group with communication that is timely, substantial, and predictable. Group members can establish this by taking initiative and coping through uncertainties (Tugrul et al., 2012). These ideas focus on how and why online teams can choose to interact with others to develop their relationships; however, the article lacks any practical application.

Frequency of online communication can help strengthen relationships, but not actually build them. Norm reciprocity, trust, and outcome expectation mean more in developing new online relations (Suh & Shin, 2010). Reinhard (2020) offers the concepts of connection, communication, and collaboration to help form a virtual team. For instance, Reinhard (2020) suggests considering conversation dominance in written communication by ensuring others have space to contribute. In an online environment, written communication can be the default with collaborative documents, chats, emails, and conversation threads where others will be working together. To make space for others in written conversation, Reinhard (2020) suggests avoiding text walls that do not allow many opportunities for others to comment or burying materials in comments, such as in discussion thread comments or collaborative documents. Maintaining face-to-face communication even in a remote environment is important to allow for knowledge sharing and developing reciprocal norms (Suh & Shin, 2010; Tugrul et al., 2012). Fortunately, today’s video conferencing tools allow for this interaction to facilitate the development of relationships.

### **Practical Applications**

Based on the research about establishing relationships with new colleagues, it was clear that developing face-to-face interactions was essential, even if those interactions would take place through video conferencing. Because technology mediums can influence interactions (Tugrul

et al., 2012), the types of technology available and their use are important. At this institution, there were many options to facilitate video conferencing, including Microsoft Teams, WebEx, and Zoom. Because the library team was new, they did not hold preferences for specific technology tools and were agile in their learning. It ultimately became a question of how to ground these interactions. The team decided on hosting two key face-to-face events that would reestablish key library allies for the new staff.

The first event the team created was a recurring monthly lunch branded as Lunch with Librarians. The goal was for the new library employees to get to know the college community in an informal context. Unlike most online events occurring across the college, this event intentionally had no formal agenda. The library created a WebEx meeting that allowed users to join without registration, along with the ability to turn on cameras and microphones. The ease of scheduling and providing a join link without registration, as well as the availability of the tool across the institution, influenced the platform decision. The library team would enter the online meeting room to take their lunch break and engage in unstructured and informal discussion with members of the college community. While the event was not an immediate success, slowly core library advocates emerged in the form of reoccurring participants. Over the course of the semester, approximately ten different college employees joined the sessions, most of whom were faculty and many who returned for future sessions.

The informal nature of these sessions was ideal for faculty. Because there was no agenda, conversations about teaching practices and student situations would naturally arise just as they would have in a campus-based lunchroom. Meyer (2014) describes informal learning between faculty members as a preferred means for sharing teaching and learning practices that enable them to transfer applicability to individual disciplines. The Lunch with Librarian sessions became a conduit for informal conversation about life during the pandemic, including about teaching. More importantly, these informal conversations allowed for relationships between the new library faculty and the college faculty to begin and enabled the blossoming of new interactions and partnerships.

The second event that the library held was a poetry reading. Poetry readings had previously been held every semester as a collaborative event

between the library and the English department. Fortunately, this institutional knowledge had been passed on, allowing for the collaboration to occur again in the fall. The poetry collaborators included faculty that frequented the Lunch with Librarian events, which enabled ongoing library relationship-building. The poetry readings were more formal than the Lunch with Librarians event, with an appearance by an invited poet who was compensated for reading their work. These events were designed for the entire college community, including students. Attendance at these events were a little higher with up to 40 participants due to their selection as a required course assignment. They provided a way for librarians to interact with students while engaging with poetry. Because of the success of these events, the lack of other face-to-face engagement with students surfaced as a stark weakness for the library.

### **Reflection and Discussion**

Beginning a new job with new administration during a global pandemic was demanding for all librarians at UC Clermont. To maintain library services and foster a thriving online environment, the library needed good teamwork, clear communication, and flexibility. It was able to do this quickly with one-way communication while its new personnel oriented themselves not just to new jobs but also to life during a pandemic. Through collaborative work, and drawing upon experiences from other libraries, the library was able to achieve its mission of supporting teaching and learning even in a virtual context. Once a need for personal and synchronous relationship-building was established, the Lunch with Librarians and online poetry events helped create the new employees' social capital and establish connections across the institution. Through these efforts, faculty began to rely on the library as a partner in online learning, and students did not lose their connection with the library. Faculty participants from the library's events then became partners in asking for help where they may not have before and directing their students to use the library.

For libraries that find themselves in similar positions, whether it is an online-only context or one where institutional history has been lost through personnel turnover, relationship-building is key. Relationships cannot happen solely through one-way communication. The COVID-19 climate proved to be a complex communication territory to navigate, since many people were already overwhelmed by new information. Creating flexible events can allow for two-

way communication. That is why the one-way communications that this academic library established at the beginning of the crisis never ceased, so that those who could not participate in synchronous library events could still find ways to connect to the library. Ultimately, to form relationships with faculty, staff, or students, there needs to be a tailored approach to community norms and, ideally, communicated synchronously.

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