COVID-19:
Lessons from the Pandemic on How to Conduct Outreach and Engagement Online

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INTRODUCTION

During the period of March 2020 to March 2021, The University of Toledo University Libraries tasked the undergraduate engagement librarian with maintaining outreach and engagement with undergraduate students throughout the pandemic, as it was already part of her listed job duties. After a year of navigating the COVID-19 pandemic, the librarian took time to reflect and analyze the efforts she made to maintain contact between undergraduate students and University Libraries. This analysis only includes out-of-class contact with students; course-integrated instruction was not considered when analyzing how the institution's response to COVID-19 impacted outreach and engagement.

COVID-19 in Context on the University of Toledo Campuses

An understanding and thorough analysis of outreach and engagement efforts by the undergraduate engagement librarian and the University Libraries requires an understanding of COVID-19 and its impact on the University of Toledo campuses. The university announced that instruction would go fully online in March of 2020, the week after the university's Spring Break.[1] Students were allowed to come back to campus to retrieve their belongings, with classes canceled for part of the week of March 16. Initially, it was announced that classes would be held online on a temporary basis,[2] but this was soon modified to include the rest of the spring 2020 semester.

After working remotely for the majority of the summer, the university started welcoming back personnel in increments starting in July, with everyone returning to work in some capacity by August, unless they had a medical exemption. In order to decrease personnel density, most individuals worked a hybrid arrangement with some work done on campus and some done at home. Students arrived back on campus later that month, with classes being offered in multiple modalities in an attempt to accommodate everyone safely.

FRAMEWORK AND APPROACH TO OUTREACH AND ENGAGEMENT

When designing intentional outreach and engagement opportunities, the librarian has treated every event as a learning opportunity. To that end, she has used backwards design, a design method in which learning goals are established first, before instruction is

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designed,[3] to establish the purpose of an event first and then organize the event around that purpose or goal. However, before and during the pandemic, there were times when the librarian was invited to participate in an event that she had no control over designing. In these situations, the librarian still focuses on the primary goals of outreach and engagement at the University Libraries. Like others before her,[4] the librarian also sees it as essential that her work takes her outside the library; most of her day-to-day duties prior to the pandemic were performed either literally outside of the library or in cooperation with individuals outside the library.

Above everything else, outreach and engagement at the University Libraries is designed to make students aware of the resources available at the library and feel more at ease using them. The ubiquitous nature of the World Wide Web has created a situation in which students are more likely to use non-library resources to begin their research,[5] regardless of the quality, breadth, or depth of the university's resources. This phenomenon has persisted, with librarians reporting that students must still be convinced to use library resources.[6] To combat this problem, the University Libraries at the University of Toledo have focused their efforts on talking to students directly whenever appropriate, whether it is information fairs, university events, or their own library programming.

UNIVERSITY LIBRARIES' RESPONSE TO COVID-19

University Libraries' response to the pandemic thus far can be roughly split into three phases: panic, regroup, and assess. These three phases have each had their own goals and outcomes associated with them, though these have been largely informally agreed upon concepts.

In the "Panic" stage, all planned events were summarily canceled immediately. This was done out of necessity, as administrators knew students were unable to stay on campus, and shortly after that decision was made, the further decision was made to close campus entirely. When these plans were finalized, university partners were contacted. In addition to contacting academic units, librarians also contacted non-academic units on campus, such as the Learning Enhancement Center, the Writing Center, the Center for International Studies and Programs, and so on. The undergraduate engagement librarian has been assigned to these units to act in an official liaison capacity for several years. In a typical academic year, the librarian would provide training for both student and staff employees, facilitate the use of library spaces for events, and engage in research to support the missions of each unit. In response, the librarian was asked to help assist with two virtual outreach replacement events: the (Re)Search Party, in partnership with the Writing Center, and a video update for the Center for International Studies and Programs. The former took place in late April, just before Finals Week, while the former took place shortly after the university pivoted to online learning. The goal in this stage was to continue facilitating communication, not only between the library and students, but also between the library and other university departments.

In the Regroup Stage, the goal shifted from keeping communication lines open to getting back to the larger goals of the university libraries: making sure students knew what resources were available to them. This began in summer 2020, when the library was asked to participate in two online information fairs. These two events replaced dozens of events that would have been conducted over the course of the summer for incoming students. The first online information fair was an Instagram-based information fair held by the Office of New Student Orientation. From the librarian's point of view, this event was non-interactive and almost completely out of the librarian's control. The second information fair was held via Facebook Live, and conducted by the Center for International Studies and Programs. This event was more interactive, but the logistics were somewhat complicated, and the event was still largely out of the librarian's control. Students watching the Facebook Live stream were able to ask questions about the resources in real time, but because of the way the Facebook Live was organized, it was not necessarily the librarian who would be answering questions; the librarian was given approximately fifteen minutes of the event, and then the organizers moved to the next physical location, in an attempt to minimize the number of people in a confined space together. Questions were not referred back to the librarian after the event.

As the summer progressed and it became clear that in-person learning would occur in some capacity in the fall, the librarian was approached and asked to hold two more events prior to the beginning to the fall semester. The main purpose of both of these events was to inform students of changes that were being made in the

library for the purposes of safety and make sure that new students understood the resources available to them. Essentially, the undergraduate engagement librarian considered every student interaction to be a new student interaction at this point in the pandemic, because many processes in the library had changed to accommodate COVID19 restrictions and guidelines. Examples of these changes include the closing of our group study rooms and the removal of some computer stations and working tables to accommodate social distancing.

The first event was a training session for Trio SSS tutors. These tutors were peer-tutors and returning undergraduate students. This training session was mandatory for students, but excuses were accepted by the tutor coordinator at his discretion. The training had twelve attendees, which was the majority of tutors for Trio SSS. The training was held synchronously via web conferencing software. Students were alert and responsive to the presentation given and asked questions after the presentation that were thought-provoking and relevant to the topic, while not being repetitive. These are qualities the librarian looks for in declaring an interaction meaningful in the absence of evaluation responses.

The second event was a Welcome Weekend AMA (Ask Me Anything). Welcome Weekend is a new series of events for incoming freshmen at the University of Toledo, which, while not precipitated by the COVID-19 pandemic, first started in fall 2020. Welcome Weekend events are centered around moving into the dorms and getting settled on campus, and include optional presentations from departments on campus, including the library. Not every incoming freshman participated in Welcome Weekend during fall 2020, but a significant number of students did. There were 11 concurrent sessions students could choose from, and 32 students chose to attend the library's AMA. Like the Trio SSS training, questions at the Welcome Weekend AMA were thought-provoking and relevant to the topic. Unlike the tutor training, however, approximately 90% of the content was generated from questions the students asked; the PowerPoint at the beginning of the AMA was stripped down to the bare basics of library information: library hours, location, main services, and the undergraduate engagement librarian's contact information.

The final outreach event that the library held in fall 2020 was a Halloween Livestream, from 6-8 pm on Halloween. The event was held in conjunction with our Division of Student Affairs and was part of a series of events that were created to give students general entertainment opportunities online in which they could meet other students. The main purpose of this event was entertainment, but the librarian also saw it as an opportunity to remind students of available library resource. The librarian and a staff member from another department created a two-hour livestream event that included trivia, ghost stories, and a costume contest. The librarian attempted to include some library-use information. However, this event only had a total of 6 attendees over the two hours, and while these attendees were enthusiastic, the event was awkward and a questionable use of time; there were not enough attendees to do breakout rooms or other programming that would facilitate communication between the attendees, which was a primary goal of the event. The secondary goal, of giving students information about the library was marginally more successful, but only in comparison to the failure of the first goal.

In spring 2021, the undergraduate engagement librarian had another opportunity to design an event for undergraduate students. This was the beginning of the assessment phase of the University Libraries' COVID19 response. Attempting to replicate the success of the Library AMA, she designed a Mid-term Library AMA, the purpose of which was to answer students' questions about midterm grades and how to finish the semester strong. This event was held online, synchronously a week after midterm grades were due. To capture an attentive, thoughtful audience, the librarian sent marketing items success coaches, advisors, and instructors in the English composition program, as these were individuals in the best position to identify students who were concerned and had questions about the library in the context of completing the semester. This event had 13 attendees, including an English Composition instructor. The AMA was ultimately deemed successful, though students were reluctant to ask questions until after the composition instructor left the event.

ASSESSMENT

With social distancing guidelines and capacity restrictions still in place on the University of Toledo campuses in spring 2021, assessment of prior events became necessary to predict a return on investment for events and determine the best events to hold as long as the pandemic continued. Study of the most successful events, the training sessions and the two Library AMAs, reveals the following guidance in planning events:

- Focus on event purpose.
- Capture a specific audience.
- Don't rely on general marketing.
- Secure buy-in from other campus departments.
- Plan for point-of-need.

Having a well-advertised and succinct purpose to the event is important for student buy-in and easy marketing. It is also important to take the event purpose into consideration when choosing how to organize the event. This is a fundamental part of backwards design and an important consideration when organizing online events; the virtual environment affords more modes for engagement than traditional face-to-face events. However, these different modes of engagement can hinder the purpose of the event; for example, if one of the purposes of the event is to allow attendees to interact with one another, modes that do not allow participant interaction would be counter-productive.

A clear event purpose also makes following the rest of the guidance easier. After establishing the purpose, ask, "Is there a specific audience that would benefit from this event?" The undergraduate engagement librarian's events that had a targeted and captive audience were more successful than those that did not; not all of those circumstances are easily replicable but some targeting can be done by marketing. General marketing was largely unsuccessful, which is why buy-in from other campus departments was essential. Trio SSS, the Office of New Student Orientation, and the English Composition Program were all essential in making these events successful.

Finally, make sure the event is as close to the point-of-need as possible. There may be a sense from students that other similar events will be available later in the semester, even if that is not true. By targeting the event at the time the students need it, the librarian can avoid this pitfall. However, this also requires advanced planning and a sense of the flow of the semester. The undergraduate engagement librarian at The University of Toledo also teaches a credit-bearing class and that helps her stay aware of the way students navigate the semester.

OTHER OBSERVATIONS

The library typically holds a dozen events of various types over the course of an academic year. In the year since COVID-19 first shut down campus, the library has participated in significantly fewer such events. Therefore, during the assessment, several topics arose that currently do not have enough data but are worth exploring.

The response from students with regard to the Halloween Livestream indicated that there was less need or desire for "general entertainment" at this time. There are several reasons that this could be true: a larger availability of free events online at this time, more on-demand programming being available, or a sense of screen-fatigue. Unfortunately, the undergraduate engagement librarian only participated in one such event.

During the pandemic, online programming potentially allowed the University Libraries to serve more commuter students. There has historically been a problem at the university with students not attending information fairs, depending on the timing, because students have already left campus for the day. By holding events online, location of attendees is largely unimportant. However, without more data about attendees, this can only be speculation at this time.

Of serious concern, and of worth to explore further, is the potential bias in the type of event held. Compared to the events previously held by the library and compared to the other events the library participated in online, the most popular events, the Library AMAs, were more casual. This familiar format might have made students more interested and comfortable in participating. If more events like this are held in the future, the librarian will want to conduct evaluation surveys specifically about the format.

Finally, there is concern that students overall may be feeling "Zoomed out." The least popular of the events held by the library occurred at the end of October, when students had been participating in campus activities, largely online, for eleven weeks of the semester, in addition to any time they might have spent doing online activities prior to starting classes in the fall. Because this issue would be inherent in the pivot to online learning, this could change as "normal" resumes and the university offers a more balanced array of activities both in person and online. To combat the fact that "normal" may not exist for several more months or more, the best advice for communicating information to students online is to either condense information or "chunk" as appropriate.

This minimizes the amount of consecutive time spend in front of a computer screen and should apply to both synchronous and asynchronous efforts.

CONCLUSION

The last year has been difficult for all academic institutions. Some have been wholly online, while others have followed a hybrid model such as the one taking place at the University of Toledo. The ways that outreach can occur in this environment are many and varied but should take into consideration the purpose of the event and the audience being reached. Wherever possible, attempt to secure buy-in from another entity on campus, whether it is another sponsoring unit or an academic department. Even though the pandemic will eventually be brought under control, libraries will still have patron constituencies that could benefit from more online outreach services: commuter and online students. According to data from the United States Department of Education, in 2018, prior to the pandemic, 16.6% of students at the post-secondary level were taking only online or distance education courses.[7] Going forward, successful events could be replicated to provide better outreach to these students.

NOTES

1. University of Toledo (2020). UToledo COVID-19 Update to Students, University of Toledo.
2. University of Toledo (2020). UToledo Announces Proactive COVID-19 Action, University of Toledo.
3. Grant P. Wiggins and Jay McTighe, *Understanding by Design* (Alexandria, Va.: Association for Supervision and Curriculum Development, 2008).
4. Leslie G Adebonojo, Kathy A Campbell, and Mark E Ellis, "Library Outreach Positions: From Planning to Practice," *Public Services Quarterly* 5, no. 4 (2009). https://doi.org/10.1080/15228950903160505.
5. Cathy De Rosa and Brad Gauder, "Perceptions of Libraries and Information Resources (2005) : A Report to the Oclc Membership," (2005).
6. Bobby Walter and Katherine Pennavaria, "College Students' Information-Seeking Behaviors: Where Do Libraries Fit In?," Kentucky Libraries 79, no. 1 (2015).
7. U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics. (forthcoming). *Digest of Education Statistics 2019*, Table 311.15.