

# The Socially Distanced Academic Library

A Case Study Series of Best Practices during COVID-19

## Capilano University Library Quickly Pivots from In-Person to Online Services

Established in 1968 in North Vancouver, British Columbia, Capilano College became a special purpose public university with a focus on teaching in 2008. Primarily a commuter school with three campuses and over 95 programs, Capilano University (CapU) enrolled FTE 6,311 students in the 2019/2020 academic year. Included in the total enrollment were 2,534 international students, most of whom came from India, China, Brazil, Iran, and Vietnam.

Mid-March 2020 was a time of uncertainty for the Canadian province's higher-ed institutions, which were in discussion with the provincial government about the timing of a possible lockdown. "I know they were holding out to try to complete the term," says Capilano University Librarian Debbie Schachter. "But it became obvious that wasn't going to happen."

Fortunately CapU had an effective emergency operations committee (North Vancouver is in an earthquake zone) that was already working closely with the regional government and the BC Center for Disease Control. Shortly before the province declared a health emergency on March 17 and the CapU Library staff was told to work from home, Dr. Schachter and Student Experience Librarian and Faculty Coordinator Tania Alekson took initial steps to rework the library for reduced occupancy numbers by removing furniture from the student spaces.

With the staff given only two days advance notice to pivot to remote services, the library's primary concern was addressing the gap in physical offerings. Ensuring online access to textbooks and other materials placed on reserve was a key task of the eight liaison librarians. "We worked to get e-book versions of those [titles] so students could complete their work without having to struggle to find things," explains Alekson.

### Moving Services Online

In-person reference service transitioned to an online chat format through AskaAway, a regional reference consortium service. The platform not only provided chat reference from librarians across British Columbia, but also allowed the CapU librarians to handle this function themselves.

### The Highlights

#### The Challenge:

With only two days' notice, the CapU library had to fill in digital resource gaps and move in-person services online.

#### The Solution:

E-book versions of titles were quickly purchased and several chat platforms were implemented to sub in for student service and support needs. Library employees across the province were able to communicate with each other via a new email listserv under the CPSLD umbrella.

#### The Results:

Collection use during fall 2020 rose 14% compared to the same period a year prior.

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“Basically, we staffed our own reference desk but remotely through that service,” says Alekson. Over the summer the Library switched over to the Springshare LibAnswers platform to set up its own chat research help desk, but AskaAway’s availability at the beginning of the lockdown helped the library’s reference service to continue basically uninterrupted.

Two other chat services, Library Service Desk Chat and Academic Support Services Chat, were also created during the summer. “My concern was not being able to replicate the in-person physical service desk for staff,” notes Dr. Schachter, who also saw a need for a chat service to refer patrons to other services across campus. “Students were desperate for help. There was so much anxiety. I wanted to see if we could offer them a single-point of contact chat service to just direct them to the right service.”

In light of employee layoff fears, another challenge was ensuring that the 12 staff members, who had never previously worked remotely, were equipped with laptops to continue their work online and stay fully employed. The new chat services kept staffers busy but Dr. Schachter also points out other duties were able to be replicated virtually because the library’s resources are primarily digital (about 88.5% online versus 11.5% physical). To help the public services/circulation supervisor and other staff members connect with colleagues across the province, she asked the CPSLD (Council of Post Secondary Library Directors BC), of which she is a member, to set up an email listserv for library employees under the CPSLD umbrella.

### Prepping to Reopen

As the spring 2020 term ended, the university and the library prepared for a fall reopening, with 20% of the courses to be held in person. Working closely with Facilities and the Emergency Planning Committee, the library removed furniture to meet new COVID-19 distancing protocols and allow for individual study only. It also installed plexiglass shields around public service points as well as employee desks in the work rooms, and created signage and provided cleaning fluids and hand sanitizer.

The purchase of a Steri-Book sterilization machine, dubbed the Cleanopatra by students in a social media

contest, shortened the quarantine time for books and allowed for open stacks. “It was really important to have the library open for students to use as a workspace and to have the stacks open if they needed materials,” explains Alekson.

To ensure adequate coverage and limit possible exposure when the library reopened in August 2020 on a Monday to Friday 8am–7pm schedule, employees, after taking an online COVID training course and submitting daily health reports, were brought back in two shifts of three with minimal overlap. A two-week staffing cohort was also instituted with employees working five days on-site, four days remotely, with the fifth day off. “People have gotten into the new rhythm quite effectively,” comments Dr. Schachter.

“The university understands now that the Library is not entirely a physical entity as it was a decade ago.”

### Gate Counts Down, but Collection Use Up

Although the daily average gate count during the fall 2020 term (Sept.–Dec.) dropped dramatically to 244 patrons from the fall 2019 count of 3,813, collection use in the same period rose to 165,243 items (163,831 electronic, 1,412 physical) from the 145,358 items (137,536 electronic, 7,822 physical) recorded for the Sept.–Dec. 2019 term. “The university understands now that the Library is not entirely a physical entity as it was a decade ago,” says Dr. Schachter, as she reflects on the lessons learned. “We’re a digital library and have been that way for a long time.”

The ability to offer all library services online was a message that the university librarian repeatedly stressed to administrators seeking budgetary savings during the pandemic, and that was obviously understood. All employees were retained to work online or in-person, with the exception of two auxiliary staff members released in March 2020 due to the Library’s closure. Those positions will be rehired when full regular-term hours are resumed in the fall.

Even as CapU prepares for a full return to campus in Fall 2021, Schachter is looking for other digital services to build into the library’s current offerings so that “we’re getting better value from our resources and building awareness of all the collections that we have.”

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