

Selinda Adelle Berg, Kristin Hoffmann, Kristine R. Brancolini, and Marie R. Kennedy

## “I mean, pandemic”

### How COVID-19 has disrupted librarians’ research

**T**he pandemic is having far-reaching consequences as we adjust to lockdowns, adapt to working from home, and face unanticipated personal and professional challenges. We have experienced disruptions to many aspects of our lives, including our professional lives. Research is one element of academic librarians’ professional roles that is being altered or interrupted.

In October 2020, as part of a larger research program, we surveyed librarians at a random sample of research libraries in the United States to help identify factors that impact their research productivity. We developed the survey long before the pandemic, so it did not explicitly address the potential impact of the pandemic on productivity. However, one open text question invited respondents to tell us about additional factors that have affected their research productivity. In 40 of 530 comments (out of 831 respondents), librarians shared that the pandemic was having, or was expected to have, an impact on their research.

Multiple articles have recognized the potential impact of the pandemic on academic research productivity of faculty members.<sup>1</sup> The effect on academic librarians also needs to be recognized and contextualized.

#### Thwarted projects and lost resources

The pandemic has altered or prevented librarians from collecting data or accessing research content, resulting in lost opportunities and thwarted projects. This includes the ability to access key resources such as archival materials, the ability to perform face-to-face interviews with participants, as well as an overarching hesitation to burden faculty, staff, and students with research requests. One survey respondent described how:

The pandemic makes conducting original research extremely hard. I cannot do in person interviews or focus groups. I cannot in good [conscience] add to the burdens of faculty and students during this time. I have had to abandon the plans I had before the pandemic.

Channels for dissemination have also been changed or cancelled, including delays in publication, cancellation of conferences, and postponement of professional development opportunities to support research. Some universities have halted all funding for travel and professional development. Many who commented in our survey shared stories about projects and opportunities that have been stalled, postponed, or cancelled.

Limited campus access and recurring lockdowns have also meant loss of workspace conducive to research endeavours. One respondent stated: “Having access to a network of resources, on campus, provides better research productivity.” In addition to space, respondents acknowledged that they missed access to other on-campus resources, such as technology and network connectivity.

---

Selinda Adelle Berg is associate university librarian at the University of Windsor, email: sberg@uwindsor.ca, Kristin Hoffmann is research and scholarly communication librarian at the University of Western Ontario, email: khoffma8@uwo.ca, Kristine R. Brancolini is dean of the library at Loyola Marymount University, email: kristine.brancolini@lmu.edu, and Marie R. Kennedy is serials and electronic resources librarian at Loyola Marymount University, email: marie.kennedy@lmu.edu

© 2021 Selinda Adelle Berg, Kristin Hoffmann, Kristine R. Brancolini, and Marie R. Kennedy

## Increased demands, decreased capacity

Librarians have less time to complete research, as well as increased workload, in response to the pandemic. In the words of one respondent: “Since COVID-19 hit, several members of the department were called upon to increase their workload even further, at the expense of research time.” Another respondent attributed the surge in workload to attrition: “Since COVID these responsibilities have grown due to ‘reduction in [work]force’ and retirements.”

In addition to increasing professional workloads, increased childcare and family responsibilities are a key challenge in the pandemic. One respondent described their challenges in balancing home demands with professional responsibilities:

My research productivity is completely linked to my caregiving responsibilities, especially during the pandemic. I now have 3 online learners under the age of 10 . . . My spouse is an essential worker and helps as he is able, but it is not consistent.

Diminished mental capacity and wellness are also limiting research productivity. Many respondents shared that they have faced mental and social challenges as a result of the pandemic. Librarians are experiencing stress, isolation, guilt, and uncertainty, all of which inhibit our ability to carry out research.

## A factor, as a matter of fact

The pandemic has resulted in widespread disorder, uncertainty, and turmoil, and respondents’ simple statements of “COVID-19,” “pandemic,” and “global pandemic” remind us that research and academic librarianship are not resistant to its impact. The pandemic as a barrier for research productivity was presented as a commonly accepted fact. One respondent merely stated, “I mean, pandemic.” The simplicity of these statements takes for granted that there is a shared understanding of the impediments and issues that have arisen from this unique environment.

## Responding to disruption

The coronavirus has caused disruptions in our

daily lives, including our professional lives. Our research work and agendas were not immune to this disruption. The themes we present here are from a data collection period about six months into the pandemic. As the pandemic lingers on and uncertainty continues to challenge us, the effects on research productivity will certainly be exacerbated.

Among the four of us, we have also experienced all these disruptions and interruptions. We have had to abandon other research projects. Our workloads have increased. We interrupted research meetings to deal with childcare. Personal stresses of isolation and lockdown have decreased our mental capacity for research.

We want to reassure those academic librarians experiencing these and other challenges in the pandemic that they are not alone. With these findings that we captured less than a year into the pandemic, we want to support additional reports of reduced research productivity, both anecdotal and research-based, that will certainly emerge in the coming months and years. We want to be sure that individual librarians can put their own experiences within a wider context. Perhaps most importantly, we urge administrators to consider how they can alleviate anxieties about lost and delayed research productivity, especially for librarians on the tenure track.

It is our hope that knowing we are not alone and placing our personal experiences of research in a wider context will help us to respond to ourselves and to others with empathy, understanding, and generosity.

## Note

1. Rebecca A. Krukowski et al., “Academic Productivity Differences by Gender and Child Age in Science, Technology, Engineering, Mathematics, and Medicine Faculty During the COVID-19 Pandemic,” *Journal of Women’s Health* (ahead of print), <https://doi.org/10.1089/jwh.2020.8710>; Kyle R. Myers et al., “Unequal Effects of the COVID-19 Pandemic on Scientists,” *Nature Human Behavior* 4, no. 9: 880-3, <https://doi.org/10.1038/s41562-020-0921-y>; Merin Oleschuk, “Gender Equity Considerations for Tenure and Promotion during COVID-19,” *Canadian Review of Sociology* 57, no. 3: 502-15, <https://doi.org/10.1111/cars.12295>. 