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Virtually (im)Possible: Transitioning to a Virtual Marketing and Outreach Program

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Abstract: This article outlines the challenges and successes of a library outreach team at a small New England college campus during the COVID-19 pandemic. In March of 2020, the highly residential College of the Holy Cross in Worcester, Massachusetts, sent almost all students home to continue their classes online—yet no online classes had ever been taught at the college before. For the first time ever, the college’s libraries were in the position to rebuild all promotional communications and activities from scratch—pivoting from a largely in-person setting to an entirely virtual setting. The team quickly created and launched social media campaigns and virtual programming and activities to engage a newly far-flung and isolated campus community. Some highlights of successful activities included poetry paired with new

photography of campus, recorded faculty book talks, library staff introductions to first-year students at its virtual LibFest, and video storytelling of legends from the college archives. The Holy Cross Library Outreach team hopes that sharing its methods may help other libraries reach more patrons and playfully experiment outside of their old library marketing comfort zones.

Keywords: Library outreach, library marketing, community engagement, COVID-19, coronavirus, virtual outreach, social media, remote learning, library programming, liberal arts college, poetry walk, egg hunt, faculty speakers

Literature Review

When the COVID-19 pandemic spread to the United States in March 2020, academic libraries did not have a lot of time to react. Decisions had to be made quickly to convert scheduled, in-person events into digital ones and begin planning for future digital endeavors.

In the July 2020 issue of *Computers in Libraries*, Terence K. Huwe (2020) touches on the idea of “educational resilience,” specifically in reference to the recent push for disaster planning at the University of California-Berkeley. The Educational Resilience initiative on UCB’s campus was a “crisis-driven approach” to create “a new mindset that emphasized extending [their] digital reach.” Originally designed in reaction to the wildfires that spread across the Bay Area in 2019, this approach became extremely useful when dealing with the coronavirus pandemic in 2020-2021. Huwe notes the library’s specific role in educational resilience on campus. Library culture has always been a source of innovative ideas and, as seen on campuses across the country in 2020, this was the case with the COVID-19 pandemic as well. The libraries at the College of the Holy Cross wanted to emulate this push and ensure that library programming continued to reach students through the end of the now-virtual semester.

Quickly after the start of the mass closures of American colleges and universities in 2020, two librarians saw the need to document these closures and responses on a large scale. Lisa Janicke Hinchliffe and Christine Wolff-Eisenberg (2020) began the “US Academic Library Response to COVID19 Survey” on March 11, a survey designed to keep track of real-time updates through the academic library world. With this project, not only were academic librarians able to keep track of updates at their own institutions, but each could also follow along with decisions librarians made at other colleges as well. This information sharing proved immensely helpful in more ways than one. By observing other colleges that had similar closing timelines as Holy Cross, the Holy Cross librarians were able to adopt adjacent virtual marketing and outreach activities as well.

After many months, academic library staff have learned more about how to best serve virtual learners. Now more prevalent are articles discussing virtual access, such as Jessamyn West’s “Digital Literacy Lessons from the Time of COVID19,” and best practices, such as the Salt Lake City Civic Engagement Team’s “Best Practices for Engagement in the Time of

COVID-19” (West, 2020; Salt Lake City Civic Engagement Team, 2020). Issues such as computer and Internet access, digital literacy, and student engagement were problems that used to be tackled on the physical college campus. However, the pandemic has compelled us to reevaluate how we engage with students in need while maintaining traditional library services. With this hindsight, we now can successfully plan future virtual events with these new, contemporary issues in mind.

The Outreach and Engagement Team of the Holy Cross Libraries prepares several events throughout the year, ranging from promotion of library services to faculty book talks and games for students. These events put into practice the values in the library’s most recent strategic plan (College of the Holy Cross Libraries, 2012). Working to create opportunities for collaboration with departments outside the library and identifying departments to approach as cosponsors help fulfill two of the library’s stated values:

- *Collaboration/Cooperation/Partnership: We value the cooperative spirit of the diverse communities comprising the College that gives it its cohesive character.*
- *Diversity: We support academic, religious, and cultural diversity that fosters mutual respect and unity within the College.*

The Outreach and Engagement Team’s events boost the college community’s awareness of library services and help the library develop deeper collaborative relationships with a variety of departments across campus. They also allow the library to meet the following Standards for Libraries in Higher Education set forth by the Association of College and Research Libraries (2018).

1.7 The library communicates with the campus community to highlight its value in the educational mission and in institutional effectiveness.

Library events are promoted to the entire campus.

2.6 The library engages in collaborations both on campus and across institutional boundaries.

Many outreach events involve collaboration with other departments, both academic and non-academic.

5.5 *The library educates users on issues related to economic and sustainable models of scholarly communication.*

Some events use open access resources.

9.1 *The library contributes to external relations through communications, publications, events, and donor cultivation and stewardship.*

Some events engage members of the library's consortium, the local public library, and the local community.

The College's Response to the Pandemic

The College of the Holy Cross is a highly residential, small liberal arts campus of just under 3,000 students, located in Worcester, Massachusetts. More than ninety percent of the college's student population lives on campus (College of the Holy Cross, *Residence Life*, para. 1). The experience of living on campus, fully engaging in the campus community, and feeling that the campus is a "home away from home" are major factors that attract students to the school (College of the Holy Cross, *The Holy Cross Experience*, para. 1-2). The emphasis on "on-campus" experiences in the campus culture is highlighted by the fact that before the COVID-19 pandemic, the College of the Holy Cross did not offer any options for online classes or events. All classes and events were held in person and on campus. Due to the global pandemic, on March 11, 2020, the president of the college announced that for the first time in college history, all in-person classes and events would cease and, with one week's notice, distance learning for all classes would begin March 23. This was a dramatic shift in history and culture. Students had one week to move out of their dorms and back to their homes, if possible. Faculty had one week to convert their in-person classes to fully remote learning, with no prior experience and little infrastructure to support an online learning environment. The college was committed to maintaining support services for students, despite the closing of campus.

Through the hard work and dedication of the campus library staff, (and the Facilities and Information Technology departments), virtual library services continued uninterrupted. Most staff worked from home for the first time, while a skeleton crew of library workers remained on campus for essential in-person work. The Outreach and Engagement Team began to meet

remotely and worked together to reimagine a year's worth of outreach events as successful online and virtual events.

Poetry Walk

Plans for a poetry walk emerged before the pandemic, initially inspired by a Project SET presentation given by Joel Newsome at the Massachusetts Library Systems Annual Meeting in November 2019. Following this presentation and other examples of similar programming, such as the “Chatham Poetry Walk” (Lawless, 2018), the Outreach and Engagement Team was inspired to create a program where students, staff, faculty, and local community members could encounter nature-themed poems while walking through Holy Cross’ beautiful campus. The proposed “Poetry Walk” would designate a temporary walking path, with mounted signs interspersed along the way. The goal was to create an interactive and interdisciplinary experience that would expose community members to the creative work and physical environment found at Holy Cross as well as to a nearby nature trail.

The outreach team discussed and agreed on the following four main objectives:

1. Increase awareness and appreciation of poetry by supporting National Poetry Month.
2. Enable participants to enjoy and develop a deeper appreciation of the physical beauty of the College of the Holy Cross—the views of College Hill overlooking the city of Worcester, surrounded by the Middle River and its wetlands.
3. Provide curation and editing opportunities for students.
4. Promote the poetry collection in Dinand Library’s circulating print holdings and raise the profile of the College Archives’ Louise I. Guiney Collection.

The Poetry Walk was intended to be a community engagement and wellness program targeted to the entire Holy Cross community (students, faculty, staff, administrators, alumni) as well as the community of Worcester, Massachusetts, where the college is located. Eleven potential partners across the campus and city were identified for collaboration and cosponsorship.

Library staff were particularly interested in working with students to curate this event. The team then estimated the materials and budget needed for signage, promotional materials, and refreshments for both a guided tour and kick-off event.

The Poetry Walk was planned for April 2020, which coincided with National Poetry Month, the fiftieth anniversary of Earth Day, an alumni event, and Holy Cross' annual Academic Conference. Measuring the number of participants in a self-guided outdoor event would be challenging. Assessments would include the attendance numbers at the kick-off event and the number of collaborating groups/offices.

After the college was closed in March 2020, the outreach team decided to continue with the Poetry Walk concept—but adapted it to social media. Instead of physical signs along the outdoor path, the team used social media to post photographs of campus, overlaid with poetry. In addition, the program was renamed “Poetry Event.” Although the team wanted students to feel emotionally close to the campus, very few people were allowed on campus to take an in-person self-guided tour. The team maintained the original nature-poem theme but, to help students feel connected to campus while at home, they also used poems that could evoke locations on campus. The selection of poems was done completely by members of the Outreach and Engagement Team rather than as a collaborative project with students; this meant the team's third event objective would not be fulfilled.

Each day from Earth Day (April 22) through the end of April, a different poem was posted to the library's social media accounts, which included Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. The team selected several nature-themed poems within the public domain and asked library staff to record videos of themselves reading the poems. Those who were still working on campus at the time recorded themselves reading poems in spaces on campus. Through these adaptations to a virtual setting, the team was still able to fulfill the first event objective, i.e., sharing poetry in honor of National Poetry Month.

Posts consisted of the text of the poem, the citation, and the poem's location in the Holy Cross Libraries if available; in this way, the team was able to fulfill the fourth event objective. Each poem was accompanied by either a relevant campus photo or a video of a library staff member reading the poem

(see Figure 1). This was critical to help participants, especially students, feel connected to the people and places they normally would have encountered if they were still on campus. Library staff contributed photos and volunteered to read, thus enabling them to engage as well. These efforts fulfilled the second objective—helping the community enjoy the beauty of campus, as the New England winter turned into spring and daffodils bloomed on the mostly deserted campus.

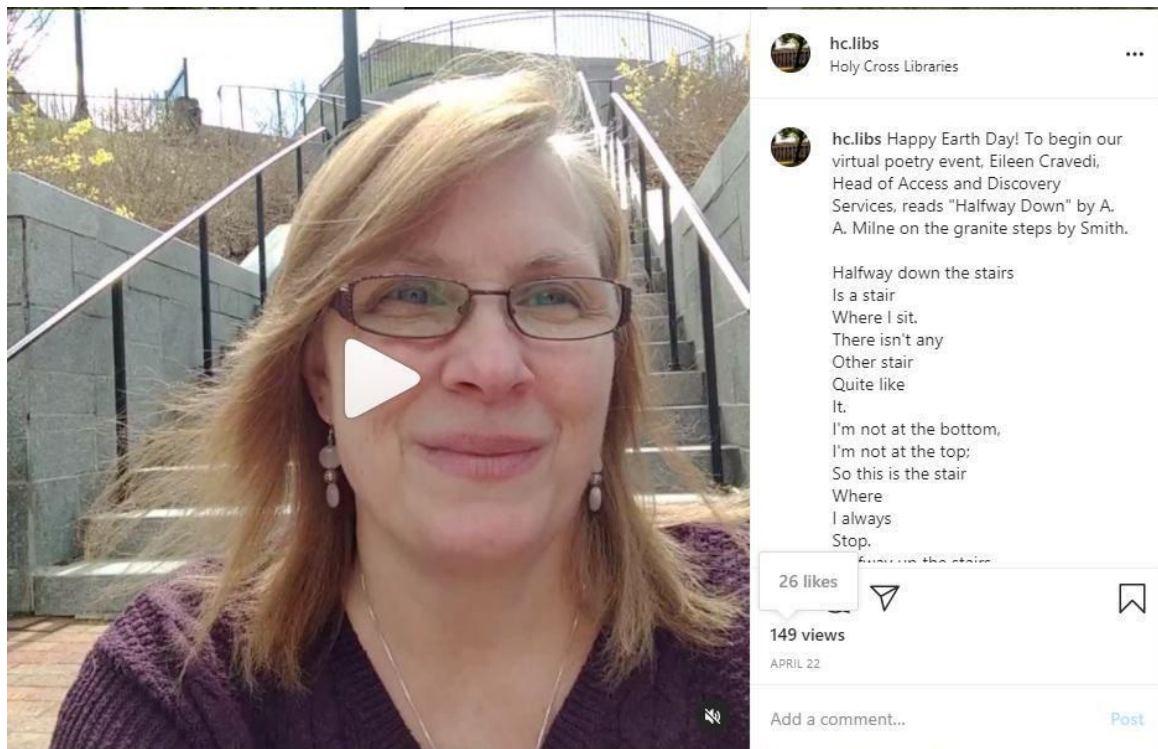


Figure 1: An Example of Holy Cross Libraries' Instagram Posts About Its Poetry Event

Creating a virtual event eliminated the need for any physical materials, sign printing services, or installation expenses. This proved advantageous, since the college's budget was frozen (and later cut), and only essential expenditures would have been approved. Unfortunately, it also eliminated the opportunity for collaboration with students. Mindful of the new pressures on both students and faculty to adapt to an online learning environment, as well as on other stakeholders whose priorities had shifted, the Poetry Event was produced solely by the Outreach and Engagement Team.

Despite numerous challenges, the virtual Poetry Event succeeded. This success was demonstrated through the social media statistics, which revealed,

for example, that the event's videos on Instagram received an average of 137 views; this is consistent with response rates to videos created prior to going virtual. Through this event, the library demonstrated a strong commitment to encouraging members of the Holy Cross community (and anyone who found the event online) to engage more, discover more, and learn more. This conclusion is supported by an increase in views of the Holy Cross Libraries social media accounts.

The majority of students moved back to campus in February 2021 to continue their studies in the residence halls—mostly online, but with the ability to roam the grounds of campus and physically access some of the libraries. Most library staff continue to work from home, and only essentially analog work is done on campus. As of March 2021, the Outreach and Engagement Team plans to resurrect the concept of a poetry walk in a physically present, but socially distanced, self-guided tour. There will be student-authored poetry on signs installed in the landscape and, using what the team learned earlier in the pandemic, there will also be a strong social media element. With even more photography of the campus installation online, the team hopes that participants can virtually walk the path from anywhere, whether they are a student currently in a quarantine dormitory room on campus or an alum living in a cozy home on the other side of the world.

Easter Egg Hunt

In years past, a popular spring semester library promotion event was the Easter Egg Hunt, in which the Holy Cross Libraries' Engagement and Outreach Team would gather to fill plastic eggs with candy and swag items such as handmade pin-back buttons and stickers with messages promoting the library's branches and archives. This year, the tradition continued, keeping the students engaged while the campus community adjusted to the sudden change of remote learning. For the Easter Egg Hunt, team members photographed the colorful plastic eggs tucked in different locations around the campus. The team worked together on a shared spreadsheet to write clues about the hiding places on campus. For each of the five days leading up to Easter, team members posted a Holy Cross trivia question beneath a new Easter egg photo on each social media account—Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram (see Figure 2).

Answers were posted in the comment section. The participants were engaged because once the correct answer was guessed, library staff would then respond to each answer, encouraging wrong answers to try again, and congratulating correct answers. This was a successful way to keep people connected to Holy Cross and allowed them to see how the campus looked and to celebrate the seasonal changes in a festive way even after everyone was sent home for the semester.



Figure 2: An Example of Holy Cross Libraries' Instagram Posts About Its Easter Egg Hunt

LibFest

LibFest, an annual information fair that is organized by the library's Outreach and Engagement Team, has been a highly successful outreach event at the college. This two-hour, drop-in library orientation event features tables with friendly spokespeople and giveaway items representing various library departments, such as the Worcester Art Museum Library (a branch of Holy Cross's libraries), the Music Library, Archives and Special Collections, and the

Dr. Mark G. Nevins '86 Collection for the Study of Comic Books and Graphic Novels. Campus departments with close ties to the library—such as the Writer's Workshop, Academic Services and Learning Resources, and Information Technology Services (ITS)—also collaborate and send representatives to show and tell students their most important services. LibFest works because it helps students put names to faces and demystify librarians. In times of high stress later in the year, students can recall their first informal acquaintance with library staff and know who to ask for help when it is urgently needed.

In previous years, this event was held either outside on the lawn in front of the Dining Hall or indoors near a popular dining spot in the campus center. This event always occurs in September, and the main target audience is first-year students. Feedback surveys indicate that students enjoy LibFest so much that they return year after year to continue to pick up free swag and interact with the library staff. This event is the library's main opportunity to personally meet students face to face, introduce its services, and answer any questions students might have.

As the fall 2020 semester began amid the pandemic, library staff recognized the vital importance of providing first-year students with a library orientation experience. The Outreach and Engagement Team decided to recreate LibFest into a 30-minute drop-in event held via Zoom during the third week of September. Each participating department created content for two Google slides to highlight its most interesting and useful services and discuss how to best reach staff remotely. Staff members from each department spoke for two minutes to introduce themselves and the services that their department provides.

To advertise the new virtual LibFest event, the outreach team members wrote emails on the campus-wide Listservs for all students, faculty, and staff. Additionally, the director of the campus' First Year Experience program emailed all faculty associated with that program to ask that they promote LibFest to the first-year students. The event was also advertised on the campus website's event calendar as well as the library's social media sites and homepage.

The day of the event, members of the outreach team were grateful that many students attended both 30-minute sessions of LibFest. This was encouraging, since many students had spoken of their Zoom fatigue, and the members of the outreach team feared that students would avoid it as one more virtual obligation.

The experience of transitioning LibFest to a virtual event inspired the outreach team to upload event materials to the campus institutional repository, CrossWorks. Making event materials available online to those who were unable to attend is a valuable action that the team plans to continue with future events—it increases access for all and helps build an institutional memory of the library’s outreach efforts over time. To reach the students who were unable to attend in person, the library recorded one of the Zoom sessions and uploaded it to the library’s YouTube channel. In addition, the slideshow presentation and associated handouts were uploaded to the institutional repository. A follow-up email was sent to all campus faculty and students a week later, advertising that these materials were available to view. As of early March 2021, these materials have been viewed 91 times in CrossWorks.

Authors on the Hill

Another event that was traditionally held in person was a faculty author lecture series titled “Authors on the Hill.” For this event, the Outreach and Engagement Team invites faculty members to present their recently published work. Students hear about advanced research topics that faculty are passionate about, learn about compelling contemporary events, and ask challenging follow-up questions. Indeed, several professors have begun to invite students to attend these talks for extra credit.

The event is usually held for one hour within a large space in the main library. The AudioVisual Services department records the event and uploads the recordings to the library’s YouTube channel. The team has received enthusiastic feedback from students saying that they enjoy this event and that they want to continue to see faculty they admire present about their research and publications. It gives students a window into the academic path of faculty members as researchers and scholars—whom they know as instructors.

When the college first switched to online classes in March 2020, the outreach team scrambled to schedule an online Zoom version of Authors on the Hill, seeking to foster a sense of continuity and community. Several faculty members were contacted to gauge their interest in the event. Understandably, all faculty declined the invitation, stating that they were feeling far too overwhelmed with teaching online and personal matters to plan an online lecture that spring.

With the start of the fall semester, the outreach team contacted different faculty who had recently published to inquire about their interest in speaking during a Zoom event. While several faculty again declined the invitation on account of feeling too overwhelmed, two faculty accepted the invitation and indicated that they were eager to present their recent publications in a virtual talk.

For advertising these lectures, as with LibFest, all students, faculty, and staff were emailed several times about them. The outreach team has noticed through several years of trial and error that emails, sent at regular intervals, help the marketing for upcoming events “stick” in the minds of the campus community. Team members also posted announcements to a campus event calendar, the library homepage, and the library’s social media accounts. Additionally, the team asked the head of the two faculty presenters’ department to encourage their colleagues to promote the event to their students.

Both events were well attended, with numbers equaling those for in-person Authors on the Hill events. The audience enthusiastically engaged with the presenters and asked many questions. For one of the events, the faculty member granted permission to live-broadcast the event on the library’s YouTube channel. This enabled the outreach team to advertise the event outside the campus community to the college’s alumni and the general public. This was a new level of outreach that had not been attempted before. The team may not have explored live streaming at all had it not been for working remotely.

Dinand in the Dark

“Dinand in the Dark” was started as an open-mic, spooky story event in October at Dinand Library, the library’s main branch. The outreach team attempted to collaborate with the campus English Honor Society to host this event. However, the competition for student attention was high at that time of the semester, resulting in low event attendance. In 2019, the team decided to stop hosting this event. In 2020, with encouragement from the English department’s library liaison, the team decided to resurrect this event as a drop-in Zoom activity. The English department library liaison and a faculty member who taught horror literature classes worked together to invite students from the English department to write their own spooky tales and present them during a Zoom meeting. The outreach team had hoped to record the student readings as well. Unfortunately, despite the efforts of the faculty and English department library liaison, the Zoom event received zero student sign-ups. The faculty and library liaison speculated that students were experiencing Zoom fatigue and felt too overwhelmed to participate in this type of event.

Undaunted by the setback, the outreach team decided to reuse the Halloween theme, drawing from the archives’ collections of campus urban legends. Several years ago, the college alumni magazine had published a series of spooky campus legends for their fall issue, with the help of the archives staff. Using the successful methods from April’s poetry event, the outreach team asked library staff to record themselves reading spooky campus legends. Team members created narrated slide shows featuring images from the stories. A skeleton crew of team members who were still authorized to work on campus during the pandemic filmed themselves alone reading a campus legend at the place each legend occurred. Each of these social media posts earned many likes and comments from the campus community and alumni, showing the audience’s enthusiasm for this sort of content.

Advertising Reference Services

A major challenge faced by the Outreach and Engagement Team was a necessary refocus for the marketing of library services. Prior to the changes brought on by the pandemic, the Outreach and Engagement Team proposed and planned opportunities and events that promoted the campus libraries as friendly, welcoming places. Attracting students to the library for

non-academic events ideally leads them to feel more comfortable and confident about using the library and approaching librarians when academic needs arise. Many events in the past had been quirky, creative, and entertaining, or offered students a break from their academic work. Some highlights in the 2018–2019 year were mini-golf in the stacks and a petting zoo on the quad—events that the library was privileged to afford before the pandemic.

When students were sent home, marketing and outreach efforts changed focus to emphasize the fundamentals: library research and instruction. Such a tonal shift in the team’s marketing helped ensure that the community understood that the library was still busily functioning, just invisibly. It was offering all the essential services that students and faculty needed for their online coursework—something that not every academic library was in the position to undertake. Advertising and outreach efforts clarified again and again what services were still available, and which were not. Promotions on social media were dominated by the library’s Personal Research Sessions, Citation Frustration Stations, new databases, and other resources that vendors had offered or extended as well as revised operational and access procedures; most of the recreational events on the calendar were canceled. Old invitations for collaboration gave way to introducing and reestablishing relationships with other departments. Greater assertiveness was necessary to participate in opportunities such as new student orientations. Communication was more important than ever, while weaknesses in communication chains became very clear.

The team quickly discovered that students and some faculty encountered quite a bit of difficulty accessing materials online. A student survey sent by the campus Assessment Office revealed many students were confused about how to access online library resources from off-campus. Library staff individually emailed each student to follow up, offering assistance with accessing materials. Subject liaisons also emailed faculty to offer their assistance with accessing materials and with library instruction. Library staff, with the assistance of Academic Technology, spent countless hours helping faculty rebuild their print reading lists and syllabi for fully digital courses. The team relearned an important lesson: Clear, efficient communication about library databases and technology is essential to the virtual library research experience.

The Role of Social Media

Outreach efforts during this time largely took place on the library's social media platforms—Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. By using Facebook Business Insights to gather data on Facebook and Instagram posts, the library discovered a trend that the most popular content during this time were posts related to the Archives and Special Collections department as well as posts featuring images of the library's buildings, the library staff, and various areas on campus. Several of the top-ten posts with the most interaction during this time were from the Easter egg hunt event, described earlier in this article. One fifth of these top-ten posts featured content from the Archives and Special Collections department, and another fifth featured images of library staff working remotely. While the outreach team created several posts to announce various policy and procedure changes, the audience preferred to interact with content showcasing the more colorful aspects of the library and the Holy Cross community, such as peeks into the archives or summer reading favorites suggested by staff of the library and Holy Cross community.

What Didn't Work and Why

Unfortunately, several events planned by the Outreach and Engagement Team were interrupted due to the campus closure and Massachusetts' stay-at-home orders. In early February 2020, the team had planned to promote a new database, HeinOnline. This database includes a large collection of law-related journals and government documents, such treaties and federal regulations. The team's typical new-database advertising strategy would have begun with distributing flyers to academic departments and posting virtual advertising both on social media and the digital display board in the foyer of the main library. The best-performing strategy, however, had been to engage with faculty at the popular biweekly Faculty Lunch. The team planned to provide snacks and drinks that thematically reflected the content of each database. At a lunch in 2019, the team had promoted another database, the Current Digest of the Russian Press, by presenting a table of Russian tea refreshments, which was met with faculty enthusiasm, especially from the Russian Department. The team had planned to creatively advertise the HeinOnline database with German-style snacks such as soft pretzels, mustard, and (ginger) beer. Unfortunately, when the pandemic halted all on-campus

interaction—especially fellowship over food—the team was not able to host any event for this database.

Two highly anticipated book talk events also had to be canceled. The team had planned to sponsor a celebration for a book recently published by the assistant archivist as well as the semester's Authors on the Hill event. In addition to the challenges of overcoming the pandemic's initial shock and adjusting to the circumstances of a new "normal," the book talk events were also difficult to bring to fruition because of Zoom fatigue. It was very clear early on that faculty, staff, and even students were getting worn out by frequent video conference calls. Additionally, since the college shifted to remote learning mid-semester, faculty and staff were already working extremely hard to reconfigure lesson plans and lectures to better suit them to a virtual format. Requesting yet another virtual presentation may have risked overburdening them.

At the beginning of February 2020, the Outreach and Engagement Team had also planned a "Tea and Buns" therapy-animal event for final exams week in May, during which students would have interacted with rabbits and other calming animals. The event was inspired by a similar happening at Mount Holyoke College as well as the success of a petting zoo sponsored by the Holy Cross Libraries. Naturally, this event was also cancelled. However, Mount Holyoke was able to develop a successful virtual format for this kind of event—which will be a great resource for Holy Cross Libraries in the future, now that the team is more practiced in hosting virtual programming.

Conclusion

The switch from entirely in-person to fully online engagement with the campus community was full of challenges and learning experiences for the library staff. The major takeaway from this experience was a deep knowledge that the whole campus community is resilient and adaptable in tough times—not only the library staff, but the students, faculty, and college staff. While there were many challenges and some unsuccessful campaigns, the outreach team was able to quickly adapt to a new environment and methods of engagement with the community. Maintaining a regular meeting schedule via Zoom allowed planning efforts to continue uninterrupted. Greater reliance on email and social media for communicating and marketing was slightly different, but not unusual. A number of events were less complicated because they did not involve venue set-ups, ordering of food, invoices and other details that normally require coordination between multiple/third parties.

Some of the outreach team's efforts may seem familiar to library staff at other colleges and indeed, may already be in practice. However, moving completely online was an entirely new experience for the college, especially challenging given the demand for immediate transition. Despite having only a week's notice to shift outreach and engagement online, many successes and many ideas will carry over into the future. For example, the virtual version of LibFest will benefit not only those who could not attend the live event, but will also create a digital resource of the recent past that can be referred to whenever necessary. The library's outreach team hopes that their experiences will inspire colleagues at other small liberal arts schools to experiment with virtual engagement when possible, take risks, and be playful in their marketing strategies.

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