Looking Back, Looking Ahead: Lessons Learned from the Pandemic (Are we Prepared for the Next Pandemic)?

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Introduction

The sudden closure of library buildings and physical spaces due to the pandemic spurred academic librarians to devise new ways to support students, most of whom continued their studies remotely. How did individual academic libraries respond to this health emergency, and what did the library professionals learn from the experience? This is a comparative review of the lessons learned at three academic libraries during this unprecedented time. The three academic libraries are a medium-size community college (Union College of Union County, NJ), a medium-size private college (Mercy College, Dobbs Ferry, NY), and a large state university (Montclair State University, NJ). The initial plan was to compare each institution's pre- and post-COVID-19 periods. However, it is difficult to ascertain whether a post-COVID-19 state has been achieved. As a result, this comparative review will focus on the successful and not so successful strategies adopted and the temporary measures instituted in response to the health crisis.

COVID-19 Responses from Other Academic Libraries

A literature search revealed examples of how other academic libraries responded to COVID-19 that, in many respects, resonated with the institutional experiences described in this article. The libraries described in this report expanded their chat reference services and added new features. In a study on academic libraries' response to COVID-19, fifty-one percent of the libraries surveyed shifted their method of answering reference questions from in-person to phone and online via chat (Hinchliffe and Wolff-Eisenberg 2020, para. 10). Library instruction during this time was offered in an online format, as was found in the survey of 129 libraries in the Consortium of Academic and Research Libraries in Illinois (Norton 2019, 65). Like Union College, Mercy, and Montclair, the Consortium of Academic and Research Libraries in Illinois reported that libraries expanded access to online resources, and it was widely agreed that these materials "would continue to be useful once librarians returned to the in-person or synchronous

classroom" (Norton 2019, 66). In an article titled "A global crisis may reshape library services," Marshall Breeding points out that technical infrastructures may need to be strengthened (11), as was the case with Union College's decision to add the OCLC EZproxy hosting service to maintain remote access to e-resources. Montclair's introduction of programming focused on health and wellness echoes the conclusions of Leo Appleton's editorial on trendspotting. Appleton, a Senior University Teacher in the Information School at the University of *Sheffield, UK,* states, "libraries are becoming more aware and involved in ensuring student wellbeing" (2022, 5). In another comparative study, Connell, Wallis, and Comeaux examined the COVID experiences of three academic libraries (Louisiana State University, Northeastern Illinois University, and Valparaiso University) and summarized the pandemic's impact on each library and its resources (2021, 1). All three institutions observed a drop in e-resource usage. Similarly, the libraries at Union College, Mercy, and Montclair experienced a decrease in online database usage. In contrast, this comparative study includes a community college perspective.

Union College of Union County, New Jersey

Union College, a medium-size community college, has four campuses in Union County in northern New Jersey. Three of the four campuses have a physical library. All College employees began working remotely following the state's COVID-19 closure directive in March 2020. Consequently, students needed to finish the semester by completing their classes virtually. Some classes transitioned either to online synchronous or online asynchronous learning. As a supportive measure, the library used the Canvas learning management system (LMS) to promote the library home page with links to the library's e-resources. The college reopened in late July 2020, and librarians returned to their posts at all three campus libraries.

Staffing & Transition

During the COVID-19 closure, the library underwent many rapid changes. There were sudden reductions in staffing, such as the layoff of all part-time librarians and an 80% reduction in full-time staff. In March 2021, the library migrated to a new integrated library system (ILS), Koha open source. Librarians learned to provide instruction online via Webex. The library purchased the OCLC EZproxy hosting service to maintain off-campus access to the library's databases. Moreover, the library boosted the number of open access resources appearing on its A-to-Z Database List and Libguides.

Collection

On the Cranford campus, the library's first floor reopened at the end of July 2020, but the second-floor book stacks were closed for students from March 15, 2020, to January 1, 2021.

When a patron requested a print book, a librarian retrieved it and arranged for it to be picked up at the circulation desk. From March 22, 2021, to December 31, 2021, 450 print book titles circulated on the Cranford campus, while 988 items circulated between January 1, 2022, to November 31, 2022.

The increased circulation of print materials is unremarkable in light of the fact that the book stacks reopened in January 2022. At the same time, DVD loans decreased from 19 in 2021 to 10 in 2022, which is consistent with the growing usage of streaming video. Pre-COVID-19, the Cranford campus had more than seventy-five physical items on reserve, i.e., print books and DVDs. Following the return to campus, we removed most of the physical reserve collection and maintained what the faculty requested. At present, Cranford has ten print items on reserve and no DVDs. Many faculty shifted to using the library's streaming video collections which have grown accordingly.

Most of the library's e-books are found in subscriptions to EBSCO eBook Academic, EBSCO Community College, and ProQuest eBook Central. Data for eBook usage was gathered from EBSCO Admin. The eBook usage for the five months of the COVID-19 closure (March 2020 to July 2020) was 1514 title accessions. In the five months following the covid re-opening (August 2020 to December 2020), the usage increased to 2278 titles accessed. This data suggests that students use more library resources, whether print or online, when the library building is open to them.

Online Services

Many students lacked access to technology during COVID-19, so the college added a laptop loan program for students. The college's laptop loan program ensured students still had access to a computer. Prior to Covid-19, the library loaned laptops to students for use in the library, but this service was discontinued during and after the pandemic. The library bolstered its online services and resources to address the transition to web-based learning at this time. New streaming video collections were added, in addition to a more robust chat service and library instruction via Webex. During and after the COVID-19 closure, the library began offering library instruction via Webex. Using Webex enabled the library to provide bibliographic instruction to online classes. In some cases, the library recorded the instruction and shared a link to the recording. By Fall 2021, many students returned to campus, with 24.1% of course credit hours being offered online. However, library instruction continued to be provided via Webex only. Face-to-face instruction was re-introduced in the Spring of 2021.

A month after the closure, the library selected a new chat service to replace its lackluster predecessor. The new chat service enabled librarians to chat internally, track missed chats, create Zoom sessions, and view chat transcripts. Chat requests jumped significantly post-COVID-19. We went from an average of about five chats per week to twenty-plus weekly chats. Most of the chat activity occurred early in each semester. Additionally, the chat service incorporated a screen-sharing option.

Below is a chart showing chat usage from January 2021 to April 2022. The chart shows a spike in chat usage at the start of the Fall 2021 semester, and it gradually decreased the rest of the year (Figure 1).
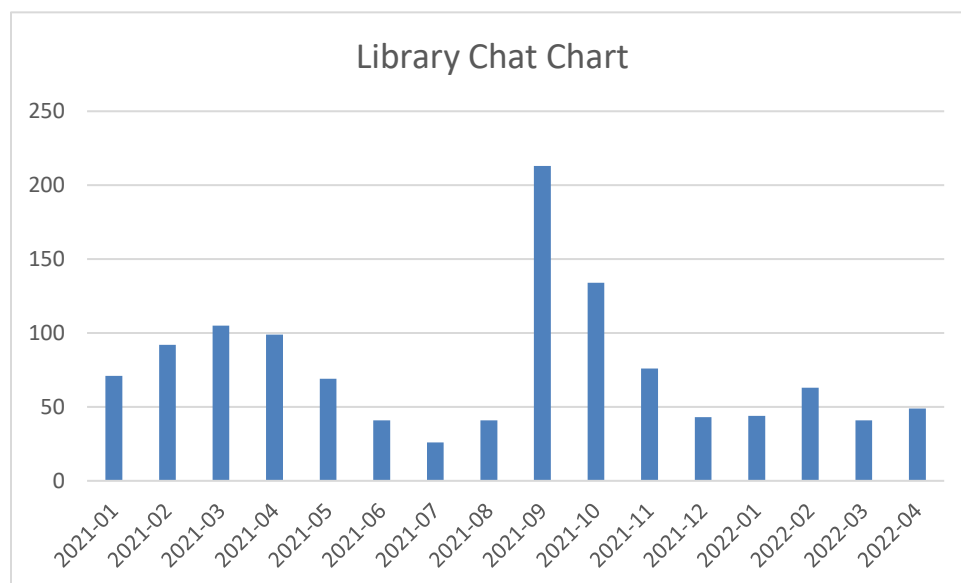

Figure 1. Chat usage at Union College of Union County

Mercy College

Mercy College is a medium-size, private institution with its main campus and library in Dobbs Ferry, New York. Mercy College has two additional campus libraries in the Bronx and Manhattan. In March 2020, the college shifted all its classes to an online modality. In preparation for remote learning, the library moved all its reference and instructional services to Zoom by creating online tutorials, conducting reference transactions via Zoom, and increasing its electronic resource offerings, particularly access to streaming video.

Computer Access

Although Mercy College Library was prepared to move most of its services to an online environment, some adjustments had to be made in light of the pandemic. Before the pandemic, laptops were one of the most heavily circulated items. Other than laptops, many students used

the library for its free Wi-Fi and printing services. To meet this need, the library partnered with its IT department to provide computers for students and employees who did not have access to a computer. The college's IT department also worked with students on obtaining internet access to complete coursework.

Access to Print Materials

Since the Mercy College Library primarily acquired e-books for its collection, book access did not pose a problem. Free resources available during the pandemic, such as zlibrary.com, proved valuable for students who needed access to electronic books we did not own. The library also used some of its budget to purchase e-books that were not available for free. When the college reopened in August, patrons in possession of checked out materials since the school's closure were given a grace period to return materials by December 2020. Since most of the materials were returned, we forgave the fines for overdue and lost items.

Reference

The library's reference services had minimal disruption because it adopted text and chat services before the pandemic. Although students returned to campus in September 2020, the library offered students the ability to schedule an appointment with a librarian via Zoom. We started offering this service because students wanted to interact with a librarian face-to-face. Zoom reference was helpful for students taking classes remotely or who were apprehensive about coming to campus. Offering reference via Zoom also made it easier for librarians to provide more personalized service.

Library Instruction

Before the pandemic, the library did not provide online synchronous library instruction. To meet the instructional needs of students, librarians were invited to conduct library instruction in some online synchronous classes. The library created pre-recorded videos and online tutorials for those students taking classes asynchronously. The video recordings were geared to help students complete specific course assignments. The video recordings and online tutorials were embedded in Blackboard for faculty teaching synchronous and asynchronous classes. During the 2020-2021 academic year, the library shifted its instruction to an online modality. Although there were some in-person courses, out of precaution, the librarians opted to visit classes virtually. Mercy College had installed video conferencing equipment in all of its classrooms, so librarians could participate remotely in course sessions whether the students were on or off-campus. In the Fall of 2021, the librarians started teaching classes in-person and remotely.

The library learned several lessons about library reference and instruction services during the pandemic. Students became more amenable to scheduling consultation appointments with librarians for research assistance at this time. Before the pandemic, students would make appointments for in-person consultations with librarians via email or by visiting the reference desk. Since in-person reference was unavailable during the pandemic, students signed up for virtual consultations. Even though the college has reopened its doors and is providing regular services, virtual reference via chat and Zoom continues to be a popular service. In comparing the 2020-2021 and 2021-2022 academic years, in-person reference increased by 266% (Figure 2).
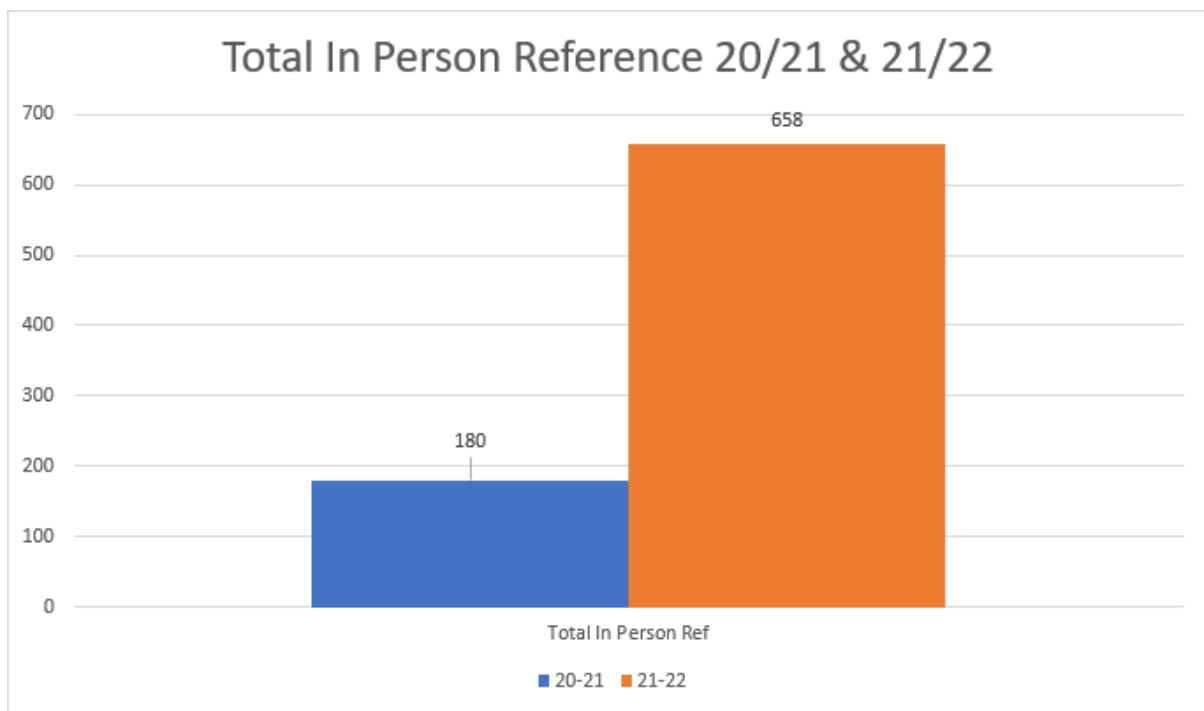

Figure 2. In person reference consultations at Mercy College

Although the gate count for the libraries more than tripled (Figure 3), virtual reference had a modest decrease of 22% (Figure 4).
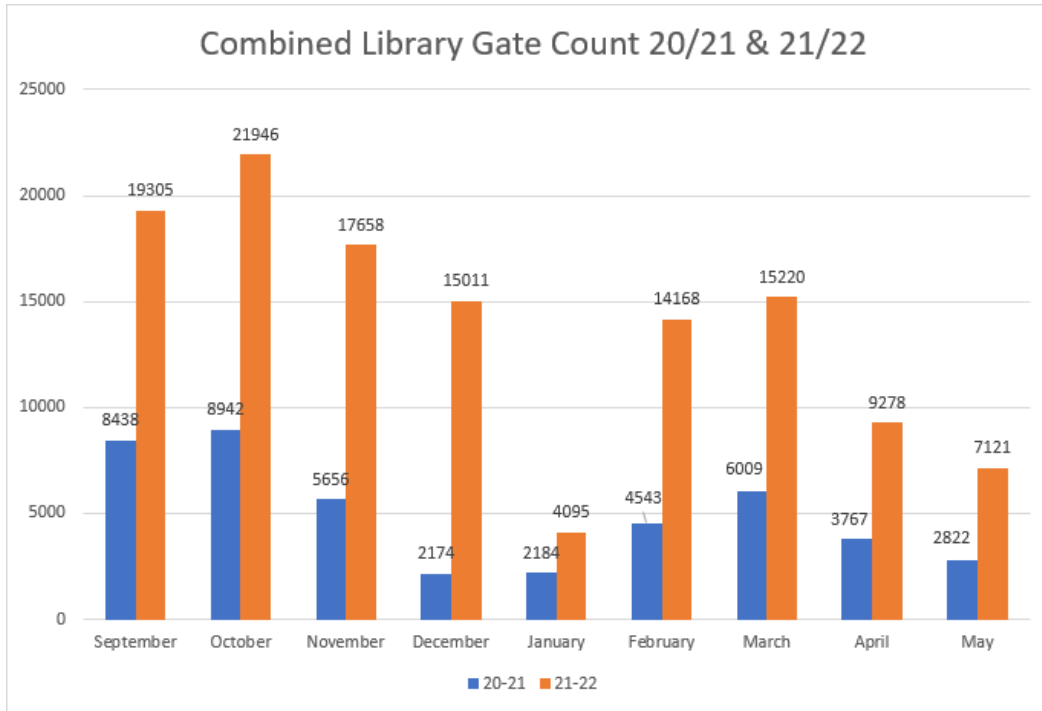
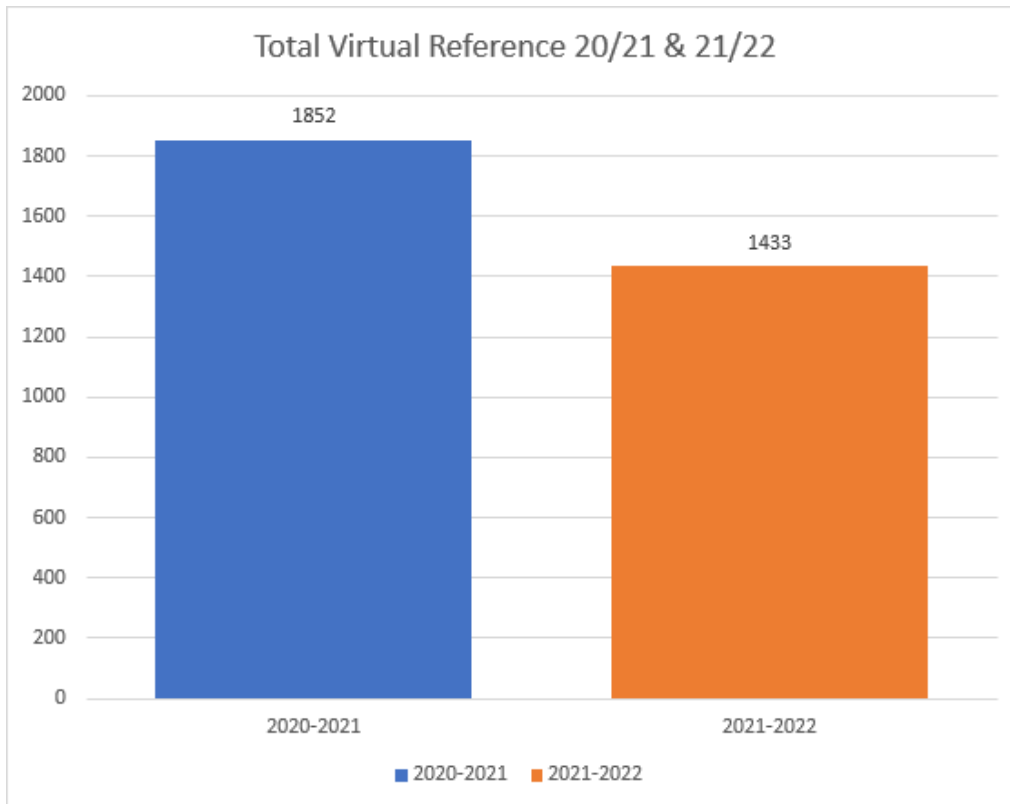Figure 3. Gate count for all Mercy College branch libraries

Figure 4. Virtual reference transactions at Mercy College

Based on feedback from students, it became clear that they appreciated the ability to meet with a librarian face-to-face while at home. Students also liked not having to turn on their cameras to get assistance using screen share. During the pandemic, students valued talking and connecting with a librarian via Zoom. Virtual reference using Zoom provided the students with an added personal touch.

The pandemic also taught us that students needed library instructional services in all modalities. We learned that faculty appreciated being able to post pre-recorded library instruction videos on their Blackboard course module for asynchronous courses. These pre-recorded video tutorials addressed finding resources specific to a class assignment. Students could view the videos at any point during their course to better understand how to use the library's electronic resources. We also learned the importance of providing library instruction for courses in a synchronous format. Faculty valued these instructional offerings because, unlike pre-recorded sessions, students could ask librarians questions during class.

Montclair State University

Montclair State University (MSU) is the second largest public university in New Jersey, located about twelve miles west of New York City. The University's Sprague Library is an R2 research library. Because of COVID-19, the library became almost entirely dependent on e-resources including databases, reference sources, e-books, and streaming media collections, to meet the research needs of the institution. Librarians supplemented these e-resources with online content made accessible during the pandemic through the generosity of the vendor community. One example is Ithaka which provided complimentary access to the entire JSTOR collection for academic libraries and their patrons. Other vendors soon followed suit. At this time, the entire Sprague staff worked remotely for approximately six months until returning to campus in August 2020 on a part-time basis (working staggered hours). Most employees returned to an entirely in-person schedule by the summer of 2021.

Staffing and Transition

Before March 2020, Sprague Library was fully staffed except for several librarian and paraprofessional positions that had not been filled. After the pandemic, however, all part-time staff were dismissed to realize some cost savings for the University, which experienced a drop in revenues from the closure of dormitories and students deferring enrollment for an indeterminate period. During FY 2021, dormitories were at half-capacity, and the library strictly enforced social distancing and the wearing of masks. The Dean of Library Services at Sprague

Library retired at the end of FY 2021, and a new Dean started at the beginning of the new fiscal year (FY 2022). In addition, a new reference librarian was hired and began work in August.

Part-time staff were rehired for the Fall 2021 semester as the library began increasing operating hours as more students returned to campus and dormitories swelled to full capacity. As the academic year progressed, several senior staff announced their intention to retire. At the same time, the library sought to fill several open positions that had remained vacant for an extended period. Like many other libraries, Montclair reassessed the library's organizational structure and staffing needs due to the shifting usage patterns that became evident during the health crisis. Some of these usage patterns or trends (such as increased eBook and streaming video usage) were long-standing and accelerated by the pandemic. As a result, plans were put into place to merge several departments, and new positions emerged in response to the changing landscape that academic libraries operated in.

Reference and Library Instruction

Our Reference Department quickly pivoted to chat and online library instruction once the pandemic began. Unfortunately, it was necessary to halt in-person reference services during the first year following our campus closing. Starting in Spring 2021, our Reference Department again offered in-person reference services after rehiring part-time librarians. In-person reference transactions shrank between FY 2020 and FY 2021, slipping from 3272 to 743 (Phone questions also contracted from 296 to 81). Interestingly, chat sessions also dipped slightly from FY 2020 to FY 2021, going from 3647 to 3462. The one exception, email reference questions, increased from 409 to 706. Library instruction shifted online with the start of the crisis as the library's electronic classrooms closed entirely in the latter part of FY 2020 and FY 2021. The library scheduled 119 classes (almost all online) in FY 2021 as opposed to 240 classes in FY 2020. Classes have started filtering back to the library this past academic year (2021-2022). Interlibrary loan activity was down in FY 2021 due to COVID-19 related restrictions on the number of requests patrons could file at one time (limited to ten instead of the standard twenty-five item maximum).

Print and Media Circulation

Permitting the circulation of print books and media items was initially out of the question as the pandemic raged during the spring of 2020. Although faculty, staff and students partially returned to campus in August 2020, the Library stack areas and Multimedia Department continued to be off-limits to library patrons. To make contactless circulation possible, the library introduced a service called "Patio Pick-up" in late June 2020, which allowed patrons to request

items without visiting the building. The materials requested would be retrieved by staff and placed on a table in front of the library for the patron to pick up. Patrons were then notified that the material was ready. The service provided a means for print books and media items (DVDs, VHS tapes, etc.) to continue circulating, although usage statistics remained subpar. Consistent with safety protocols, returned books and media materials were sanitized and quarantined for a week before being reshelved. Eventually, the quarantine of Library materials was phased out as studies indicated a low risk of viral infection from surfaces (CDC, 2021). Usage of the Patio Pick-up service was minimal in FY 2022, trailing off since its introduction.

Electronic Resources (E-books, E-serials, and Streaming Video/Audio)

As mentioned, print and media circulation was severely impeded early on, a trend that continued through successive viral outbreaks. In addition, reserve requests for print books, journals, and physical media were scarce. Faculty insisted that the library purchase licenses for e-books and streaming video to accommodate class usage instead of the physical reserve items. Journal articles were ideally procured from online databases and publisher sites. We arranged database and streaming video collection trials to address the shift to virtual classes where possible. Interestingly, our ACRL e-serials usage, which measures item requests (based on counter-compliant database statistics) edged down from 738,548 in FY 2019 to 731,231 in FY 2020 and then fell further to 646,730 in FY 2021 (Figure 5).
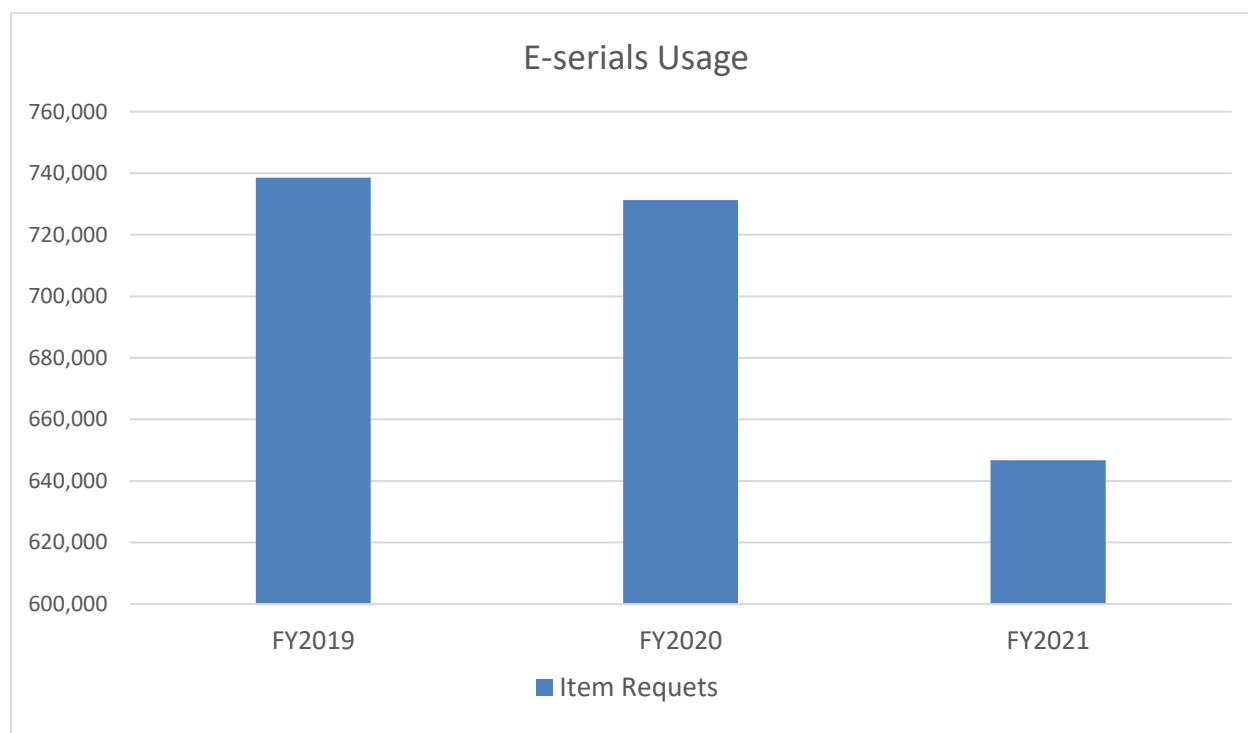
Figure 5. E-serials usage at Montclair State University

Library Work and Study Spaces

Study and workspaces were unavailable until we partially reopened the library in August 2020. In the Multimedia Department, our viewing rooms, classroom, collaborative spaces, and listening rooms were closed, except for one collaborative study room, which was limited to three users. By late summer/early Fall 2021, we reopened all our spaces but limited the viewing rooms, photo studio, and listening rooms to one user, while room capacity in the group study areas continued to be restricted to three users. Restrictions on room capacity were lifted later in the Fall 2021 semester. Usage of rooms and spaces climbed dramatically during the Fall of 2021. Concurrently, there was a discernable shift in how students utilized our study spaces. Besides study sessions and group projects, many students used the rooms to attend virtual classes, take online tests and exams, videoconference, and participate in online interviews. Faculty were also using collaborative spaces and classrooms to participate in online courses. Many faculty and students preferred using the collaborative study rooms because of the large-screen TVs, mobile whiteboards and webcams (originally Polycom cameras). The library accommodated these needs as best as possible.

Study spaces can also play a supportive role in cultivating a library environment conducive to health and wellness. They offer students (and faculty) privacy and a place to collect their thoughts, rest, and work (alone or in small groups) without distraction and interruption. During the pandemic, we discovered that our patrons used the rooms in new and novel ways. Students who traveled to campus for in-person classes often had virtual classes scheduled for the same day. These students used library study rooms as a quiet space to participate in these online sessions. At the same time, faculty frequently used our classroom space to teach virtual classes. This presents an opportunity for academic libraries to enhance their facilities and introduce new services.

Health & Wellness

Montclair actively promoted public health by sponsoring vaccine clinics, opening COVID-19 test centers, engaging in contact tracing, distributing PPE, initially closing campuses, and minimizing in-person contact. Montclair mandated that faculty, staff, and students be up to date with vaccinations and boosters, required masks on-site, sanitized classrooms and facilities, provided laptops for working remotely, setup Plexiglas barriers, insisted on social distancing, and implemented a host of other safety measures. The library followed university and state directives and made sure staff adhered to safety protocols.

In terms of addressing employee health concerns, the library, with help from the university, provided our entire staff with laptops so they could work remotely starting in March 2020. By August 2020, most staff returned to campus and worked staggered hours to avoid contact with their colleagues and prevent the possibility of viral transmission. Those staff who were vulnerable because of age, a chronic medical condition, or ailing family members continued to have the option of working remotely. Eventually, the university rolled out a Flexible Work Arrangements policy, allowing library staff to have a hybrid work schedule where they could work up to 3 days at home and at least two days in the office. University employees also had the option to work a compressed schedule, allowing them to work the same number of hours over four days. Library employees are required to fill out a form, and the request needs to be approved by their supervisor every couple of months to continue to be honored.

Programming as Therapeutic

It is axiomatic that the constant barrage of discouraging news, illness, increasing rates of infection and hospitalization, social distancing, long lines at supermarkets, lockdowns, and social isolation took a mental toll on everyone, especially our students. As a result, Montclair students and staff alike were subjected to extraordinary emotional stress and conditions resulting in their physical and mental health being compromised. A growing number of academic libraries, including Montclair, offered health and wellness and general programming activities to lift the spirits of their faculty, staff, and students. These activities included meditation sessions, destress rooms during finals, film screenings (an anime film and documentary), and a Robotics Showcase where students demonstrated some of their robotic projects. The library also hosted a film screening and lecture by a Computer Science faculty member. In Fall of 2021, the library, in conjunction with a variety of community partners (IEEE North Jersey, Livingston Public Library, Livingston Historical Society, Montclair Society of Engineers, Montclair TV34, and Clifton Public Schools) as well as several university co-sponsors (College of Humanities and Social Sciences, College of Science and Mathematics. Center for Community Engagement, Disability Resource Center, Office of International Engagement, and WMSC) sponsored a series of grant-funded lectures and events related to New Jersey and the Birth of the Atomic Age. On average, these events attracted forty-four attendees per session, consisting of students, faculty, and the public.

New Services

The pandemic proved detrimental to library services, contributing to a decrease in the circulation of print materials, media items, and print reserve requests. Nevertheless, it did

present an opportunity to offer new services. These new services included "patio pick-up" of physical materials, providing library spaces for video conferencing, organizing health and wellness activities, and general programming for faculty and students overwhelmed by the stress of functioning in a continuing health crisis. In particular, many students and faculty needed rooms or spaces in the library to participate in virtual classes via Zoom, Webex, or other video conferencing platforms. Accordingly, academic libraries should consider expanding the number of collaborative spaces equipped with large screen TVs and webcams that patrons can use to videoconference and attend online courses, workshops, training, and interviews. In addition, libraries can offer additional services like lending out headsets, headphones, microphones, webcams, and other equipment for videoconferencing and Zoom sessions.

Lessons Learned

The sudden COVID closures led libraries to adapt services and resource offerings to address the reality of the physical library being inaccessible. While many services introduced during the COVID closure will continue, some services, like patio pick-up, "trailed off." Montclair found that this service did not increase circulation. To address students' need for computer access, Union College and Montclair began a laptop loan program, which has been an ongoing program.

Certain resources, like streaming video, became especially critical to faculty teaching online. For example, when the UC Physical Therapy classes could not meet in person, the Films on Demand Physical Therapy video collection became a valuable tool for the instructor. Adding a permalink to library resources in all Canvas course modules became an effective tool for promoting usage. In some cases, technological enhancements were needed to compensate for the necessity of working remotely. For example, Union College needed to secure a better chat service as well as the hosted EZproxy service and Webex videoconferencing to accommodate the new virtual learning environment.

Study spaces were found to be valued by students and other groups seeking space for privacy or a quiet place to work with others. As a result, group study rooms and study spaces were heavily used when the libraries reopened. Montclair, Union College, and Mercy observed students using group study spaces to attend virtual classes, collaborate on projects, and take online tests and exams.

Some usage patterns indicated a renewed appreciation for the availability of library physical spaces. Study spaces can also play a supportive role in cultivating a library environment conducive to health and wellness. They offer students (and faculty) privacy and a

place to collect their thoughts, rest, and work (alone or in small groups) without distraction and interruption. During the pandemic, we discovered that our patrons used the rooms in new and novel ways. Once the libraries reopened, it became apparent that students had developed a deeper appreciation for the usefulness of library spaces.

Conclusion

As a consequence of COVID-19, academic libraries had to adjust quickly to meet the needs of students, staff, and faculty. The COVID-19 experiences of the three different academic libraries profiled here show striking similarities that make it possible to extrapolate specific strategies and best practices that could be applied in the likely event of a future disruption in operations. In addition, the many pandemic-related library closures speak to the necessity of having an emergency closure plan. The plan must include operating procedures and policies to prepare for the unexpected. Technology certainly plays a key role. Librarians and library staff need to be equipped with laptops, videoconferencing software and apps, internet connectivity, and adequate audiovisual gear to work remotely. This means librarians should be able to provide reference and consultation services and library instruction while working off-site. In addition, library instruction needs to be offered in several modalities (asynchronous, synchronous, hybrid, face-to-face) to maximize flexibility and adapt to user requirements.

Equally important, libraries need to market and draw attention to the e-resources, streaming video and audio, and e-books in their collection to better meet the research needs of their respective users. They should also seek to be responsive to faculty and patron requests for additional online resources, including streaming media, e-books, and journals. Collection development should continue to be balanced, but priority should be given to online content. Open access can also play a significant role here in expanding online resources without impacting the library budget.

Regarding the human dimension, academic libraries must consider the health and well-being of their staff and campus communities. Library employees should be given some flexibility in deciding when to work from home where feasible to minimize the stress of virus exposure, long commutes, and environments to work with minimal distraction. Fortunately, mobile technology and videoconferencing applications, like Zoom and WebEx, make it easier for staff to telecommute, participate in meetings, and provide library services (e.g., reference, consultation, instruction, etc.). In addition, students with full-time jobs or family obligations may also want the flexibility to choose between attending class online or in person. This is consistent with a recent EDUCAUSE survey which shows that student preferences for online instruction,

whether mostly or entirely, tripled from 2020 to 2022 due to the pandemic (Robert, 2022). However, a plurality of students in the recent survey continued to prefer completely or primarily in-person classes. Students also need adequate spaces for quiet study, self-reflection, de-stressing, prayer, and group projects. Directly and indirectly, such spaces contribute to student success and well-being.

The lessons and practical strategies implemented by all three academic libraries cannot address every exigency. In addition, they are not exhaustive or complete by any measure. However, they comprise a good start in grappling with the uncertainty and complexity of functioning as library professionals in a "post-pandemic" world.

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