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# Looking through the COVID fog

Toward resilient, reimagined libraries

**L**ike so many facets of higher education, academic libraries adapted admirably when the COVID-19 pandemic began. Collections and consultations moved online. Books went contactless for pick-up, drop-off, and shipping. Events went virtual. Seats in the library spread out. Learning and research continued.

As COVID-19 restrictions are relaxed, it's time to look to the future and understand which adaptations will remain, what trends will accelerate, and where progress may be on hold. Will libraries continue as hubs that bring together information, collections, technology, services, and spaces to support creativity, create knowledge, build community, inspire concentration, and foster collaboration? Or will there be retrenchment into quiet study halls divorced from student success, coursework, and the research enterprise? To answer these questions, we offer four big ideas for the future on library spaces, services, and collections.

## **A new role for the campus**

One paradox of COVID-19 is that we all learned how much more we can do online and yet how much more we value being together in person and the residential college experience. Students, faculty, and staff have come to appreciate the flexibility to work and learn anywhere. They've also missed the community and sense of belonging that campuses foster.

As we fully reopen this fall, we'll re-enter a new reality in which the physical campus is even more important than before but is no longer the default, with online as an alternative. Instead, we'll be intentional about what we do in-person:

the things that we can't do (or do as well) online. There's no rush back to the lecture halls since those are better done online. But there is a desire to return to the seminar room, the dance studio, the laboratory, the archives, the makerspace, the innovation lab, the meeting space, and the quad connecting them. The campus isn't for classes, it's for community, collaboration, and creativity. As the go-to place for the space, collections, technology, information, and advice for projects, libraries can lead the way.

## **Partnerships and service hubs for experiential learning**

What does that paradox mean for the services, expertise, collections, spaces, and technologies libraries provide? Libraries will accelerate their development into centers for experiential, interdisciplinary teaching, and learning, with a focus on the activities that benefit most from proximity. Through existing and emerging efforts with programs such as makerspaces, visualization, augmented and mixed reality, digital media, data science, and emerging technologies—academic libraries can become centers

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of experiential learning. While these are not exactly new developments, the pandemic and subsequent evaluation described above of how we use space will accelerate and intensify the transformation of traditional spaces.

Partnership-based, collaborative service hubs in library spaces will become standard as libraries increasingly align with and house strategic campus partners to deliver services that drive student success, improve teaching, centralize research support, and promote community engagement. More than simple co-location, the emerging waves of partnerships will emphasize deep integration that leverages the expertise and service ethos found in libraries while opening expanded channels to emerging services such as research facilitation and data services, and attract more users with services such as tutoring, writing, career counseling, and collaborative public programming. This will be made possible by the decline in emphasis on traditional stacks storage, large or multiple service desks, and private, single user spaces.

### **Monitoring and responding in real-time**

COVID-19 protocols for physical distancing resulted in the loss of two-thirds of the seating and in-person collaborative study options, decidedly reducing the “buzz” of activity in library spaces. Interesting developments that can be applied post-COVID-19 include using sensor technologies, such as Occuspace, to provide real-time information on study space density that adheres to strict privacy protocols. Information is deployed using an app or through an API for data visualization on digital signs to help inform students of their study-space options. Students find this information very useful, optimizing their time spent searching for an available study space.

During the pandemic, many libraries organized virtual study groups to address the vacuum that occurred when physical group study spaces needed to be removed to respond to social distancing protocols. Students missed the motivation and inspiration they gleaned from studying in the presence of others. The virtual study space service resulted in varying degrees

of success underscoring that not all in-person services map well to a virtual environment.

Working in a primarily virtual state did amplify the importance of frequent, iterative, and meaningful engagement and assessment with faculty, students, and the broader community. Myriad changes spawned myriad questions and the importance of creating timely opportunities for input and response. Regular meetings with student leaders and advisory groups that occurred in-person prior to the pandemic flipped to virtual. COVID-19-related plans, including new and retrofitted services, programs, and events, were run by student leaders and faculty to gauge their response and to obtain their input in what became an iterative planning process that, at heart, supported a spirit of continuous improvement. Information provision, outreach, and engagement also occurred more vigorously through social media and the library website. These became critical channels for monitoring and responding in real-time to user needs and for conveying critical, and sometimes fun, information. A more intentional focus on strategic virtual communications will continue beyond the pandemic.

### **Enabling physical and digital access to collections and services**

The pandemic has accelerated trends in collection building, access, and delivery. The challenges of delivering physical content coupled with moving classes online resulted in more demand for online access. Even with classes moving back to in-person this fall, libraries will continue to invest heavily in ebooks and streaming media, while focusing their physical collections on subjects of local interest. Consortia agreements will help fill in the gaps. Challenges in the delivery of physical textbooks and course materials have led to greater advocacy and investment in e-textbooks and open education resources (OER), providing faculty flexibility in delivering course-specific content while making education more affordable. Libraries can also support the speedy

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Tacoma Community College, 2019, 5, accessed May 14, 2021, [https://docs.google.com/document/d/1z4P\\_s94y0RGD3jZiYbb6Rj9eAdBp9fFMx4WNuURChtw4/edit?usp=sharing](https://docs.google.com/document/d/1z4P_s94y0RGD3jZiYbb6Rj9eAdBp9fFMx4WNuURChtw4/edit?usp=sharing).

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dissemination of research data by developing platforms for sharing content and advocating for open access.

Services are changing, as well. Self-serve options for materials pickup are leading to the prioritizing personalized, in-depth human interactions over transactional ones. Reference and instruction will transform, with services delivered in person and online. The availability of real-time research assistance where and when the patron needs it will allow libraries to integrate into researchers lives more fully. Special Collections and Archives will digitize more of their collections to increase access and provide online research services. This will elevate the impact of these collections for both research and pedagogy.

## The way forward

While nothing is certain, we think that as campuses fully reopen, they'll do so with a more focused purpose and new role to play to foster community, support creativity, and create impact for students and communities through experiential learning. Pre-pandemic pace and workflows won't be fast enough to understand what's happening and respond, and so agile service and staffing models will be needed to help spaces, services, and systems adapt. Experiential learning and the right suite of support services will be the priority as libraries propel learning and research forward by bringing together the people, information, and tools needed. To enable access and advance equity, services and collections will be reimaged to increase awareness, access, and usage with greater flexibility. 