Library Experiences During COVID-19: From Crisis and Uncertainty to Moving Forward in the New Normal

Anna Tapia MacDonald, Northwestern State University of Louisiana

Abstract

As the effects of COVID-19 spread across the nation, universities and libraries struggled to devise new ways to maintain and deliver physical services while transitioning to a completely online environment. The primary challenges and obstacles of moving classes and services entirely online included technology and internet access issues. At Northwestern State University, online tutorials, free resources, webinars, and direct answers through social media became part of an institutional plan of response. As libraries moved to develop phased reopening processes, it became vital to follow COVID-19 safety guidelines and devise clear protection procedures for the health and well-being of the library staff and patrons. Libraries will continue to deliver services as well as remain an enduring symbol of strength and stability in uncertain times.

Keywords: COVID-19; university library; Northwestern State University; students; faculty; challenges; technology; access; Wi-Fi; social media; guidelines; reopening; ALA; CDC; LOUIS; IMLS; REALM project

Introduction

At the end of the first week of January 2020, Chinese authorities identified a new type of coronavirus that previously emerged in the Hubei province of Wuhan, China, in early December 2019 (Ölcer, Yilmaz-Aslan, & Brzoska, 2020). The new virus spread rapidly across China and to neighboring countries, finally appearing in other parts of the world. On March 11, 2020, the World Health Organization (WHO) declared COVID-19 an official outbreak, and by April 5, COVID-19 had spread to 210 countries and territories around the world, with over 5.1 million confirmed cases as of May 23, 2020 (Ölcer et al., 2020).

While world governments struggled to manage the spreading pandemic and the effects of COVID-19, regional and local universities, as well as libraries, endeavored to devise new ways to maintain and deliver physical services while protecting the health of employees, students, and faculty. Libraries reexamined their online platforms and services for additional content conversion and delivery, as a result of COVID-19 information being conflicted and limited.

University libraries, including Watson Library on the campus of Northwestern State University, currently provide electronic access to robust digital collections and e-resources. Virtual services such as LibGuides, tutorials, FAQ's, and email assistance were already offered for off-campus, and distance learning requirements. However, to adjust to the remote learning environment and improve rapid and responsive communication with students and faculty, additional modifications were necessary. Services such as virtual reference implemented WebEx and synchronous instruction sessions. The library homepage adjusted content to highlight departmental contact information, e-resources, and online services. Finally, the Social Media Committee developed and implemented a variety of hashtag campaigns to emphasize virtual library resources and offer responsive and direct communication with patrons through Facebook

and Twitter platforms.

Challenges

Northwestern State University was fortunate to utilize the week of Spring Break to transition face-to-face classes to a completely online format. For many faculty members, the transition took place seamlessly as NSU was an early pioneer in distance and online education. Many faculty members already teach a combination of face-to-face and online classes, and most summer instruction is conducted online. Nevertheless, some members of the faculty struggled to convert face-to-face classes to an online format prompting a proliferation of tutorials and messages from a variety of departments. University support personnel offered staff assistance, guidance, and tools to help struggling faculty and students who were not familiar with online technology or who did not feel confident in the virtual environment.

Technology and internet access constituted the two primary obstacles for both faculty and students. For some faculty and students, it was the lack of updated devices – computers and smartphones- for others it was poor internet or lack of an internet connection. Many of our students live in rural or underserved communities without proper access to high-speed internet and few, if any, public libraries provide access to these services and technology. On the various NSULA Facebook pages devoted to student concerns, postings consistently mentioned issues with connectivity and lack of proper or working technology.

According to a Pew Research Center survey, 73% of U.S. adults in 2019 had home broadband internet. However, the in-age group of 18-29, only 67% reported broadband in the survey. Broadband access fell even lower in rural areas to 63%. To put this in perspective, 5,260 students are under the age of twenty, and 2,178 are 21-24 years of age, according to the Northwestern State University Fact Book 2018-2019. Even more worrisome is the disparity

between income level and broadband access. The Pew Research Center reported that 44% of adults in households earning less than $33,000 did not have access to broadband service in 2019. While many of our university students come from surrounding parishes and states, this number is troubling. According to the 2018 United States Census Bureau statistics, the median household income in Natchitoches Parish is $27,795. These statistics highlight the disproportionate number of low income and rural households with little or no access to the internet and online resources. In addition to the demographic statistics, the current pandemic revealed that many students were left behind when the university moved courses online. Moreover, access was restricted when libraries and campus computer labs closed.

As the semester progressed, student questions on the university and library Facebook pages shifted to specific requests involving office hours, contact information, as well as access to computer labs for homework and printing. Furthermore, students posted questions about proctoring during finals, how to install and use Proctor U, as well as Testing Center hours. Additional questions typically concerned technology, software, and continued connectivity issues.

Library staff continuously monitored social media posts to respond to relevant service questions. Many of the posts related to offices and resources located in the library building, such as the Computer Lab and Testing Center. Other students required direct assistance with remote access to the library catalog, e-resources, and virtual reference.

Open and responsive communication was a key factor in transitioning to online and virtual formats. Communication through social media was the most effective and direct platform for rapid university response in a variety of ways. Students, faculty, and staff could connect in one location to answer questions and receive almost immediate feedback. Student familiarity

and fluency using social media helped students transition and cope with the stress and anxiety associated with not only COVID-19, but also the change in their college experience and everyday lives.

University and Library

To help address some of the challenges and questions caused by the disruption of COVID-19, the university utilized the NSULA Student Concerns Facebook page to post current information and to respond to student questions. The Watson Library Social Media Committee monitored the NSULA Student Concerns Facebook page to address any library or service-related questions. Library hours and contact information were updated on the main library page as the library transitioned to online-only, and the physical library was closed. The committee frequently posted reminders highlighting 24/7 electronic access to the library catalog, e-resources, and reference services available to keep the community informed and up to date about library services and hours.

For students who had questions about free Wi-Fi access, Watson Library utilized social media to share the LOUIS map of free library Wi-Fi hotspots and replied directly to individual posts with local free hotspots. Locations with free Wi-Fi access included the Natchitoches Parish Public Library parking lot and other businesses around Natchitoches. In addition, The Northwestern State University Office of First Year Experience partnered with EPICTOUCH telecommunications in Natchitoches to offer free Wi-Fi access in their parking lot to current Northwestern State University students.

Numerous student support departments located in Watson Library used social media to promote their e-resources and services. For example, the Academic Success Center offered WebEx tutoring sessions and posted free study tools for a range of subject areas. Additionally,

the University Testing Center posted special testing hours and weekly guidelines for on-campus testing appointments, along with COVID-19 safety measures required when entering the Testing Center. The Department of Counseling and Career Services posted information and links on NSU campus-wide Messenger email as well as Facebook to inform students and staff about available resources. Additionally, the Student Government Association addressed mental health issues of fear and isolation associated with COVID-19 with a series of free videos on Facebook.

Social media took the lead as the primary platform for information and rapid response to student questions. Faculty, administration, and staff were able to monitor the university pages and respond quickly to issues ranging from housing to office closings. The university Messenger email remained functioning for announcements, but Facebook was the primary communication tool for students.

As classes transitioned to online-only instruction and faculty moved to home offices, a Facebook page similar to the NSULA Student Concerns page was created called NSULA Faculty Helping Faculty. Here faculty could share information and address faculty needs with fellow faculty, instructors, and administrators. Primarily the platform is used to share free resources and tools, offer technical help, and as a safe environment to connect and share with other faculty members during this unprecedented period.

Social Media

The impact of COVID-19 has magnified the need for a user-friendly method of direct and responsive communication with students and faculty. Social media platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram constitute the primary meeting places for information sharing, Q&A, and serve as online community gathering spaces. Statistics reinforce the necessity for social media as a conduit of communication and information.

According to the 2019 Pew Research Center, 72% of U.S. adults use social media. Younger adults ages 18 to 29 were among the first social media adopters, and they account for the highest percentage of social media use at 90%. Women make up a slightly higher percentage of users at 78%, and men at 65%. Income levels appear to have the least amount of variance between the two lowest income brackets. Those making less than $30,000 reported 68% usage, with the next income level $30,000 to $49,000 reporting 70% usage. Statistical data confirms the lowest use of social media in rural areas at 66%. Suburban users account for 72%, and urban areas report 76% usage. These numbers are reflective of the disproportionate access to internet/broadband and mobile technology in rural communities. Demographic statistics and anecdotal evidence from student posts on university social media platforms during COVID-19 reaffirm the need to provide additional support to those students living in low income and rural areas.

Library Social Media

In addition to monitoring the NSULA Student Concerns page, the Library Social Media Committee responded to student needs and the changing environment caused by COVID-19 by creating new hashtag campaigns and adapting content to specifically feature positive stories and posts that were both informational and entertaining. Posts that promote libraries, reading, information literacy, and encourage lifelong learning, comprise the focus for all social media platforms including Twitter, Pinterest, and now Instagram. The primary platform for library posts is Facebook, as it is the most-widely used online platform apart from YouTube. According to the Pew Research Center, Facebook accounts for 69% of the market with YouTube slightly higher at 73%, Instagram at 37%, Pinterest at 28%, and Twitter at 22%.

Some of the daily posts have specific scheduled content for days of the week with

hashtag themes created by the committee to categorize and highlight content across the various social media platforms. For example, Wednesday posts feature unique words and definitions with #WednesdayWordsWithWatson, and the Assistant Archivist in the Cammie G. Henry Research Center has generated a large following with her #ThrowBackThursday, #TBT, posts on Facebook and Twitter. Currently, we are featuring our home offices and "new coworkers" with the hashtag #WatsonStrong, #CovidDiaries. The Watson Library hashtag compliments the #LibrariesStrong national campaign, an initiative of 2018 American Library Association President Loida Garcia-Febo, aimed at highlighting the value of academic, public, and school libraries (American Library Association, 2019). The campaign has been very successful on Facebook generating positive feedback and consistent engagement on the posts. Other hashtags are specific to the type of posts such as #WatsonReads for individual titles or book-related posts. Special events and programs are highlighted with #WatsonYourLibrary and #WhatsUpWithWatson for general information and updates to library hours.

The Watson Library Social Media Committee has worked diligently to develop and implement a creative social media presence with a consistent schedule of posts and corresponding hashtags for message clarity and library name recognition. Communicating with both the NSU and Natchitoches community has never been more important or relevant as it is now with a community eager for information and engagement from a trusted source.

Plan of Action and Reopening

The Library Director and Department Heads closely monitored the Louisiana Governor's plans for statewide phased reopening and followed the plans set forward by our university president and administration. Department Heads met virtually through Zoom meetings to discuss departmental needs and plans for the library reopening. Early on and throughout the

process, we utilized the American Library Association (ALA) website for COVID-19 resources and webinars. The Director of the Natchitoches Parish Library shared their library's phased plans for reopening which was developed with the cooperation of the regional public library system administration. These plans, along with research and guidelines from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), and findings from the Institute of Museum and Library Services (IMLS) research partnership, REALM (REopening Archives, Libraries and Museums) provided best practices and guidelines on how to mitigate COVID-19 on paper-based, and other types of collections (OCLC, Institute of Museum and Library Services, & Battelle, 2020). Additional information from our Head Archivist, on material handling and disinfecting from an archival perspective, helped us formulate our phased reopening procedure guidelines for the library and archives.

Library plans are considered a work in progress as research on COVID-19 and government and university policies are released. Each department continues to develop strategies for reopening with the assistance and input of the staff, which will be part of the greater library phased reopening plan. We continue to work with the Physical Plant, the Office of Environmental Health & Safety, and our building cleaning staff to develop phased reopening protocols that create a safe environment for our students and staff. The primary goal is to design a plan that facilitates a smooth library reopening with the appropriate safety equipment and protocols recommended by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). And by following the REALM project (REopening Archives, Libraries and Museums) science-based research recommendations on specific library materials handling for COVID-19 quarantine guidelines (OCLC, Institute of Museum and Library Services, & Battelle, 2020).

Conclusion

As we move forward towards a "new normal" and the phases of reopening, the library will continue to be a safe place, where the public can go for access to information and resources. The emergence of COVID-19 and its impact on society and information resources may finally validate the opinion that libraries have evolved with technology. Library content is available electronically 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. Reference services and e-content delivery are a click or email away. Even in the era of Google and personal computers we are once again, recognized as "essential and relevant." As we move towards the new post-COVID-19 prospect of reopening buildings and creating the best practices for delivering library services, the library remains, as always, a calm and enduring symbol of strength and stability in uncertain times.

References

American Library Association. (2020). *COVID-19 Recovery*. http://www.ala.org/tools/covid-19-recovery

American Library Association. (2019, April 08). *LIBRARIES = STRONG COMMUNITIES TOUR*. http://www.ala.org/news/state-americas-libraries-report-2019/libraries-strong-communities

Berendes, D., & Rasberry, C. (2020, April 29). *Mitigating COVID-19 when managing paper-based, circulating, and other types of collections*. https://www.imls.gov/webinars/mitigating-covid-19-when-managing-paper-based-circulating-and-other-types-collections?_ga=2.93859230.2046056169.1590870180-2039709688.1590870180

Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. (2020, May). *Coronavirus Disease 2019 Colleges, Universities, and Higher Learning*. https://www.cdc.gov/coronavirus/2019-ncov/community/colleges-universities/index.html

Dixon, J. A. (2020, July 1). CAMPUS CONCERNS: College and university libraries face unique challenges as institutions begin reopening this fall. *Library Journal*, *145*(7), 18.

Enis, M. (2020, June 1). Vital and visible. *Library Journal*, *145*(6), 24.

LOUIS: The Louisiana Library Network. (2017). *COVID-19 resources*. https://www.louislibraries.org/

Northwestern State University Office of Institutional Research. (2020). *Northwestern State University 2018-2019 Factbook*. http://oir.nsula.edu/

Northwestern State University. (2020). *Northwestern State student concerns*. https://www.facebook.com/groups/NSULAStudentConcerns/

Northwestern State University. (2020). *NSULA faculty helping Faculty*.

https://www.facebook.com/groups/217165726226029/

Northwestern State University. (2020). *Return to Campus Plan*.

https://www.nsula.edu/return-to-campus/

OCLC, Institute of Museum and Library Services, & Battelle. (2020). Reopening Archives,

Libraries, and Museums (REALM) *Information Hub: A COVID-19 Research Project*.

https://www.webjunction.org/explore-topics/COVID-19-research-project.html

Ölcer, S., Yilmaz-Aslan, Y., & Brzoska, P. (2020). Lay perspectives on social distancing and

other official recommendations and regulations in the time of COVID-19: A qualitative

study of social media posts. *BMC Public Health*, *20*(1), 1–9.

https://doi.org/10.1186/s12889-020-09079-5

Pew Research Center. (2020, June 05). *Demographics of social media users and Adoption in the

United States*. https://www.pewresearch.org/internet/fact-sheet/social-media/

U.S. Census Bureau. (2019). *QuickFacts: Natchitoches Parish, Louisiana.*

https://www.census.gov/quickfacts/fact/table/natchitochesparishlouisiana