THE LIBRARY NEVER CLOSES:
Assessing Resources and Services After a Crisis

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INTRODUCTION

There are different ways to interpret the statement, "the library never closes." One interpretation is that the library as a place and a building is so vital to a university that it cannot close under any circumstances. At the University of Memphis (UM), one of the universities included in this study, the McWherter library did not close, even in March 2020 when fear and uncertainty around the COVID-19 pandemic were at their height. The University of Colorado Colorado Springs (UCCS) and Illinois State University (ISU), the other two institutions included in this study, closed their buildings in March and stayed closed into the summer. A second interpretation of "the library never closes" is that the library is more than a place or building. The library is a collection of resources, a set of services, and a group of people who can operate independently of the building. As long as it continues to serve its users, the library remains open even when its doors are closed.

This paper uses data to examine the extent to which three university libraries were able to continue serving library users despite the disruptions of the COVID-19 pandemic. The data cover various aspects of library collections and services: physical checkouts, research services, instruction, website visits, discovery service sessions, electronic serials, electronic books, and streaming videos.

Studies like this one, which examine data and compare the experiences of libraries, have a role to play in helping libraries learn from the pandemic. Libraries made decisions a year ago without time for planning or knowledge of what the repercussions would be. Now that they know more about COVID, how libraries can respond to it, and how users are affected, it may be time to revisit those decisions.

This type of study can also help libraries in forming their "pandemic value narrative." Many librarians face difficult financial decisions and need to be able to articulate the value that their libraries provided during the COVID pandemic. Regardless of their institution's financial circumstances, librarians would benefit from using their data to craft a succinct, accurate story about how they responded to the pandemic, what they did to mitigate its effect on users, and how they will continue to change as a result.

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BACKGROUND

The University of Colorado Colorado Springs is an R2 institution with over 11,000 students. Due to the pandemic, the Kraemer Family Library started the transition to remote work in the middle of March 2020 and the physical building was closed by the end of that month. While the building was closed, the Kraemer Family Library continued to provide online instruction and virtual research services to support online learning. The Kraemer Family Library physically reopened on July 26, 2020 with minimal staffing at the main circulation desk, restricted user access to the physical collection, limited capacity, and building access only to current UCCS affiliates. Research services remained remote, and most instruction services were online. Interlibrary loan services were also paused during this time. After the fall semester break, most in-person or hybrid classes moved to an online format due to the increase of COVID-19 cases in the state. The Kraemer Family Library was able to remain physically open during that time, but it never had more than 50 users in the building at one time.

Illinois State University is an R2 institution with a high undergraduate population and a typical total student enrollment of around 20,000. Milner Library was shut down by the order of the governor on March 21, 2020 and all of Milner's 70 full-time personnel were sent home to work. Services that could be offered remotely were, and personnel—primarily those in access and technical services, but also library administration—began returning to work on-site in June. The building did not open to patrons until August 17, 2020, and after being open for around two weeks, the library again closed to walk-in patrons. Throughout the fall semester, patrons were required to schedule an appointment in order to enter the building. The entire building has now been open to patrons since the start of the spring 2021 semester. The hours of operation are limited to facilitate daily deep cleaning and the capacity is limited to around 30 percent to promote social distancing.

University of Memphis is a public, R2 institution located in a mid-sized city with a fall 2020 FTE of 16,614. Over the week of spring break 2020 the University of Memphis took increasing measures to protect students, faculty, and staff from the spread of COVID-19. Non-essential personnel were directed to work from home, but the University Libraries never full closed their doors to the public. Essential front-facing staff, such as employees in circulation and facilities, have remained working onsite throughout the pandemic. Access to the University Libraries has been restricted to current UM students, faculty, and staff and all visitors are required to swipe their university ID for building access.

METHODS

This study used data collected from each of the three institutions from three years: 2018, 2019, and 2020. All selected data was segmented by month, allowing analysis of how use of resources and services changed over the course of the pandemic. In most cases, the same metrics were used for each institution. When that was not possible, consistency was maintained by comparing data from each institution to its own data from previous years. Most of the graphs included in this study display the percentage change in resource use or services provided, comparing 2020 to 2019 or an average of 2018 and 2019. In some cases, data between institutions were too disparate to compare, so there are times when data from a single institution is provided. In such cases, the raw data from each year is displayed instead of percentages.

RESULTS

Physical Checkouts

As figure 1 demonstrates, checkouts of physical materials came to an almost complete stop at UCCS and ISU. UM devised a paging system to have books brought to the lobby for patrons and this service, paired with the fact that the building remained open to student, faculty, and staff users, likely contributed to its relatively robust recovery of physical item circulations. Under normal circumstances, the total number of physical checkouts is much lower at UM, however, so it required fewer checkouts to have a higher percentage of checkouts recovered.
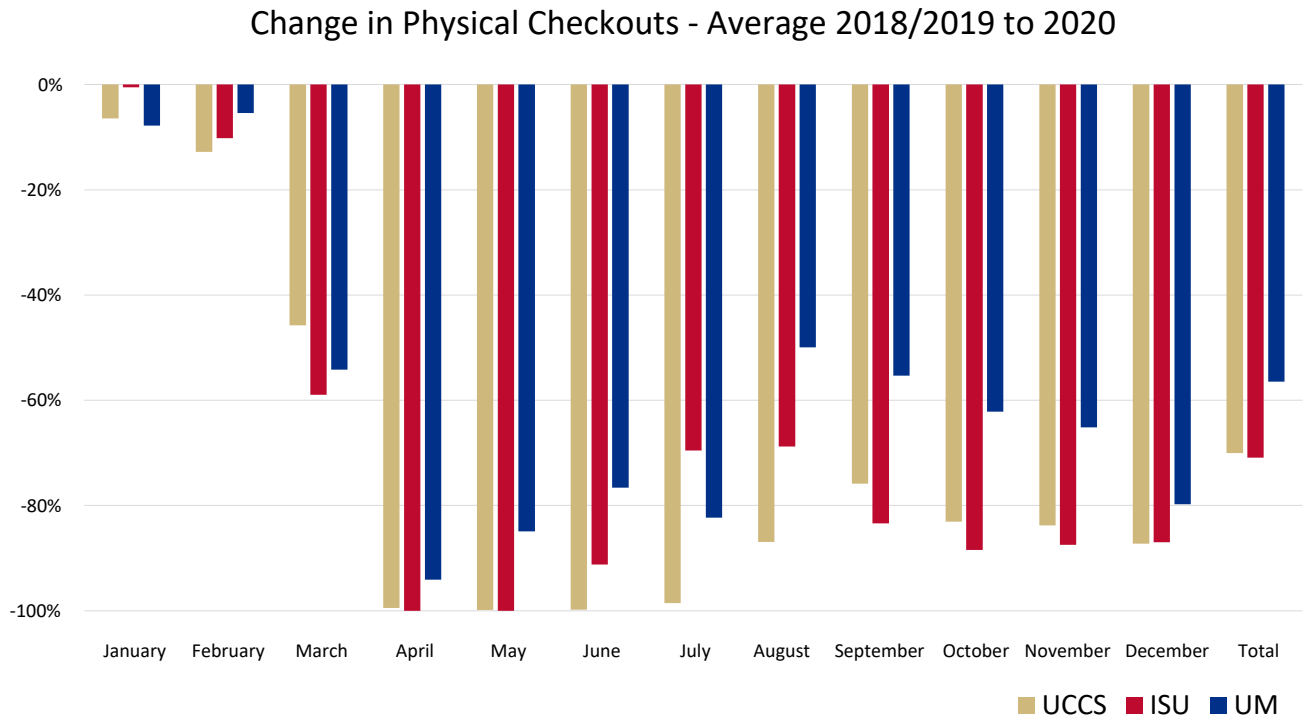
Change in Physical Checkouts - Average 2018/2019 to 2020

Figure 1. Physical Checkouts

Change in Reserves Checkouts - Average 2018/2019 to 2020
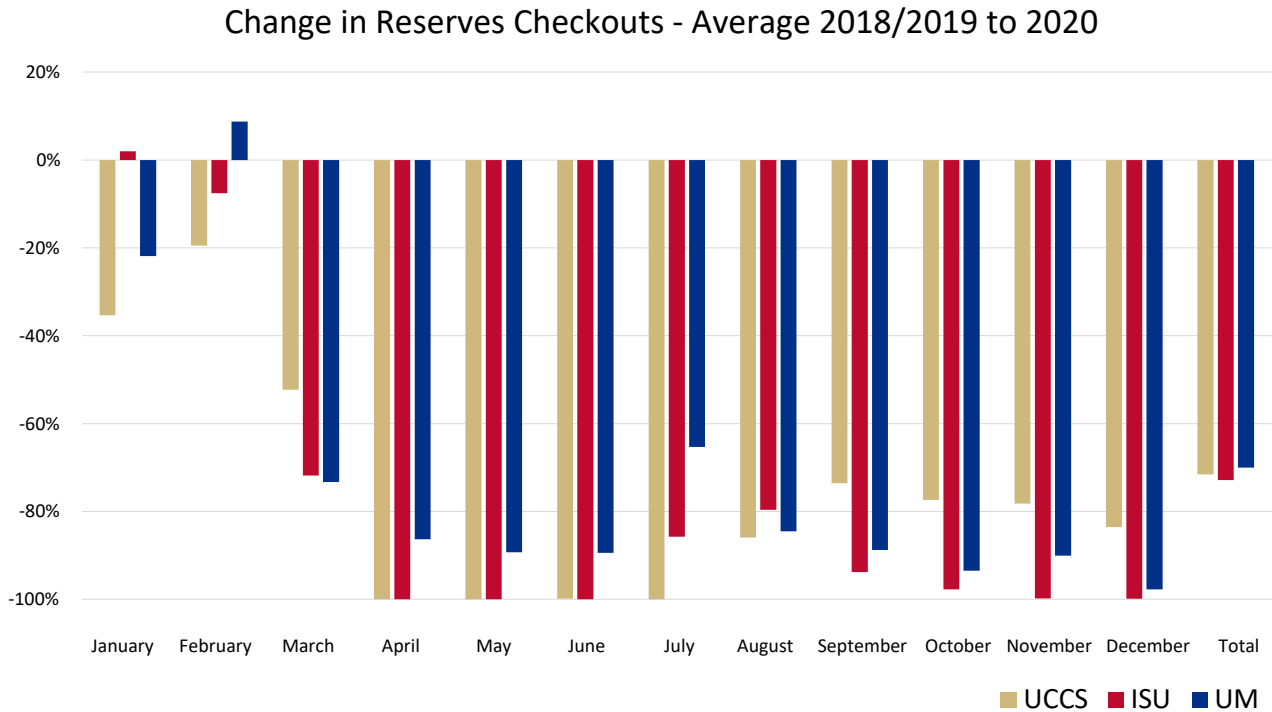

Figure 2. Reserves

Concerns about access to physical collections were voiced when considering closing libraries, and it is important to look at the data to consider whether these circulations are meeting a critical need, or if they put library employees at risk for a marginal benefit. Several libraries, including ISU, devised low-contact checkout options for physical materials, such as curbside pickup or grab-and-go bags, and many expanded existing mailing or shipping services.

Even with innovative or expanded services in place, the recovery of physical item circulation, including reserve materials and loanable technology, has lagged. Figure 2 shows the circulation of reserve materials at all three schools. Despite including some of the items perceived as most critical to student learning and success, these circulation numbers have seen little recovery at any of our institutions.

Several institutions introduced workarounds for these unprecedented circumstances, including expanded digitization of reserve materials, but the legality and sustainability of continuing these workarounds is fraught. In academic libraries, the circulation of physical items has long been trending downwards; the pandemic has highlighted the degree to which many libraries were built to support physical collections. Despite all the services that cropped up to support it, the circulation of physical items during the pandemic was quite low and may call into question the value of supporting and maintaining some physical collections. Librarians can investigate their data and discuss with campus stakeholders the degree to which restrictions on access to physical materials caused problems for teaching and learning. If users indicate that they adapted to online materials and may be fine with fewer print materials in the future, or if the institution continues offering more online classes and serving fully online students, such information can inform librarians' decision making about collection development. Academic libraries have important decisions to make about print book sharing in the short and long term and data from multiple channels should inform these decisions.

Reference & Research Services

All institutions experienced an increase in chat, or virtual reference, interactions from March to November 2020. Figure 3 shows the average change in chat transactions from 2018/2019 to 2020.
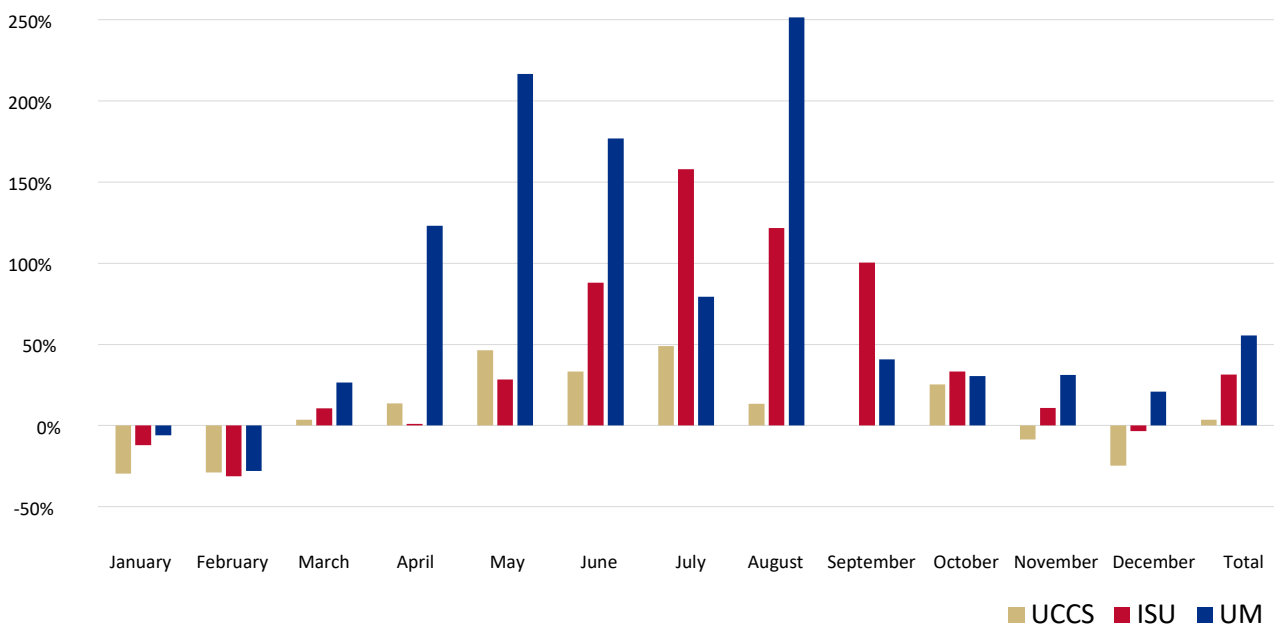

Figure 3. Chat

Although these increases appear substantial, in the context of overall reference interactions, they were quite limited. Figure 4 presents chat data in the broader context of all reference interactions. This chart is specific to ISU data and shows the total reference paired with the chat reference interactions for all three years.
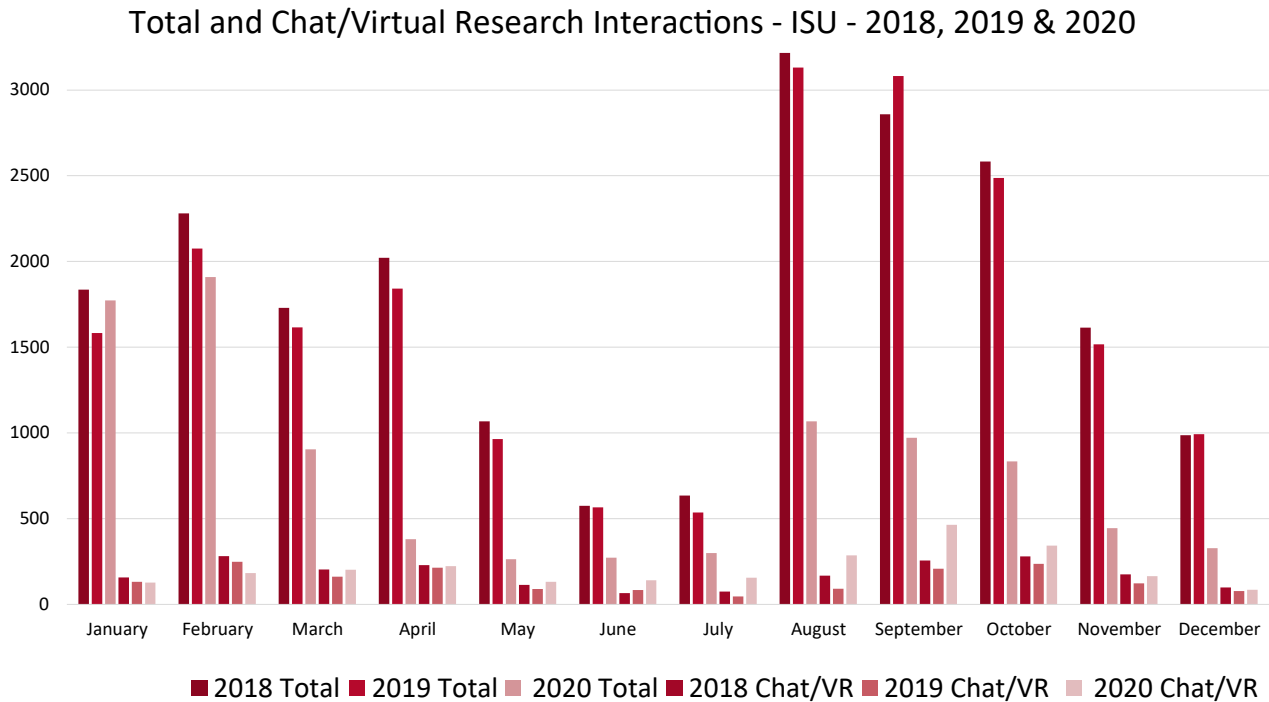
Total and Chat/Virtual Research Interactions - ISU - 2018, 2019 & 2020

Figure 4. ISU Research Desk

Chat continues to be a small percentage of total reference interactions; ISU, at least, has relied on physical desk interactions to connect with students. Libraries have hard questions to answer about what to do with in-person reference and research services. Due to long term declines in reference statistics, many academic libraries had already moved away from physical reference desks; after the pandemic, others may see an opportunity to reinvent their reference and research services.

Phone reference typically makes up a small portion of total reference transactions as well, but arguably it became more important during the pandemic. ISU implemented Cisco Jabber to redirect reference desk phone traffic, and UCCS used Google Voice to the same end; both institutions were accordingly able to stabilize their phone reference numbers. UM did not implement an alternative phone reference service and effectively put that service on hold during the pandemic.

Instruction

Requests for synchronous instruction experienced a predictable decline from 2018/2019 to 2020, as seen in figure 5. Instructional services had moved entirely remote for all three institutions by April 2020. With the exception of ISU in June and December, and UM in July, there was a significant decline in synchronous classroom instruction. This data does not account for virtual asynchronous instruction, the production of which has increased since the pandemic at the three institutions included in this study. Because the creation and promotion of asynchronous instructional content has only recently been expanded, the libraries in this study are not yet recording consistent data about asynchronous instruction and it is too early to make comparisons across institutions.
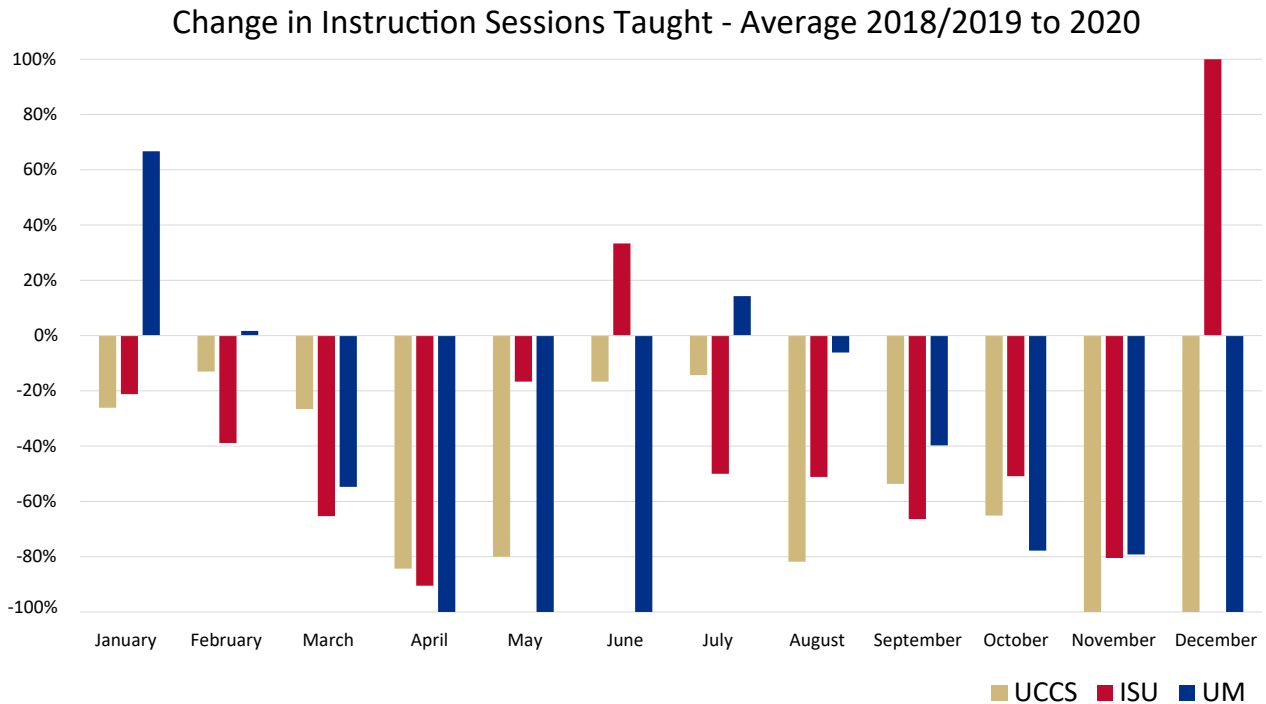
Change in Instruction Sessions Taught - Average 2018/2019 to 2020

Figure 5. Instruction

Several academic librarians have started to think about the implications of building closures on how they connect to and with various student populations. Students who were in their first year during the pandemic can hardly be expected to make use of a physical building they were not allowed to visit and in-person services that were unavailable to them without some additional effort on the library's part. Such groups may benefit from a re-orientation to the campus library and its services, or additional incentives to learn and use library services, collections, and spaces.

Librarians in research services, instruction, and outreach can also look at their data to evaluate what did work well in a remote environment. ISU, for example, was able to recruit an internationally known speaker for Open Access Week and attract its largest audience to date for a synchronous event. Compensating this caliber of speaker and securing so many attendees for an in-person event would likely have been impossible. Librarians that developed or refined useful public services during the pandemic should explore what data they have or would need to have in order to support their continuing such services.

Library Website Sessions

Library website sessions were selected to measure website usage because it is the closest metric that aligns with the number of times users engage with a website. All three libraries in this study used Google Analytics as their primary digital analytics tool, so a consistent data point was possible for this analysis.

Figure 6 compares the averaged library website sessions from 2018/2019 to 2020. It was predicted that sessions would be down starting in March 2020 as the pandemic began disrupting classroom teaching. Both UCCS and UM showed some increase to library website sessions before March 2020. After March 2020, all three libraries experienced a decrease in website sessions but to varying extents. UM had the least amount of decrease and even saw an increase in library website usage in June and August of 2020. Both UCCS and ISU's website session counts remained consistently down.

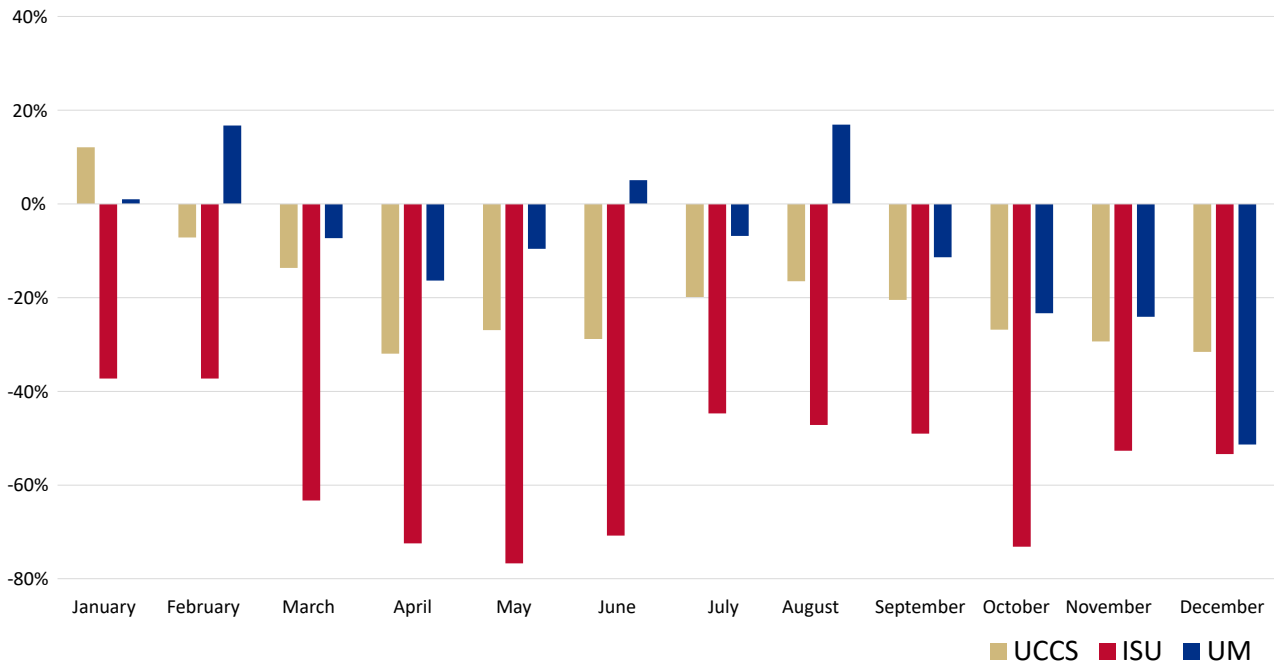## Change in Library Website Sessions - Average 2018/2019 to 2020

Figure 6. Website Sessions

To further make sense of this usage pattern, figure 7 displays a timeline of library website sessions from the start of 2018 through the end of 2020. UCCS and UM showed a fairly stable usage pattern, but ISU's library website sessions drastically increased and fell during the fall 2018 semester due to a library website redesign and a likely modification in how Google Analytics was implemented on their website. Despite this discrepancy, all three libraries saw a decline in library website sessions starting in March 2020.
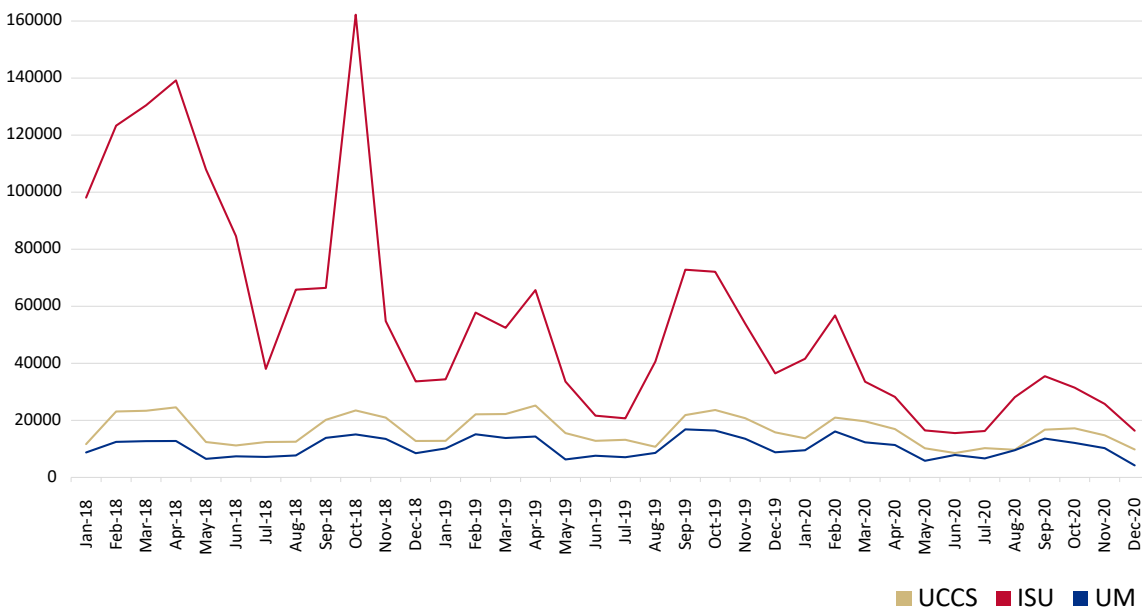
Library Website Sessions Timeline - 2018-2020

Figure 7. Website Sessions Timeline

Discovery Service Sessions

Figure 8 compares discovery service sessions, which was more complicated because each library had a different discovery services that measure sessions differently. Additionally, ISU's discovery session data was removed from July to December because they migrated from EBSCO Discovery Service (EDS) to Primo VE in July 2020, and the two discovery services measure sessions too differently for an accurate comparison.
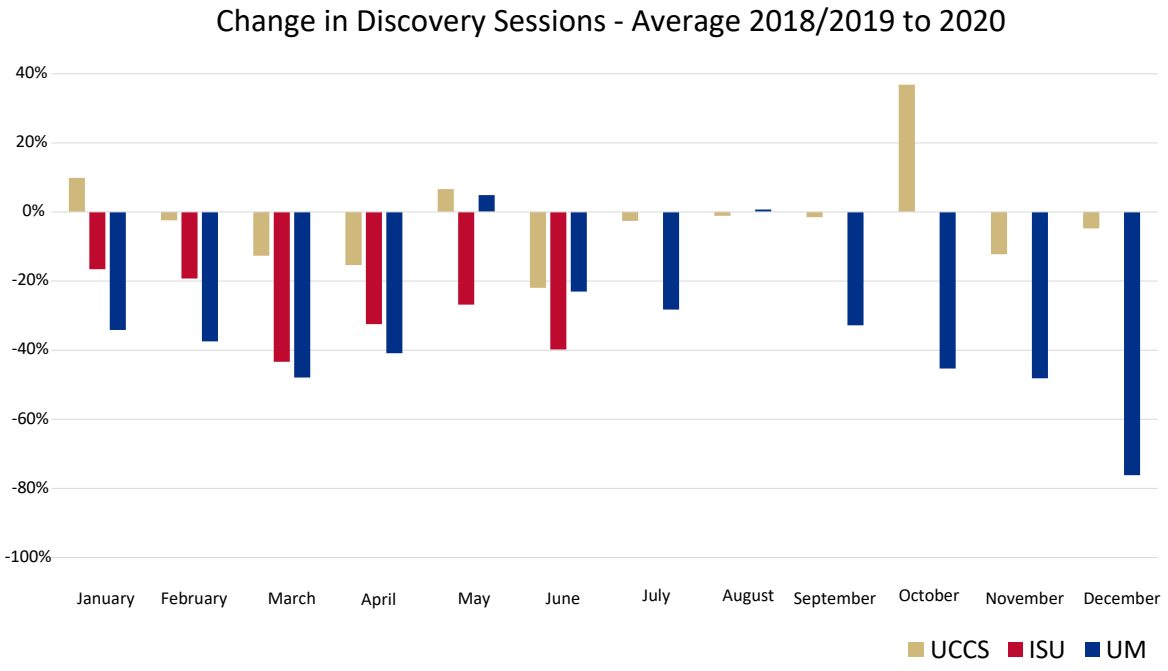

Change in Discovery Sessions - Average 2018/2019 to 2020

Figure 8. Discovery Sessions

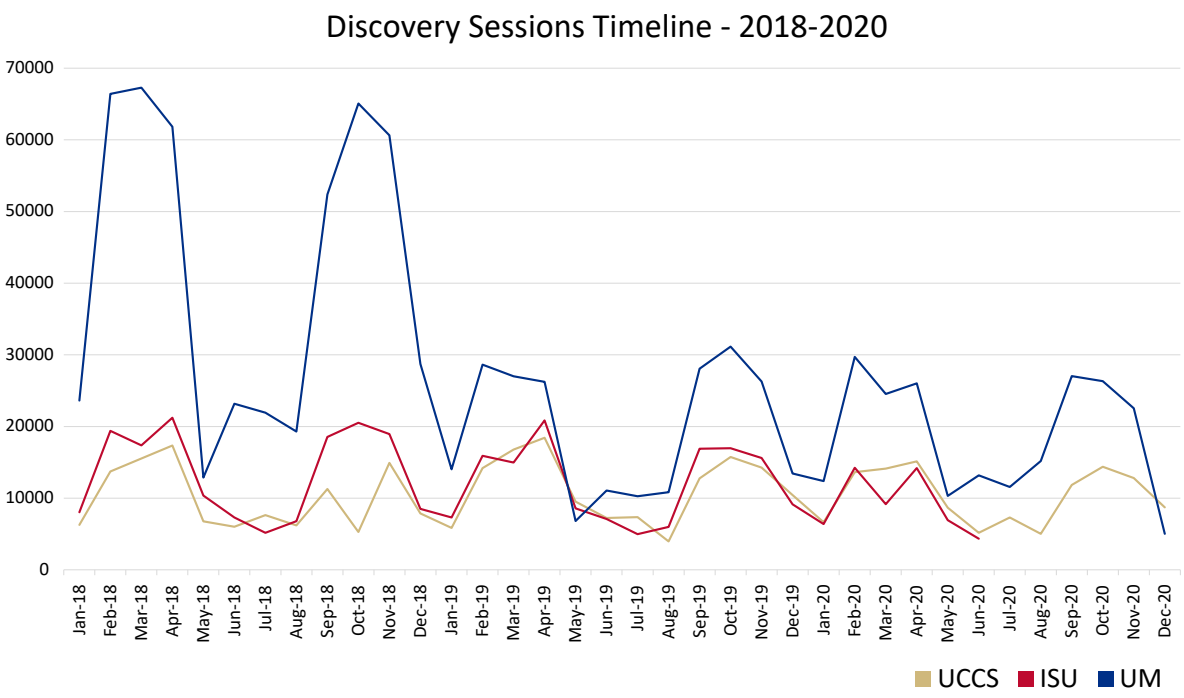Discovery Sessions Timeline - 2018-2020

Figure 9. Discovery Sessions

The results of comparing the averaged discovery sessions between 2018/2019 and session from 2020 were mixed. All three libraries experienced a decrease in discovery sessions for most of the spring 2020 semester but not at the same rate that was seen with library website sessions. Additionally, both UCCS and UM had an increase in discovery sessions in May 2020. UCCS also had a large increase in discovery sessions in October 2020.

These results were surprising, so a timeline of discovery sessions, displayed in figure 9, was also utilized to further study the three-year usage trends. UM's discovery sessions were very high in 2018 but become more regular in 2019 and 2020. This possibly explains the higher percentage of change in UM's discovery sessions in figure 8. ISU's discovery sessions appear to be trending slightly down over the past three years, while UCCS's discovery sessions have been remaining consistent or slightly trending up until March 2020. More data and additional analysis are needed to understand the change in discovery service usage due to the pandemic.

Electronic Serials

To gauge the effect of the pandemic on electronic serials use, usage data from ten publishers and platforms were collected. 2018/2019 averages of total item requests were calculated for each month and compared to 2020. Counting Online Usage of Networked Electronic Resources (COUNTER) Release 4 JR1 reports were used in most cases because they were consistently available for all years. Figure 10 displays the percentage increase or decrease for combined number of requests from all platforms for each campus and each month.
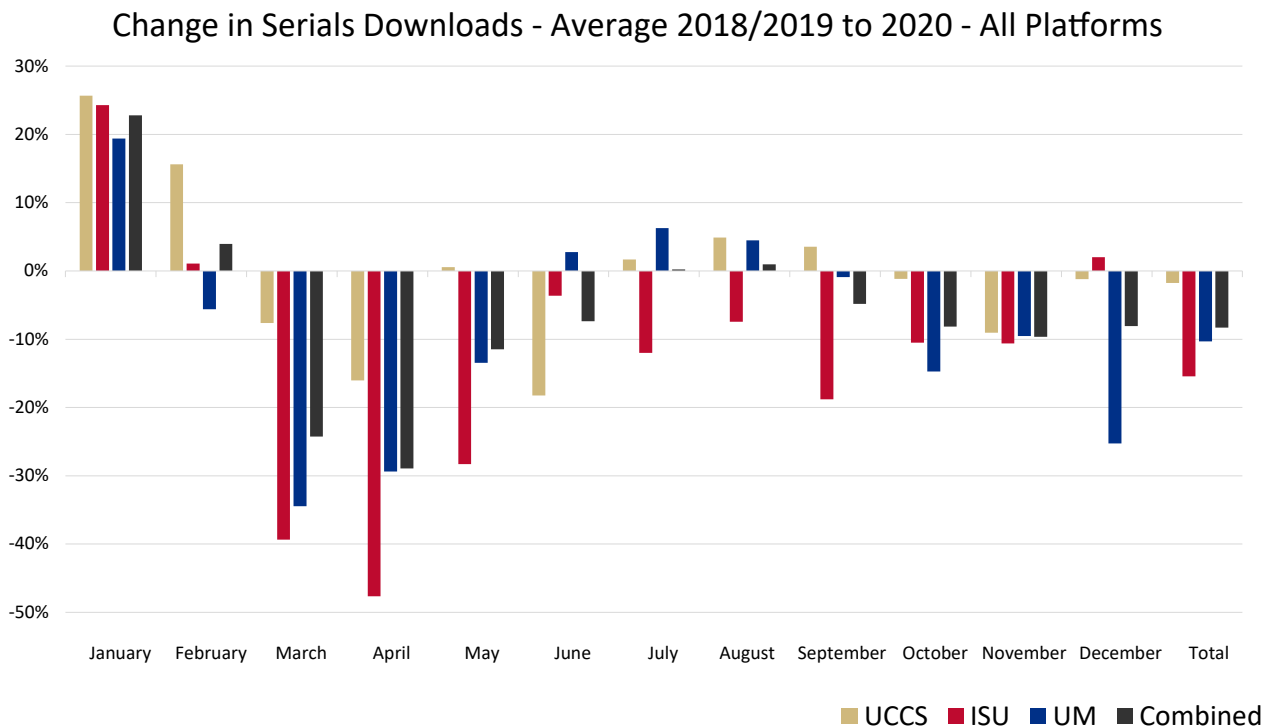

Change in Serials Downloads - Average 2018/2019 to 2020 - All Platforms

Figure 10. Total Serials Use

Serials use was up for all three libraries in January 2020, but in March there was a sharp decline in use when compared to previous years. The sharp decline continued in April, when the disruptions to library operations were at their worst. As the year continued, serials use stabilized. Although most libraries still saw a decline in most months during the fall, the declines were more modest.

In general, the direction and relative size of the declines by month followed similar patterns across campuses. It appears that the decline in use, especially in March to May 2020, was due to the effects of the pandemic and not anything specific to a campus. Nonetheless, the size of the effect does vary between campuses. Looking

at totals for the entire year, ISU saw the steepest declines, down 15 percent in 2020 from their 2018/2019 average. UCCS showed the shallowest decline, down only about 2 percent, and UM was in the middle with a decline of 10 percent. The cause of the differences between campuses is unclear. While it is possible that some difference in campus composition or actions taken by the library had an effect, it is also possible that the differences reflect longer term trends. Serials use at UCCS, for example, has been growing for years, so some of the effects of the pandemic may have been offset.

Although there was a decline in serials use, it was not nearly as extreme as the decline in use of print materials or library services. Despite the disruptions of canceled assignments, cancelled library instruction classes, declines in faculty research productivity, and shrinking enrollments, the libraries in this study still maintained 85 to 95 percent of their average serials use over the course of 2020.

Changes in serials use were not uniform across platforms. Figure 11 displays the change in serials use for nine platforms from 2019 to 2020. The tenth platform, Wiley, was excluded because data could not be reliably obtained for UM.

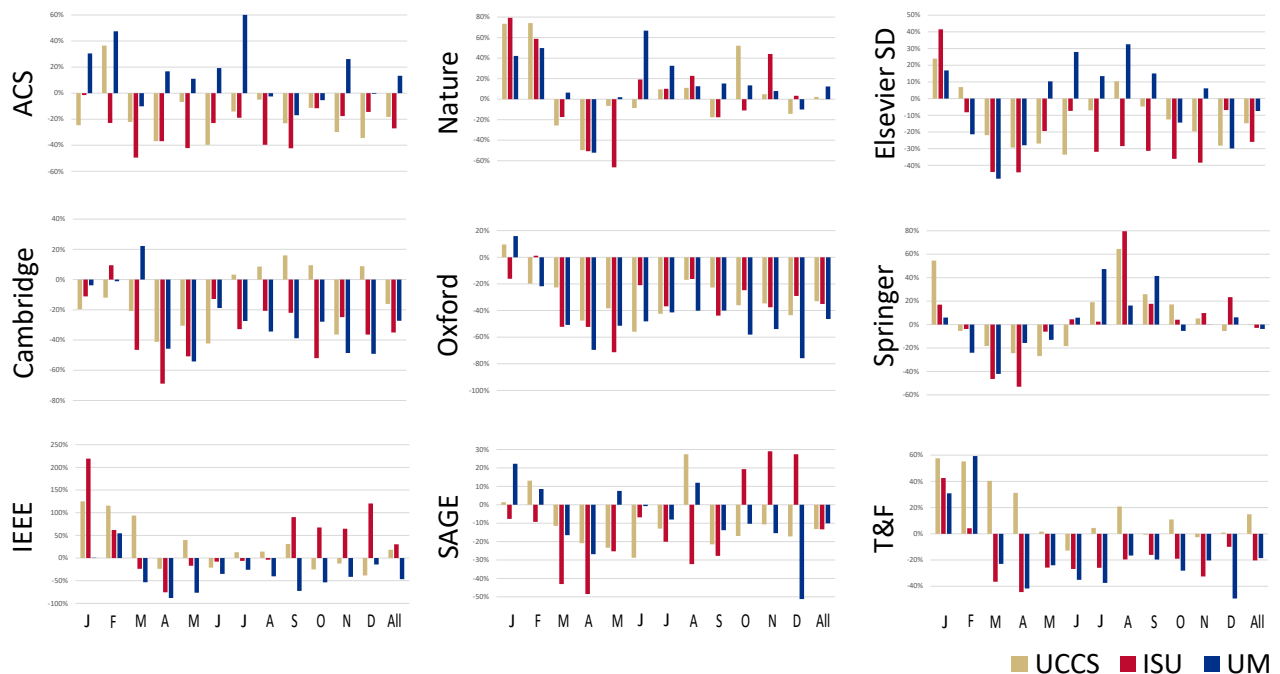## Change in Serials Downloads - 2019-2020 - Nine Platforms

Figure 11. Serials Use by Platform

Although use was almost uniformly down for all publishers in March, April, and May 2020, the extent of the recovery during the fall semester varied by publisher and campus. Starting in the summer, Springer and Nature use was up for most campuses in most months. Use of journals from Cambridge and Oxford, on the other hand, remained down at most campuses throughout the fall. Again, the reason for these differences is unclear and may merit further investigation. It may be interesting, for example, to see if serials use from different disciplines recovered from the effects of the pandemic at differently.

eBooks

Gauging the effects of the pandemic on eBook use is difficult. The three libraries included in the study have different strategies for eBook collections and different eBook collection sizes. All three libraries had eBooks on

the EBSCO and/or ProQuest platforms, so comparisons were made on the combined use from those platforms. The metric used for these comparisons was the COUNTER Release 4 total section requests because these were the most consistently available data. Again, 2018/2019 averages were compared to use in 2020. The percentage change in use for each campus is displayed in figure 12.

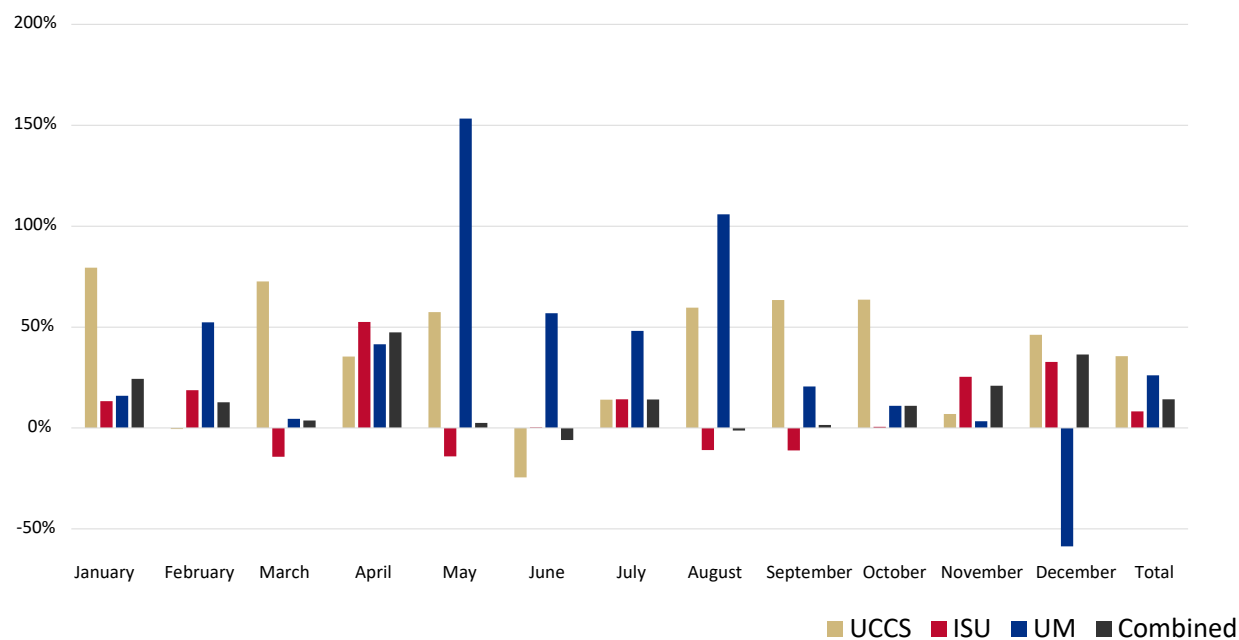Change in eBook Section Requests - Average 2018/2019 to 2020 - EBSCO & ProQuest

Figure 12. Total eBook Use

This figure does not tell a clear story. There are rises and falls in different months compared to previous years, but results are not consistent across different libraries for the same months. The timing of the pandemic's beginning is not as obvious as it was in the figures related to electronic serials use. Nonetheless, it is notable that all three libraries saw significant increases in eBook use in April, a time when that pandemic's effects on libraries were at their height and when electronic serials experienced steep declines. All three libraries saw a cumulative increase in eBook section requests in 2020, with UCCS having the largest increase at 36 percent, UM in the middle with 26 percent, and ISU with 8 percent. ISU, however, had the highest use on these platforms overall, so the percentage changes may be misleading.

Adding data from other publishers does not show a clearer trend. Figure 13 shows section requests at UCCS from Books 24x7, Oxford Scholarship and Elsevier's ScienceDirect platforms for 2018, 2019, and 2020. There is not a consistent pattern that appears to be related to the effects of the pandemic. Instead, use appeared to be fluctuating normally or continuing longer term trends of increase or decrease.

It is interesting that there was such a clear decline in serials use and stable or increased use in eBooks during the pandemic. It is possible that users turned to eBooks to help compensate for the unavailability of print collections. Serials collections were already almost entirely online prior to the pandemic, so there was little print serials use to be offset. Another possibility is that the types of research and learning that required eBooks was less disrupted than serials-based learning and research. Of course, it is also possible that the increase in eBooks use was driven mostly by longer term trends of increased availability and use of eBooks. Further research would be required to fully attribute the causes.
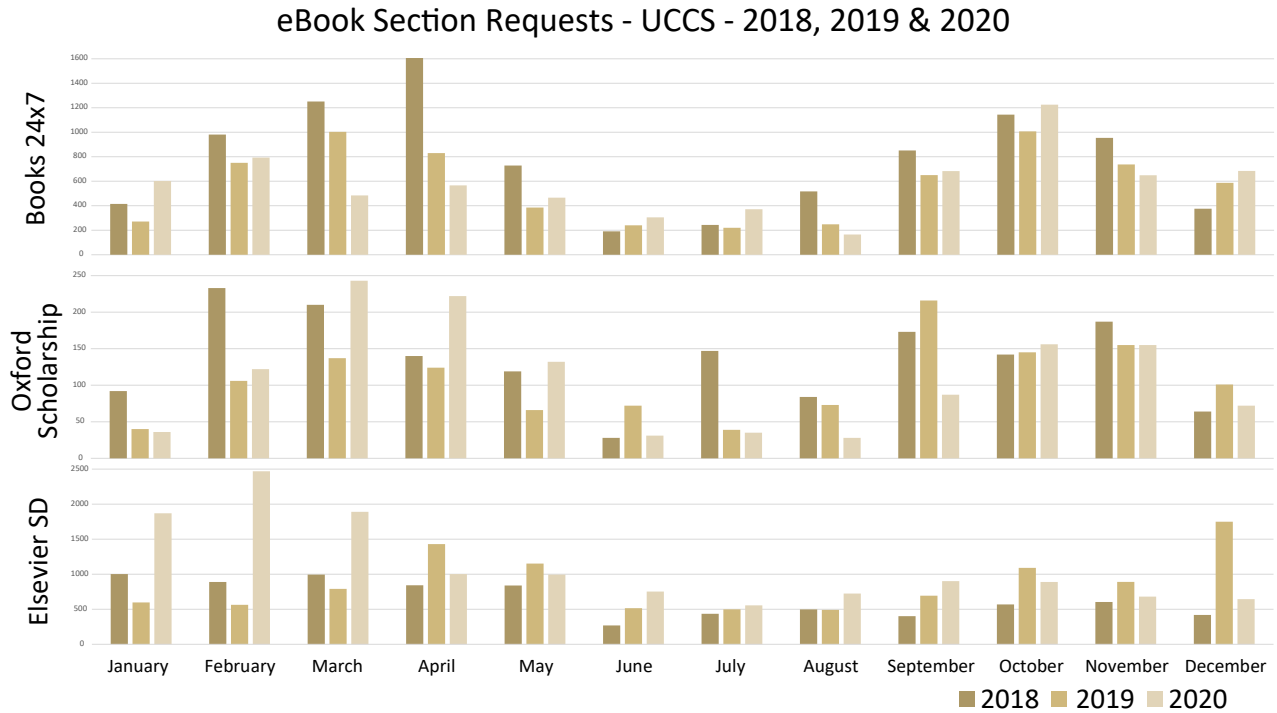
eBook Section Requests - UCCS - 2018, 2019 & 2020

Figure 13. eBook use by Platform

It is obvious that eBooks outperformed their print counterparts during the pandemic. Increases in eBook spending at the libraries included in this study proved to be valuable in that they allowed for continuity of access when print was inaccessible. At all three libraries, purchases of eBooks accelerated during the pandemic as the acquisition, processing, and delivery of print became much more difficult. The libraries will have important decisions to make in the months ahead about the extent to which they wish to resume print purchasing.

Streaming Videos on Kanopy

Kanopy was the only multidisciplinary streaming video platform for which UCCS, ISU, and UM all had access, so it was chosen to examine how the pandemic affected use of streaming videos. UCCS had only selected collections available for unmediated licensing and viewing, while ISU and UM had the full Kanopy platform available for unmediated viewing. UM switched to a fully mediated PDA account in December 2020.

Figure 14 depicts the total minutes streamed on the Kanopy platform for each institution from 2018-2020. Use increased for all three institutions from 2018 to 2019, and that upward trajectory continued through 2020. All three institutions experienced a spike in Kanopy use in April 2020, and there was a consistent rise in use during the fall semester of 2020. The spike coincides with the abrupt transition to remote learning during spring 2020. Instructors had more time to plan for remote learning in fall semester, and it appears many included Kanopy and other streaming videos in those plans.

Kanopy expenditures are another way to gauge the use and value of streaming videos for students, faculty, and staff. The changes in monthly cost between 2018 and 2020 depicted in figure 15 look similar to the streaming minutes in figure 14. For example, ISU and UM both experienced a spike in August 2020, possibly when instructors were taking advantage of streaming video for their remote classes. September, October, and November of 2020 are interesting because for ISU and UM the total amount spent in each of those months is fairly consistent from 2019 to 2020. UCCS Kanopy costs in September and October are similar from 2019 to 2020, and in November 2020 there is a visible drop in cost from November 2019. As previously noted, UM transitioned their Kanopy account from fully unmediated to fully mediated in December 2020, which can account for the decline from 2019 to 2020 in that month.
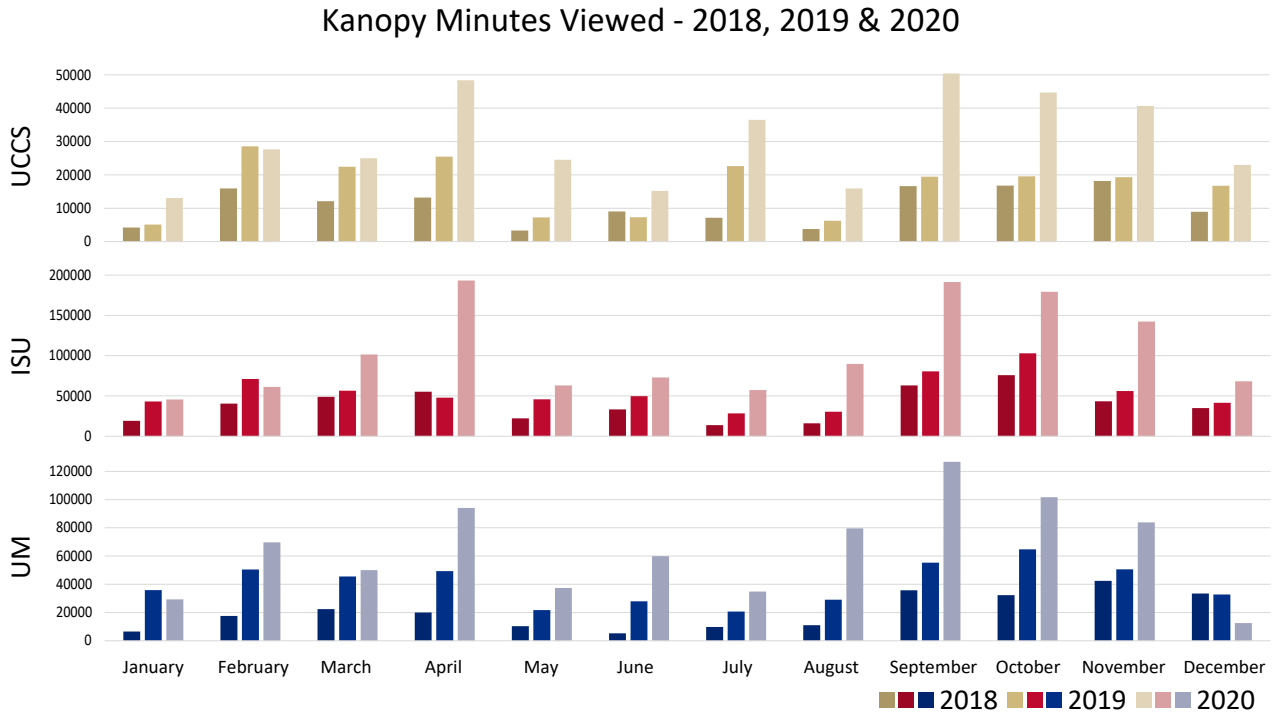
Kanopy Minutes Viewed - 2018, 2019 & 2020

Figure 14. Kanopy Minutes

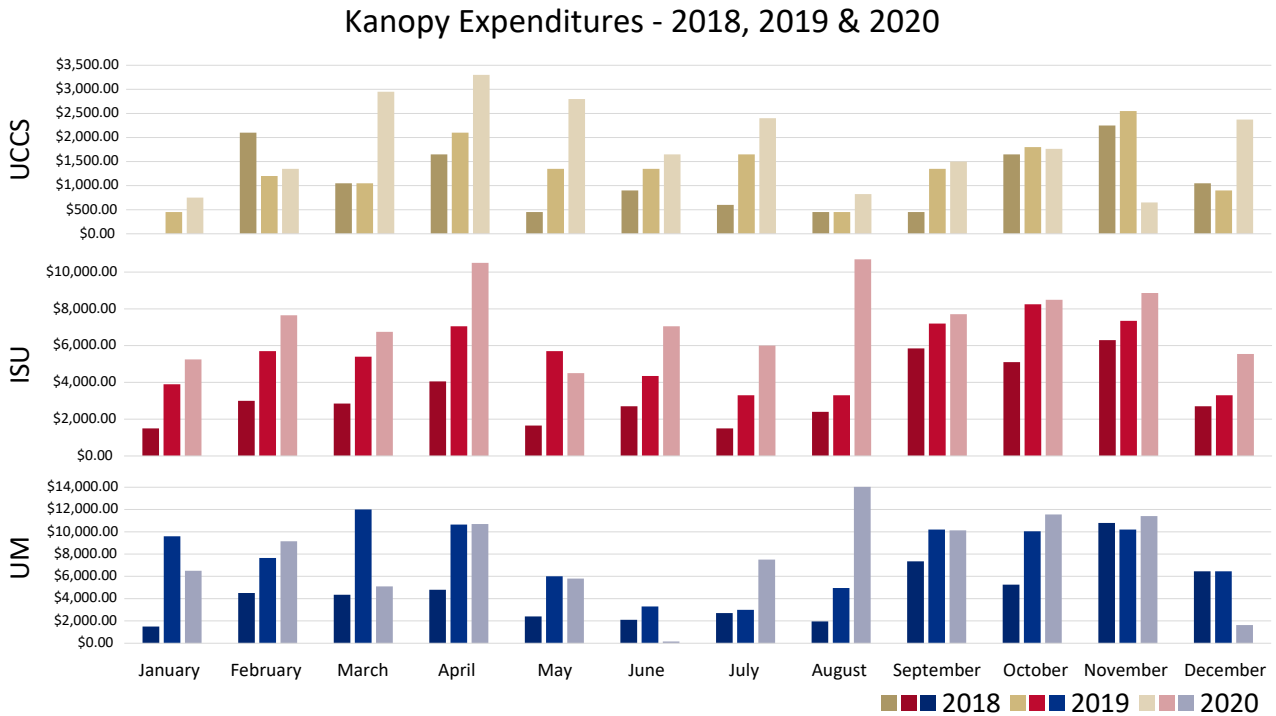## Kanopy Expenditures - 2018, 2019 & 2020

Figure 15. Kanopy Expenditures

FINAL REFLECTIONS

Our analysis of library data spanned from 2018 to 2020 and, we expected the pandemic to have ended by the time we presented this paper in the spring of 2021. Although we do not yet have sufficient distance to see the big picture, we can detect some clues that will help our institutions get through the rest of this pandemic and any future surges. We can see from our usage data that eBooks were a good investment for all three institutions, and they were one of the few data points that had a clear increase after March 2020. Kanopy saw some surges in use and cost in the fall 2020, but for nearly every month in 2018 and 2019, it had already been on the rise at all three schools. Broader trends towards eBooks and streaming video are continuing and accelerating; if this pandemic had happened a decade or two ago, the library would have not been able to deliver resources and value the way it has this year. The use of library services, physical collections, and some online serials, however, have a long way to go before they can be considered recovered.

It may be too early to define the narrative that you will communicate to stakeholders about the value of the library during the pandemic. Much of the traditional work of academic libraries to provide services, spaces, and resources is still restricted, and that is to be expected; the pandemic is ongoing, and life is far from normal. As restrictions are lifted, however, an important question to ask is if we are going to recreate traditional services as they were or leverage data to reimagine them.

Our data have many limitations. First and foremost, they cannot measure or capture the quality of user experience. Our students and patrons may have gotten less out of their online use or engagement with library services or used information differently than they might have preferred. Second, it is harder to compare data for services than for resources due to different institutional practices, and this project suggests the need to ensure best practices for data collection in all areas of the library to facilitate evidence-based decision making and cross-institutional comparisons. Finally, although our data focus on library services and resources this focus should not be interpreted as a diminishment of the importance of "library as a place." Cultivating an inclusive community space for all users is important work and we do not want to imply that library buildings are obsolete.

As librarians, we certainly hope that users value the collections and the services we provide, but we cannot assume that they do. The need to articulate a pandemic value narrative has highlighted the importance of collecting quantitative and qualitative data about how our communities engage the library. Librarians, and most people in higher education, worked very hard under challenging circumstances in the last year. The circumstances have, unfortunately, made much of our labor even less apparent. Projects like this can bring visibility to library labor.

Librarians must value the health and safety of ourselves, our coworkers, and our users over the perceived sacredness of our missions or institutions. Fobazi Ettarh describes "vocational awe" as "the set of ideas, values, and assumptions librarians have about themselves and the profession that result in notions that libraries as institutions are inherently good, sacred notions, and therefore beyond critique."[1] Vocational awe can lead librarians to believe that "the fulfillment of job duties requires sacrifice… only through such dramatic sacrifice can librarians accomplish something 'bigger than themselves.'"[2] The safety of library employees and their ability to serve user needs are not necessarily at odds. Although the mission of a library is important, we want to avoid allowing it to pressure library workers to make needless sacrifices. Data can help librarians advocate for practices that do not increase risks without benefits and that communicate the continued value that libraries deliver.

NOTES

1.   Fobazi Ettarh, "Vocational Awe and Librarianship: The Lies We Tell Ourselves," *In the Library with the Lead Pipe* (2018): http://www.inthelibrarywiththeleadpipe.org/2018/vocational-awe/.
2.   Ibid.