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CARLA FLENGERIS

Keeping Close from a Distance: Pandemic Reflections of a Library Coordinator

The library at Luther College, University of Regina is the smallest of four academic libraries on campus. It employs me, a part-time assistant, and four student assistants who keep the library operating in the evenings and on weekends. This year, Luther College celebrates fifty years of being on the university campus as a federated college of the University of Regina. But our history actually extends to 1913 with the founding of Luther Academy, a high school which relocated to our present city and began offering university level courses in 1926.

As I write this, we are approaching what our chaplain calls our “COVIDversary.” At 5:00 pm on Friday, March 20, 2020, I closed our library doors for what we thought would be a few weeks. Although the Spanish Flu had temporarily

and needed stability and reliable information. It was the very void a library was meant to fill. And I had just locked the doors. Ours had been one of the last units on campus to remain open—my staff and I were still madly scanning, packing, loading everything we could identify as crucial for our students’

success. Taking a 4100 square foot library and moving it, its collection and services online or to our individual homes was not easy. Additionally, this was happening at a particularly critical point in the winter semester: research papers and projects were in full swing, classroom library instruction was in peak demand. This was the time of the semester when I typically cleared my schedule to accommodate one task only—to sit down with students one-on-one, ensuring they had a focused research question, guiding them towards the resources they needed, and helping them manage their anxieties along the way. I took my cues from the Luther College mission and vision: “a commitment to retaining the personal atmosphere, individual attention, and sense of community that only a small university can offer.” How was I going to retain this “personal atmosphere” or nurture this



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shut down Luther Academy in December 1918, this was the first time in the University of Regina’s history that people had been sent home. Our university community was hurt

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“sense of community” from behind a computer screen in my basement? I was a Library Coordinator without a library. What was I coordinating?

Within hours, it became clear: I was coordinating information delivery, just in new and different ways. University operations across the province moved into virtual spaces, but university libraries continued to provide vital services with barely any disruption. With the help of the other three academic libraries, my own staff, and the immeasurable expertise of my campus library colleagues, we embraced new buzzwords: *pivot*, *mobilize*, and *touch base*. We rolled out chapter and article scans, a curbside pick-up system and home delivery service of our physical collection. We streamlined our virtual consultation methods, revamped our events to online formats, and upped our social media game. We switched our instruction delivery methods to Zoom, made videos and LibGuides. We promoted the existence of our online collections, bought new ones, and tapped into resource-sharing partnerships, such as HathiTrust. We stressed the benefits of institutional repositories, open access and open educational resources (and watched those benefits finally “sink in” to faculty), and held workshops on how to design them. We increased the frequency of our regular meetings and formed new working groups.

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I saw my campus colleagues (albeit on screen) more often than I ever had before, and the synergy was amazing and heartwarming. Many of us envision these online services continuing for years to come, regardless of when or to what extent in-person instruction resumes—precisely because they are so valuable. Libraries had been preparing for this shift for decades and I am incredibly proud of how nimble we were and continue to be. So, why was I left with this feeling that the online universe was completely out of sync with the spirit of my job? Something had not “mobilized,” or “pivoted” to the digital realm—an important group of people with which I had yet to “touch base.”

The start of a new semester at the University of Regina means, for me, a new set of library “regulars”—that little group of students and library users who are waiting for me at the door when I arrive to open it. (The makeup of the group changes every semester, along with course schedules.) Within a few weeks, this group learns my opening procedures and silently starts to pitch in: the first few people through the door turn on the workstation computers, someone carries in the daily newspapers and hangs them on the old wooden rods, one might even slide a ream of paper from behind my desk and start filling the photocopiers and printers. I rarely know their names, they rarely know each others’ names, and apart from pleasantries, there is little or no interaction. But what they all have in common is a need for early morning privacy and isolation in proximity to one another. I realize now that this group was practicing social distancing before it was a thing. I would wait until the third or fourth week into the semester before introducing a Friday morning ritual—a box of doughnuts that we would pass around as we each quietly settled into our desks and daily routines. We would become fixtures in each others’ lives for the rest of the semester. It was a community.

Another custom at the start of each fall semester is first-year orientation. In fact, in addition to Orientation Day, Luther College offers an advanced, two-day program called UPREP. This past August/September, I welcomed these new students and introduced them to campus libraries via Zoom. I never saw their faces come through the library door. I never learned who I should keep the tiniest watchful eye on for signs of homesickness. They are now a few weeks away from crossing the threshold into becoming second year students, but they have yet to see the library as a place to gather and to seek out answers and connections. I wonder if they ever will.

Part of my daily routine in the library is to get up from my desk at the top of every hour and walk through the entire place. I meander through every row of computers, every row of study tables, every aisle of bookshelves. It is not a patrol. I am not concerned with what is on their computer screens, or what may be going on in that blind spot in the stacks. I pretend to push in chairs that have gone astray or scoop up paper coffee cups left behind. But the real purpose is to try to make eye contact and smile at every student in there.

Much of the time, I come back to my office with little more than an armful of old coffee cups. I have resented these walks more times than I care to admit. They are disruptions to my work and the more pressing tasks. Nevertheless, I keep to this hourly schedule because of those times I get smiles back. And at the next hour, on my next walk, one of the smilers will make eye contact first. And the following hour, they will shyly ask for help finding journal articles. In the library world, this is a model of library service known as “roving” or “roaming” reference librarianship. For me, it is something far more natural—being in the same space.

Once the student has made contact, I pull up a chair to conduct a “reference interview” (another unnatural library term). The end goal of these interactions is for the student to walk away with the skills and/or information they need—another satisfied customer. But these experiences are so much more. When the student describes the assignment to me, what topic they have chosen, their plan of attack (or lack thereof), I can decipher how well they are doing in the course, how well they are doing at university in general (whether they are thriving or hanging by a thread), and if they need additional support (academic or otherwise).

These hourly walks seek out the students waiting to *ask* for help, but also occasionally reveal *cries* for help. Despite being communal spaces, libraries also offer quiet privacy and often attract people, like the regular morning crowd, needing a combination of both. The student who is fast asleep on their laptop is working two jobs to pay for the courses that they are too tired to attend; the student sobbing into their hands has just received their first failing grade and the hopes (or parents’ hopes) of med school might be

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over; the student making tiny cuts to their forearm misses family overseas. After thousands of hourly walks, you learn when to mind your own business and when to put a hand on a shoulder.

Whether these encounters are standard reference interviews or an accompanied (and somewhat urgent) walk down

the hall to our pastor or to counseling services, they spark a relationship. The student who gets a good grade because of their stellar journal articles will come in to give me high fives. The student who had to have the tough conversation with their parents about med school will come in to tell me “it wasn’t so bad” (but they could still use a hug). None of this translates to a virtual space. I have spent much of this pandemic mourning the loss of these relationships, trying to figure out how to light those sparks from afar.

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Something else I have done during this pandemic is worry. Our closure is a temporary measure that keeps all of us safe. I know that. Nevertheless, our campus counseling services have never been busier; student anxiety is through the roof; academic misconduct is at an all-time high (most studies cite stress as the number one predictor for student cheating). Not all students (or faculty or staff, for that matter) are thriving in this online environment. We all know the challenges—loss of loved ones, loss of financial stability, loss of social supports and childcare supports, inadequate access to technology. It is a long list. Students have never needed our support more than they do now. If those hourly walks have taught me anything, it is that students are hardwired to wait for us to come to them. They will seek out help if they are desperate but would prefer that we make the first move.

The majority of students who seek my help now, in this virtual space, are usually upper-level students that I had already established relationships with (pre-pandemic) and they typically reach me by email. My contact information and availability are well-advertised. I have struggled to reach those first-years. I have struggled to reach the ones who may have stumbled upon us looking for a communal, private space.

I have tried. Early on, I ended each Zoom instruction session by staring straight into the camera and explaining that I was here to help, and not just with the stuff we had spent the last hour discussing. I think the only thing that sparked were feelings of unease—it probably came across

as creepy. A campus library colleague had moderate success working with an instructor to make a 15-minute Zoom chat with a librarian mandatory to their participation mark. When I do hear from student names I do not recognize, I am thrilled and I sign off my responses with something like: "I know you're busy with this paper, but when you have a minute, I'd like to know how you're doing. And please come in and introduce yourself when we're back on campus." Sometimes I never hear from them again—like walking back to my desk with the empty cups. But sometimes I receive lengthy responses—the spark. I can now slide up the chair.

As I reflect on this COVIDversary, I realize how much I miss those hourly walks, and that they were my way of practicing servant leadership. When they led to a reference interview, I never told students what their thesis should be, nor did I read their scholarly articles for them. When non-academic trouble bubbled up, I did not counsel, or offer to talk to professors, parents, or employers. I was never a servant to students, a superior, a guardian, or even a friend. And I do not need to be any of those things now. I listen, I am curious, I take their concerns seriously, and I guide them to the resources and expertise they need. I *can* still do that from my basement. Many library workers deeply feel our responsibility to teach students something (as we should); however, at the end of this pandemic, what will matter most will not be that they learned how to cite a book in APA, but that they learned, perhaps by example, to support, trust, and advocate for each other. That is what I will spend the rest of this pandemic doing: supporting them through the ways I know how (information gathering,

evaluating, delivery), trusting that they will ask for help when they need it, and advocating for them when professors and administrators forget that schoolwork cannot always be a student's top priority.

The adaptability demonstrated by academic libraries deserves to be applauded and I am proud of my part in that. But, to say we did not miss a beat suggests that we are merely information repositories. When we lost our physical space, we lost our community and, for me, it felt like a huge hole at the center of the entire operation. The next few months will be focused on uncertainty, health and safety,

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and the current and potential budget cuts that need to be managed. I know it will take some time to build back that unspoken, unacknowledged camaraderie of the morning "regulars." Demonstrating our importance to students who completed their first-year without setting foot in a library will be challenging. I will come up with new ways of expressing a smile behind a mask and when I pull up a chair, it will be from a safe distance. I will rein in the high-fives, the hugs, the communal boxes of doughnuts. But, I realize now that those hourly walks were not disruptions to my work, they *were* my work, and I will never again take them for granted.