Pennsylvania Libraries: *Research & Practice*

Commentary

Lessons Learned in Leaving the Library and Coming Back Again

Meg E. Massey

Meg E. Massey is the Manager of Interlibrary Loan at Penn State University, mem548@psu.edu

In early March 2020, libraries across the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania began to close in the wake of the COVID-19 crisis. On March 19, staff members in the Interlibrary Loan (ILL) Department at Penn State University Libraries pivoted to providing remote services to Penn State users and library partners from around the world. In addition to describing the difficulties of transitioning to and the realities of working from home, this piece describes the challenges experienced in returning to the library. Considerations for the future are also discussed.

Introduction

In early March 2020, libraries around the commonwealth of Pennsylvania began to close in response to the COVID-19 crisis. On March 11, Penn State University moved to remote learning for all classes from the period of March 16 to April 3. On March 18, it was announced that remote instruction would be extended through the end of the semester. On the following evening, Governor Tom Wolf ordered non-life-sustaining businesses to close their physical locations. The following morning, members of the Interlibrary Loan (ILL) Team at Penn State University Libraries entered the Pattee and Paterno Libraries at the University Park campus to wrap up some requests and adjust our systems as we pivoted to provide remote services. As we gathered items necessary for our remote work and left the building, none of us could have anticipated that we would work from home for the next four months or how our on-site work environment would need to be adjusted in order to return to campus.

Preparing to Return

In late May to early June, discussions about returning to on-site work began. Penn State University had developed a return-to-work authorization process that required units to submit detailed descriptions for what they planned to accomplish in their on-site work. Managers or unit heads also had to describe their plans for maintaining health and safety guidelines as established by the university, which included providing a list of all employees that

planned to return. These plans had to be approved by various groups at the university, including libraries administration, the Provost's Office, Human Resources, and Facilities.

The libraries also established a Safe Return to Work Group. Small groups were created to address a variety of issues where guidelines were necessary, including materials handling and quarantine, access services, public spaces and services, and office/cubicle spaces. These small groups contained stakeholders from various units and campuses around the Commonwealth, so that a variety of perspectives would be acknowledged and taken into consideration. Each small group developed a set of recommendations that were delivered to the Safe Return to Work Group.

In Interlibrary Loan, staff shared documents in Box to help prepare for the return to work. Guidelines established by the university and the libraries were shared with team members. Separate documents were established for the ILL borrowing and lending teams, so that staff could brainstorm about how to handle certain tasks upon returning to the building. Of course, as with our broader libraries guidelines, we knew that the situation was bound to evolve and that all the planning in the world might not prepare us completely for what we would find upon our return.

The Return to the Building

As we expected, it was one thing to discuss returning to on-site work, but it was another thing to experience it. The first day that I went into the office to begin preparing for the Interlibrary Loan Team's return, I sat down at my desk and shed a few tears. I do not think I realized how much I had been grieving for a sense of normalcy. I also do not think I realized how much I had missed having two computer screens and my ergonomic chair. That day I also went to the receiving room to assess the "damage." The damage, of course, being the mountain of returns and mail that had never been opened or returned to sender. Our ILL Management Team began to adjust spaces to accommodate new social distancing guidelines. A staggered schedule had already been created to help maintain proper distance.

On July 29, the ILL Team returned to our offices. In our early days back in the building, we began the following processes: working through a backlog of returns, preparing items for shipment back to lending libraries, retrieving materials from the Pattee and Paterno collections to scan, scanning items from print materials for document delivery, course reserves and lending, and reinstating delivery services.

Despite working on normal processes, things now feel anything but normal. Employees are masked daily and engaging in new cleaning protocols. Our staggered schedule works to ensure proper social distancing, but communication in this hybrid environment is a challenge. We have really come to rely on technologies like Zoom and Microsoft Teams. One-on-one meetings, full team meetings, office hours on Zoom, and the Teams chat feature have helped encourage communication and collaboration.

Added to these challenges is the stress of providing services while we are essentially operating at half-capacity. While there are always many materials flowing through Interlibrary Loan on any normal day, it has not been unusual these days for things to back up. For a department that is known for our responsiveness and willingness to share materials, this has been challenging. It is difficult to leave the office with piles in our wake that need to be handled by tomorrow's team. On the days we work from home and do not report to campus, many of us struggle with productivity and the feeling that we could contribute more on-site.

Considerations for the Future

Since the start of the COVID-19 crisis, one question that I have been asked a few times is how we could have better prepared for the transition to remote work. To be completely honest, I am never quite sure how to answer. I have talked with many people that have worked in the library field for a long time, and most say they cannot remember experiencing anything quite like this. Rather than focusing on what we could have done differently or how we could

have been more prepared, I find myself reframing the question. What do our people need to be successful in their work from home? After all, it is the people that have made library services work.

One key aspect that has emerged is the importance of flexibility. Even as most of us are back in our libraries, we know it may become necessary to continue working off-site for at least a portion of our time through the fall 2020 semester and perhaps beyond. There are still many library staff members around the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania who are still working completely remotely. We need flexible schedules, understanding, and empathy for those who are balancing the pressures and responsibilities of work with the needs of home and family. Managers should consider ways to be creative as they are assigning projects to their employees during this time and point staff toward learning opportunities that will enrich their professional experience.

Technology is also a key component to our success in the current environment, whether we are working from home, are back on-site, or balancing the two. Where possible in the future, libraries should consider purchasing equipment and technology that makes this type of work possible, including laptops or software that allows for remote access to office computers. If we've learned anything throughout this crisis, it's that we can develop the capacity to deliver instruction and provide resources and patron assistance from remote locations. I expect that in the coming months, we will see remote work continue as companies realize their staff may not need to return to the physical workplace, even as things begin to normalize.

Conclusion

At Penn State, there are several silver linings that have come about because of the COVID-19 crisis. Staff members from around the libraries have provided support and encouragement to each other, volunteering for new extended services like curbside pickup and offering to help in public-facing units. Departments across the libraries have collaborated to create innovative services to accommodate remote users, such as ILL working with the Microforms Department and Libraries Strategic Technologies to create links in our catalog for users to request scans from microfilm as well as creating similar links that allow users to request materials from branch library reserves collections. In the resource-sharing community at large, library partners have worked together to create best practices and workflows to extend grace (and due dates!) in a time where it is needed more than ever.

At this point, the university plans to shift to remote instruction after the Thanksgiving holiday. Even if we must shift to remote instruction before then due to rising case counts or recommendations from the state, we intend to remain in the building this time around to continue providing physical services. In the last three months of working on-site, we have learned that we can perform most of our regular duties while adhering to university guidelines for social distancing and universal masking. However, if it becomes necessary for us to work completely remotely again, we know what must be done to accomplish this, and we know that there is light at the end of the tunnel. Regardless of where the next few months take us, we are confident that we can continue to work together to meet the needs of our users and support our colleagues at Penn State and beyond.