

Karen O'Grady

Virtually hired

Why I can't wait to meet my colleagues after working with them for six months

I interviewed for my dream academic librarian position in July 2020. I was thrilled beyond words to be hired as the nursing librarian for the University of San Diego in August 2020. Yes, August 2020. Yes, during the COVID-19 pandemic. I interviewed, was hired, and began working entirely on Zoom. It has been, and continues to be, a unique and strange experience.

I have joined my new colleagues for committee meetings and faculty meetings. I have collaborated with them on our library's newsletter and on our annual report. I have consulted with some of them on my LibGuides, my instructional videos, and my faculty's database usage and interlibrary loan statistics. I have done all this sitting at my kitchen table, which, like many of our kitchen tables, has quickly morphed into my work area. I have yet to be in the physical presence of my new co-workers. I engage exclusively with their heads and torsos on my laptop screen. I do not know what kind of shoes any of them wear.

I feel somewhat like I have been among them, yet I know I have not. I am acquainted with them, but I do not know them. I do not know which of them is tall or short, or who wears perfume or smells like coffee. I have never heard any of them laugh. I have yet to exchange a private quizzical look with anyone during a meeting—impossible in our egalitarian Brady Bunch Zoom world. I have had neither coffee nor lunch nor drinks with any of them. I know almost no personal details about them—where they live, who has children or pets, what they are reading or watching. I have had the job for six months, and almost none of these small personal exchanges have happened.

What might be stranger still is that I have seen intimate slices of them in their home lives some-

thing that, pre-pandemic, I would not normally see. In a virtual world, we learn different details about our colleagues. Having not known mine before, it is doubly strange for me. I cannot take a clue from their Zoom backgrounds and piece it together with facts I have surmised from being around them. I can only make up my own stories, there is never a chance to inquire.

On the plus side, I find everyone to be utterly professional and uproariously polite. Actual warmth is hard to come by in a virtual workplace, humor too. Working exclusively through Zoom and email allows me to take in almost no human idiosyncrasies, short of perhaps speaking pace and word choice. There is almost no body language to be read beyond head tilts and raised eyebrows. No one shares anything close to personal opinions about the news, the weather, campus politics, or even the pandemic. It almost feels ideal to be judged only on my work rather than on my laugh or my eating habits.

I was told the grueling two-day interview process would normally include lunches and dinners and drinks so we librarians could get to know each other. None of that happened. Between interviews, I rose from my kitchen chair and simply paced my apartment. Would they have hired me if there was not a pandemic keeping things so hollow and formal? Would they not have chosen me because of something I said in passing during lunch, some subtle thing that might have turned them off about

Karen O'Grady is nursing librarian at the University of San Diego, email: kogrady@sandiego.edu

© 2021 Karen O'Grady

me—my mannerisms, my walk maybe, the way I spoke to the waitress? Will they regret hiring me? Will I wish for these sterile black-and-white ultra-polite relationships a year from now, when his boisterous laugh or her tedious cat stories irk me? I think not. I miss people.

Working during this pandemic shows us a different side of people. It undoubtedly makes everything more professional and productive. Yet, it is less human. Won't it be interesting to see which of my co-workers will make me laugh in person after this strange delay? Who will end up becoming a good friend, who will become my professional nemesis? I will continue to be held in some suspense for these answers. It is a bit like that old show *The Dating Game*, where contestants were prevented from seeing each other while they tried to determine who would be compatible on a date simply by talking to each other. I am looking forward to the big post-Zoom reveal. I cannot wait.

For the foreseeable future, I am not allowed to be physically near my new colleagues. We are limited to the plane in which we are currently working. Vaccines have been approved, so both the benefits and the drawbacks of these peculiar and unique circumstances will likely not be re-

peated. I wonder what I will miss about working from my apartment, literally half-dressed all day. What will I wish I could maintain from my virtual environment? I suspect the answer is probably nothing at all.

I believe every academic librarian prefers being on a college campus, where the atmosphere is bustling with students and energy. Being sequestered at home has brought to light just how much that backdrop for being a librarian means to me. College campuses are usually lively, exciting environments. They are ever-changing communities, bursting with innovation and challenges to the status quo.

After six months I do not feel like a genuine part of my new community. I am still an outsider, watching it on my computer screen. I see photos of a past life all over my university's website. There are images of smiling unmasked students, laughing with their arms around each other, blissfully unaware of what is coming.

One thing this terrible pandemic has taught us is that we are much more social than many of us thought. It has been hard on everybody not to be together. Innumerable subtleties are missed. I hope I never take the human minutiae for granted again. Bring on the cat stories. ♪

("Surging virtual reference services," continued from page 107)

ency among departments, including circulation and reference. Additionally, there was an urgent priority for electronic access and a greater focus on copyright and open access issues, especially driven by requests from faculty transitioning courses online and students requesting more e-books, including e-textbooks (especially in community college libraries).

The pandemic sharpened focus on our core strengths of providing excellent and equitable service to all users, and pushing increased access to high-quality, reliable information to combat misinformation and disinformation, especially during crisis. Our research serves immediate, future, and historical purposes, helping librarians to: a) continue adapting to the ongoing pandemic, b) build resilience to respond to any unforeseen disruptions or crises, and c) serve as a record of the incredible academic librarian response to ensure

that their users and institutions would move ahead, even as the world shut down. Our research has overwhelmingly shown that amid the confusion of institutional closures, librarians led their campuses in uninterrupted service to their communities. As one participant said, "I think that one of the big value-added things about librarians is creating connections and a sense of belonging." How much will all these game changes that COVID-19 hath wrought continue? This remains to be seen, and much hinges on our professional vision, decisions, values, and will. Service excellence is an individual choice, made in the midst of every encounter.

As we continue our analysis, stay tuned for future presentations and publications. We invite you to our ACRL 2021 Virtual Conference panel presentation "Taking the Temperature: Research in the Time of COVID-19" for updated results on library research in the pandemic. ♪