

No Library is an Island: how a consortium of academic libraries transitioned to a remote-only service model.

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Abstract: This paper constructs a narrative timeline of the events that occurred during spring semester 2020 as the disruption and uncertainty unleashed by the COVID-19 pandemic made it imperative for an academic library at a public college in Jamaica, Queens transition their in-person service model to remote learning while simultaneously navigate being designated as 'essential' personnel. Fortunately, this college is a member of a municipal university system and as such did not face these challenges alone. During this semester, New York City went from zero confirmed cases to being the epicenter of the country with the largest outbreak on the planet. The virus placed this public university in a dilemma; how to continue providing the services and physical spaces their students relied upon while at the same time ensuring a safe environment for the academic community as a whole. The efforts of these librarians, and the requisite leadership from state, municipal, university, and college administration, have to be placed within the prevailing context of insufficient coordination and communication provided by the Federal government and the Centers for Disease Control and Protection (CDC). The dialogue which took place within the university was necessary, and ultimately, successful in determining a remote-learning model would be consistently applied to classrooms and libraries across CUNY. With this case study we contend membership in a consortium unique to such institutions as the City University of New York (CUNY) was essential for maintaining both relevant services and safety at the level of the individual campus. We present this case study as an opportunity for reflective assessment of what resources were in place, as well as those that were needed, in service of a highly impacted population.

Keywords: COVID-19, coronavirus, pandemic, distance learning, remote-learning, consortium, public university, New York City

1. Introduction

York College is one of eleven senior colleges in the City University of New York (CUNY) municipal system, the largest urban university in the United States which also includes seven community colleges, seven post-graduate institutions, and one honors college spread across the five boroughs of the city; The Bronx, Brooklyn, Manhattan, Staten Island, and Queens. City College, the founding college of CUNY, was established in 1847 as the Free Academy of the

City of New York. The school's mission from the beginning was to provide the opportunity for an education to the working class and immigrant populations of the city and became known as 'the poor man's Harvard'. The first president of the school, Dr. Horace Webster, stated at its inception that "the experiment is to be tried, whether the children of the people, the children of the whole people, can be educated; and whether an institution of the highest grade, can be successfully controlled by the popular will, not by the privileged few." This commitment to the popular will produced the country's first student government, with the establishment of the college's academic senate in 1867. Almost a century later in 1966, CUNY voted to establish its fifth senior college, which in time became known as York College and Jamaica Queens was selected for its location. The commitment to shared governance in CUNY's DNA can be seen today in York's charter that establishes the York College Senate as the legislative body of the college and that this body shall consist of representatives of the Faculty, Student Government and Administration, with the President of the college serving as the Chairperson of the Senate.

But who is the York student? "York College students are a cross-section of New York City's diverse population, representing at least 80 countries, from Algeria to Zambia, and speaking over 50 languages". The majority of CUNY undergraduates, like college students nationally, are young and single. Unlike college students nationally, however, 42% of CUNY senior college students (which includes York College) are among the first generation in their family to attend college. Despite living in one of the most expensive areas of the country, York students are not wealthy: according to the 2016 Student Experience Survey conducted by the CUNY Office of Institutional Effectiveness, 61% of York students report annual household income at less than \$30,000, while 39% of York students have household income of less than \$20,000. Given this data, it is unsurprising that 57.5% of students at senior CUNY colleges received Pell Grants in Fall 2018 (CUNY, 2018) and that most students work outside of class. Over half of York students work to support themselves and their families: 57% of York students work for pay, and 51% of York students work more than 20 hours per week. The reasons given for working are similar across all CUNY campuses: 61% of York students report that they work to pay tuition, while 78% are working to pay for living expenses. The tragedy for York students is that CUNY was tuition free until 1976, and in 2017 tuition surpassed funding from the city or the state in terms of the budget.

2. Narrative timeline

For York College, Friday January 29th was the first day of classes of the spring 2020 semester. The next day the World Health Organization (WHO) declared a global public health emergency. The day before classes began, the Chancellor communicated to students, faculty and staff stating the university was monitoring the situation in China and cited Governor Andrew M. Cuomo's announcement that the New York State Department of Health had submitted nine samples for testing by the CDC. Four cases were negative, five were

pending and those individuals were known to be in isolation. At the time there were no confirmed cases of the virus in the state of New York.

On February 4th, CUNY's central office disseminated updated guidance and information resources on the coronavirus to campus presidents and deans in response to inquiries regarding CUNY's policies. This guidance was based on the recommendations of the New York State Department of Health (NYDOH), New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene (DOHMH), and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC). CUNY central cited current reports from the CDC that the risk was low and Americans were unlikely to be exposed. Undergraduate study abroad programs to China were cancelled for spring semester, and graduate students or faculty planning on travel to China could petition for a waiver but were advised to avoid nonessential travel. The application process for a Chancellor's Global Scholarship for study abroad in summer or fall would now require students attempting to study in China to list additional programs in other locations.

Almost a month later on March 2, the Chancellor sent a human resources update to faculty and staff acknowledging the first case of coronavirus in New York City had been confirmed and that it was important to begin planning for a variety of scenarios. While the NYCDOH had not detected community transmission in the city of what they were now referring to as COVID-19, the Chancellor acknowledged that this first positive case did raise the sense of concern and that additional steps would be taken to prepare for the possibility of the virus impacting campuses. These preparations included disseminating additional signage conveying proper hygiene and ensuring that facilities were stocked with sanitizers and cleaning supplies. While this may seem obvious, it is a common experience on many CUNY campuses for restrooms to go unstocked with hand towels or soap. The Chancellor affirmed that the university was in constant communication with the NYC Health Department and taking the situation seriously. Academic systems such as Blackboard, Microsoft Office 365 for Education, and Dropbox were in place across the many campuses should the need arise to provide instruction remotely.

At a briefing on March 4, Governor Cuomo announced that SUNY and CUNY would be arranging return travel for roughly 300 students in study abroad programs in China, Italy, Japan, Iran and South Korea. All campus sponsored travel to these countries would be canceled for the remainder of the semester, and those returning from these countries would need to quarantine.

On March 6, the President of the Professional Staff Congress (PSC), the union representing faculty and staff of CUNY, made public a letter sent to the Chancellor establishing the right of the union to negotiate changes in employment conditions that are incurred due to the coronavirus epidemic. The president of the union expressed appreciation for actions taken by CUNY administration such as the creation of a website dedicated to information on

COVID-19 procedures and the creation of a Coronavirus Task Force. Among York Library faculty speculation and conjecture ran the gamut from grave concern to continued focus on the work at hand.

On Monday, March 9, the President's Office of York College issued a coronavirus update that no person associated with the college was known to have had any exposure to the virus and acknowledging that the news cycle regarding the virus was overwhelming and a source of growing anxiety within the community. She addressed this anxiety by reassuring that safety was a primary concern and relayed information regarding measures the college was taking to ensure facilities were kept sanitary. Under the direction of CUNY Central a liaison was designated for the campus to whom the community could address questions and concerns. Measures for prevention were specified, such as encouraging elbow bumps and hand waves over handshakes. Plans to ensure academic continuity were being prepared in case of closure and information on resources to address mental health concerns were shared.

Meanwhile, on the same day in Manhattan, New York University (NYU) announced that classes would be held remotely for the rest of the semester beginning March 11. Fordham University acted even more quickly suspending all face-to-face instruction by 1pm that day, encouraging all residential students to return home immediately. Several blocks away, Hunter College (CUNY), announced that they were adding measures to keep campus facilities, including dorms, safe with enhanced cleaning procedures and provided a list of recommended prevention practices such as getting a flu vaccine, washing your hands, and refraining from touching your face with unwashed hands. However, campus activities would continue without interruption.

On March 10, Shumita Basu wrote a news article published on Gothamist.com entitled "Classes Are Still in Session at CUNY, Despite Calls to Move Online Amid Coronavirus Concerns." Basu noted that "while many private universities and colleges in the New York area have decided to suspend classes or move instruction online amid concerns over preventing the spread of COVID-19, CUNY public schools are still directing their students and faculty to come to class." Basu linked to several accounts on Twitter where these students and faculty were expressing their frustration. Basu referred to a Tweet from Brooklyn College (CUNY) which denied rumors that a library employee had tested positive for the virus, and linked to a Change.org petition asking CUNY to move classes entirely online that had garnered 17,000 signatures at time of publication. By 2pm, the Graduate Center (CUNY) announced that all public programs through March 29 would be postponed. By 3pm, news outlets in Massachusetts were reporting that Harvard University had announced that students needed to move out of dorms by the following Sunday and that all instruction would transition to remote learning, "other colleges including Tufts, Amherst, Emerson, Suffolk University and MIT will also move classes online." By the evening, Cisco announced that Webex would be freely offered with

enhanced features including unlimited usage and support up to 100 participants at a time. The President of John Jay College of Criminal Justice (CUNY) announced the closure of the Manhattan campus beginning the following day, Wednesday March 11, due to the fact that a student who had been on campus had tested positive for COVID-19.

On March 11 the WHO declared the outbreak to be an official global pandemic. At the Governor's coronavirus press conference, he announced that SUNY and CUNY campuses would transition to distance learning by March 19. The campuses would not close entirely and there would be exceptions made for instruction that required access to labs and for students living in dorms who faced hardship. In response the Chief librarian at York College called for an emergency department meeting to discuss how the library would plan for transitioning services as classes moved online. Some things were clear, all fines would be waived and renewals would need to be made automatic. The library department at York College had experienced the same chronic underfunding that the wider college and CUNY as a whole had suffered in recent years, the result being a limited electronic component to their service model. There was no program for electronic reserves in place. The budget for streaming video was almost nonexistent and the Electronic Resources Librarian had been working on finding a more financially sustainable replacement for Kanopy. Another concern was that many of the students would not have access to technology outside of what was available in the physical space of the library. In regard to reference, thanks to the consortium of CUNY libraries and the dedicated work of the Electronic Resources Advisory Council (ERAC), a basic Springshare license was in place CUNY-wide; however, the option to include Springshare's Libanswers/LibChat service had not been activated at York, where email served as the only online reference point of service.

By the evening of March 11, it was announced to the York College community that in compliance with Governor Cuomo's order to transition to remote instruction, from March 12-18 classes would be suspended in order to give time for pedagogical retooling. The plan was for the distance-learning model to be operational by March 19, however throughout the suspension and the period of distance learning the campus would remain open and staff would remain on-site in order to continue providing students access to computer labs and the library. CUNY librarians have faculty status, and this effectively, but not explicitly, designated them as 'essential' personnel, separating them from the rest of the faculty who were allowed to work in the relative safety of their own homes. Immediately some library faculty voiced objections, especially as many depend on public transportation for their commutes, however all were aware that many York students relied on the resources and services provided in the physical space of the library, and were likely to struggle with this transition and need support.

There is a CUNY-wide Council of Chief Librarians (CCL) who released a list of recommendations and contingency statements by March 13, after consultation with library faculty, including the PSC Library Faculty Committee. These recommendations were intended to ensure safe working conditions if the physical spaces of the libraries were to remain open for the remainder of the semester. Among York library faculty there was still resistance to these recommendations as insufficient, mainly for two reasons; first, there was no way to ensure that subway commutes would be either clean or afford for physical distancing, and secondly, there was skepticism that the campus, let alone the library which is a heavily trafficked space with shared keyboards, copiers, and scanners, could be effectively cleaned and maintained as a healthy environment. The suggestion was even made that library faculty who rely on public transportation be exempted and allowed to work fully remotely.

By the afternoon, the New York Public Library (NYPL) system announced that all locations would temporarily close to the public beginning Saturday, March 14 through at least Tuesday, March 31. Transitioning CUNY library services to be fully online, allowing library faculty and staff to work remotely was beginning to seem like the safest option, however the power structure from the Governor and Mayor, to the Chancellor and various college administrations were maintaining that these facilities remain open to accommodate students. By the evening of March 15, both Brooklyn Public Library and Queens Public Library systems had announced that they would be closed to the public beginning Monday, March 16.

The morning of March 16, Carl Campanile at the New York Post reported that a library worker at the Rosenthal Library at Queens College (CUNY) had tested positive for COVID-19, and while the employee was asymptomatic the college was shutting down the campus and taking active measures to disinfect the space. By 4:52pm that afternoon the CCL shared to a CUNY-wide listserv for librarians a letter expressing grave concern over the decision to keep the libraries open after having been sent to the Chancellor, Executive Vice Chancellor, and Associate University Provost. By 6:08pm that same evening the Chancellor issued an update to faculty and staff on CUNY's response to the coronavirus crisis. Citing and linking to Governor Cuomo's executive order defining 'essential' personnel, the Chancellor stipulated that campus presidents and deans would determine which facilities would remain open. Furthermore, he stipulated that it was up to supervisors to determine if it was feasible for an employee to telecommute, and yet he reaffirmed that the health and safety of university employees was a high priority while at the same time ensuring continuity of operations. CUNY needed to have the libraries safe and open too. The irony was not lost on many librarians; when it came to budget cuts, library departments tended to be first in line. And now, when it came to providing 'essential' services to students amid a pandemic at great personal risk, librarians were also at the front of the line.

On Tuesday March 17, York College Library did open its doors 9am-5pm with limited staffing and services. The only librarian on site was the chief librarian, who had instructed fellow librarians to remain home. The Electronic Resources Librarian persuaded the business office to agree to the additional expenditure required to add chat reference to the existing Springshare license and began to make the necessary changes to the library website. The Reference Librarian was curating training materials for faculty and staff to learn the new service in hopes of being trained and operational before online classes resumed on March 19th. The Higher Education Officer (HEO), or library technician, was setting up remote access to the library's integrated library system (Aleph) and the circulation staff at the Newman Library of Baruch (CUNY) volunteered to validate barcodes until this was in place. The Science Librarian was creating a COVID-19 research guide. The yearly acquisition lists had been scheduled to be submitted by April 10, so the Acquisitions Librarian worked to expand access to ebooks in Proquest Oasis in order for all librarians to transition their lists to ebooks before submitting. Then by midday the American Library Association (ALA) Executive Board released a statement recommending that all libraries be closed to the public. That evening an email went out from administration to the York community announcing the immediate closure of the campus due to an employee who had been on campus reporting symptoms consistent with the virus. The administration requested that all faculty telecommute and focus on preparing for the transition to distance learning. Fortunately, the chat reference module was operational by the next day and training was already underway.

At this point on March 18, there had been confirmed COVID-19 cases on at least four CUNY campuses, and in each instance campus administrations had taken swift action, however there remained library faculty and staff still expected to commute and provide face-to-face services. One librarian from the Grad Center (CUNY) took initiative, designing a chart in Google Docs and sharing it openly in order for librarians across CUNY to crowdsource the open status of different libraries as they changed between four quadrants of open/partially open/temporarily closed/closed for face-to-face services indefinitely. The Council of Chiefs expressed appreciation for this ad hoc advocacy and were working towards the same goal, sending the Chancellor another letter requesting a comprehensive directive. Efforts from individual librarians, the Council of Chief Librarians, the University Dean for Library Services, and the PSC were coalescing into a chorus of advocacy. On the evening of March 18, the union sent out an email with the subject line "What to do if you are asked to report to work on campus tomorrow" articulating the legal options available and reassuring members that the PSC would help address any repercussions and continue discussions with management until all members were telecommuting.

By the evening of March 19, the Dean of the libraries informed all librarians that the Chancellor now indicated that most CUNY libraries were closed for in-

person services. There remained a few service points in place to house a laptop loan program for students overseen by the Coronavirus Task Force. The Chancellor confirmed this with an email sent to all staff and faculty the same evening entitled 'working together' explicitly confirming that he had removed libraries from the list of campus facilities that were required to remain open.

The next day, March 20, Governor Cuomo signed the New York State on PAUSE executive order, stipulating all non-essential workers should remain at home, ensuring uniform safety for everyone.

3. Conclusions

Disaster response plans were in place; campus administrations and librarians understood that these public facilities can and should serve as safe-havens and that the services provided here contribute to the resiliency of a systemically underserved community. However, lessons learned from 9/11 or Hurricane Sandy were not applicable to the COVID-19 response. The provision of public spaces to gather, most likely after traveling on public transportation, would contribute to rather than mitigate the vulnerability of this community. The island needed was a virtual one. The organizational structure of the library, the college and the university were not designed to pivot services abruptly. In the case of York College Library, added to this was the pressure decades of austerity funding had placed on these services effectively reducing them to the bare necessities. The librarians at York had the daunting task of transitioning a primarily face-to-face service model to support distance learning for a student population that they knew did not necessarily have access to the internet at home. The association with the wider university ended up protecting workers and providing for students in a more comprehensive way. The experiment that Dr. Webster spoke of at CUNY's inception worked; an institution more varied than he could have ever imagined governed itself successfully according to the collective, popular will.

However, the economic challenges of this academic community have only worsened because of COVID-19. When York College transitioned to a full distance learning program in the middle of the Spring 2020 semester, the IT department purchased and loaned out several hundred laptops to students who had no other means of completing their coursework or 'attending' a virtual class. We do not yet know how many students simply withdrew entirely, however we do know that 58% of CUNY students report that their ability to complete school work has decreased (Freudenberg, 2). According to the New York City Office of the Comptroller, a fifth of New Yorkers are expected to lose their jobs by the end of June (Sanders, 2020). If we assume that job loss will hit York students at the same rate, that means 1,623 York students will lose their source of income because of the coronavirus pandemic. However, given the temporary and part-time nature of York college student employment, the actual proportion is likely to be even higher. Without assistance from multiple sources, including the campus library, many York students are likely to drop out because of this

economic impact. However, if we can remove barriers like unequal access to technology, and add an electronic component to all of our services, we can help retain students facing economic hardship and thus keep them on track for graduation. York Library is a natural starting point for students, who already turn to the library to borrow technology and who often seek help from the librarians to navigate resources.

The challenge is urgent since York College is primarily composed of the very same people hit the hardest by COVID-19. Apart from the economically precarious student population, York students are also 44.1% black and 21.9% Hispanic. In New York City, black and Hispanic people are dying from COVID-19 at more than twice the rate of white and Asian people (NYC Health, 2020) which reflects other health disparities and economic inequality in general. While York College Library cannot undo the years of systemic racism that led to this gap in health and economic outcomes, all efforts are being focused on providing better online resources that can help alleviate some of the burdens placed on the students by allowing them to complete as much of their coursework from home as possible.

The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic, and New York City's role as the American epicenter, will have lasting effects on CUNY and the York College community specifically. As of this writing, CUNY has not made any decisions regarding whether to reopen fully in Fall 2020, but it is increasingly likely that on-campus activities will remain limited until a vaccine is developed. York students will continue to bear the brunt of the economic hardship caused by the pandemic and ensuing recession. CUNY has a proven track record of being a potent engine of upward mobility and expanding access to this type of public institution is critical in addressing systemic inequities (Chetty, 41). Finally, the devastating economic impact of COVID-19 on New York State has financial repercussions for CUNY and York College, who rely on NY state and city funding for their operational budgets. The first two reasons are why York students need library support more than ever; the latter is why the library, and CUNY in general, requires an end to austerity funding.

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