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Original Publication Information

Willenborg, A., & Withorn, T. (2021). Online Learning Librarianship in a Fully Online World: Findings (and Advice) from a National Study During the COVID-19 Pandemic. *Ascending into an Open Future: The Proceedings of the ACRL 2021 Virtual Conference*, April 13–16,2021, 356-364.

ThinkIR Citation

Willenborg, Amber and Withorn, Tessa, "Online Learning Librarianship in a Fully Online World: Findings (and Advice) from a National Study During the COVID-19 Pandemic" (2021). *Faculty Scholarship*. 530. <https://ir.library.louisville.edu/faculty/530>

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ONLINE LEARNING LIBRARIANSHIP IN A FULLY ONLINE WORLD:

Findings (and Advice) from a National Study During the Covid-19 Pandemic

Amber Willenborg and Tessa Withorn*

INTRODUCTION AND LITERATURE REVIEW

In March 2020, libraries across the United States closed their physical buildings due to local government mandates and federal guidelines for the COVID-19 pandemic. The American Library Association conducted a survey in May 2020 that provides comprehensive data about library closures and response. Some preliminary findings of the survey report that along with closures, there were “shared leaps in the use of digital content, online learning, and virtual programs,” and that libraries were, “committed to meeting the educational needs of students and researchers.”¹ A rapid response survey also collected data from U.S. academic libraries to provide a timeline of responses and live updates. According to this survey, most reference and instructional services are provided online, and 80% of responding libraries are required to work remotely.² Although this data provides some insights into how academic libraries in the U.S. have responded to COVID-19, the pandemic has changed and continues to change how librarians provide equitable reference and instructional services for online students and faculty.³ Remote work has also changed the nature of training, supervision, and professional development for librarians in a fully remote environment. If “we’re all online learning librarians now,” what might fully online and hybrid reference and instruction models look like at various institutions during and after a pandemic?

While research on the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on academic libraries and librarians will likely continue in the future, previous theories and practices from library science and related fields can provide some background and insights into the challenges of academic librarians who are both experienced and new to providing fully online reference and instruction. Previous research has shown that online learning librarians can

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provide functional expertise to enhance online instruction in collaboration with subject experts;⁴ however, not all academic libraries have this dedicated functional role. Theories of transformational leadership also describe how experts can support others and earn trust through personal relationships.⁵ Librarians who may have been resistant to using online tools for reference and instruction in the past can also benefit from seeking support from their colleagues and experts in the profession.⁶

Providing sustainable and personalized online library instruction⁷ and research consultations⁸ can be time-intensive and challenging. For some time now, librarians have warned others against “burnout”⁹ and other negative affective dimensions of public services such as reference and instruction.¹⁰ In her introduction to *The Feminist Reference Desk*, Maria T. Accardi speaks of prioritizing self-care and turning “the tension of work-life balance and life-life balance” into self-reflection on one’s own relationship to work, especially during times of personal loss and grief.¹¹ Many librarians recognize the affective dimensions of research in working with students,¹² and instruction librarians have incorporated approaches like mindfulness¹³ and culturally sustaining pedagogy¹⁴ in the classroom to reduce library anxiety.¹⁵ Even at institutions where some classes are still offered in person, it’s unclear if increased workload for providing online services may lead to “Zoom fatigue”¹⁶ and other stress-related conditions while working from home, in addition to the added stress of reopening plans during a pandemic. Critical librarians have also unveiled troublesome narratives such as “grit” and deficient thinking about students¹⁷ and “vocational awe,” which casts librarians as “essential” when they assume the roles of first responders for public health or social work.¹⁸ These narratives of deficit and heroism may also apply to how librarians view themselves and others in the profession.

Certainly in times of crisis like a global pandemic, work is only one dimension of the “Whole Person”¹⁹ of library workers. The purpose of the present study is to better understand the effects of the pandemic on online learning librarians specifically, and present their advice based on their functional expertise²⁰ in online reference and instruction to librarians who may be new to providing online library services. Since the long-term effects of the COVID-19 pandemic on the evolving roles of academic librarians is still unknown, this study attempts to address the following research questions:

- How has the COVID-19 pandemic affected academic libraries and the roles of online learning librarians?
- What advice and recommendations can online learning experts provide to librarians who may be new to online reference and instruction?

METHODS

This study builds upon the authors’ previous research and data collected in early 2020 on the roles, skills, and challenges of academic online learning librarians using semi-structured interviews.²¹ The authors conducted follow-up interviews with all seventeen original participants who held a position of online learning or e-learning librarian and worked at an academic library in the United States (see Table 1 for participant demographics). Modifications to the initial study were approved by each authors’ Institutional Review Boards in June 2020.

TABLE 1		
Study participant demographics (n=17)		
	Number	%
Gender		
Male	7	41
Female	9	53
Non-binary	1	6
Race or Ethnicity		
White	15	88
Hispanic/Mexican	1	6
Chinese-American	1	6
Age		
20–29	3	17
30–39	7	41
40–49	6	35
50–59	1	6
Highest Degree Earned		
MLS/MLIS	13	76
Other advanced degree	3	17
Years of Profession Librarian Experience		
0–5	4	24
6–10	7	41
11–15	3	17
16–20	3	17
Carnegie Classification of Institution		
Doctoral	15	88
Baccalaureate	1	6
Associate’s	1	6

In October and November 2020, the authors conducted semi-structured interviews with each participant from the previous study over the phone or web conferencing software. Each interview lasted approximately thirty minutes and participants were prompted to answer questions about the COVID-19 pandemic's effect on their library or department, changes to their role and additional support for colleagues, if any, as well as their own challenges and advice for other reference and instruction librarians. Interviews were recorded, de-identified, and transcribed for analysis. Pseudonyms are used to refer to individual participants to anonymize results. As with the previous study, interview responses were analyzed and interpreted using discourse analysis²² to reveal themes based on the social context of a historical moment. In the present study, the historical moment and context is the COVID-19 pandemic in relation to academic libraries.

RESULTS

COVID-19, Academic Libraries, and Online Learning Librarians

Participants were asked to describe how their institution and library responded to the COVID-19 pandemic after March 2020 and their library's plans for the near future. Responses about the start of the pandemic were consistent among all librarians interviewed; academic library buildings closed in March 2020 and librarians began to plan for fully remote services with their department or supervisor.

At the time of their interview, some librarians were still working in a fully remote environment while others had returned to their library to conduct reference and instruction in buildings that were open with some restrictions, such as reduced capacity, social distancing, and local mask mandates. Most librarians interviewed were providing reference and instructional services online through chat, synchronous online sessions, and providing online instructional materials; however, some participants continued to provide in-person services during some months of 2020.

Academic Libraries' Evolving Relationship to Online Learning

Participants were asked to discuss changes in their library or department's relationship to online learning during the pandemic, if any. Online learning librarians described how their libraries quickly pivoted to providing fully online instruction for most classes and noted significant changes to their reference models. Each library's instructional offerings were unique, but most described a range of instructional approaches including interactive web conferencing sessions, embedded services, and providing online instructional materials such as recorded videos, tutorials, modules in the Learning Management System (LMS), or research guides. In terms of online reference, changes to services included extended chat reference hours and virtual reference services through live chat, email, and research appointments.

Online learning librarians viewed these changes as positive improvements toward best practices. Tim noted that building up the library's asynchronous instructional materials cut down on "one shot" instruction sessions, and Anne mentioned the time saved by creating reusable and scalable online content like videos and tutorials. Several librarians, including Carole, viewed the shift to online services as an opportunity for the library to support student success and collect data on library services in more meaningful ways.

Online learning librarians also noticed changes in the job duties of their colleagues within the library and increased involvement in online reference and instruction within their library or department. Erik's fellow librarians were not involved with online learning before the pandemic but are now responsible for online reference and instruction in their liaison areas. Dillon described online learning work as being more of a collaborative effort in the library, whereas before it was a solo venture.

Most participants noted that their library was prepared to provide fully online reference and instruction. Looking ahead, online learning librarians also believed that their colleagues would continue with these roles and hoped they would feel more comfortable with online learning work due to their experiences during the pandemic. However, some participants did not believe this evolution in librarian job duties was a result of the COVID-19 pandemic or working remotely, but rather it had been an ongoing discussion before the pandemic.

Academic online learning librarians also observed changes in librarian attitudes toward online learning work. Marsha's department is now more supportive and open to online learning, whereas before some members of the department were hesitant. Remy's library administration has begun to prioritize online learning now that they've seen the benefits of this work in times of crisis, and Anne has noticed greater value placed on online learning expertise within her organization. Overall, online learning librarians are hopeful that the newfound recognition of and respect for online learning work in academic libraries will continue after the pandemic.

Evolving Roles of Online Learning Librarians: Leadership, Expertise, and Workload

In addition to changes in their library's relationship to online learning, online learning librarians were asked to discuss if the COVID-19 pandemic affected their own job duties. Participants commonly discussed their evolving duties in terms of taking on new leadership roles, spending more time training colleagues, and managing an increased workload.

Several online learning librarians described their new leadership roles on campus and in the library as a direct or indirect result of the pandemic. At the campus level, participants were often called upon to share their online learning expertise. Erik was asked to provide technology training to several departments outside of the library, while Anne was invited to sit on a university-wide COVID response task force. Within the library, other participants received promotions related to their leadership roles in online learning. Anne received a coordinator title, Gladys was put in charge of a newly created distance and online library services department, and Lauren became the director of her library.

Another significant change in the roles of online learning librarians was the increased time spent training library colleagues newly involved in online learning work, particularly in online instruction. Participants like Anne and Howard began providing workshops and developing training materials for librarians on teaching tools and best practices related to online instruction. Others, like Joshua, did not offer formal training but instead made themselves more available as a resource to colleagues, spending more time answering questions and offering tips for creating engaging online instructional materials.

Even if their role didn't formally change, most participants described increased workload surrounding online learning as a result of library services moving online. While the workload was challenging to many, some online learning librarians discussed the benefit of having more time to focus on their online learning work. Dillon no longer has to spend time on collection development, and Carole has enjoyed dedicating more time to thinking strategically about her vision for online learning. Still, many participants feel overwhelmed by the amount of work they have taken on. Susan was given more responsibilities in answering questions from students, faculty, and colleagues, and Jamie described the work as exhausting.

ADVICE AND RECOMMENDATIONS FROM ONLINE LEARNING LIBRARIANS

Participants were also asked if they had any advice or recommendations for academic librarians who may be new to providing online reference and instruction. Participants offered practical advice such as finding a support network in the library or through professional organizations. They also recommended being proactive about seeking out relevant training and support to build online learning skills. Online learning librarians also acknowledged that online learning requires a lot of planning and preparation but offered words of encouragement to those who may be new to this work.

Find a Support Network

Most participants agreed that finding a support network is key to professional growth in providing online reference and instruction. Joshua suggested looking to one's own departmental colleagues as a resource for sharing teaching strategies and tools, while Sylvia advised reaching out to a teaching and learning department at one's

institution for support. Many online learning librarians mentioned external support networks like the Online Learning Consortium, Educause, and ACRL's Distance and Online Learning Section (DOLS) as communities of practice providing resources and mentorship opportunities from experienced online learning librarians.

Be Proactive about Training and Lifelong Learning

Online learning librarians also discussed the importance of taking initiative to seek out training, particularly professional development relevant to one's institutional context. Carole emphasized that librarians do not need to become experts in all areas of online learning, but instead they should focus on learning opportunities directly tied to the tools used in one's organization. Jamie recommended sitting in an online class in one's liaison area to observe the strategies used by other teaching faculty. Participants also urged librarians to look to existing literature and the Association of College & Research Libraries (ACRL) *Standards for Distance Learning Library Services*²³ for ideas and best practices for offering online services.

It's a Lot of Work, but Don't Get Discouraged

A final shared piece of advice offered by online learning librarians was to recognize that getting started with online learning is a lot of work up front, but it's important not to get discouraged. Jamie and Howard described the amount of preparation involved in teaching online compared to in-person instruction in terms of planning opportunities for student engagement and gathering feedback. Even with the extra work involved, online learning librarians offered words of encouragement to other academic librarians providing online services. Marsha emphasized the importance of "not being too hard on yourself" and encouraged librarians to ask for help when needed. Joshua reminded librarians that "everyone is involved in online learning now" due to circumstances outside of their control. Many participants noted that the most important thing librarians can do is be kind to themselves as they navigate their new roles.

DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

The Evolving Roles of Online Learning Librarians

These findings suggest that although the roles of online learning and e-learning librarians have not significantly changed as a direct result of the COVID-19 pandemic, roles in academic libraries have changed for other reference and instruction librarians. In the authors' previous study, this added workload and responsibilities for online learning librarians is described as a "slasher" role, indicating multiple job titles and "other duties as assigned."²⁴ In terms of organizational leadership, these added responsibilities for all librarians often lead to added stress and decreased morale.²⁵ Library administrators and supervisors should acknowledge the expertise of online learning specialists and account for an increased workload when advising on schedules and assigning job duties within a library or department.

Changes to Organizational Structures and Support

Several participants mentioned the Distance and Online Learning Section (DOLS) of ACRL, which recently updated its name to better reflect the changing nature of online library services and best practices in the professional literature²⁶ as a source of professional development and mentorship. As more librarians grow their skills in online reference and instruction, online learning has also become a focus of ACRL's Instruction Section (IS) and the Reference and User Services Association (RUSA). While these organizations provide valuable resources, online learning librarians have expressed concerns about silos in other institutional contexts.²⁷ Leaders in the field should acknowledge these evolving roles and avoid additional fragmentation or siloes in professional organizations. Library administrators can also encourage policies that allow flexible remote work, taking time off, participating in professional development, and practicing self-care.

The Future of Online Learning in Academic Libraries

In this historical moment, the future of online learning in academic libraries for online learning librarians and their reference and instruction colleagues remains unclear. However, the authors present three categories that academic libraries can use to describe progress in online learning initiatives: 1) developing, 2) expanding, and 3) strategizing. In the authors' previous study, many libraries were still developing or beginning to expand online learning initiatives. These libraries had recently hired an online learning librarian and were in the early stages of building up online learning materials. The majority of academic online learning librarians in the present study described challenges related to their roles in terms that could be described as growing pains in expanding online learning services and strategizing toward a more sustainable future. Many participants described their library's evolving relationship to online learning and their own evolving roles in terms of rapidly expanding online services to meet the needs of a fully online population, and thus also expanding their workload and the workload of their reference and instruction colleagues. Others described efforts to strategize toward a more sustainable future and reinforce online learning initiatives that would allow the library to play a larger and more integrated role in supporting students, faculty, and other stakeholders.

A limitation to this study is that online learning librarians were not asked about potential challenges or downsides to a future in which academic libraries place greater emphasis on online learning and reduce face-to-face services. Future research could explore librarians' attitudes toward this shift after the pandemic and examine the pandemic's impact on academic libraries' relationship with students, teaching faculty, and other stakeholders. Still, in light of the COVID-19 pandemic, the authors suggest that academic libraries use the momentum of online learning in higher education to continue to support students and instructors who are "at a distance" from library spaces and services. Academic libraries can also support student success by continuing to offer online and hybrid models of reference and instruction that encourage "creative collaboration."²⁸ Ultimately, as institutional advocates, trainers, and leaders in online learning, academic libraries should continue to leverage the expertise of specialists in online learning to assess and grow online reference and instructional services into the future.

APPENDIX A. INTERVIEW QUESTIONS

1. How did your university/library respond to COVID-19?
 - a. What modality were/are courses offered?
 - b. Is your library closed and you're working remotely, open with restrictions/limited staff, fully open, etc.?
 - c. What online instruction did you offer in the Spring and this Fall after COVID-19? How did you/your library decide what type of instruction would be most effective in an online environment?
2. Do you feel your library/department was/is prepared to provide fully online reference and instruction? Why or why not?
3. Has other librarians' involvement in online learning at your library/in your department changed due to COVID-19?
 - a. Do you support other librarians in performing their duties online? If so, how?
4. How have your job duties related to online learning changed due to COVID-19?
5. In what ways, if any, do you think the effects of COVID-19 might permanently change your library's/department's relationship to online learning?
 - a. In what ways, if any, do you think COVID-19 might permanently change your role?
6. What has been your biggest challenge as an online learning librarian during COVID-19?
7. What advice would you offer for librarians new to providing online instruction?
 - a. How would you recommend these librarians go about growing their skills in online instruction?
8. Is there anything else that I didn't ask that you'd like to share?

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