

**Campus Closure Spurs Reflection and
Brings Important Insights to Departmental Management**

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Abstract

When COVID-19 caused wide-spread campus closures, librarians had to re-evaluate how they and their staff would continue their work. This led one librarian to a full evaluation of the technical services department in which she works. Departmental tasks, communication, processes, and procedures were all evaluated and fine-tuned. However, the most surprising discovery was the importance and impact of actively seeking professional development on the entire department.

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I supervise a technical services and electronic resources department at the library of a University that serves over 8,000 undergraduate and graduate students. We handle all of the traditional tasks of technical services (acquisitions, cataloging, and processing materials) and also manage the library's electronic resources, collect and manage the library's data and statistical records for analysis, lead library initiatives for affordable learning, and receive and process donations. When talk of COVID-19 and the proceeding shut-downs began to circulate on the news, on social media, and on campus, I began to prepare myself and my staff to work from home. We quickly began to put all our efforts into any time-sensitive tasks that must be done on campus and into preparing off-campus access to resources we would need to work from home. Books were rushed to the shelves, e-resource access was double-checked, and a hurried inventory of departmental tasks was completed to determine what work was essential to serve students and faculty and what work could be done remotely. This evaluation and the subsequent campus closure lead to important insights about our department and brought lessons that will have a great effect on the department after our return to campus.

The results of our departmental inventory were unexpectedly positive. Much more of the management of these resources and services can be done remotely than I had initially anticipated. I had assumed that the majority of our work was site-based and that our department would fall very far behind schedule due to the campus closure. However, the inventory revealed that much of our work could be continued off-site. Statistics and data management, catalog clean-up, acquisitions record-keeping, e-resource management, affordable learning initiatives, and even purchasing and cataloging e-books can be (and was) managed remotely. Ultimately, only the tasks of cataloging of physical items and maintenance of the physical collection were affected during the closure. Our department was able to fulfill the vast majority of its duties to

the library and, more importantly, to provide un-interrupted (albeit virtual) service to students and faculty.

While the majority of our work continued smoothly, the transition to remote work highlighted two areas for improvement in the department: communication and workflow procedures. While neither departmental workflow issues nor miscommunications lead to any major issues, the change in working circumstances highlighted just how much informal communication we rely on for daily operations. The switch to working remotely prompted me, as the department head, to emphasize regular, formal communications within the department (a scheduled phone call, Zoom meeting, or e-mail to replace the multiple daily asides, questions, and conversations we usually engage in).

Working and communicating remotely also forced me to be conscious of the many assumptions I make when communicating with others in my department and to re-evaluate the difference between face-to-face and virtual communication. These assumptions may not have led to a misunderstanding in a face-to-face conversation, but if they did, body language or shared visual clues would have revealed the need for a clarification before the project really began. These cues are either lacking or missing in virtual communication. This realization caused me to make sure my communications were more specific and detailed. Scheduling time for detailed discussions and meetings and focusing on detailed, specific communications within my department are priorities and practices I intend to carry on when we return to campus. Focusing on making our communication clearer can only improve the department.

The closure and the change in working circumstances also allowed me to reflect on the department's workflow, processes, and procedures. While the need for a re-evaluation of the department's processes and procedures mostly stems from the recent changes in the roles and

functions of the department, the virtual and remote work environment highlighted specific areas where these should be addressed and improved, specifically, when different aspects of a project must be handled by multiple people in the department. Because we could no longer rely on informal communication, less than optimal workflows in projects and processes were more apparent.

Additionally, our department has taken on new responsibilities within the last few years, and this change has not only affected the work of the department, but the change in duties also brought major changes to each and every role in the department, including the creation of new positions in the library. When coupled with the staff turnover (no member of this department has been employed by the library for more than 3 years), these changes mean that we are still actively refining the flow of work in the department—from acquisitions, to data gathering and management, to collection management, to affordable learning and campus support. Because the closure forced us to step back from our regular day-to-day routines and because the campus closure highlighted the need for more formal, routine communication during this time, it revealed the need for a clearer work-flow and provided the opportunity to analyze these processes and to formalize those that needed to be clear and consistent. Gathering the information to document these processes required participation from each member of the department as well as library administration. The input of every member of the department was vital.

Due to their different roles, each participant was able to provide details, explanations, and perspectives on each process that allowed us to build effective and efficient procedures. These newly-developed processes and procedures were documented and collected into a department handbook so that they can be easily located and referred to when needed. We will now return to

campus with an improved understanding of how each role should function and how each operation should flow in our department.

Because all of our work was not able to be completed remotely, more time was available to actively and purposefully pursue professional development. This proved to be one of the most valuable uses of my time off campus. In the hustle-and-bustle of my day-to-day work on campus, professional development is often relegated to the back burner, often waiting for annual conferences or special occasions, unless skill development is needed for an immediate project or something especially important or relevant just happens to come across my desk. Getting resources into patrons' hands is my top priority and usually consumes the large portion of my time in the office. However, taking the time to catch-up on the workshops and webinars allowed me to more deeply engage with various professional communities and has led to new discoveries, plans, and skills that will improve our department and our service to the university.

Through these learning opportunities, I have been exposed to new ideas and tools which provided insights into ways to improve our services to students and faculty. These new insights then led to focused planning for the upcoming academic year. I was able to evaluate the needs and weaknesses of our department and how we can better meet the needs of our campus community. This evaluation of needs then allowed me to outline a plan to address them. This includes a schedule of workshops, meetings, and projects for the next year. I also asked my staff to participate in professional development during this time. I suggested several webinars for them, and even asked that they watch one or two specific ones that related to the upcoming projects I was planning. This allowed us to discuss their roles in the projects and will ensure that each member of the department has some ownership of each project, is not surprised by new project assignments that will begin when we resume our regular on-campus schedule this fall,

and can learn the skills needed to accomplish these tasks and develop their own professional skill set. Actively seeking out professional development for both myself and my staff has now become one of my top priorities; it is no longer relegated to the list of secondary tasks.

Despite my initial misgivings about what we as a technical services department could accomplish from home, my staff and I were able to fulfill the overwhelming majority of our duties and keep most of our tasks and projects moving forward. This is in no small part due to the remote access to many products and information provided by library vendors and our own campus IT (information technology) department. In addition to revealing positive aspects of our work, the campus closure also led to important discoveries about how I and the department can improve communication, procedures, and planning when we return to campus. But most interestingly, the closure re-introduced me to the importance of professional development and prompted detailed planning of projects and improvements for the department.

Thus far, my staff has responded positively to these departmental developments; however, since we have not yet returned full-time to campus, the full impact of these changes on myself, my staff, and our department is yet to be seen. While the ultimate effects of these changes are still unknown, these newly discovered and re-discovered lessons will certainly have a lasting impact on the process and priorities of my department and my own work.