Changed, Changed Utterly

Christopher Cox predicts the significant ways academic libraries will shift in terms of collections, services, spaces and operations as a result of the pandemic.

By Christopher Cox June 5, 2020

In early March 2020, COVID-19 blindsided academic libraries. With little time to plan, we closed our library facilities at Clemson University to protect the safety of our patrons and employees and moved to online services only and work from home. Thankfully, years of curating digital content, providing multiple opportunities for research interaction and developing robust search interfaces and web presences served us well during this transition.

With discussions now occurring about reopening campuses, academic libraries face a paradigm shift. Instead of returning to normal, librarians will be returning to a "new normal" -- one where in-person classes and service interactions may be impossible or no longer preferred, where collections in physical format may be a barrier to access, and where collaborative study is shunned in favor of social distancing in buildings that can only safely house half the people they used to. How can we leverage this crisis to create new and innovative collections and services to improve our campus communities?

Below are some of my predictions, based on trend analysis, of how the landscape of academic libraries may change in terms of collections, services, spaces and operations, in hopes they inspire new thinking and continued dialogue.

Collections

The diminishing value of print collections. If the coronavirus crisis has taught us anything, it's how irrelevant our circulating print collections have become. Overnight, most libraries eliminated access due to concerns of virus spread. Strangely, requests for these materials were minimal. How can we make the content in our print collections more accessible and relevant in a post-COVID-19 world?

Mass digitization and access versus archives. For years, research libraries have engaged in "just-in-case" print digitization efforts. With print materials locked behind closed doors, the Internet Archive launched the National Emergency Digital Library, and Hathi Trust opened Emergency Temporary Access to its members. While some authors expressed chagrin at those actions, the result, as Roger Schonfeld points out, is a triumph of long-term planning over the prioritization of immediate needs. Although copyright issues will need to be resolved, additional mass digitization efforts should be undertaken, leveraging collaborative storage agreements currently dedicated to the preservation of print content, to make library print collections more accessible.

E-everything. Unlike our print materials, libraries have seen use of our electronic resources skyrocket. Over the next few years, we will spend more time and money developing our electronic collections. That will be a challenge with diminishing budgets. Libraries will need to develop new strategies for negotiating better deals with publishers and lobby for greater access to streaming media and ebooks, which are more plentiful and cheaply accessible to individuals than they are to libraries. New access models will also need to be developed, and if the recent [Macmillan e-book embargo](#) is any indication, publishers will make this challenging.

The end of big deals. The long-term financial implications of COVID-19, as well as years of inflationary increases by publishers, have caused several institutions to rethink multiyear licenses to large journal packages. [The University of North Carolina](#) and [State University of New York system](#) libraries recently announced that they will be canceling their Elsevier contracts in favor of title-by-title purchasing that will save significant money. Look for more libraries to follow suit and cancel big deals, relying instead on resource-sharing agreements and document delivery services, forcing publishers to develop à la carte access options.

Distinctive collection digitization. The greatest asset of any academic library's collection is its special collections and archives. Ironically, these distinctive materials are often hidden in vaults, only available for in-person access. Archivists have been challenged to provide research materials and services online during the COVID-19 closure. Look for an increase in archives digitization efforts in the coming years, transitioning digitized content from being a method of preservation or preview, to being *the* primary access point for the collection.

Copyright/fair use challenges. While it justly protects the creators, copyright has always been unreasonably restrictive. And while fair use does provide for educational use of copyrighted materials, most faculty members don't understand it, concerned only with making content available to their students. As courses go online, they'll want greater access to materials to use in their courses. Librarians must provide more copyright education, as well as encourage authors to use creative commons licenses and lobby for more flexible copyright laws.

Services

Self-service models and virtual alternatives. Libraries pride themselves on the in-person customer experience they provide. How do we recalibrate our service desks so they don't become hot zones of traffic and disease spread but continue to provide the high-quality customer service our patrons expect? Will we have service desks at all? Look for more self-service and touchless interactions: self-checkout, curbside pickup, scan and deliver, and materials delivery. Expect also that patrons won't visit us as much as they used to. We'll need to bring our services to them.

Embedded librarianship. Placing librarians physically in the flow of teaching and research efforts has been a trend for years. If courses remain online, deeper integration of both library resources and personnel into course management systems is essential to ensure students gain information literacy skills. Librarians can help faculty members develop course content, co-teach, provide research consultations, hold virtual office hours online and assist in the identification and linking of course content.

The rise of open content … The quest for a coronavirus cure has emphasized the importance of immediate access to scientific information and data sets. Librarians have been lobbying for years to develop alternative pathways for research dissemination through institutional repositories and support of open-access publishing. This is the moment to advocate for open research and open data in federal grants and to educate faculty members about how to retain their publication rights. Look for libraries to also seek greater control of the research being produced at their institutions, as can be seen in the recent rise of publisher open-access agreements.

… and open educational resources. Libraries have already taken a leadership role in educating faculty on the benefits of creating and adopting open educational resources, free or low-cost textbooks, and learning materials that provide teacher personalization while lowering the cost of student education. OERs will be in demand as faculty seek alternatives to bulky print textbooks. Libraries can also introduce and manage free homework systems and virtual labs to enhance online student engagement.

Support for online teaching. Libraries are perfectly positioned to assist faculty in the development of online courses. Our instructional technology game is strong, having extensive familiarity with tutorial and instructional video creation, course management systems, OER and the like. We already provide students with instruction, technologies and spaces that support digital literacy -- using technology to create and communicate. We need to build further relationships with campus offices of online education, instructional technology and teaching and learning to leverage this expertise and ensure that students and faculty have the skills they need to succeed in this new online environment.

Support for online research. Lab closures and travel restrictions present barriers to faculty research. Libraries can assist researchers by developing online environments for faculty members to collaborate from a distance. Virtual lab environments, built on current voice recognition and data visualization initiatives, can be developed to aid researchers who are unable to conduct physical experiments. Researchers will also need places to deposit data and distribute their research. Libraries can use tools like ORCID to connect preferred gateways like ArXiv with institutional repositories to develop a comprehensive research platform for researchers.

The library website as a virtual front door. Libraries have had to rethink their websites now that they represent the primary path of interaction for patrons. Following usability principles, look for library websites to evolve to be more user friendly, responsive and customizable.

Personalization and the promise of artificial intelligence. Libraries have been reluctant to embrace artificial intelligence surveillance technologies due to our desire to protect the intellectual freedom of our patrons. Yet AI technologies could be harnessed to provide more tailored search results, monitor social distancing and integrate the library into personal assistants.

Spaces

Studied study spaces. New library designs have intentionally emphasized open floor plans and collaborative study space. How will this change in a post-COVID-19 world? Will students prefer, or be forced, to use individualized study spaces? Will group studies be in demand or

closed altogether? If there are guidelines on the size of groups, how do we monitor and enforce them?

Removing tables and chairs will be necessary to encourage social distancing. Technology can be harnessed to help patrons avoid clusters of individuals or identify and book open seats in less populated areas. Look for significant changes in space design as libraries study user behavior and seek to respond.

A second, larger challenge exists in serving our populations in our current footprints. Knowing we will have to limit the number of patrons in our buildings, more study spaces will be needed across campus. Taking the lead in managing and coordinating access to these new spaces would allow us to become more integrated across the geography of our institutions.

The disappearance of public technology. Computer labs are disappearing from our campuses, but libraries still have large numbers of public computers and even greater collections of circulating technology. Public computers may become a thing of the past in a post-COVID-19 world. Libraries will encourage students to bring their own devices and provide student work environments -- dual monitors, shareable screens -- that can be tailored to individual needs. New cleaning routines will need to be developed to ensure safe circulation of technology should that continue.

Operations

Employee safety. Procurement of personal protective equipment will be essential for employees on the front lines to be safe and comfortable interacting with patrons. How will patrons react to masked librarians behind Plexiglas shields? Employees may need to work in shifts, making communication and the preservation of community difficult. Office spaces will need to be rethought, too, as open-concept office spaces may give way to preference for enclosure.

Continuous learning and development. The move to work from home proved challenging for many people, as they were asked to quickly learn new collaborative technologies like Zoom and WebEx, Microsoft Teams, Box, and Google Docs. Most embraced this immersive learning experience. Libraries should harness this momentum, providing additional technology training and identifying essential technology skills for employees in this new normal. With travel restricted, online professional development will also be important.

Doing more with less. The economic impact of COVID-19 will be felt for years to come. As colleges struggle to maintain enrollment and reduce expenses, libraries will confront budget reductions, hiring freezes and other spending restrictions. How will we do more with fewer personnel while protecting our acquisitions budget to provide greater online access to content? We will need streamline workflows and retrain existing employees to fill new roles. Student learning and faculty research may be impacted by what are sure to be drastic cuts.

Equity of access. COVID-19 has exacerbated the divide that exists between "essential" workers and those who are provided the privilege of working from home, those with reliable internet access and those without, and those whose income or social status do not afford them quality health care.

Librarian activism. Librarians across the country mobilized on social media to [document how libraries were responding to COVID-19](#), as well as call for closures to ensure employee safety. Look for librarians to activate further around issues such as open access, copyright, worker rights and ending the digital divide.

To thrive in this new reality, libraries will need to be nimbler and more responsive than ever before. We have learned and grown during our time in quarantine. I look forward to our future transformation.

Bio

Christopher Cox is the dean of libraries at Clemson University.