Sink or Swim? Transitioning Academic Library Outreach in Times of COVID-19

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Abstract: This practical article explores the challenges and unexpected benefits discovered when a public regional academic library transitioned its engagement and outreach efforts to a fully online format. The onset of COVID-19 presented a need for a radical change to Central Washington University Libraries' events and social media communication. While adhering to the core principles of library outreach and engagement, the library has shifted the modality and types of programming offered to meet safety guidelines. Online event assessment, promotion, and engagement will also be discussed.

Keywords: Outreach, programming, COVID-19, academic libraries, social media

Introduction to CWU Libraries

Central Washington University (CWU) is a four-year public institution located in Ellensburg, the county seat of Kittitas County, Washington. The university also has eight University Centers located throughout Washington State, many of which are co-located on community college campuses. Approximately 11,100 undergraduate and 550 graduate students are enrolled across all locations, with most students attending classes full-time (College Navigator, n.d.). First-year students are required to live in the residence halls, while upper-level students have the option to live on or off campus. Retention

rates of CWU students for one year average 71.92% for the period 2015–2019, with a high of 76.13% in 2015 and a low of 69.26% in 2017 (see Figure 1). The retention rate for 2019 was 70.56% (CWU Analytics, 2021).

Figure 1: CWU Retention Rates
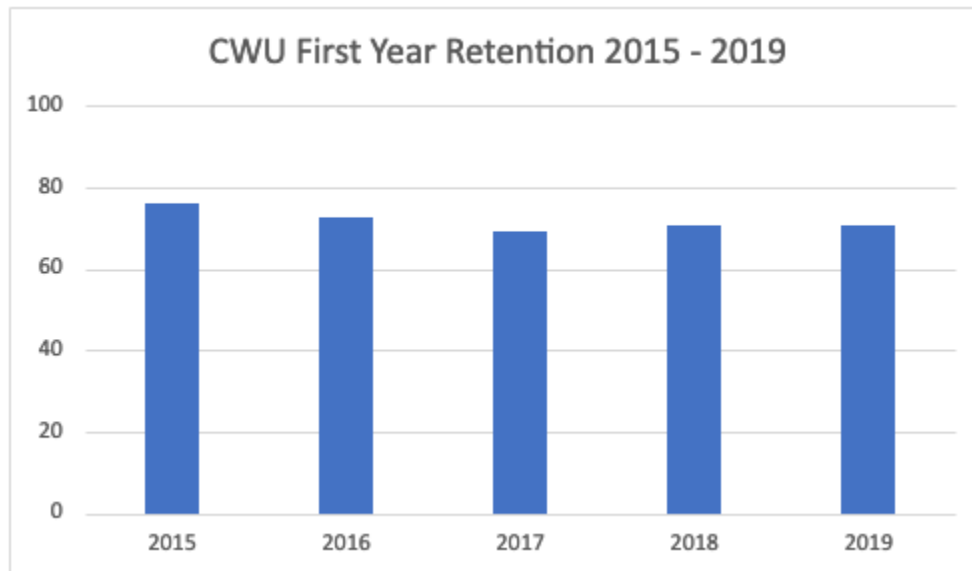
The CWU Libraries system has three branches: The Dr. James E. Brooks Library in Ellensburg and two smaller satellite locations in Des Moines and Lynnwood, Washington. When fully staffed, the libraries employ 13 full-time tenure-track and non-tenure track faculty librarians and 25 staff and administrators. Library event programming is organized and administered by the student engagement and community outreach (SECO) librarian, and online event promotion is managed by the user experience and assessment (UXA) librarian. Both positions are relatively new to CWU Libraries, having been created within the past six years. Library programming is offered throughout the academic year as well as during the summer quarters, albeit with fewer offerings.

Literature Review

Student Engagement

Academic libraries provide users with a diverse set of programming, ranging from scholarly pursuits and addressing social justice issues to improving wellness, and the corresponding literature reflects this diversity.

The types, budget, and frequency of library programming can vary greatly among institutions; however, the overarching goals are to make the library more accessible and raise awareness of collections and services that reflect "both [the] academic and social aspects of the student experience" (Eshbach, 2020, p. 2). Schlak (2018) reviewed foundational literature focused on the definition of "engagement" in the context of higher education institutions as well as how academic libraries fit into this notion. He concluded "engagement can thus be viewed as an outcome of the library's efforts as well as a critical component of the library's contribution to the scholarly and cultural life of its parent institution" (Schlak, 2018, p. 134).

The underlying engagement objective is to foster a sense of belonging among students, which is a key factor determining if a student decides to stay at the institution, transfer to another institution, or to leave higher education altogether (Tinto, 1975, p. 96). In his 2020 State of the University Address, CWU President James Gaudino noted the first year to sophomore retention rate increased 2% from 2019 to 2020, bringing it to 73%, and that CWU is on track to meet the retention rate goal of 85% over the next ten years (Central Washington University, 2020). The library's demonstration of its engagement actions as a retention tool reinforces its conscious effort to align with university goals, heightening its perceived campus-wide value.

Effects of COVID-19 on Student Mental Health

Prior to the emergence of COVID-19, 30.1% of college students sought out psychological or mental health services within 12 months of being surveyed (American College Health Association, 2020). With the abrupt shift to a fully remote learning environment and a record number of individuals being laid off from work, students' mental health became a concern early in the pandemic. Increased isolation, fear of the health repercussions due to COVID-19 exposure, financial instability, increased screen time, or a combination of these factors greatly affected students' psychological health. A study found 59% of college students reported high psychological impacts due to COVID-19 (Browning et al., 2021, para. 64). Researchers at the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention found analogous results: Approximately 75% of adults aged 18–24, students or otherwise, reported poor mental health and 25.1% reported suicidal ideations, both as a result of the pandemic (Czeisler et al., 2020). Armed with this information, higher education institutions should "develop

platforms that facilitate safe student social interaction" (Browning et al., 2021, para. 58). Knowing students were already dealing with issues related to depression and anxiety prior to the COVID-19 outbreak and that students continue to crave socialization, libraries have the perfect opportunity to creatively demonstrate value through modified outreach efforts and partnerships with departments across campus.

Because the pandemic has affected almost every aspect of library operations, the related literature and suggested guidelines has continued to grow. Professional organizations, such as the Association of College and Research Libraries (ACRL) (2021) and the International Federation of Library Associations and Institutions (2020), have compiled resource guides about events and activities and how to engage with users virtually. While these guidelines are certainly helpful to understand best practices, there is no one-size-fits-all approach, as each library system is responding differently based on institutional, county, and state mandates and guidelines. A COVID-19 response team at CWU meets regularly with Kittitas County's health officer, Dr. Mark Larson, resulting in reopening guidelines based on his recommendations.

Social Media

According to the Pew Research Center (2019), 7 out of 10 American adults use social media, with usage rising to 9 out of 10 Americans among those in the 18 to 29-year-old age group. Having social media accounts is important for academic libraries to advertise their events and resources and share announcements and updates. However, simply posting to social media is not enough; libraries need to understand the wants, behaviors, and culture of their community of users (Luo et al., 2013). When a library demonstrates approachability and strong customer service skills through proactive two-way engagement, its users are more apt to see the value of the library (Phillips, 2011; Young & Rossmann, 2015); in this way, academic libraries have the potential to support academic success and feelings of belonging within the campus community (Creighton et al., 2013; DeAndrea et al., 2012). Social media platforms are also useful as a "digital listening post" to informally learn what users are saying about the library, even if they are not tagging or direct messaging the library's accounts (Bell, 2012).

Over the last decade, social media best practices and analyses have been developed that are specifically geared for academic libraries. The literature ranges from broad how-to guides (Burkhardt, 2010; Fiander, 2012; Garofalo, 2013) to the specific, such as incorporating memes (Woodworth, 2018) and utilizing Instagram to engage users in academic special collections (Fulgham, 2019).

In addition to regularly producing engaging and timely content, managing a library's social media accounts can often present another set of challenges. Taylor & Francis (2014) commissioned a study to understand how libraries in the United States, India, and the United Kingdom use social media. They found 44% of respondents had three or more team members oversee their library's social media presence. A study conducted by researchers at the Virginia Commonwealth University Libraries two years later found similar results (Peacemaker et al., 2016). Unlike the private sector, libraries typically fold social media responsibilities into one or more position descriptions, as it is rarely a librarian's full-time job. At CWU Libraries, social media started off disjointed with no formal plan and ad hoc posting. In 2015, the former UXA librarian took over with support from another library staff member; now social media is fully managed by the current UXA librarian with occasional content suggestions from colleagues.

Outreach History at CWU Libraries

CWU Libraries has a history of outreach activities and programming intended to engage campus and community constituents and heighten awareness of available library resources, both physical and virtual. The arrival of a new dean in 2010 and an associate dean in 2013 added new outreach energy and resulted in increased efforts, including a well-received and attended community-wide gala in 2014. Simultaneously, a team of faculty and staff instituted a quarterly waffle night, offering a free late-night breakfast to fortify students during their final exams. The library's potential for supporting the campus and community with new and innovative activities was realized, instilling optimism and positivity among the library staff and enhancing the library's perceived worth as a campus and community partner. Additional outreach was developed, including pop-up library displays and collections at campus events; library faculty and staff marching in the annual Labor Day parade; hosting a Freedom to Read table at the local farmer's market; and

promoting library resources at new-student orientation events, just to name a few. However, these additional staff responsibilities were not sustainable without a corresponding allocation of additional hours. In 2015, a tenure-track SECO librarian position was created and filled, followed six months later by a dedicated UXA librarian position. Filling these roles allowed the library system to substantially increase campus and community activities. These dedicated outreach positions also made it possible to cultivate collaborative relationships with other student success groups on campus and literacy-focused community institutions and to develop a strong social media presence to promote outreach and raise awareness of library resources. Support staff for these efforts now include a part-time events assistant with graphic design skills and dedicated time from library graduate assistants (GAs).

Soon a roster of sustainable library outreach events and activities took shape, developed by using a combination of best practices and a bit of trial and error. Successful face-to-face events and activities included expanded finals week events, a greater presence at campus open house and orientation activities, poetry readings, and campus and community programming in conjunction with two National Endowment for the Arts Big Read grants. Additionally, the library launched Cultural Conversations, a quarterly storytelling and discussion activity held at the Ellensburg community center, which was cosponsored by the public library and the campus international programs office. The 2018 renovation of the Brooks Library student commons resulted in hosting even more collaborative programs, including the campus visiting writers' series, as well as multidisciplinary panel discussions. Using this space, the library was slated to host the Washington Library Association's Academic Library conference in March 2020, and an ACRL Scholarly Communication Roadshow in May 2020.

Adapting to COVID-19

CWU Libraries remained open with regular business hours until mid-March 2020, when employees received word of potential COVID-19 exposure at the Brooks Library location. In a matter of hours, all three library locations were shut down, and employees packed up their offices, immediately transitioning to fully virtual services. At the onset of the COVID-19 restrictions, most outreach programming immediately transitioned to virtual delivery, although not all planned events lent themselves to the online format.

For instance, planning for all in-person events, such as the ACRL Scholarly Communications Roadshow and a "Browse and Brews" fundraising collaboration with a local brewery, have been indefinitely postponed.

Over the past year, reported cases in Kittitas County have remained relatively low despite sharing a border with King County, where the first widely reported COVID-19 outbreak in the United States occurred in early 2020. CWU extended spring break by an additional week, and spring and summer 2020 courses were offered completely online. At instructors' discretion, fall 2020 courses were offered via online, hybrid, or in-person modalities, with more than two-thirds of classes held completely online. The number of students living in campus housing drastically dropped to about 250 students in spring 2020, and capacity was formally lowered to 50% starting in fall 2020 to foster physical distancing. In total, there were about 1,800 students living on campus during the 2020–2021 academic year.

The Brooks Library building was reopened just prior to the fall 2020 session. Unless responsibilities required physical presence, the majority of library faculty and staff continued to work remotely. While many libraries across the country scaled back their programming efforts during the pandemic, the number of events hosted by CWU Libraries per quarter has increased. When looking at 2018–2019, the last academic year without COVID restrictions, the average number of library events per quarter was 14. However, from spring 2020 to winter 2021, the average number of library events per quarter increased to 17.

Staffing Adjustments

Promotion graphics, calendaring, and posting notices are the responsibility of the SECO events assistant. She began quarantining in mid-March and finished out the 2019–2020 academic year working from home. This was a smooth adjustment because the library, and the entire campus, was fully online except for a few essential staff members. When the campus shifted to a hybrid model in fall 2020, additional library faculty and staff were allowed back in the building on a restricted, rotating basis. During this time, the SECO events assistant continued to work fully from home to minimize any potential exposure to COVID-19. A library graduate assistant (GA) was subsequently assigned SECO hours to fill on-campus responsibilities, such as creating

display exhibits and posting events flyers around campus. Her SECO responsibilities became part of her GA workload allocation, avoiding the need to include additional compensation in the library budget. The SECO team continues to communicate planning and promotion by way of regular virtual meetings and collaborative task spreadsheets.
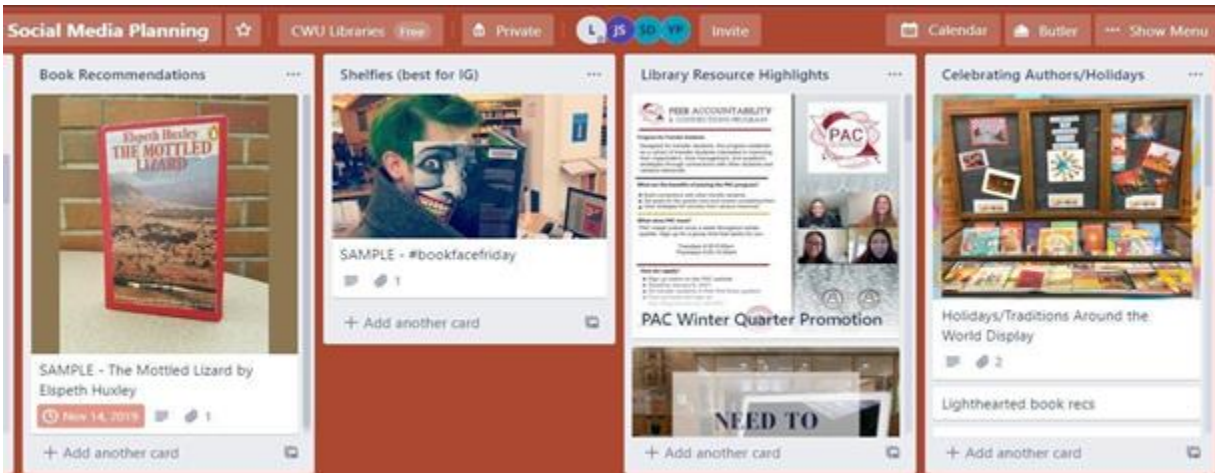
Social Media

As part of her job responsibilities, the UXA librarian manages the CWU Libraries' Twitter, Facebook, and Instagram accounts. Because the doors to Brooks Library closed from March through early September 2020 and the Center libraries remain closed for the foreseeable future, social media became a critical venue to maintain connections with the CWU community. When comparing September 2019–March 2020 with September 2020–March 2021, the monthly average posts to Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram remained comparable. However, the average number of Instagram stories each month increased 70%, going from 10 per month to 17 per month. This was intentional because Instagram event promotion was done exclusively using stories and were added to the stories highlight section. Engagement remained steady, with peaks correlating with major announcements, such as building closures and modifications to operations. Information overload was a concern, particularly at the beginning of the pandemic. CWU Libraries social media posts have been primarily limited to events, library news and virtual services, and new and trial e-resource promotion. However, library faculty and staff have occasionally reached out to the UXA librarian to suggest new posts and sharing of library-related content from external organizations. The goal for the tone of the library's social media over the past year has been friendly and optimistic with limited references to COVID-19, stay-at-home orders, and social distancing. Followers continue to be inundated with information and misinformation about the pandemic, so the UXA librarian wanted to keep posts focused on all the ways the library can help the campus community rather than a constant reminder of what cannot be controlled.

As a way of incorporating student perspectives, three student library assistants were assigned to develop social media content starting fall 2020 via Trello, a free collaborative project management software used to help conduct high-level project planning. Users can organize ideas or projects into customizable *boards*, which consists of *cards*. In the case of social media

planning at CWU Libraries, the UXA librarian created a social media board, and the high-level cards are some common, recurring social media categories (see Image 1).

Image 1: *Using Trello to plan and schedule social media posts*

Using Trello helped centralize proposed future posts into one location. In addition to organizing the posts, the student library assistants also included which social media platform(s) the information should be posted to, suggested posting date, associated images, and any notes or questions they wanted to share with the UXA librarian. Dividing up posts into major categories, such as library resource highlights and celebrating authors/holidays, was not only a way to quickly access posts but also helped the student library assistants understand the types of content the UXA librarian was looking for.

Before posting, the UXA librarian edited all student-created content for clarity and augmented it with additional information as needed. When programming or library news was light, these "filler" posts have proven to be particularly helpful to support engagement. CWU Libraries' Facebook and Instagram accounts have seen an overall decline in engagement when comparing numbers from September 2020–February 2021 with numbers from September 2019–February 2020; however, Twitter engagement has seen a 31% increase. It is important to note, among the many logistical shifts around campus, CWU administration extended the 2020 spring break and moved the start of fall 2020 up by two weeks, so any direct comparison between the two academic years is somewhat misleading.

While tracking social media metrics is necessary, these numbers do not always tell the full story. For instance, the CWU Libraries regularly features databases through a *Database Spotlight* series. Examining monthly usage reports from vendors, particularly the number of sessions and total searches, has shown there is often a correlation between promoting a database and increased usage. Some of the featured databases have seen an increase of 140 – 195% while the corresponding social media posts only show a modest amount of likes and engagement.

Crisis Communication

At the beginning of the pandemic, most of the communication planning was *ad hoc* because the situation was novel. The dean, associate dean, and faculty chair met regularly to review current safety protocols along with institutional, county, and state guidelines. When major announcements needed to be shared, such as the closing of the CWU Libraries locations or major adjustments to services, the UXA librarian was responsible for relaying the message via social media along with creating any corresponding graphics. Initially, service updates and suggested remote resources were compiled into a LibGuide. After five months, the content was pared down and moved to a dedicated library webpage linked on the homepage in an announcement banner. The dean also recorded brief update videos throughout each quarter. These videos were shared via the updates page as well as on social media.

Successes and Challenges

Knowing the library wanted to continue providing a variety of programming while still adhering to health guidelines, the SECO librarian regrouped over the summer to plan a predominately virtual lineup of fall 2020 events. Because low morale and limited opportunities for engagement were primary concerns across campus, events geared specifically towards students were prioritized.

As with any lineup, there were varying degrees of success in piloting new programming and retooling well-loved, face-to-face favorites. The following events had the highest number of attendees and participant engagement:

1) Light-hearted haiku and limerick writing contests were popular, and gift cards were awarded to the best submissions.

2)   The popular in-person speaker series, Cultural Conversation, was easily converted to a synchronous virtual platform. Speakers who were raised or lived extensively abroad shared their education and professional experiences with the goal of sharpening attendees' empathetic listening skills and exploring deep and relevant topics as a group.

3)   The Here's a Poem I Like event was moved to a YouTube playlist, which includes poem readings from students, faculty, staff, and community members, and allows for future videos to be uploaded as additional submissions are received.

4)   Various virtual workshops and panels, including banned-book author talks and book discussions, a voter registration forum, and a research strategies series provided attendees with a wide assortment of programming options.

A version of two of the library's most popular finals week activities were attempted. Instead of bringing therapy dogs to the library, an online demonstration by a professional animal massage therapist was offered. Instead of making crafts while listening to a live jazz band, an online crafting event featured the demonstration of two crafts by a local arts educator. There were high hopes these two events would be successful, especially given their face-to-face popularity; however, that was not quite the case. While these events had a relatively good turnout among faculty and staff, they were not considered successful from a student engagement perspective because only one student attended one of these events. It is worth noting that both modified events were held in spring 2020 when pandemic restrictions were relatively new. The popular finals-week waffle night, an event designed to provide a tasty study break, successfully transitioned to waffle kits delivered to the campus residential housing in spring 2020 when the total on-campus population remained extremely low (see Image 2). Subsequently, grab-and-go individual pizzas are now distributed to students outside the library entrance for two consecutive nights during finals week (see Images 3 and 4). Budgets across the library units were either frozen or greatly reduced at the onset of COVID-19. Purchases for programming were approved by library administration on an *ad hoc* basis, including gift cards for giveaways, take-and-make craft kits, and packaged to-go food items.
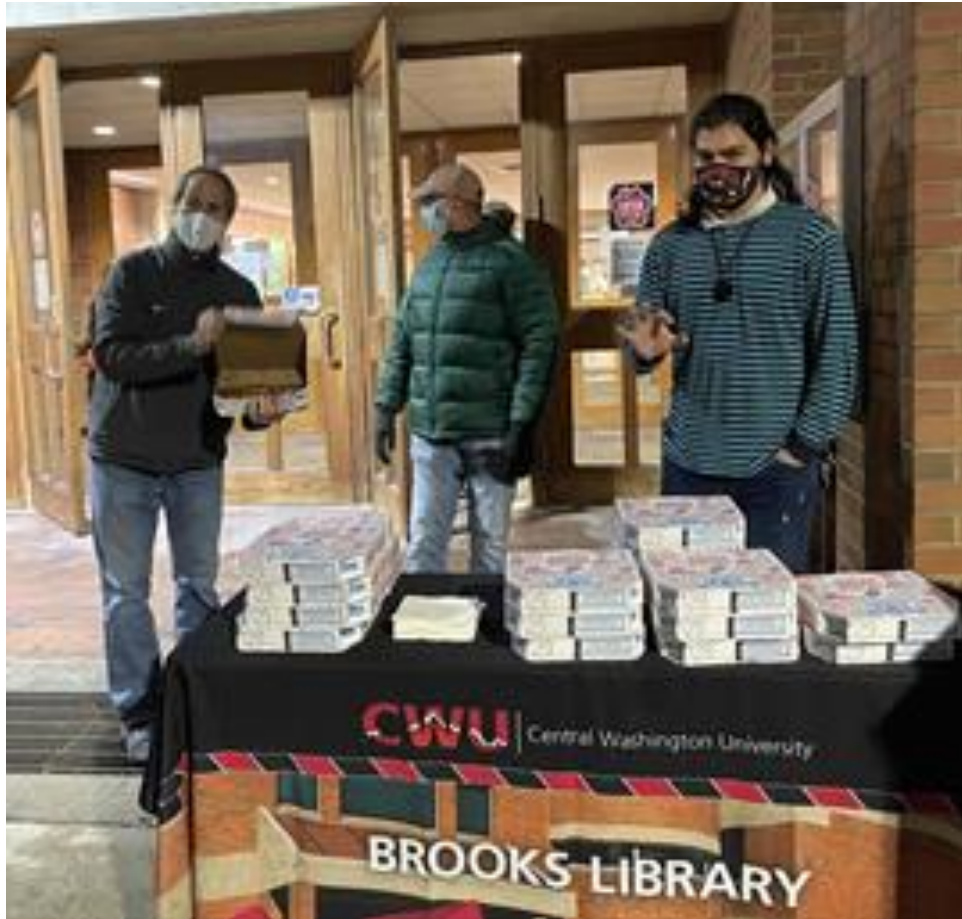
Image 2: *Spring 2020 Waffle Delivery*

Image 3: *Spring 2020 Pizza Distribution*

Image 4: *Fall 2020 Pizza Distribution*

Lessons Learned

Partnering with the Campus and Community

CWU Libraries has a robust history of collaborative partnerships with a wide variety of campus and community entities, including Residence Life and the Residence Hall Association, the Wellness Center, the Veterans Center, the Diversity and Equity Center, the Center for Leadership and Civic Engagement, and the Office for International Programs and Studies. Community partners in Ellensburg include the public library, the county historical museum, the public school district education foundation, the public school district, and the local food bank. Adjusting to online communications and planning was relatively straightforward and, in some ways, streamlined scheduling and removed geographical barriers to collaboration.

Two unintended but valuable benefits have arisen due to the shift in event modality: reaching a wider audience within the CWU community and enhanced accessibility. Because all past library events were held face-to-face, most online and University Center students and employees were unable to attend due to distance. The virtual format of library events allowed these groups to participate in ways that were simply not possible pre-pandemic. The transition to online also made the activities more accessible to those with disabilities or various learning styles due to features like closed captioning, downloadable presentation materials, and select event recordings available for playback. Overall, moving online has increased event accessibility for campus constituents.

Assessment

Before COVID-19 hit, the library was in the formative stages of a website revamp project, as it had been years since any significant changes were made to the site. When the governor's stay-at-home order was issued, the project deadline was expedited to before the start of fall 2020 to better serve the large increase in remote users. The project also included an overhaul to the events calendar, which was previously a homegrown page with limited functionality. The new calendar, administered via LibCal, offers a more robust platform for event sign-up, Zoom integration, automatic event reminders for registered attendees, and the ability to easily access and aggregate attendance statistics. When comparing the new events calendar with the former version, the library has seen an 84% increase in page views from September 2020–March 2021 compared to September 2019–March 2020. Prior to the pandemic, most library events did not require any type of registration. Now, attendees must register for almost all online events to receive the Zoom invitation, so the registration form asks for an email address, accommodations needs, and the attendee's status (i.e., student, employee, or community member).

Since almost all 2020–2021 library events are virtual, program assessment has needed to be reexamined to determine the return on investment. Regardless of the modality, the SECO librarian always collects the number of attendees and the number of faculty and staff volunteers. For events requiring registration, the librarian tracks the number of registrations, which encompasses actual versus cancelled, and compares that number to the expected registration; this helps gauge interest for future planning.

Additionally, an optional Qualtrics survey is sent out through LibCal one hour after the event. The questions were modified from a paper survey distributed at in-person events, and they collected the following information:

- Name and date of the event
- Attendee status (student, faculty, staff, community member)
- Reason(s) for attending
- How did you hear about this event?
- Would you like us to contact you about future library events? If so, please provide your email.
- In 1 or 2 sentences, please let us know what you enjoyed about this event.
- Do you have any suggestions for future events or ways for us to improve?

Starting fall 2021, the survey will be modified to ask about campus location or online status if attendees indicate they are students or employees to get a more detailed snapshot. The number of responses to this survey remains much lower than the face-to-face surveys from previous quarters. However, the effort needed to continue this assessment approach is minimal, as LibCal has been set to automatically send a follow-up email using a customized template.

Even though the survey response rate is limited, the library has received useful feedback and recommendations for future event planning. Multiple attendees want online events to continue, saying they "[w]ould like to see a Zoom option even after 'return to normal' for those of us who can't always be there in person" and "[p]lease consider offering more online options in the future." The library is already exploring ways to administer hybrid events, particularly to maintain engagement with online and University Center students as well as those students and employees who cannot return to or remain on campus for events. Regarding the research strategies series, a staff attendee suggested that "a 'lite' version of this workshop would be really valuable to all incoming students and administrative staff. I also think it would be great to have the full version available on Central Learning Academy [CWU's employee training portal]." While this may not be a possibility, recording future research strategies events and uploading them to the library's YouTube channel would be a viable alternative for on-demand engagement.

For recorded programming, understanding what constitutes attendance is not always straightforward. Some events are strictly pre-recorded, such as Here's a Poem I Like, so the number of times the video is viewed is the primary metric used to monitor engagement. For recorded synchronous events, such as a voter registration forum, tracking attendance is complicated, as users attend the live event, watch the recording, or a combination of the two. To make the process easier, live events are tracked by synchronous attendance, and any statistics for the recordings are kept separate.

Library recordings can be housed in three different platforms — YouTube, Kaltura, and CWU's institutional repository, ScholarWorks. The decision of where to store event recordings depends on whether the event is a signature event (e.g. held regularly throughout the academic year) or more ephemeral in nature (e.g., programming inspired by a notable current event like voter registration). Within each platform, the metrics accessible by administrators are slightly different (Blackson, 2020):

1) YouTube tracks views, average view duration, likes, comments, and shares. For instance, the total views for the Here's a Poem I Like recordings has hit more than 1,100 at the time of this publication, which is far more people than could be accommodated if the event was held in person.

2) Kaltura tracks user engagement, video performance impressions, top countries, devices, number of downloads, and domains via a generated report. Within the platform itself, administrators can view impressions and plays, unique views, minutes viewed, and average completion rate for specific or preset date ranges. Kaltura is integrated with CWU's learning management system, and therefore, managed by the institution's Multimodal Learning department. Statistics are accessible at the user level rather than publicly available, as they are on YouTube.

3) ScholarWorks tracks downloads and metadata page hits for a specified timeframe sorted by the country and domain from which it was accessed. As time goes on, select recordings and playlists will be transitioned to this platform for archival purposes.

Comparing event attendance pre-COVID and post-COVID would give a deceptive snapshot of the success of the library's current efforts, given current logistic and financial limitations. Attendance counts in the hundreds for programs, such as Waffle Night and Paws and Relax, are simply not currently possible. It is heartening and affirming to see the strong turnout and interest in our virtual programs, ranging from a Black Lives Matter presentation (101 attendees) to a panel discussion on racial justice during a pandemic (121 attendees) and an author presentation by a recently published CWU history professor (32 attendees). It is safe to say that these types of programs are garnering comparable attendance to when similar in-person events.

Conclusion

Pivoting to online outreach promotion and delivery came on unexpectedly and suddenly. Although CWU Libraries has been unable to replicate some of the most popular events virtually, the situation has created more opportunities than originally anticipated. With technological tools provided by software, such as Zoom and LibCal, programming has expanded in new ways. Headcounts and feedback confirm that this virtual programming has frequently been well-attended and well-received. Social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and YouTube provide the means to promote and provide programming to an ever-widening pool of participants as well as keep followers and other departments around campus informed about operational updates. While the CWU Libraries' faculty and staff, like everyone else, look forward to the day when everyone can safely interact in person, 21st century tools have allowed the library to reach out and connect with its stakeholders in new and exciting ways.

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