The Challenges of COVID-19 for Early Career Librarians

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Last week John Vsetecka offered his perspective on the impact of COVID-19 on early-career scholars. In today's post, we learn what's been like for early-career librarians from Laura Rocco, outreach and engagement librarian at California State University, Stanislaus.

When I started as an Outreach and Student Engagement Librarian at California State University, Stanislaus (Stan State) in July 2019, I could not have anticipated that I would spend the latter part of my first year responding to a global pandemic. Rather than holding to my original plans, I found myself helping my library pivot to fully virtual services and resources.

As an early-career library and information science (LIS) professional, I was looking forward to how the holistic approach to librarianship at Stan State would help me to develop a wide range of skills. My main goal for my first year was to develop connections with campus partners to better integrate the library into student success initiatives and programming across campus. I utilized several existing campus outreach programs, such as the weekly quad tabling event, where campus services share information with students. I also initiated new projects, such as pop-up research help desks in various campus locations and a “Share Your Story” campaign aimed at collecting stories about the library’s impact. I also planned to use data from my outreach efforts to contribute to the LIS literature and to satisfy retention, promotion, and tenure requirements for faculty librarians.

When our university went fully online due to COVID-19 in mid-March, I had to cancel all scheduled in-person events and pause other projects to focus on publicizing our COVID-19 updates and highlighting virtual resources so that students could continue to access the materials they needed. I focused on providing social media and newsletter content to help students hone digital information literacy skills. While I had been working to grow our social media presence, I leaned even more heavily into Instagram.

I also worked with my colleagues to move research and instruction services fully online, to purchase e-books and online resources for my subject liaison areas, and to respond to new kinds of questions from teaching faculty, such as copyright/fair use concerns and how to locate open educational resources. We faced limited budget cuts for the 2020-2021 year and anticipate more substantial cuts across the CSU system in future years. This is a mounting challenge because the e-resources our campus needs are often more expensive than their print counterparts.

Once Stan State decided we would continue remote instruction through at least the fall 2020 semester, I began to consider how my outreach strategies would need to change. Could I continue with the same plans and goals that I had pre-pandemic?

While in-person engagement was no longer feasible, new needs were rapidly emerging, including an
increased urgency and focus on digital literacies. Over the summer, I provided presentations about using remote library services and resources at several faculty workshops. I am working with faculty to develop virtual book clubs and film screenings for students. In planning these events, I am relying on my increasing knowledge of copyright and licensing issues. I began coordinating with our Division of Student Affairs to provide virtual tours of the library website and other informational events at the now all-online campus Welcome Weeks for students.

While some of these programs may only last the duration of our remote instruction during COVID-19, others have long-term potential, as distance education becomes more prevalent. My desire to continue researching the value of Instagram in outreach has grown as it has now become one of our primary modes of communication with students. I gave a presentation on utilizing Instagram during the pandemic with a fellow CSU librarian at a virtual library conference in October. I now also have a greater interest in researching current and future social media as tools for information literacy.

There is no simple, one-to-one conversion from face-to-face to virtual programming and instruction. Online engagement must reflect student needs and technical limitations. It is more important than ever for librarians to teach digital information literacy. My research agenda needs to reflect my shifting day-to-day practices. I look forward to learning from my experienced colleagues and participating in collaborative problem-solving.

Laura Rocco is a 2019 MLIS graduate from the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign and has been an Outreach and Student Engagement Librarian at California State University, Stanislaus since July 2019. She is interested in digital literacies, student engagement on social media, and information literacy instruction. You can follow her on Twitter @roccowrites.

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