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2021 ACRL Academic Library Trends and Statistics Survey

Highlights and key academic library instruction and group presentation findings

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Each year, ACRL's Academic Library Trends and Statistics Survey provides data that can help us understand how academic libraries provide and demonstrate their impact and value to their users, institutions, and communities. Findings from the 2021 survey continued this tradition while also supplying additional insight into how library services and use continued to evolve during the COVID-19 pandemic.

The 2021 survey collected data from 1,533 academic libraries in two main areas:

- A standard set of questions related to:
    - Collections (including titles held, volumes, and electronic books)
    - Expenditures (library materials, salaries and wages, etc.)
    - Library services
    - Staffing
- A one-time set of survey questions focused on instruction-related and group presentation activities before, during, and after the pandemic

The highlights and insights below from each area are based on data from ACRL's Benchmark: Library Metrics and Trends tool (**librarybenchmark.org (http://librarybenchmark.org)**). Academic libraries completing the survey have free access to their own survey responses and selected aggregate data. Benchmark subscribers can leverage data outputs to perform institution-specific analysis for benchmarking, self-studies, budgeting, strategic planning, annual reports, and grant applications.

The Academic Library Trends and Statistics Survey Editorial Board thanks the academic libraries that participated, including the 155 first-time contributors. The response rate was nearly 42%.

Standard questions during non-standard times

Each year the ACRL survey collects data for a standard set of questions related to expenditures, staffing, information and other services, collections, and more. This set includes all questions in the IPEDS Academic Library Component (**https://nces.ed.gov/ipeds/report-your-data/resource-center-academic-libraries (https://nces.ed.gov/ipeds/report-your-data/resource-center-academic-libraries)**), with instructions and definitions completely aligned. Academic libraries' responses to these longitudinal questions can demonstrate consistency, disruption, or, in some cases, a surprising combination of the two.

Academic libraries' **total expenditures** decreased about 7% over the last three years (2019–2021). However, the proportion spent each year across the three main categories of expenditures (**salaries and wages**, **materials/services**, and **operations and maintenance**) remained very similar.
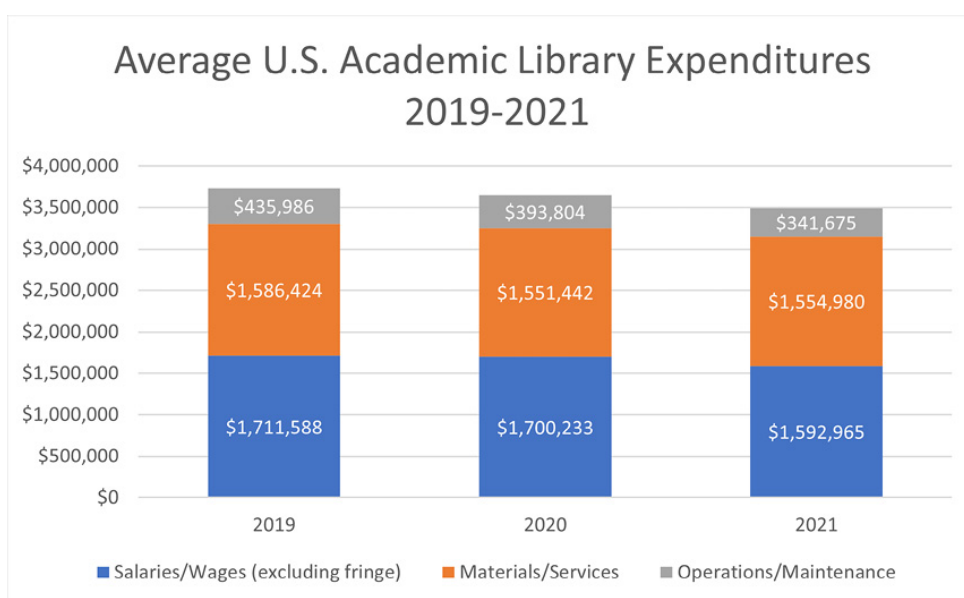

Chart 1: Average US Academic Library Expenditures 2019–2021.[1]

The average percentage of the budget committed to ongoing subscriptions has remained generally level over the past three years. However, it also demonstrates a small but steady increase across Carnegie classifications.
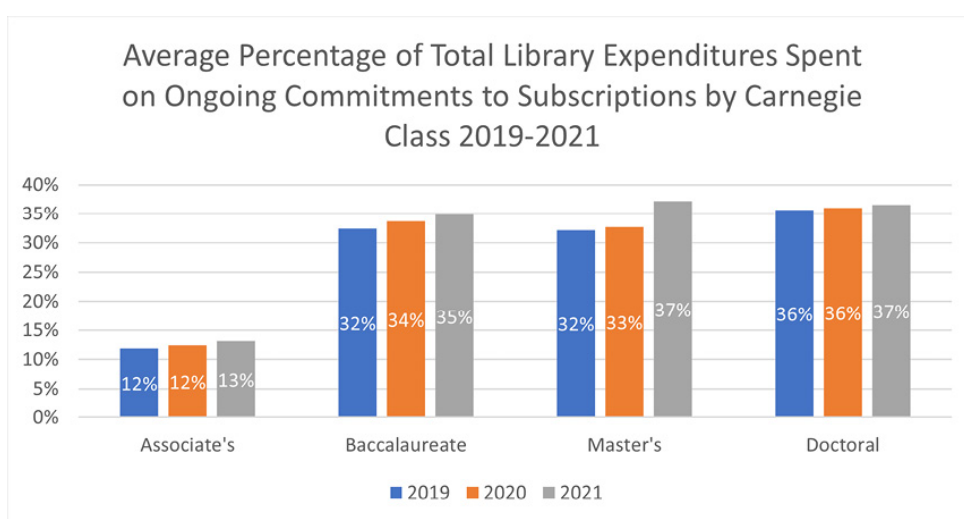

Chart 2. Average Percentage of Total Academic Library Expenditures Spent on Ongoing Commitments to Subscriptions by Carnegie Classification 2019–2021.[2]

Although the **average number of FTE librarians** remained constant over the past three surveys, the **average number of FTE student employees** dropped 40%. This likely reflects not only reduced need due to pandemic library closures and occupancy limitations but also a reduction in the number of students enrolled and/or on campus, among other potential factors. Will this number return to its pre-pandemic level or demonstrate a permanent staffing shift? Only time—and responses to the future surveys—will tell.
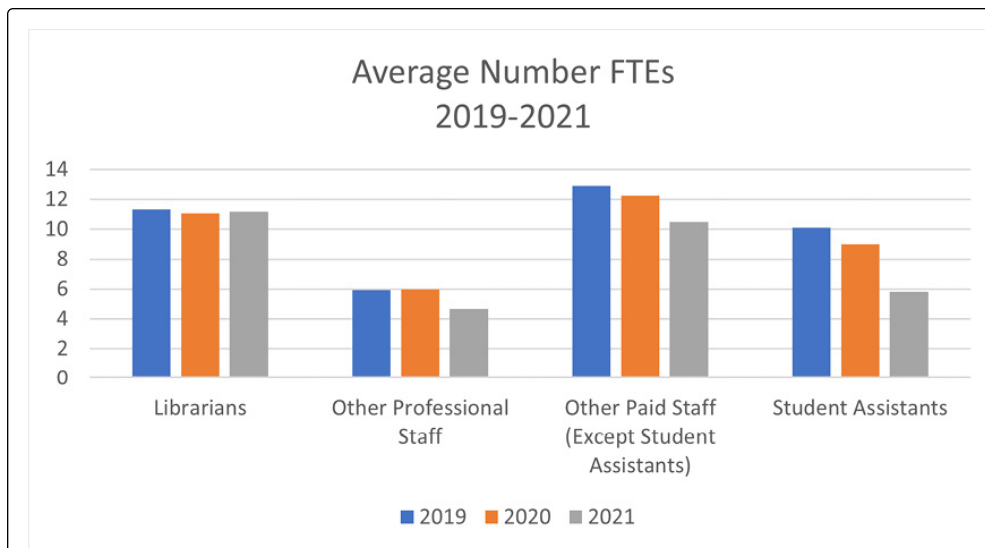
Chart 3: Average Number of FTEs 2019–2021.[3]

Transactions, consultations, and virtual reference services fall under the "Information Services to Individuals" umbrella. For the 2021 survey, respondents reported:

- **Transactions**: 3.9 million total. Transactions involve the knowledge, use, recommendation, interpretation or instruction in the use of any information sources other than schedules, floor plans, handbooks, and policy statements. Carnegie doctoral institutions reported the highest average number of transactions (8,340), followed by master's (2,129), associate's (2,023), and baccalaureate (1,020).
- **Consultations**:493,000 total. Consultations are defined as one-on-one or small group appointments outside of the classroom or a service point. Carnegie doctoral institutions reported the highest average number of consultations (1,151), followed by master's (358), baccalaureate (233), and associate's (163).
- **Virtual Reference Services**: 2.4 million total. A virtual reference interaction is a question received and responded to in electronic format such as email, webform, chat, or other virtual reference options. Carnegie doctoral institutions reported the highest average number of consultations (5,547), followed by master's (1,446), associate's (1,044), and baccalaureate (584).

In the 2021 survey, 54% of transactions and consultations were provided virtually. In 2020 that amount equaled 24%, and in 2019 it was 16%.

A related chart shows a combination of elements with two falling and one rising. The **average number of transactions** and the **average number of consultations** continued to decline. However, the portion of these delivered as **virtual reference services** continued to rise.

Chart 4: Average Information Services to Individuals 2019–2021.[4]
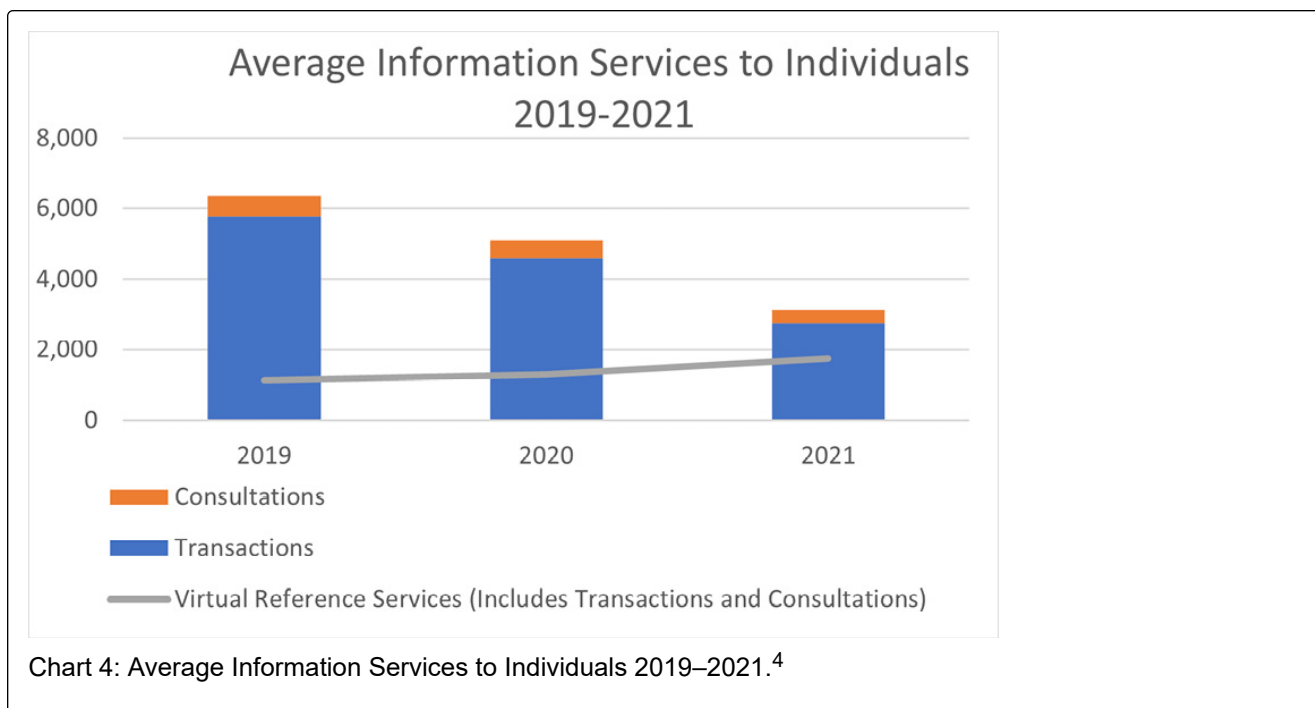
Group presentations planned, provided, or facilitated by library staff fall under the "Information to Groups" umbrella. For the 2021 survey respondents reported:

- **Group Presentations:** More than 295,000. These can include information literacy instruction as well as cultural, recreational, or other educational presentations. Carnegie doctoral institutions reported the highest average number of group presentations (455), followed by master's (204), associate's (144), and baccalaureate (87).
- **Attendees:** More than 4.6 million. Carnegie doctoral institutions reported the highest average number of total attendees (9,025), followed by master's (2,726), associate's (1,733), and baccalaureate (1,210).

Yes, these numbers are lower than those in the 2020 survey, when academic libraries reported more than 375,000 presentations and more than 7 million attendees. But how *did* libraries reach millions of group presentation attendees during a pandemic?

Academic libraries' reporting of delivery among three main modalities—synchronous in-person, synchronous online, and asynchronous online—showed significant shifting. In the 2020 survey, the survey introduced questions asking for the number of asynchronous presentations provided and the number of participants reached. Asynchronous presentations are defined as a recorded online session, tutorial, video, or other interactive educational module created in a digital/electronic format.

Respondents to the 2021 survey whose reporting allowed them to provide the number of asynchronous presentations—in addition to the more standard to synchronous in-person and synchronous online—reported significant shifts both within and between Carnegie classifications between 2020 and 2021. The most significant change for each classification:

- Associate's: In-person was 49% but fell to 5% in 2021.
- Baccalaureate: Synchronous online increased from 6% to 46%.
- Master's: Synchronous online increased from 9% to 23%.
- Doctoral: Asynchronous online increased from 5% to 31%.

Chart 5: 2021 Presentations by Modality and Carnegie Classification.[5]
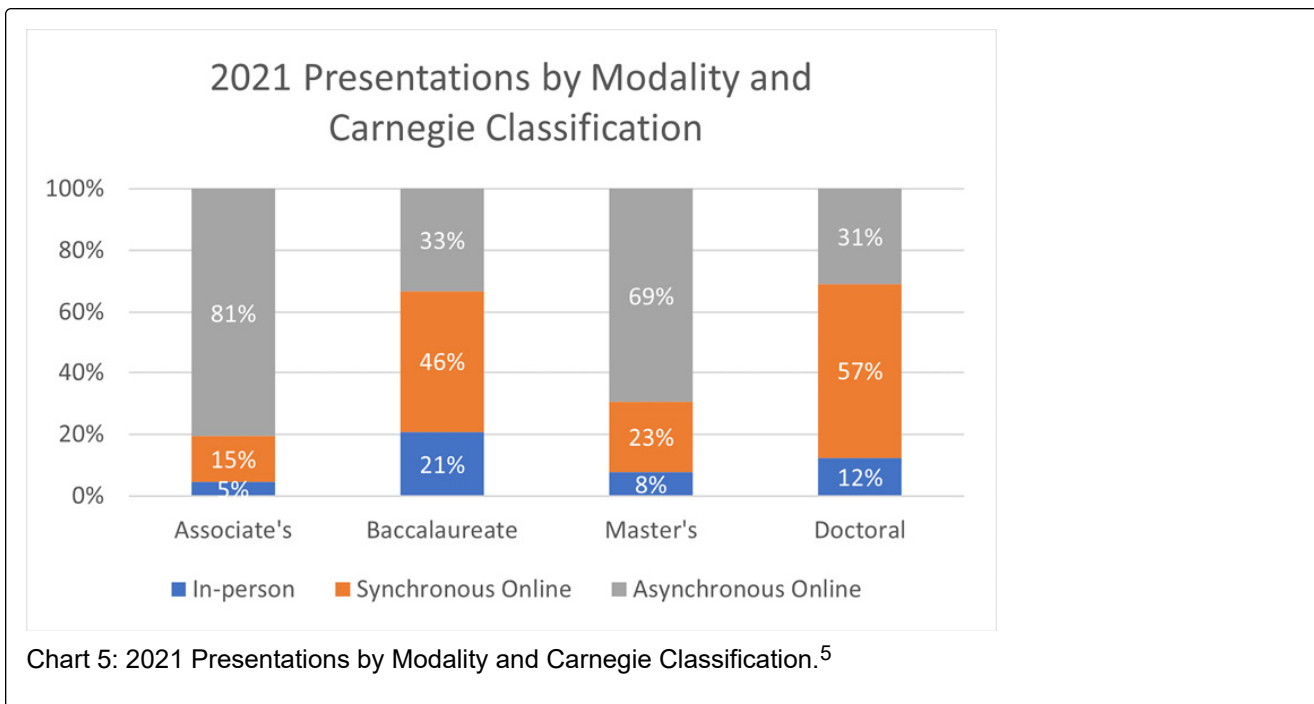
In 2020, more than 80% of participating libraries reported being closed for some period of time (15 weeks on average). In 2021, 58% of libraries reported being closed for some period of time (12 weeks on average). Nineteen percent of libraries reported being closed half the year or more, and 8% reported that the library was closed the entire year.

In 2020, 40% of participating libraries reported implementing limited occupancy practices for some period of time (7 weeks on average). In 2021, 46% of participating libraries reported limited occupancy practices (18 weeks on average), with 37% reporting limited occupancy practices in place for six months or more.

Chart 6: Average Number of Weeks Libraries Reported Being Impacted by COVID-19 2020–2021.[6]
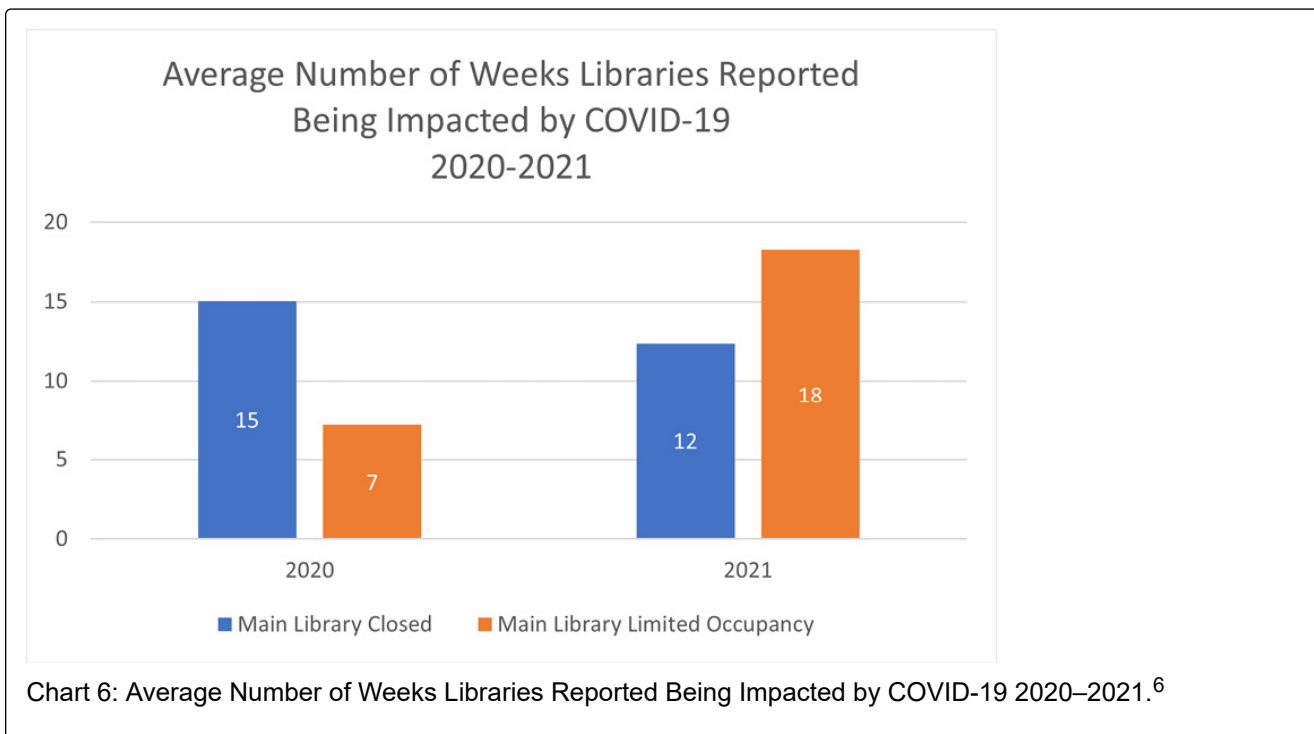
# 2021 survey questions: Instruction and group presentations

The 2021 survey sought to identify the broad range of instruction-related activities undertaken by academic libraries as well as changes in delivery modes and types of educational activities offered before, during, and after the COVID-19 pandemic.

Delivery diverged

Before COVID-19, "entirely/mostly in person" was the primary mode for offering classes for both academic libraries (79%) and their parent institutions (51%). The second most common mode for both was a "mix of online, in person, and hybrid," with libraries at 20% and their parent institutions at 48%. The least common mode, "entirely/mostly online," included both synchronous and asynchronous but accounted for only 1% among libraries and parent institutions alike.

Academic libraries reported a shift during the 2020–2021 academic year, with "entirely/mostly online" as the most prevalent instruction mode (56%), followed by a "mix of online, in person and hybrid" at 36% and "entirely/mostly in person" at 8%. In contrast, libraries' parent institutions reported "a mix of online, in person and hybrid" as their most common instruction mode (58%), followed by "entirely/mostly online" (37%) and "entirely/mostly in person" at 4%. The data suggest that while parent institutions were more likely to transition to a mix, libraries were more likely to move to entirely or to a mostly online instructional mode.

Participating libraries reported that before the pandemic "entirely/mostly in person" accounted for 79% of instruction or other group presentations. As they look to the future the same percentage (79%) anticipate offering instruction or other group presentations via "mix of online, in person and hybrid," signaling a significant shift for these activities.

Chart 7: Academic Libraries: Instruction Modalities, 2019–2021.[7]
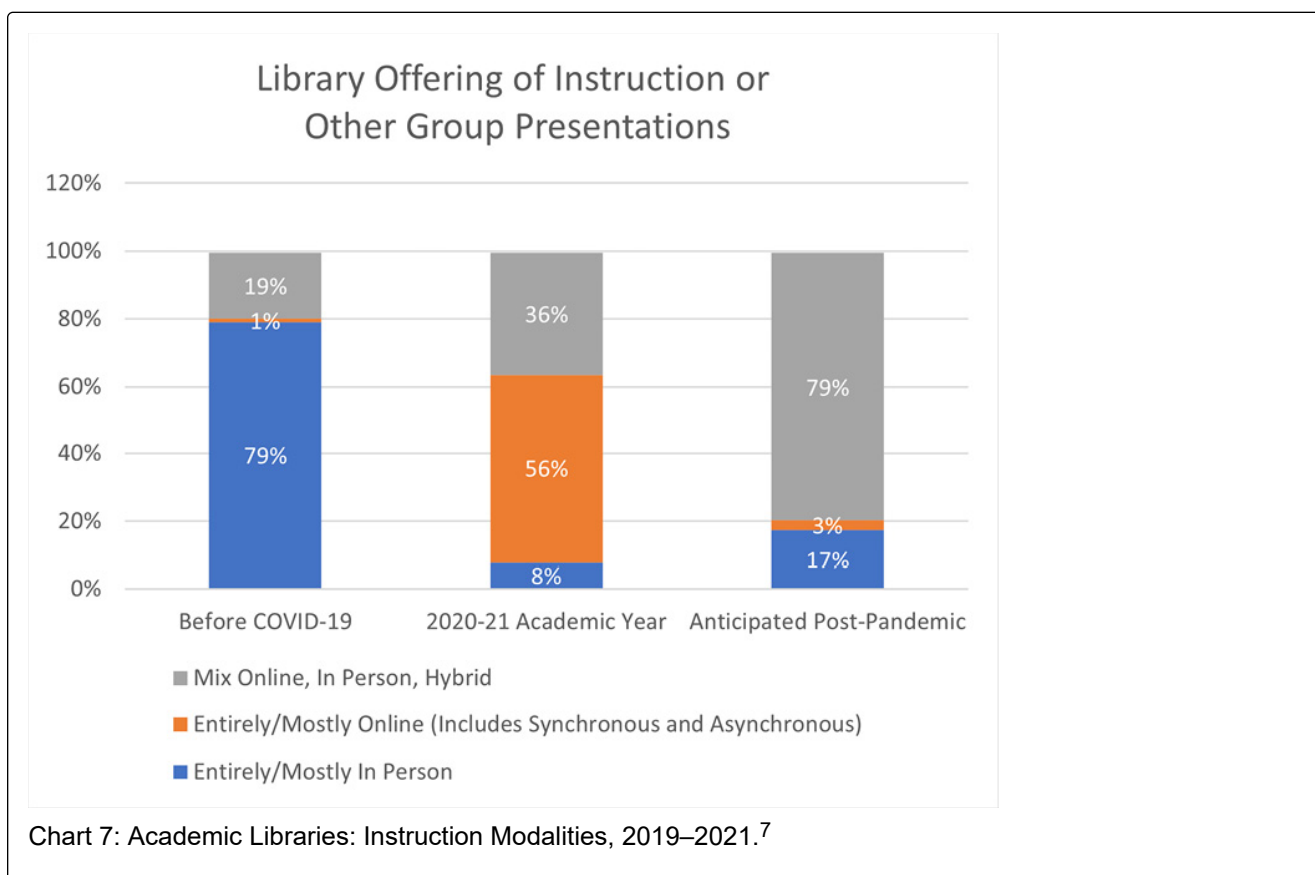
Library activities and resources before and during the pandemic

The four **most** common instructional activities dropped by approximately one-third during COVID-19:

- **Course-specific information literacy session**s: Offered by 86% of libraries before COVID-19 and 57%

during it.
- **Course-related guides**: 81% before, 54% during.
- **Non-course-related guides**: 80% before, 54% during.
- **Online tutorials or videos**: 71% before, 49% during.

Only 21% of libraries reported offering credit-bearing library courses before COVID-19; this fell to 16% during COVID-19.

Less commonly offered activities were also the most impacted:

- **Tours:** Offered by 69% before COVID-19 and 18% during it.
- **Special events**: 65% before, 25% during.
- **Workshops:** 59% before, 29% during.

Academic libraries were most likely to collect numerical data for course-specific information literacy sessions (41%) course-related guides (33%), non-course-related guides (29%), and online videos/tutorials (24%). Thirteen percent of libraries reported collecting numerical data for credit-bearing library courses. Nineteen percent reported collecting numerical data for workshops, 15% for special events, and 8% for tours.

Instruction and presentation partners

While many libraries have staff with dedicated instruction and presentation responsibilities, academic libraries also collaborate within libraries and across their organizations to deliver instructional programs and services.

Library staff in many different roles actively engage in library instruction. The percentage of respondents reporting **active engagement of staff in other roles in the delivery of instructional programs and services** include:

- 94%: Library administrators
- 92%: Liaisons/subject specialists
- 91%: Public services staff
- 89%: Archives staff
- 83%: Educational technology/IT Staff
- 82%: Marketing/outreach staff
- 42% Other

Academic libraries also consult and coordinate **with other units on campus to deliver instruction and group presentations**. The most frequent partnerships include:

- 99%: Individual faculty members
- 98%: Academic departments/programs
- 93%: Composition or rhetoric programs; tutoring programs
- 92%: Teaching and learning staff/offices; distance learning staff/offices; academic advisors; community members
- 91%: Student affairs staff/office; K-12 instructors/staff; career services office
- 90%: International student office/study abroad program
- 42%: Other

Digital badges or credentials

The overwhelming majority—83% of academic libraries responding—did not offer digital badges/credentials nor do they plan to do so in the future. Only 6% currently offer digital badges or credentials, 9% plan to do so in the future, and 2% were unsure.

The 2022 survey questions focus on post-COVID-19 library service and workplace trends, and we look forward to learning more about how academic libraries continue to evolve in general and respond to COVID-19 during these dynamic times.

About the survey

The annual ACRL Academic Library Trends and Statistics Survey is the largest of its kind and offers the most comprehensive picture of academic library budgets, staffing, teaching, services, collections, and more. The data facilitates benchmarking, assessment of impact over time, tracking of new trends, and demonstration of academic library value. The survey is generally open from September through February each year to align with the Integrated Postsecondary Data System (IPEDS) collection. Libraries completing the survey can easily download their IPEDS responses to share with their local IPEDS keyholder. Libraries required to submit Academic Library Component data to IPEDS can download a file containing all the data required for the IPEDS Academic Library Component and

share it with their campus IPEDS keyholder.

The survey is developed and administered annually by the ACRL Academic Library Trends and Statistics Survey Editorial Board (**https://www.ala.org/acrl/aboutacrl/directoryofleadership/editorialboards/acr-stats (https://www.ala.org/acrl/aboutacrl/directoryofleadership/editorialboards/acr-stats)**) in collaboration with ACRL staff. The editorial board recognizes ACRL's Mary Jane Petrowski and Gena Parsons-Diamond for their collaboration and contributions. From the biggest picture to the smallest detail, they have demonstrated their commitment to the ongoing success of the Benchmark tool, which launched in 2021, and the ACRL survey.

Notes

1. Data source: Benchmark Survey Metrics Dashboard, 2021 Materials and Operations Expenditures Summary, US Libraries. Excludes fringe benefits.

2. Data source: Custom Benchmark Report, US Libraries. Responses to questions 21 and 31. Carnegie filters:

    - Associate's (16): Associate's Colleges: High Career & Technical-High Nontraditional, High Career & Technical-High Traditional, High Career & Technical-Mixed Traditional/Nontraditional, High Transfer-High Nontraditional, High Transfer-High Traditional, High Transfer-Mixed Traditional/Nontraditional, Mixed Transfer/Career & Technical-High Nontraditional, Mixed Transfer/Career & Technical-High Traditional, Mixed Transfer/Career & Technical-Mixed Traditional/Nontraditional, Mixed Transfer/Vocational & Technical-High Nontraditional. Baccalaureate/Associate's Colleges: Associate's Dominant, Mixed Baccalaureate/Associates. Special Focus Two-Year: Arts & Design, Health Professions, Other Fields, Technical Professions.

    - Baccalaureate (14): Baccalaureate Colleges: Arts & Sciences Focus, Diverse Fields. Baccalaureate/Associates Colleges: Associates Dominant, Associate's Dominant, Mixed Baccalaureate, Mixed Baccalaureate/Associates. Special Focus Four-Year: Arts, Music & Design Schools, Business & Management Schools, Engineering Schools and Other Technology-Related Schools, Faith-Related Institutions, Medical Schools & Centers, Other Health Professions Schools, Other Special Focus Institutions. Tribal Colleges and Universities.

    - Master's (10): Master's Colleges & Universities: Blank, Larger Programs, Medium Programs, Small Programs. Master's/Professional: Blank; Master's Colleges & Universities Larger Programs, Medium Programs, Small Programs, Medium Programs; Masters/Professional.

    - Doctoral (3): Doctoral Universities: High Research Activity, Higher Research Activity, Highest Research Activity.

3. Data Source: Benchmark Survey Metrics Dashboard, 2021 FTE Staff Summary, US Libraries.

4. Data Source: Benchmark Survey Metrics Dashboard, 2021 Information Services Summary, US Libraries.

5. Data Source: Custom Benchmark Report, US Libraries. Responses to questions 70A, 70B, 72B. Carnegie filters as in note 3. This chart includes data from libraries able to report in-person, online synchronous, and asynchronous sessions separately.

6. Data Source: Custom Benchmark Report, US Libraries. Responses to questions 77, 78.

7. Data Source: Benchmark Survey Metrics Dashboard, 2021 Trends: Academic Library Instruction and Group Presentation.