

The Socially Distanced Academic Library

A Case Study Series of Best Practices during COVID-19

How Elon University's Carol Grotnes Belk Library Not Only Maintained, but Grew, Its Campus Community

Founded in 1889 and located in central North Carolina, Elon University is a mid-sized private institution nationally recognized for its emphasis on student-focused engaged learning and its leadership in high-impact educational practices. It offers 60 undergraduate and 10 graduate degree programs. Enrollment (full- and part-time) as of fall 2020 totaled 7,117, with 6,291 undergraduates and 826 graduate and professional students.

As an engaged academic library, the Carol Grotnes Belk Library incorporates eight categories of high-impact educational practices essential to Elon University's mission. Its most notable services include the Personal Librarian (PL) program, which matches all first-year Elon students with their own personal librarian, and the Belk Library Liaison Program, which assigns librarians to specific academic departments and interdisciplinary programs for closer collaboration with the faculty in various areas from collection building and research to library instruction.

In March 2020, the COVID-19 pandemic forced the residential Elon campus to go fully remote, although most students did not return home until the spring break. For the Belk Library, the challenges of minimizing in-person services and transitioning to virtual were mitigated by already having an operational online infrastructure in place. "On some level we never really shut down, as we continued our core services throughout [this period]," says Joan Ruelle, Belk Library Dean and Associate Professor.

When online instruction began, the library prioritized providing access to materials in electronic format. This switch to digital resources was made manageable by the sizable collection of e-books and e-journals that the library had built prior to the pandemic. "We have long had the policy that whenever possible we would buy unlimited simultaneous licenses to e-books so that our community wouldn't hit a maximum user wall," explains Ruelle. Other available remote services included online (chat) reference, email support, and individual research consultations via WebEx or Zoom.

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The Highlights

The Challenge:

With colleagues, faculty, and students dispersed during the shutdown, the library worried it might lose ground and recognition of the important services it provided.

The Solution:

To stay involved with activities and colleagues around campus, library staff volunteered with Student Life to help with quarantined students, handling COVID intake, daily check-ins, and campus testing. By the spring of 2020, the library was carefully preparing spaces for limited walk-in traffic by implementing COVID-19 safety measures. The fall saw a hybrid reopening.

The Results:

While first-year instruction during summer and fall of 2020 dropped 45% compared to the previous year, research consultations jumped 45% and liaison activity spiked 181%. Likewise, despite a 63% drop in gate-counts during 2020, overall interactions with patrons jumped 199%.

After the library was closed to walk-in services for all patrons on March 22, a small number of staff from public services/circulation continued to go into the building regularly to pull requested materials for curbside pickup and email scans of selected chapters from physical books to students and faculty. Even when we weren't allowing walk-in traffic into the building," notes the dean, "we were still providing access to our physical collection."

Keeping Connections Alive

The larger difficulty for Belk staffers during the shutdown was maintaining relationships with colleagues, faculty, and students. "We're a highly relationship-based campus," says Ruelle. "Trying to find ways to maintain that sense of community and connection when we were dispersed was probably the biggest challenge."

Helping their colleagues in Student Life do daily contact with quarantined students was one option for the Belk Library staff to stay connected with the university at large. About 71% of the full-time staff volunteered to handle COVID intake, daily check-ins, and campus testing. Ruelle worked testing every Monday. "It's been invigorating to be able to participate in those larger initiatives and be a citizen of the campus," she comments.

May 2020 was devoted to preparing the library spaces (installing plexiglass shields, moving furniture, signage, and implementing other COVID-19-related safety measures) for the return of students and the re-integration of staffers to working on-site. Seat count was reduced from the pre-pandemic level of 906 seats and 43 small study rooms to the current 388 seats and 14 small study rooms (limited to one person per room).

On June 15, the Belk Library reopened walk-in services to faculty, staff, and students with swipe-card access only (9am-5pm M-F); virtual service hours continued at the same level as that of the spring semester. The fall 2020 term brought the return of in-person as well as hybrid and remote classes; library instruction was provided in all available formats as well. The pre-pandemic normal operating hours of 24/5 were cut to midnight to allow for overnight deep cleaning. Stacks became available for browsing and checkout, but patrons still had the options of self-service pickup and curbside service.

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The Hard Work Is Validated

With the reopening, Ruelle worried that library research instruction and other activities would drop off in the fall. But an analysis of the library's efforts from 2019 to 2020 left the dean pleasantly surprised. Although first-year library instruction for the summer and fall of 2020 declined 45% from the previous year, the freshman writing classes increased 20%. Research consultations also jumped 14% from 2019, and liaison activity skyrocketed 181%. "The fact that these referrals and consultations held steady or even went up felt like a validation that the time and energy we have dedicated to building [campus] partnerships are really what helped us remain a relevant value-adding partner during this time," says Ruelle.

While 2020 in-person gate counts dropped a significant 63%, the Belk Library's overall interactions with patrons jumped an astonishing 199%. In 2020 one in 34 visitors reached out to staff for assistance, compared to one in 96 in 2019. Ruelle again sees this increase in interactions as confirmation of the library's integral role within the university community, thanks to years of relationship building.

Bridging the Gap

However, the dean is concerned about those students currently at the end of their first year who, because of

physical distancing restrictions and reduced library instruction, did not develop the library habits of their predecessors. (Student contact with their personal librarians declined 45% last year, according to the library's analysis.) The challenge for the Belk library staff in Fall 2021 will be to reach out to these new sophomores.

In March 2020 Dean Ruelle asked her team, "are we still going to be recognizably us?" When the staff paused in December to assess the library's activities and engagement during the crisis, they found that it had not morphed into an unrecognizable organization. "We were still very much Belk Library," says Ruelle. "That was a great source of pride and gratitude for all of us."

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