

Christine Woods

Going online and staying online

Becoming an online librarian during the pandemic

*Ah-ah-ah-ah, staying online, staying online,
Ah-ah-ah-ah, staying online, staying online,
Ah-ah-ah-ah, staying online –ine-ine-ine,
I'm staying online!*

Sing along with the famous tune by the Bee Gees. White suit and disco ball are not required.

I recently became an online reference and instruction librarian. During the pandemic, my institution made the difficult decision to have fewer physical locations and encouraged students to stay online. I was given the opportunity to continue online full-time as a remote worker. I live in Virginia while the main campus is in Florida. We also have a librarian in Georgia, as part of our geographically dispersed team, who works with some of the education centers. I absolutely love being an online librarian. I provide large group and individual instruction through Zoom, work within the learning management system as an embedded librarian, and answer questions by phone, text, email, and the library chat virtual reference desk. But getting here was quite the journey.

Starting out

I began the new year in January 2020 with a new job and career as Saint Leo University's regional librarian for the Virginia region. Prior to being hired by Saint Leo, I was a public school teacher-librarian and media specialist for 25 years, and I was eager to start my new career as an academic librarian. I was also excited about the uniqueness of my position as a "traveling librarian." The Virginia region consisted of eight education centers in the Hampton Roads area but also included several out-of-state centers. As part of my onboarding, I spent a week with the library director and the other library faculty on the main campus in Saint Leo, Florida. After I returned, I met with both regional directors in Virginia as well as the directors of all eight education centers to discuss educational objectives and plans. Then I began to promote library resources as fast as possible. I immediately started driving to a different center each day, determined to share my time as equally as possible between all eight.

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This lasted until mid-March when we went into lockdown like the rest of the world due to COVID-19. During this time, I was able to communicate with faculty via email and continue teaching using Zoom while working from home. Our library started using Springshare's LibAnswers chat widget for virtual reference help. This was the first chance I had to interact with students and faculty who were outside of the Virginia region. Although hesitant at first and worried that I did not have the knowledge to answer questions, I soon discovered that chat was a wonderful opportunity to hone my reference skills and learn more about the library's resources.

Our initial two-week lockdown carried into April and by the end of the month, I started to feel like part of the library team as we tackled the challenges and changes created by the pandemic. As my physical world shrank to the confines of my home office, my working world expanded to helping faculty and students worldwide. Students and faculty eagerly reached out to the library faculty through email, Zoom meetings, and chat, allowing us to create positive relationships no matter how brief our interactions.

Moving online

As the pandemic showed no signs of abating, Saint Leo University made the difficult decision to reduce the number of physical locations and encouraged students to stay online. This turned out to be a perceptive move. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, the percentage of undergraduate students who ended up taking exclusively online courses in fall 2020 was 43%, and the percentage of graduate students taking exclusively online courses was 52%.¹ As part of the move to online learning, I transitioned into a new position as an online reference and instruction librarian, working from home on a permanent basis starting in July 2020.

Over the summer, I shadowed another distance learning librarian to learn about being an embedded librarian, and together, with our library director, we created a plan for the fall 2020 semester. Our plan involved posting to discussion boards, emailing students with access to the class lists in each course, communicating with professors, teaching via Zoom as requested, and strategically tailoring the timing and content of materials shared with each course. I scheduled individual help sessions, answered students' questions by phone and email, and continued as part of the library team providing essential reference assistance with live chat. I stayed in constant communication by phone text or email with my embedded librarian partner and met periodically with the library director. I was embedded in 36 undergraduate classes in nine different undergraduate courses. I had to get up to speed quickly with the content and assignments of each course. My embedded librarian team and the library faculty coming together as a whole to support my change in position helped me get off to a great start.

Picking up speed

Building relationships and fostering effective communication within embedded courses with library faculty and the university faculty was critical to my new position over the course of the next several semesters. The relationships I had fostered in the Virginia region by meeting professors in person, followed by weekly newsletters and constant communication, created a sense of teamwork as we continued to collaborate on lesson plans. Within

embedded courses, I encouraged students to ask questions via email or make an appointment with me for a Zoom meeting. Students who were taking online classes often needed course or tech support, in addition to instruction on using online library resources.

With permission from the library director, our embedded librarian program grew during the spring semester of 2021 to include graduate-level courses, as requested by faculty. Being embedded in doctoral and master's level classes was a welcome challenge as I eagerly learned about assignments and requirements for each course, deepened relationships with faculty and other librarians, and worked on improving my online teaching strategies. The growing number of requested lessons and embedded requests demonstrated the importance of having an online librarian.

Mapping out the road ahead

My first academic year as a permanent online librarian was a success, but it is important to continue to improve. Some of the challenges of working online with students include getting students to interact during Zoom lessons, planning for synchronous and asynchronous lessons, and determining whether instructional strategies were effective. Some of the challenges of working online with faculty and librarians include building relationships through phone and video meetings, missing out on opportunities to share muffins and interact in less formal ways, and staying involved in the university community as a whole. I plan to continue to improve by assessing student learning during and following individual and large group instruction, as well as continuing to find ways to improve communication and teamwork with library faculty and faculty.

Conclusion

Due to the pandemic, all librarians became temporarily online librarians with many campuses shut down. As Alex Wheeler and Voula Kyprianou-Chavda explained, "We are all distance learners now."² Only time will tell if there will be an increase in academic librarians working permanently in remote settings, but I predict that there will be more academic librarians joining me staying online.

Notes

1. National Center for Education Statistics, "Enrollment and Employees in Postsecondary Institutions, Fall 2020 (Preliminary Data)," National Center for Education Statistics, September 14, 2021, <https://nces.ed.gov/pubsearch/pubsinfo.asp?pubid=2021100>.

2. Alex Wheeler and Voula Kyprianou-Chavda, "We Are All Distance Learners Now': How Distance Learning Informed a Library Team's Response to the Covid-19 Pandemic," *Journal of Library & Information Services in Distance Learning* 15, no. 2 (April 3, 2021): 84–98, <https://doi.org/10.1080/1533290X.2021.1938788>. *zz*