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Guest Editorial: Reimagining the Post-Covid Library

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Reimagining the Post-COVID Library

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Imagine, for a moment, that it is early-March 2020. News about a new, dangerous virus has been growing with every passing day. Within several weeks, your library and the rest of the world will be in full lockdown. Libraries around the world will be shuttered, leaving librarians to figure out how to continue providing services to their users. Librarians, of course, met the challenge head-on as we always do. Examples of extraordinary librarianship could be found everywhere, including on these pages, over the past two years.

If you are thinking “no, not another Covid column,” don’t worry, I am not going to recap the last three years of our struggles and successes with Covid. Rather, I am going to look ahead to what I think libraries may look like after we fully emerge from the pandemic. This is a question I’ve often considered over the past three years. Clearly, both our way of providing services and our patrons’ expectations have changed so let me look into my crystal ball and make some predictions.

First, I think libraries have become more nimble. We had to quickly shift from face-to-face to online and no-contact services almost overnight. For libraries that offered a robust suite of virtual services, this was an easier task than for libraries that offered few or no virtual options. As always, though, libraries stepped up to the challenge and met the needs of their communities. They increased chat hours and offered no-contact materials pick up. They expanded online consultation options, moved to all-virtual instruction and programming models, and beefed-up digital content. Librarians, as true public servants, identified the needs of their users and found ways, often creatively, to continue library services. Now that we are heading down the other side of the pandemic mountain, many of the lessons learned and services implemented have survived and will serve us well in the future. We are hopeful that we won’t face anything like Covid again

during our lifetimes. However, the lessons we've learned as a library community will stay with us. Whether we are faced with a natural disaster or some other significant event, we've proven that we are nimble and can rise to any challenge.

Second, I think our users' expectations have changed. More access to digital content, more e-books, more real-time online help from the library. Libraries did many of these things before Covid. So what's changed? Users now expect this level of online service and content as a baseline for normal library services whereas before it was a "nice to have" service for many libraries. And this change in expectations is not a bad thing. Libraries would have eventually gotten there. Covid just sped up the change, much to the benefit of our users.

Finally, I think the way we expect to meet with each other has changed. I am just as tired of Zoom meetings and conferences as the next person, but I can see the benefits that Zoom offers. Zoom allows us to get more done because we don't have to leave our offices for meetings. No more travel time. It also allows us to meet with people who otherwise would have been unavailable for a face-to-face meeting. I've seen this play out time and again on my campus. And, although I certainly prefer in-person conferences, being able to attend virtually has allowed us to remain connected professionally. Looking again into my crystal ball, I predict that virtual meetings will remain ingrained while conferences will return to in-person with a virtual component. Only time will tell, though.

We are all trying to get back to some level of pre-Covid normalcy, and the articles in this issue show that we are headed in that direction, however that may look. One library shows how it has been successful in launching and growing an ongoing series of "Team Trivia" for students that was originally delayed due to the pandemic. Another library has reimagined user-engagement activities and programs to reach incoming students as they have returned to campus in pre-pandemic numbers. Increasing access to YA and children's collections in an academic library is the focus of another library. I know you will enjoy reading about the great things your colleagues around the state are doing in their libraries as we continue our return to normal.