

What We Did During the Pandemic: Transforming Our Student Welcome Fest to Virtual

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Abstract: On March 16, 2020, the majority of the Santa Clara University community moved to remote work due to the COVID-19 pandemic. All in-person work and activity were suspended and moved to an online format. During this time, open positions were frozen, budgets were cut, and the future seemed to change every other day. Marked with uncertainty, the University Library's Marketing and Events Committee embarked on a journey to transition its annual in-person Welcome Fest to an online event. This article describes the Marketing and Events Committee's marketing campaign, implementation, and outcomes of the University Library's first Virtual Welcome Fest.

Future considerations include strategic collaboration with instructional librarians, feedback as an option for participants, and a hybrid format for orientation.

Keywords: Library orientation, marketing, outreach, social media, virtual event

Background

Established in 1851 and located in the heart of Silicon Valley, Santa Clara University (SCU) is a private Jesuit institution focusing on educating the whole person—intellectually, spiritually, aesthetically, morally, socially, and physically—and preparing students to create a more just, humane, and sustainable world. SCU’s student population is approximately 8,669, with 5,694 undergraduate students and 2,975 graduate students. Guided by a commitment to intellectual growth, lifelong learning, and social responsibility, the Santa Clara University Library provides resources and services to support student learning and faculty teaching.

Launched in 2015, Welcome Fest is designed to introduce students to the University Library at the start of the fall quarter. Library staff, along with staff from other departments of the Learning Commons, take shifts at stations all around the building, and each station features a different interactive experience to introduce students to library services and other tips and tools, with a special emphasis on creating a fun and welcoming atmosphere. In the past, activities have included spinning a prize wheel, making buttons, taking a tour of the Automated Retrieval System, setting up an email profile, viewing rare books, and sending a postcard home. Driving the event is a “passport card” students fill up with stickers at each station, which they deposit in a box at the end as their entry to win a prize. Prizes have included a Roku Express, a Keurig coffee machine, a JBL Bluetooth speaker, and gift cards. Snacks are also prominently featured at each station.

Each year the event is characterized by a specific theme. For example, 2019’s Welcome Fest theme was “Mission Possible” and 2017’s theme was “California Dreaming.” The “Mission Possible” theme centered around the library’s new branding efforts, which the Marketing and Events Committee (MEC) developed in 2019. “Mission Possible” acknowledges both the

university's past as a California mission and how the tech culture of Silicon Valley promotes forward-thinking.

Welcome Fest is hosted by the MEC, which is historically chaired by the communications and events coordinator. The MEC is comprised of six library staff and one student and is responsible for planning and promoting Welcome Fest, which has included advertisements placed on the digital monitors throughout the university and physical signs attached to foam core and placed on tall easels. In addition, two sets of clapboards are used at the entrance of the library to advertise the event's date and time.

Every month, the University Library sends out an email digest to various groups on campus (students, faculty, and staff) that highlights library events, announcements, and resources. Our September email digest, which welcomes the SCU community back to campus, usually includes an announcement about Welcome Fest. Shortly thereafter, an event invitation email is sent to all graduate and undergraduate students with more information about the Welcome Fest stations, prizes, and activities. On social media, visuals are used to encourage students to attend the event. In the past, photos from previous Welcome Fest events, along with photos of prizes have been posted to the library's social media profiles. The captions provide a very short blurb about Welcome Fest and a link to the event description on the library's website.

In March 2020, the pandemic hit and Santa Clara County's "Shelter in Place" order was issued—a county health order that is not expected to be lifted until summer 2021 at the earliest. The library's communication and events coordinator position, which chairs the MEC, had just been vacated weeks before, and the search for a successor was cut short by the university's mandate of an immediate hiring freeze. University operations abruptly moved to an online format and all scheduled in-person events were either canceled or moved online.

The MEC was further hindered by the vacant chair position and the retirement of another committee member. In addition, the university librarian position was vacant, the budget for expenses was limited to none, and the staff was dealing with an increased workload due to additional open positions. With the massive shift to online education and no ability to physically visit the library, the instruction librarians and public service staff members thus

experienced a marked decline in engagement with students and faculty in the spring quarter.

The committee, consisting of only four members at the time, met to discuss the next steps in the summer of 2020. Despite the many challenges presented by doing a Welcome Fest to kick off the 2020–2021 school year, the MEC felt strongly that the library played an integral part in the success of student's academic life in school. The decision was made to host a remote Welcome Fest in an attempt to create a high-energy atmosphere to kick off this strange new school year. Even though the library had limited experience with hosting online events, this was seen as a challenge that needed to be met. After several meetings and the addition of two more members to the committee, the MEC set off to create the first Virtual Welcome Fest at Santa Clara University Library.

Literature Review

No shortage of literature covers marketing in libraries and the library orientation. Both academic and public libraries have embraced marketing strategies to stay visible, relevant, and approachable, especially when promoting library orientation. Although each library orientation may be implemented differently, they commonly include an introduction to the library's physical space, library resources, policies, and services (Hoffman & Popa, 1986; Du Mont & Schloman, 1995; Cahoy & Bichel, 2008; Burke et al, 2013; Giles, 2015; Eystad & Stekel, 2020; Reed & Miller, 2020). Often, this is the first point of contact between the library and students. Making a first great impression is pivotal. Singh and Ovsak (2013) emphasized branding as an important marketing strategy to increase interest amongst students. Libraries need to create a brand that allows patrons to feel like they belong, especially college students. This can be achieved by targeting an audience, understanding their needs and values, and creating a brand that delivers a positive experience (Walton, 2008). Oftentimes, this branding will come in the form of adopting the university colors or mascot. This allows students who are attending a library orientation to feel connected to their institution as well as the library specifically.

Traditional marketing can be done by face-to-face interaction, hanging flyers on campus, or putting up posters at the entrances of libraries. With the

advent of technology and users' increased presence online, libraries have included the digital world as a place of advertisement for library orientation. Houghton-Jan (2007) outlines twenty steps for marketing online. In step number eight, she encourages libraries to create a social media profile so that they can be relevant, as well as using emails to connect to students. Cole and Graves (2010) also discussed the importance of using library websites, blogs, emails, social media platforms, instant messaging, and wikis as a new and effective way to reach a greater audience. In a case study at Indiana University Kokomo, the library designed a marketing campaign to promote the launch of its discovery service. The campaign included the use of emails and advertisements on the library website, among other traditional avenues such as in-person promotion and hanging flyers outside and around the library (Thorpe and Bowman, 2013).

In a similar case, Grasselli Library and Breen Learning Center at John Carroll University implemented a marketing campaign to promote a series of film screenings. They included the promotion of this event on their website and in emails and scheduled posts on social media such as Instagram and Facebook. Each of their posts on social media reached 2,000–3,000 viewers (Wainwright, 2015). Although social media is currently being utilized as an avenue of promoting library events, Jones and Harvey (2019) argue that it is not necessarily the preferred method of marketing for students. They found that students preferred college emails and posters to social media output. Factors included the blurring of the line between personal and academic life; the irrelevance of information posted, and the potential for libraries to clog up their social media feeds (p. 12–13). Libraries must be vigilant and evaluate how best to market their events to their audience based on engagement metrics from each platform.

Using an online format is not limited to the promotion of a library's events—it can also be used as the platform for library orientation. In the last five years, a trend has emerged of libraries moving from traditional in-person presentations to online scavenger hunts, virtual escape rooms, and self-paced modules. While Giles (2015) and her colleagues implemented a library orientation in the form of an in-person scavenger hunt called *Mystery* at the library that required students to physically seek out answers by completing tasks, Eystad and Stekel (2020) implemented a virtual scavenger hunt online. Using LibWizard as the format for the orientation and promoting the open

house on their social media platforms, they saw an increase in student participation. Reed and Miller (2020) also took their orientation session and turned it into an online game, which is commonly known as “choose your own adventure.” Participants chose their characters based on their personas (undergraduate student, graduate student, faculty, or community member) and answered a series of questions that were part of a story. All three cases saw an increase in attendance and engagement as they transitioned their in-person events to an online format.

Event Description

In the past, Welcome Fest was an in-person event that ran for about three hours. Due to the challenges of reaching a maximum number of participants in a virtual setting and minimizing Zoom fatigue, the MEC opted for an asynchronous event held during the entire second week of the fall quarter of 2020. The event was marketed as a Virtual Welcome Fest. Students participated in a digital scavenger hunt by watching videos about library staff members and gleaning information from the videos to answer questions. The set of questions was circulated on a Google form that students could fill out as they worked through each video. This form replaced the passport card from the original in-person Welcome Fest, which would have been entered into a drawing for prizes after getting stamped at each station. Working with a limited budget, the committee was able to offer prizes for three winners as an incentive to participate in the scavenger hunt. The two runners-up would each receive a \$25 Visa e-gift card, while the grand prize winner would receive a \$25 Visa e-gift card and a library-themed gift, the Golden Bookend Award (Figure 1).

Figure 1: *The Golden Bookend and \$25 Visa e-gift card, awarded to the winner*



As one might imagine, pivoting Welcome Fest from physical stations through the library and Learning Commons to the virtual environment required a different type of buy-in from library staff. Rather than staffing a Welcome Fest station in the building as in the past, library staff members were asked to participate in submitting digital content that would be shared on social media. Therefore, MEC found it necessary to gauge the library staff's interest and willingness to make digital objects (videos or narrated slides) before planning the event. For this, the committee sent a survey to all library staff and continued encouraging staff to participate at various staff meetings. A reminder was sent a week later along with a sample video created by a committee member. In the survey, the committee asked library staff to select activities they would be comfortable doing. For example, one of the choices was to provide a video around a minute long that could be of oneself or a voice narration with slides. Fifteen library staff responded to the survey, and most of them were willing to share a video on social media for the event. Additionally, two staff from Technology Training showed interest in submitting a video once the MEC extended the invitation to departments that share space with the library in the Learning Commons.

The MEC began collecting the videos as participating staff submitted them by email. Library staff opted to use a variety of platforms to make their videos, Zoom and Loom being the two most popular. The original MP4s were edited for branding and captions were added for accessibility purposes. The resulting products were published to the library's YouTube channel as a playlist of unlisted videos, making them accessible only via the playlist's URL and preventing unintended discoverability (Appendix A).

Meanwhile, the committee began producing the scavenger hunt portion of the event by splitting up the videos among MEC members so that each member could generate questions from the videos' content. The videos varied in subjects, such as describing one's job, hobbies, lifestyle, and thoughts on the pandemic. The variety of topics helped us develop an array of interesting questions that were not only about the library's offerings but also humanized the people who deliver library services, even during an extended closure in which most library staff had spent months working from home full time. Twenty-five questions were chosen to be included in the scavenger hunt game. Rather than creating a synchronous event and requiring attendance to play the game, committee members transferred the questions onto a Google Surveys form with multiple choice answers, making it easy for students to complete independently after watching the videos (Appendix B).

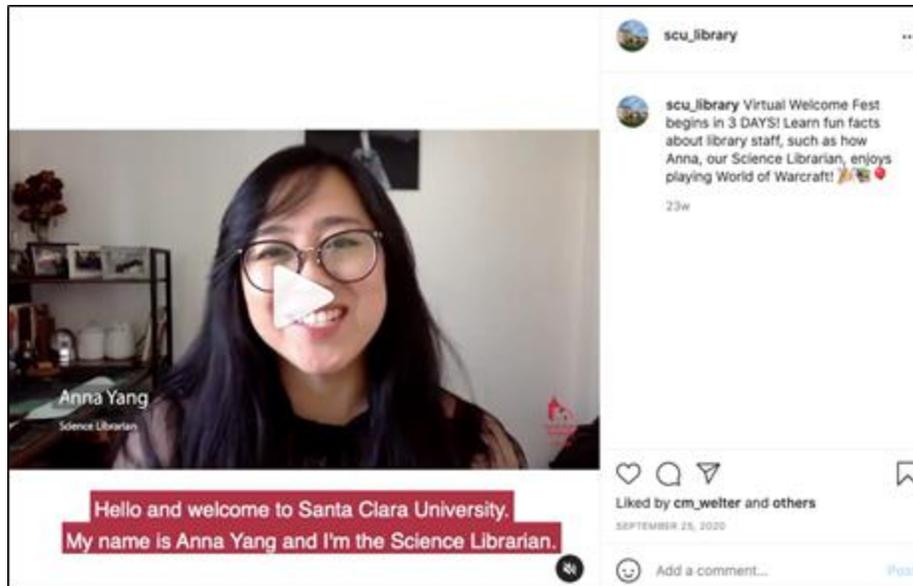
To effectively promote the event, one of the first action items was to develop a brand for Virtual Welcome Fest. Previously, this event reached its audience through a variety of physical signs and advertisements that were spread throughout the library. However, at this point in the year, it was not yet clear if the library could offer any in-person services in the building, and a fully digital campaign became necessary. Drawing from the university's official brand colors, the MEC's student assistant created a logo for the event using Adobe Illustrator. The logo utilized various typefaces and two colors to create a distinction between this event and previous library events, as well as embellishments that gave a fun feeling of motion, activity, and celebration (Figure 2). Additionally, MEC's student assistant animated the logo on Adobe After Effects for video advertisements, and the animated version was included as an opening to the staff videos on YouTube.

Figure 2: *Logo created for Virtual Welcome Fest included university colors and festive design*



The promotion of this event included emails, social media posts, and the library's website. The first mention of the event was sent in the September issue of the library's monthly email digest, which typically features events and announcements that are pertinent to the SCU student population and is sent out via MailChimp. To pique the interest of the library's followers, the MEC's student assistant created short clips from the full-length videos that introduced the library staff person starring in the video as a teaser of the full video and of Virtual Welcome Fest itself (Figure 3). About two weeks before the launch of the event, the committee scheduled this promotional content on three main social media channels: Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook. Scheduling posts in advance was accomplished with Sprinklr, a social media management tool that allows content to be scheduled throughout multiple platforms on a designated day and time and that generates detailed engagement metrics from the posts.

Figure 3: Video of the science librarian on Instagram



On the launch date of the event, the committee published posts on the library's social media accounts that featured photos from previous Welcome Fest events. A second email was sent to SCU students on the day of launch as a reminder. This email described the event and how participants could get started with the virtual scavenger hunt and included hyperlinks and buttons that redirected to the YouTube playlist with all the videos, the Google Forms scavenger hunt questionnaire, and the LibGuide landing page for the event. Throughout the week of the event, other short video clips aired on social media to encourage participation.

Outcomes

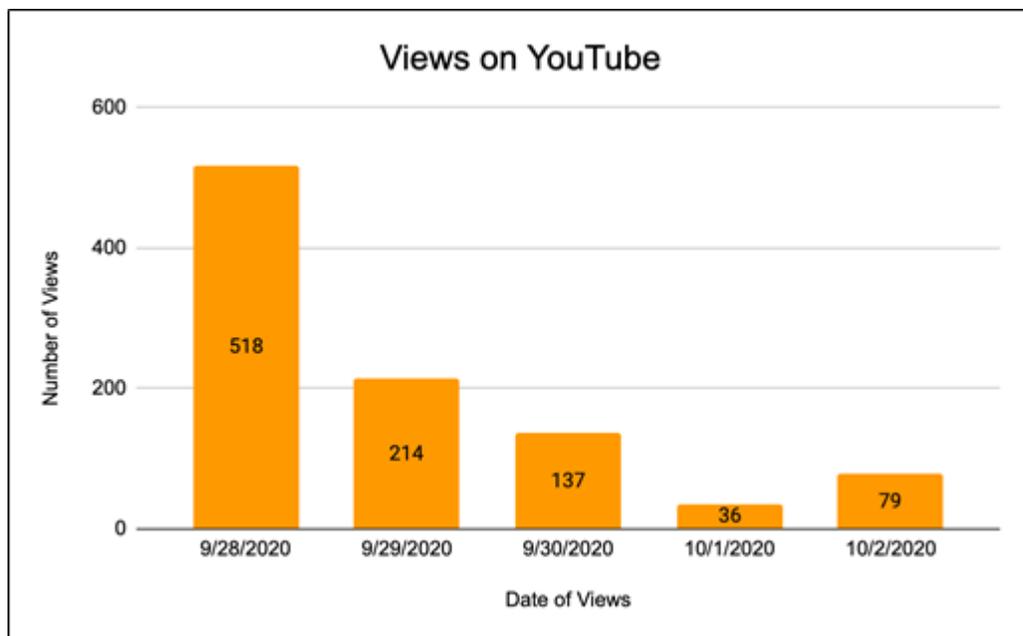
We look at the outcomes of this event from three perspectives: library staff participation, engagement on social media, and submission of the scavenger hunt from students. Fourteen library staff and two members from Academic Technology responded to the committee's survey and submitted a recording of themselves. The recordings ranged from 42 seconds to 3 minutes and 33 seconds. Common themes from the staff recordings included the regret of not being together, animal companions, and tips on how to access library resources and services.

After a spring and summer of working in isolation from home and the library being closed to its users, staff members were happy to engage with students again. In an informal interview with one Virtual Welcome Fest video

creator, Sarah Smith, Help Desk Supervisor, commented: “I had been coming into the library on my own for a couple of months to empty the book chute and it was beginning to feel like moving deck chairs on the Titanic. Being able to record a short greeting to the students whom I hadn’t seen for such a long time reminded me that we did have customers who needed us and all this would be over one day.” Several of our student assistants who saw the videos commented on a particular staff member’s smart cat, who knew exactly when to walk in and out of the recording. These clips were followed by more informative videos on how easy it is to request interlibrary loan, how to contact subject librarians, and what staff do in Archives and Special Collections. In all cases, the staff members featured in each recording speak directly to students and appeal to them personally or practically, making a connection despite the space and time divide.

During the week of Virtual Welcome Fest, there were a total of 944 views of the videos on YouTube (Figure 4). Even with that many views and interaction on our social media, only 31 students submitted their scavenger hunt entries through the Google form, with the majority of submissions being on the first day of the event. This corresponds to the number of views the videos got on YouTube on the first day.

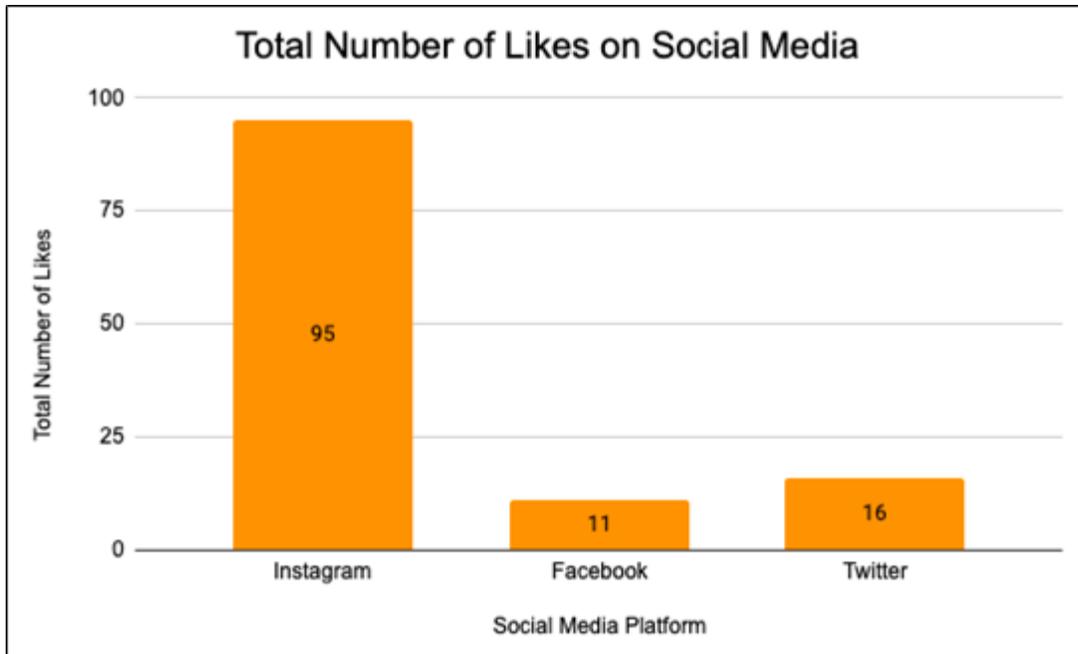
Figure 4: *This chart illustrates the number of times the YouTube videos were viewed during the week of Virtual Welcome Fest*



During this week, we also highlighted four videos on our social media platforms. This was meant to intrigue our students and lead them to the complete playlist of videos on YouTube. The four videos saw 95 likes on Instagram, 11 likes on Facebook, and 16 likes on Twitter (Figure 5). The numbers confirm that Instagram is the preferred social media platform for students. Featuring videos on these channels helped us advertise more broadly and invite more viewers to our YouTube videos and the Scavenger Hunt.

Several students got most of the scavenger hunt questions correct, and it was difficult to determine a clear first, second, and third-place winner. Because of this, the committee decided that all participants with a score of 25 or higher out of 27 would be entered into a free random name generator called Miniwebtool. The grand prize winner was a first-year student who is currently employed by the library. When asked what could have made the event better, she remarked that possibly holding a Zoom panel with librarians and staff would be helpful so that students would have the opportunity to interact with them. The MEC's initial inclination was to not have a synchronous session due to Zoom fatigue, but after hearing the student's suggestion for a library panel, the MEC will investigate this as a possible option for next year's event. The student went on to express enjoyment in watching the videos and found them full of helpful information, which she welcomed as a freshman. She said she was surprised to learn there are so many different roles in the library.

Figure 5: *Total number of likes on four videos, posted on our social media*



Conclusion

Our traditional orientation event, where students walked from station to station throughout the library to check out activities, morphed into a virtual event where students could explore online videos featuring library staff members. With the requirement of social distancing during the COVID-19 pandemic, the virtual environment was the only way institutions could engage with their student population. It was critical, however, to strategize ways to mitigate issues like Zoom fatigue by employing alternate formats such as asynchronous activities. More than ever, event participation had to rely heavily on cohesive branding and multi-channeled marketing so that the organization's message would not become garbled in the cacophony of other online marketing voices. In addition, engagement depended on content: The MEC edited its short video teasers for social media to create intrigue before launching the event. These videos received a good amount of views and, according to feedback from student assistants, the videos drummed up excitement for the event launch date. New technologies are making it easier for academic libraries to stay relevant and add value to the lives of their students even when physically separated for any number of reasons. Furthermore, having a student on the committee provided insight into students' online behavior, which greatly shaped our messaging to students.

We were very pleased with the overall engagement our event fostered. In future events, we want to capture data such as who is participating (e.g. freshman vs. returning students) and have a feedback option. Regarding promotion, we plan to reach out to professors and encourage them to promote the event in their classes. This could be in collaboration with subject librarians who have established relationships with faculty members. Other things to consider would be to survey our student workers to inquire on how they like to receive library-related information (e.g. by email/social media/digital signage). We plan to also consider including Help Desk student assistants in the videos as ambassadors, sharing their library tips and insights. Lastly, next year we will gauge interest in hosting an optional synchronous event where students can come and ask questions to library staff members.

As members of the Marketing and Events Committee, we may have had previous experience with teaching or doing reference virtually, but our first experience with a virtual marketing event encouraged us to explore more of the format's potential: we broke our digital pieces into chunks and allowed participants to do the scavenger hunt at their own pace, without forcing potentially awkward interactions on Zoom. For a future virtual event, we will be sure to create new videos so the content is fresh and timely. Depending on the COVID-19 environment we are confronted with in the fall of 2021, we envision a hybrid event: some in-person activities in the library and some virtual excitement. Despite the new world, the Virtual Welcome Fest opened up, it is still not a true replacement for the atmosphere of students physically exploring the library together in one afternoon, making new acquaintances, seeing old friends, and getting a feeling that the library is a welcoming place where they belong.

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Appendix A YouTube Playlist

Virtual Welcome Fest Youtube playlist:

<https://youtube.com/playlist?list=PLBuRueDjolbo4ESzZIP00Fb1LH8XF8zb3>

1. Kelci Baughman McDowell - https://youtu.be/eWb5APIE_SE
2. Teri Escobar and Marc Raymos - <https://youtu.be/j9GvOf6Xlzg>
3. Summer Shetenhelm - <https://youtu.be/E4onbKvB7ow>
4. Wen-Ying Lu - <https://youtu.be/q-9GyFxe-NU>
5. Sarah Smith - <https://youtu.be/PLIqXyp8Qgk>
6. Lev Rickards - https://youtu.be/HlwFOeJ_tD8
7. Judy Rodriguez - <https://youtu.be/3ZVoiDNKBl8>
8. Leanna Goodwater - <https://youtu.be/l9MJfQ56mfg>
9. Christine Welter - <https://youtu.be/wWbPfkUxDS0>
10. Anthony Raymond - <https://youtu.be/SIjdF2DbfBg>
11. Nicole Branch - <https://youtu.be/omLbu9TXepE>
12. Susan Boyd - <https://youtu.be/xANc6L8jYD8>
13. Evan Rabinowitz - <https://youtu.be/QlUjw-QGg4o>
14. Sophia Neuhaus - <https://youtu.be/ttff5Qbpcao>
15. Anna Yang - <https://youtu.be/3r5GfutpvIs>

Appendix B Virtual Scavenger Hunt Questions

The list of questions for the scavenger hunt is listed below. Some of the questions were multiple choice and some were short answer questions. A copy of the original Google form can be viewed here:

<https://forms.gle/muSXNE4CZdGd68wJ6>

1. Susan loves horseback riding. What is her trusty steed's name?
2. What department does Summer work in?
3. How does Christine describe the Interlibrary Loan service?
4. Judy mentions a good rule of thumb for calculating how many cats is too many! What is this rule?
5. According to Nicole, what is one way subject librarians can help you?
6. If you're an engineering or math major, who's your go-to librarian?
7. What is Evan developing in his apartment?
8. What does Summer enjoy doing when she's not in the library?
9. Where was Sophia's craziest bike ride?
10. If you have a question about politics, the election, or anything government related, which librarian should you seek out?
11. What is Lu's job title in the library?
12. What can Tony help you with?
13. What is NOT something that Evan mentions doing in his free time?
14. What object did Kelci feature in her video?
15. Judy mentions that she is a library supervisor. What section of the library does she work in?
16. How does Lu make sure students know about new books and e-books?
17. What country did Lev live and work in before he came to Santa Clara?
18. Who is this person?
19. Leanna works with six academic departments. Which of the following does Leanna NOT work with?
20. What game has Anna been playing during shelter-in-place?
21. According to Lev, how much money does the library spend each year on electronic journals?
22. What department does Kelci, Research & Instruction Services Coordinator, work in?

23. What does Sarah put on her sandwiches?
24. Which are Anthony's subject areas? (check all that applies)
25. What subject(s) can Anna help you out with?
26. What can Marc help you out with?
27. What program do SCU students have access to according to Teri?

About the Authors

Anna Yang is the science librarian at Santa Clara University. Aside from providing instruction and reference assistance, Anna is also a member of the Marketing and Events Committee at the University Library. She enjoys promoting library resources and implementing library-led events.

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Judith Rodriguez is a library supervisor in Access and Delivery Services at the Santa Clara University Library. She is a first-generation studio art graduate from SCU who has enjoyed working in libraries since high school. Judith looks forward to more projects involving marketing and communications for libraries.

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