

## **Editorial**

# Work/Life Unbalanced

### **Living in Strange Times**

Everyone's personal and professional lives have changed significantly over the past month or so and it feels like real life took a vacation and never came back, leaving us with... whatever this is.

The reality is, this is likely the new normal for the foreseeable future, and there will be long-lasting effects in every aspect of our lives, on every level. This "unprecedented" situation has forced several personal realizations for me, some of which may be relevant for organizations as well.

### **Not So "Unprecedented"**

There are countries in the world that have dealt with pandemics as a reality of everyday life and have been dealing with them for years. Because of this, their average life expectancy is significantly lower than that of those of us in the United States.<sup>1</sup>

This fact has reminded me of my own personal privilege of living in the United States, and my compounded privilege of working in higher education as a tenured faculty member and librarian. Many of my colleagues don't have the same protections<sup>2</sup> (although the exact protections that tenure affords have not been tested in a crisis of this magnitude).

A recent article cited a Bureau of Labor Statistics report that indicated only about one in four workers can work at home during this crisis.<sup>3</sup> Those who do not have the luxury of working from home—people who work retail or in restaurants and have been laid off, medical personnel and first responders who see the worst of this disease and are stretched thin, and people who are considered other essential workers who need a job and can do nothing else but hope they don't get sick, are all likely not feeling particularly privileged to live in the United States right now.

As disruptive as this has been to my life, it is nothing compared to those who have lost their livelihoods, and those who have lost their loved ones, and those who risk their own lives daily on the front lines of this pandemic.

### **Gratitude**

All of this has taught me that I have many more things to be grateful for than I ever would have recognized before. I'm thankful to continue to work at home and help support my family; to be able to support the students and faculty I work with through technology; to see my colleagues through Zoom and be able to make progress on projects; to have gotten my teenage daughter (on high school foreign exchange) out of Thailand before they closed the borders; to be able to support my aging parents and in-laws (from a distance) and know that they are okay and get-

ting the food and medicine they need; to have my daughters continue their schooling through computer-based solutions; and to know that we have access to healthcare should we need it.

Thinking about this more broadly in terms of the impact on institutions and on higher education, thankfully, many institutions have the resources to be flexible and move classes online. They have the support of their governing boards or states and are continuing their missions of education and research as well as they can. The faculty and students are making every effort to continue, and university administrators are working hard to be flexible and supportive.

### **“We Have the Technology”**

Those of a certain age or having an interest in the 1970s *Six Million Dollar Man* series will recognize the catchphrase that introduced this section. I have found myself considering this phrase more in various situations, including the one in which we are currently enmeshed. Even before the current situation, there were many situations where I found myself thinking — there’s an app for that, why don’t we use it? There is a technological solution, why don’t we implement it? Pre-pandemic, I drafted the following:

When so many patrons (faculty and students) are online and making use of library services in a computer-mediated environment (including consults and instructional and research support from librarians) why do we not have the flexibility to be anywhere when we are providing virtual help? I look at teaching faculty who use ecampus and an online environment and they can do it from anywhere (office, home, café, or literally anywhere)! If the students are “going to college in their pajamas” via the web, then we should be on the web too (pajamas optional)!

If most of my work is computer-mediated — either communicating through or using computers — does it matter where I am physically? We have tools like Skype, Zoom, and WebEx to connect with students and faculty — all of which are more convenient and even preferable to some and likely to even increase librarian consults.

These thoughts strike me as ironic now. I’m no Luddite, but I have a self-confessed aversion to social media thanks to privacy issues and the indecisive squirrel effect, but COVID-19 has turned that aversion into gratitude for the technology that allows us to stay connected, stay informed and, for some, stay employed. A recent article shed some light about just how much more damaging the Coronavirus would have been had it hit in 2005 before all the technology was fully launched as it is today.<sup>4</sup> Believe it or not, things could be way worse. However, not every individual and not every institution of higher education has the same capabilities or access.<sup>5</sup>

### **What's Important**

Most people are periodically dealt a reality check — a reminder that life is finite, that the meetings and the emails, and all the busywork and political machinations are extraneous and ultimately matter little. Usually it comes in the form of a crisis or a tragedy that later becomes a learning opportunity. This is just such an opportunity that we all happen to be experiencing simultaneously.

Perhaps it can help us all discover what's important. Where you choose to spend your time and with whom you spend it matters because it, too, is finite. So, make it count. This thinking made two weeks of self-quarantine with my husband and 2 daughters (after the one returned from abroad) a gift of sorts. I cherished the time with them, knowing we were all safe and that we were not going anywhere, together.

All of it has been a wakeup call to everyone on the planet. There will need to be long-lasting changes to our infrastructure in a lot of ways. We will need to move to accommodate the accelerated transition of course instruction from in-person to online for all institutions, particularly those traditional institutions which may have previously lagged in an online presence. My own institution, among many others, cancelled face-to-face classes in the one week after Spring Break and went online with intentions to remain as such through the Summer. Higher education will cope and adapt and ultimately change for the better.

Thinking about the work we do (and the work I do specifically), I have concluded that my job has been changing all along—and in profound ways. The time of reference questions and consults, instruction sessions and books ordered, and the easy to count activities are long gone. The outbreak has served as an exclamation point to this new reality.

My work life had consisted of very individualistic projects and problems that could be grouped under data literacy or scholarly communication or, more broadly, under project management. The reality now is that there is no knowing what will come next. What might start out as a simple consultation about the best method to collect articles on a specific topic could turn into how to get them published onto a web site for an emerging center and then evolve into developing a taxonomy to present this information in categories to demonstrate what the new center stands for and to promote their events, identify experts, and highlight research in this emergent area. My work now involves any number of initiatives related to program development or career readiness for whatever happens to come up.

This pandemic has impacted institutions similarly by forcing an identification of what is essential to the operations of the university and reorienting to those priorities with everyone hopefully moving in the same direction. There are 2 scenarios that mobilize people in the same direction. As outmoded as it may seem, it is the carrot-and-stick scenario at play. People are either incentivized in a direction or they are threatened.

COVID-19 is the threat that has mobilized institutions and academic libraries to find—and return—to their core. When one considers strategic planning, it is largely an academic (pun intended) exercise that may or may not provide vision or have meaning in the actual work. One thing that this situation has done is made it very apparent very quickly which library services are critical to the work of the institution. When you strip all the extraneous busywork away to focus on what MUST happen, the core is exposed. Academic libraries may find that they are well equipped to expose their core, or they may find that the services and expertise that the library currently offers are not the ones that are considered critical in the current environment. In that case, this crisis has served as a signal that the library needs to refocus its core to meet fundamental and evolving needs.

For the library where I work, one of the most critical needs now is ensuring that course materials are available online since our electronic reserves have become a lot busier with classes moving to an online format. The strain on our electronic reserves is an indicator that this is an area that should be fortified and built up, and that this is a very real way the library can engage to directly support the curriculum and to benefit students and promote access.

This reality check not only demonstrates what's important to do, but also indicates that the previous path we were heading may not have been the right one.

### Keep Calm and Embrace the Uncertainty

To be patient and calm is easier said than done these days, especially with all the political rhetoric and daily news briefings announcing the infection count and the death rate. Attempting to get on with work and life as much as possible is made even more complex if one is responsible for the health and emotional well-being of another, perhaps more vulnerable person. My yoga teacher, like many others, has been doing classes via Zoom. One of her recent mantras was "Embrace the uncertainty." Moving beyond the meditative nature of that advice, I have been considering how I might model that in my life. Certainly, being calm keeps us calm in the face of growing anxiety, but it has also allowed me to reflect on possibilities. Admittedly, in some cases these possibilities may verge toward catastrophizing but embracing the uncertainty is a way I can bring my thoughts in to work on my flexibility in other ways and to think about possibilities and opportunities for me to make things better and help others through these troubling times.

Be well, everyone.

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### Notes

1. World Health Organization, "Life Expectancy and Healthy Life Expectancy, Data by country," last updated April 2018, available online at <https://apps.who.int/gho/data/node.main.688?lang=en>.

2. University Council–American Federation of Teachers, Twitter account @UCAFT\_UCLA statement regarding lack of position protection during COVID-19 for contingent teaching faculty and librarians at University of California, April 3, 2020, available online at [https://twitter.com/UCAFT\\_UCLA/status/1246228749743321088](https://twitter.com/UCAFT_UCLA/status/1246228749743321088).

3. Tara Law, "Americans Are Being Encouraged to Work From Home During the Coronavirus Outbreak. For Millions, That's Impossible," *Time*, March 9, 2020, available online at <https://time.com/5797382/coronavirus-remote-work-home/>.

4. Rory Cellan-Jones, "Coronavirus: What if this had happened in 2005?" BBC.com, March 28, 2020, available online at <https://www.bbc.com/news/technology-52052502>.

5. Tyler Sonnemaker, "The number of Americans without reliable internet access may be way higher than the government's estimate—and that could cause major problems in 2020," *Business Insider*, March 12, 2020, available online at <https://www.businessinsider.com/americans-lack-of-internet-access-likely-underestimated-by-government-2020-3>; Beth McMurtrie, "Students Without Laptops, Instructors Without Internet: How Struggling Colleges Move Online During Covid-19," *Chronicle of Higher Education*, April 6, 2020, available online at <https://www-chronicle-com.srv-proxy2.library.tamu.edu/article/Students-Without-Laptops/248436>.