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2-24-2021

When One Library Door Closes, Another Virtual One Opens: A Team Response to the Remote Library

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Original Citation

Terri Gotschall, Shalu Gillum, Pamela Herring, Carly Lambert, Raney Collins & Nadine Dexter (2021) When One Library Door Closes, Another Virtual One Opens: A Team Response to the Remote Library, *Medical Reference Services Quarterly*, 40:1, 11-22, DOI: [10.1080/02763869.2021.1873612](https://doi.org/10.1080/02763869.2021.1873612)

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ABSTRACT

The University of Central Florida Health Sciences Library is a digital library with 98% of resources being electronic and available online. Though almost all aspects of the library's operations were impacted by the closing of the physical space during the coronavirus pandemic, being a digital library helped the library team transition quickly to remote reference, programming and instruction services.

KEYWORDS

Remote library, remote work, reference, programming, instruction, coronavirus

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INTRODUCTION

“Information: Anywhere, Anytime, on any Device” is the University of Central Florida (UCF) Harriet F. Ginsburg Health Sciences Library’s motto. The global coronavirus pandemic that closed physical library spaces across the nation in spring of 2020 brought a variety of challenges, but it also provided the opportunity to uphold this motto by continuing to provide resources, services and programming remotely.

The Harriet F. Ginsburg Health Sciences Library is a 12,300-square-foot facility that includes study space located on the second floor of the medical education building, with an information commons and a quiet reading room.¹ Users are greeted by the library front desk team, four non-librarian staff members who are at the desk from 8 am to 5 pm, Monday through Friday at assigned daily shifts. The library team is comprised of these four full time staff and six faculty librarians. The librarians use a Personal Librarian model to connect with the 480 medical students in the college. Each student during their first year is assigned to a librarian, who is their personal contact for all library related support.² Librarians are available for in person meetings either by drop in or by appointment. Librarians provide library instruction, reference management training, search strategy support, scholarship support, and wellness activities.

Library staff provide circulation assistance and technology support at the front desk, support wellness activities, and handle interlibrary loan services.

The Health Sciences Library (HSL) is a born digital library, with 98% of the collection available online. The library also provides wellness activities for students, faculty and staff with activities such as weekly popcorn popping, monthly lunch and learn workshops, and regular stress-relief and fun activities throughout the year. The library was a hub of activity at the beginning of March 2020, with plans to help students prepare for their exams after spring break in the form of a lunch and learn workshop for staff. Plans were also being made for “Stress-Less Summer” wellness events. In anticipation of a county-wide stay at home order on March 18, UCF transitioned to online classes and remote work. This required a speedy response from the library team, including checking out laptops to the College of Medicine faculty and staff who would be working from home, curating telemedicine e-books for the library’s collection, and creating a COVID-19 resource LibGuide.

Working remotely did not last two weeks, as was originally planned, and as of the writing of this article, the library is operating remotely, while working on plans to safely return to campus for the spring semester. Over the past months of being a remote library, almost every aspect of operations, from reference, to programming, to instruction, to collection development has been impacted. However, being remote has also provided the opportunity to learn and grow, and helped the library team find new ways to serve users.

INITIAL RESPONSE

Circulating Laptops

Fortunately, the library had recently purchased 20 laptops that had just arrived but had not been formatted for circulation. The library staff, with the help of the Systems Engineering team,

quickly unboxed and formatted the laptops, including installing the university's licensed copies of software that would be needed for remote work, such as Microsoft Office, Zoom, and Citrix Client. As news spread across the college about the pandemic and the possibility of the building being closed, faculty and staff quickly came to the library to request a laptop. Nearly all of the library's laptops were checked out to faculty and staff within two days.

COVID-19 LibGuide

Anticipating library users' need for authoritative information on the coronavirus pandemic and COVID-19, the library's Electronic Resources team created a LibGuide with links to high quality resources.³ Links were curated from a variety of sources, including the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention and the Medical Library Association's "COVID-19 Resources for Medical Librarians & Other Health Information Professionals" website.⁴ The guide was continually updated over the spring and summer as librarians came across more useful resources. A link to the guide was added to a highly visible banner at the top of the library's homepage. After six months, the guide had been viewed a 195 times.

REFERENCE SERVICES

Like many libraries, the main point of contact for reference interactions is the front desk. Located at the entrance of the library, it is where students know to go to ask questions, check out technology, borrow a pen or marker, or request a meeting with a librarian. It is also where the main phone line for the library is answered. The medical education building being closed meant the primary point for communication had to change. The entire college was rapidly going to virtual meetings through the online video conferencing platform Zoom⁵, and each member of the library team was provided a Zoom account through UCF. This made it remarkably easy to

transition to meeting with students, faculty and staff online. With everyone having an account, it became possible to invite library users to online meetings, even if the meeting was to take place immediately.

With this new way of communicating came new challenges common to any online platform. “You are muted” is a popular phrase often heard during these meetings, along with “Can you hear me now?” Connectivity issues occur, colleagues freeze on screen, the student speaking suddenly disappears, someone cannot get into the room at all. Online video conferencing also brings with it a lot of security measures like passwords, waiting rooms, and not allowing people to enter the room until the host starts the meeting. These are great for security but add an extra opportunity for technology to fail. Patience and understanding has helped everyone get through these moments of technology failure and frustration.

To direct students to this mode of reaching the library with questions, each student received an email from their Personal Librarian letting them know to email their librarian with any questions, and encouraging them to set up a Zoom meeting in place of a face-to-face meeting.

As no one was in the library to answer the phone, the outgoing message was changed to ask callers to email the library. Team members who regularly staffed the front desk were asked to remotely monitor the library’s general email account during their normal shifts and to respond to emails as needed throughout the workday. Each front desk staff member has an assigned shift from Monday through Friday from 8am to 5pm that does not change, and they are expected to monitor the library’s email during their shift. Front desk shifts are 8am-10:30am, 10:30am-1:00pm, 1:00pm-3:00pm, and 3:00pm-5:00pm. If an email is unanswered for any reason during a shift, it is left as unread, and is addressed by the staff member on the next shift. Emails that cannot be answered by staff are forwarded to the appropriate librarian.

Public patrons make up a small percentage of those who use the library resources. License agreements do not allow public patrons to access the digital collection unless they are physically in the library, so with the library closed they lost access to not only the physical library space, but also the resources.

PROGRAMMING AND ACTIVITIES

While having an almost all-digital collection allowed the library team to continue providing seamless access to library resources, moving to remote work prevented the team from delivering any regular programming,¹ including wellness activities for students studying for exams that involved providing coffee and cookies, and the library's biggest event, the semi-annual "Info Expo," which typically draws 30-50 individuals seated together in a small lecture hall and where lunch is provided. Normally, the library provides monthly lunch & learn sessions for faculty and staff all year. During the summer the library team provides a series of weekly wellness activities. Having the library closed to users prevented the team from providing these programs so the Public Services team met via Zoom and decided early during remote work to transition existing programming to an online format and to come up with new, virtual ways to engage with users. Three programs evolved out of the remote work time: (1) virtual lunch & learns; (2) Wellness Wednesdays; and (3) HSL Podcast Club.

Virtual lunch & learns

For five years the library has provided a monthly lunch & learn session for faculty, staff, and students. The series, called "BYOL" short for "Bring Your Own Lunch," has garnered a consistent following of College of Medicine staff and is generally well-attended. Not wanting to

miss an opportunity to provide the next scheduled BYOL due to the remote work situation, the library team decided to create a virtual BYOL.

The April 2020 session, “Audiobooks & More Free Resources,” featured free audiobooks and other resources available online from public libraries, and was delivered via Zoom. Surprisingly, the virtual session attracted at least the same number of attendees as the in-person sessions. The Zoom platform also allowed the library team to create an interactive session using Zoom’s polling feature. While one library team member presented the session, another engaged with the audience via the Zoom chat feature. The audience engagement was so positive during this session that future BYOLs followed the same format. Other virtual BYOL sessions have included “2020 Hurricane Update,” “Fun TED Talks,” and “Guided Meditation.”

One benefit to moving the lunch and learns online is that it was easier to arrange guest speakers for the sessions. Meeting rooms in the medical education building, where the library is located, are in high demand and they are scheduled on a first-come first-served basis with rooms booked 12 months ahead of events using an online scheduling software, Astra. These scheduling issues make lunch and learn dates less flexible once a room has been booked. For consistency, lunch and learns were generally scheduled at noon on the third Thursday of the month. With online meetings, the library team had greater flexibility as to which Thursday to schedule the session, based on guest speaker availability.

Wellness Wednesdays

The library has a reputation for being a center for workplace wellness for faculty and staff at the College of Medicine. In order to continue providing an outlet for wellness and still maintain library visibility while all faculty and staff were working remotely, the library’s public services team created a weekly email campaign called “Wellness Wednesdays” using a free MailChimp

account. MailChimp allowed the public services team to create and schedule emails ahead of time, to have the sender appear as “Health Sciences Library,” and to create a uniform appearance to emails regardless of who created the content. It also allowed the public services team to see how many recipients opened the emails and which emails were more popular than others. The Head of Public Services was primarily responsible for this campaign and its content, and created a list of ideas for emails with input from the library team.

Every Wednesday faculty and staff received a Wellness Wednesdays email from the library highlighting wellness resources they can enjoy from home. Some Wellness Wednesday emails were less resource-based and were instead intended to provide pure entertainment, providing readers with a fun, positive message amidst what was surely a stressful time for all. Wellness Wednesdays topics have included: learning a new language with Mango, educational baby animal videos, virtual National Park tours, meditation apps, coloring apps, music therapy, a video tour of artwork hanging in the library space, and a video of crowd-sourced pet photos. In total the public services team created 16 emails that were scheduled from March through July of 2020.

Wellness Wednesdays emails were opened by an average of 110 out of 339 recipients over the course of the 16 weeks, for an average open rate of 32%. According to MailChimp’s benchmarks, the average open rate for Education and Training is 23%. College of Medicine staff have emailed the library to share that they enjoyed the resources shared in various Wellness Wednesdays emails.

HSL Podcast Club

Prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, the library hosted a weekly Thursday event called “Popcorn Day,” in which the library team popped and provided popcorn to faculty, staff, and students. This

encouraged library users to intermingle casually in the library in an informal setting. Unable to continue Popcorn Day as the library staff moved to remote work, the team felt the need to create another opportunity for engagement that could be hosted virtually, and that would still allow faculty and staff to interact with each other. Students were excluded due to their schedule changes during this time. The library staff decided to create a podcast club that would be held the same day and time that the Popcorn Day event used to be, but this event would be hosted on Zoom. An email was sent in March inviting College of Medicine faculty and staff to sign up for the Podcast Club. A total of 20 individuals from various departments within the College, including Human Resources, Internal Medicine, Faculty Development, and others, joined the Podcast Club at its inception. Another email invitation was sent at the end of the summer, and several other College of Medicine staff members joined. Attendance at the meetings has varied weekly, depending on the content of the podcast and individual schedules. Meetings typically have an average of six participants.

Every Thursday the Senior Library Technical Assistant hosted an hour long discussion on a single episode of a new podcast. The genre of the podcast changed every week and was selected by the Senior Library Technical Assistant based upon the podcast's success in the Apple and Google Play podcast apps, and also at the suggestion of participants. Genres included true crime, diversity and inclusion, comedy, mystery, and current events among others. The Head of Public Services assisted in the management of the meetings, and created weekly emails to podcast club members. An e-mail was sent to podcast club members each Monday informing them which episode to listen to by the Thursday afternoon meeting; this email included an Outlook calendar invitation for the meeting. Prepared questions and background information on the podcast episode were used to encourage participation in the discussion.

HSL Podcast Club has been running for seven months, and two more months of podcasts are already planned. The club has been a source for both socialization and stimulation for faculty and staff. The club has gained a regular following each week, and members have shared that it has helped overcome feelings of isolation that many people have experienced since they began working remotely.

INSTRUCTION

Along with how the library provides reference and programming, another area impacted due to working remotely is instruction. The library team provides opportunities for face-to-face, live instruction in a variety of settings throughout the four years of medical school, from lecture-style orientation for first year students, to small group instruction with fourth year students in a library-led elective. Working from off campus meant finding new ways to deliver instruction, and brought with it its own challenges.

Orientation for new medical students and residents

The start of a new academic year provides academic libraries an opportunity to showcase library services and resources, train new student users, and to make a good first impression on a brand-new class of learners. This year the college required the library team to provide orientation to new medical students and residents virtually.

Conducting orientation for 120 new medical students via Zoom certainly did not seem ideal, as it lacked the personal interactions afforded by in-person instruction in a lecture hall. During a normal new student orientation, the library team gets an opportunity to introduce themselves, and students get to meet their Personal Librarian. In an attempt to replicate this in an online setting, students were asked at the start of the session to select the speaker view in Zoom to allow each member of the library team to briefly introduce themselves. To make sure students

had a chance to put a face with the name of each Personal Librarian as they were introduced, the presentation included a picture of the librarians. Student evaluations from the session indicated that many students would have preferred a one-on-one interaction with their librarian via Zoom's breakout rooms, so the library team is planning on incorporating this feedback for future online orientations.

The primary instruction provided to residents is generally how to access library resources remotely, and to highlight specific resources geared to residents. As a result, the library team decided to create a short video tutorial on how to login from the library's website and access these resources. The video was then presented during the live new resident orientation. This video was recorded using Zoom by conducting a screen share and recording the "meeting" with a voice over. This method of creating a tutorial may not produce a highly edited video like those generated by software like Camtasia, but it did look and sound professional, as pointed out by multiple individuals on the graduate medical education team.

WikiProject Medicine

Since 2017, the health sciences library has provided a hybrid learning opportunity for fourth year medical students to gain medical writing experience by editing a Wikipedia entry on a specific medical topic in an elective course called "WikiProject Medicine." Typically, students were required to attend in person on the first day of class for an orientation and the last day of class to present their completed topics. During the pandemic, the class went completely online for all required sessions using Zoom. This presented a challenge because the library team provides face-to-face instruction on searching PubMed during the orientation session. For the librarian providing the live demonstration when screen share was enabled, and with only one laptop monitor to work with, there was no way to see all of the students; did they look confused, were

they asleep? This left the librarian feeling disconnected from the students. This is a significant limitation of this video conferencing platform when using it for instruction. For future courses, the students were informed to use the chat room to ask questions. The course instructors monitored the chat room and responded to questions during the presentation or following the presentation read the questions to the librarian to be answered. When the live demonstration was over, the students had the opportunity to conduct their own search and share screening was available if they wanted to share their screen when asking questions about their searches.

COLLECTION DEVELOPMENT

Because the library's collection is almost entirely digital, faculty, staff, students, and residents are familiar with accessing library resources from anywhere on their computer or mobile device, so there was little if any interruption in users' accessing library resources. However, teaching and assisting students remotely is less familiar ground. The medical curriculum is a mix of in-person and small group lectures, so transitioning to all online was a learning curve for most of the faculty. The pandemic forced faculty to get creative with finding resources for students to use remotely. For example, the Surgery Clerkship had to find a way for surgical students to complete their clerkship after the pandemic made it impossible for students to shadow live surgeries. The surgical faculty, funded by the office of Faculty and Academic Affairs, licensed a product called the Journal of Medical Insight (JoMI), a peer-reviewed surgical journal that publishes videos of surgical procedures. Since access needed to be granted to a select group of students, the faculty reached out to UCF IT and the Electronic Resources Librarians to find a way to quickly provide access to just students in the surgery clerkships. Taking advantage of the library's authentication software, UCF IT and the librarians worked together to set up a new permissions group, securing access to selected users.

In addition, the physicians in the UCF Health clinics also had to scramble to provide services to customers remotely. To assist them, the Electronic Resources Librarians found telemedicine e-books readily available in the UCF Libraries collection. The e-books were then added to the Health Sciences Library's E-Books page for easier access for Health Sciences Library users.

COMMUNICATION

The closing of physical spaces brought with it a push to move instruction and communication online, this increased dependency on online communication channels, especially email. However, communicating via lengthy text-based emails was not ideal for engaging with users, especially when users needed to follow complex instructions. To combat potential reading fatigue, short videos were created.

Working remotely changed not only communication methods between the library team and users, but also communication between team members. A new way of communicating in real time had to happen quickly, as things were changing rapidly, and everyone needed to be kept informed.

Making videos

Short videos were created to better communicate with users and to help them engage with the content. A variety of platforms were utilized that were either free or provided by UCF. Adobe Spark, Zoom, Camtasia, PowerPoint, and ScreenFlow were used to create videos to educate, instruct, and engage with library users. Adobe's Spark was used to create the short video tour of artwork hanging in the library space, and the crowd-sourced pet photos video for a Wellness Wednesdays email. Spark is specifically designed for creating short photo-based videos, and

includes background music, and easy to add text.⁶ The videos were distributed via email and social media platforms to allow users to access content on their preferred communication channel.

When the college's communication team put out a call for 30 second video clips to welcome the class of 2024, the library team did not want to miss the opportunity to welcome the new students. So, using PowerPoint's animation and record slide show functions, a one slide "Welcome Class of 2024" video was created. Once exported as a video file, the clip was shared via social media.

Some faculty and students used this time to write articles for publication, and one frequently asked question over the summer was on the differences between open access, hybrid, and traditional journals. To help answer this question, PowerPoint was used to create an educational video on publishing models. The video is available on the Getting Published LibGuide.⁷

Choosing the right video software for the project allowed for creating videos efficiently and quickly without steep learning curves. Zoom, Camatasia and Power Point can be used to screen capture. Camtasia has additional features for video editing and adding special effects. When appropriate, videos were created without using terminology that would date the content, making the videos reusable in the future. The video instructing third year medical students on how to return their iPad—a fun black and white movie created using Apple's ScreenFlow—had a 100% success rate in students returning their technology to the library.

Slack

During the first week of remote work, the library director set up a free instant messaging app called Slack for the team to use to communicate with one another. Separate channels were set up:

one for daily-activities, like signing in and out for the day; a COVID-19 resource section, so resources and files could be shared easily; departmental channels including Administration, Public Services, and Interlibrary Loan; and a “Random” channel for camaraderie, where birthday wishes, newborn pictures, achievements and frustrations could be posted. This kept conversations going without filling up email inboxes or “blowing up” cell phones with group texts.

CHALLENGES OF REMOTE WORK

Remote work created challenges for everyone. One challenge was planning when the future is unknown and things are changing on a daily basis. The Public Services team, for example, had to cancel several programs that were planned for summer and fall because they involved in-person activities for students and college staff. Flexibility is the key to overcoming the constant changes. Instead of dwelling on missed opportunities for events that were planned, it was necessary to find new ways to host events virtually. Another challenge experienced by everyone was technology frustrations and failures. At first there was a steep technology learning curve; learning new online communication platforms, learning how to provide instruction virtually, or just learning to unmute before speaking. After many weeks of working remotely, these things became second nature. Communication was another challenge, the library team has a history of being highly collaborative, even within departments. It was common for members of the library team to enter into the office of another team member to discuss a problem, collaborate on a project, or just to share ideas. Working remotely removed the serendipitous nature of these interactions. Instead, the team began inviting colleagues via messages on Slack to join them in an impromptu Zoom meeting when needing to collaborate or brainstorm on a project.

POSITIVE IMPACTS OF REMOTE WORK

The COVID-19 pandemic of 2020 forced many libraries to quickly redirect nearly all aspects of their operations. For the library team, moving to remote work due to the library's closure resulted in new and innovative ways to interact with users and with one another. It also resulted in novel ways of doing things and created opportunities for new programs and services. Above all, continuing library services while working remotely forced the library team to learn new skills, adapt to unfamiliar technology, and to create new and lasting programming for users. When the library doors finally reopen, it will not be business as usual, but instead users will find library operations that are new and improved.

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