

Library value during COVID-19 and beyond: shifting, pivoting, and moving forward

In June 2020, Christopher Cox, Dean of Libraries at Clemson University, predicted the significant ways academic libraries will shift in terms of collections, services, spaces, and operations as a result of the pandemic. He wrote:

Instead of returning to normal, librarians will be returning to a “new normal” – one where in-person classes and service interactions may be impossible or no longer preferred, where collections in physical format may be a barrier to access, and where collaborative study is shunned in favor of social distancing in buildings that can only safely house half the people they used to.

Cox’ predictions focused on how the landscape of academic libraries will change in terms of collections, services, spaces, and operations. We suggest that he predicted these changes with amazing prescience.

Over a year later, the rise of the COVID-19 Delta variant has proven a challenge as we return to in-person education and research. Library services during and post-COVID are the focus of considerable discussion, reflection, case studies, research, and scholarship. Scholarly articles focus on strategy and collections during the pandemic (Matonkar *et al.*, 2021), service and policy changes to meet and mitigate changing circumstances (Heady *et al.*, 2021), and supporting the user experience while managing and minimizing risk (Soulas *et al.*, 2021). Not surprisingly, the overall value of libraries is a recurring theme in many of these scholarly articles. The pivot to online learning and remote services provided academic, research, and public libraries with myriad opportunities to demonstrate our value to the academy and our communities.

Today, with ever-evolving user bases and an increasingly intricate information landscape, librarians and library staff are still being called upon to help our communities navigate complex terrain and align collections and services more closely to the holistic pursuit of knowledge. Librarians and library staff are still out there answering the call – and then some. Librarians and library staff provide a variety of resources and services that support the discovery, conception, creation, and dissemination of information, or the promotion and celebration of scholarly work.

The articles in this issue reflect the persistence that librarians and libraries have been able to maintain during the pandemic. Before now, we have seen few research studies based on the effects of COVID-19 in libraries and information organizations, but they are starting to emerge as time and the pandemic continue. The pandemic affected libraries in all areas as we begin to see in the research. In this issue, De Groote and Scoulas (2021) used multiple data sources to determine the changes in use patterns due to the pandemic, exploring in-person and online use, services, and resources. Hervieux (2021) took a targeted approach to study the effects of the pandemic on virtual reference services and reflected on the value of virtual services during any type of crisis or building closure. Other authors for this issue did not specifically focus on the pandemic, but continued with their research in other areas –, a feat in itself considering the stress, fatigue, and anxiety overlaying personal and professional circumstances over the past few years. This issue reflects both the dedication of library and information science professionals working during a pandemic, and the ongoing reality that this pandemic rages on as we see the final months of 2021.

The annual bibliography (Withorn *et al.*, 2021) reflects the same themes as the other manuscripts in this issue. We see both general research across library types, and the emergence of research studies focused on the effects of COVID-19. The bibliography also



notes new research focused on critical pedagogy and cultural competence. As we reflected in Volume 49 Issue 2 (Watstein and Johns, 2021), anti-racist practices, critical reflection, and inclusivity are (and should be) fundamental to library work. We see this work in the bibliography and hope the work of Withorn *et al.* helps to highlight these important practices.

As we look to 2022, we hope to see both the end of the COVID-19 pandemic and more critical anti-racist practices in libraries. We will do a small part to further elevate the voices of marginalized groups and highlight anti-racist work in our first issue of Volume 50, a special issue on “Anti-Racist Action in Libraries.” The upcoming issue will feature non-white voices to hold up the promise of a suitably diverse and vibrant profession. We look forward to encountering, exploring, and sharing these voices in 2022 and beyond.

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