New Model Library:

Pandemic Effects and Library Directions

OCLC

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This briefing represents work done on behalf of OCLC Research. When this briefing was written, Christopher Cyr, Ph.D., was an Associate Research Scientist at OCLC. At the time of publication Christopher had left OCLC to become the Director of Data Science for another company.

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FOREWORD

Janice Welburn
Dean of Libraries
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"Find a way or make one" is an often-quoted English translation of a Latin phrase used to describe determination in the face of the seemingly impossible.

Libraries in communities and cultures across the globe are accustomed to working in the face of adversity due to persistent geopolitical and economic constraints. Despite this adversity, library leaders have found ways or made them to provide access to information and to create space and services under a variety of circumstances.

But what happens to libraries in a pandemic when the risks associated with exposure to a highly transmissible, debilitating, and deadly virus force doors to close? And what happens when those doors remain closed month after month with the promise of business-as-usual no more than a mirage on the horizon? The COVID-19 pandemic has been fast-moving and unrelenting, much like a pattern of storms that surge and resurge with unpredictable power, as unpredictable as human behavior. The pandemic has done this and much more. It has revealed the scars and opened the wounds of global inequality, scars and wounds that represent what sociologist Charles Tilly called durable inequality,[1] those persistent and systemic forms of social inequality that are similarly rooted and affixed despite differences across cultures, communities, and people.

The consequences of inequality that the pandemic unmasked are those that deny a fair chance at education, food, decent housing and safe neighborhoods, and access to basic health care. It is no coincidence, then, that in 2020 society would experience social protest and challenges to the edifices of inequality. Physical closure of libraries also meant the suspension of physical access to one of society's great equalizers, a place for children to gain exposure to their first books, students to work together, and independent scholars to have unfettered access to knowledge.

This briefing addresses a set of fundamental questions to envision libraries in a post-pandemic era, regardless of size, culture, or community served. These are questions addressed through the experiences and observations of a group of library leaders from academic and public libraries in four regions: North America, Europe, Asia-Pacific, and the Middle East. It may be true that libraries are valued as physical spaces in their communities—be they campuses, cities, or rural towns. In a world constrained by a highly contagious virus, however, leaders have had to be proactive in creating innovative pathways for diverse communities of users who need information during lockdowns, while sheltering in place and practicing social distancing. Regardless of when societies around the world are able to turn the corner on the pandemic, information access through libraries may remain much more digital.

For libraries, many anticipated societal changes have been fast-tracked by the pandemic. Many of these changes introduce uncertainties, especially when access to information resources is constrained by the social forces of an unequal society and by the privileges of those able to maintain or strengthen access under differing social conditions.

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[1] Tilly, Charles. 1999. *Durable Inequality*, 6. Oakland: University of California Press.

The pandemic has focalized efforts in US college communities, for example, on short-term problems of access in a troubled economic environment, particularly among low-income households. These experiences have documented the need to address the realities of a persistent digital divide, financial fragility for families, dislocated students, and different classroom modalities.

These issues have been further exacerbated worldwide. The comfort of library as place was disrupted as face-to-face service suspended, group study rooms closed, instructional practices were altered, and access to print materials was restricted. Many library leaders have faced a balancing act addressing the needs and fears of staff with those of our user community. Moving forward, we are challenged to use what we have experienced and learned since early 2020 to help rethink our service models and organizational structures.

A New Model Library emerges from societal trends already in existence that have been accelerated by a large-scale disruption in the order of things in our society. These include the rapid adoption of emerging technologies and artificial intelligence as well as advances in the development of smart machines and devices. The pandemic has intensified the need for library leaders to take action quickly on issues that, perhaps previously, might have taken longer to implement. While there has been a decades-old evolution to the work, collections, and engagement experiences with our respective communities, these have been greatly affected by the pandemic.

Traditional work arrangements have been challenged by a new set of models that have made telecommuting and changes in staffing an overnight reality. Collection access has bifurcated as libraries have had to create new approaches to accessing and delivering print materials while managing the digital divide created by inequities in broadband access. And faced with the possibility of invisibility in communities over time, libraries have found new life and opportunities through collaborations with existing and new partners.

This report provides a window into how library leaders around the world have navigated our present crisis and asks some essential questions about how to begin to reimagine work, collections, and engagement with their respective communities. Some of the choices that library leaders must make were apparent before the pandemic. But as the library leaders made clear, the pandemic experience often helped clarify the implications or consequences of those choices. As we continue to support culturally diverse populations through the current pandemic, it is imperative that the lessons learned are logged and analyzed to prepare not only for the next crisis, but also for everyday practice in our more immediate future.
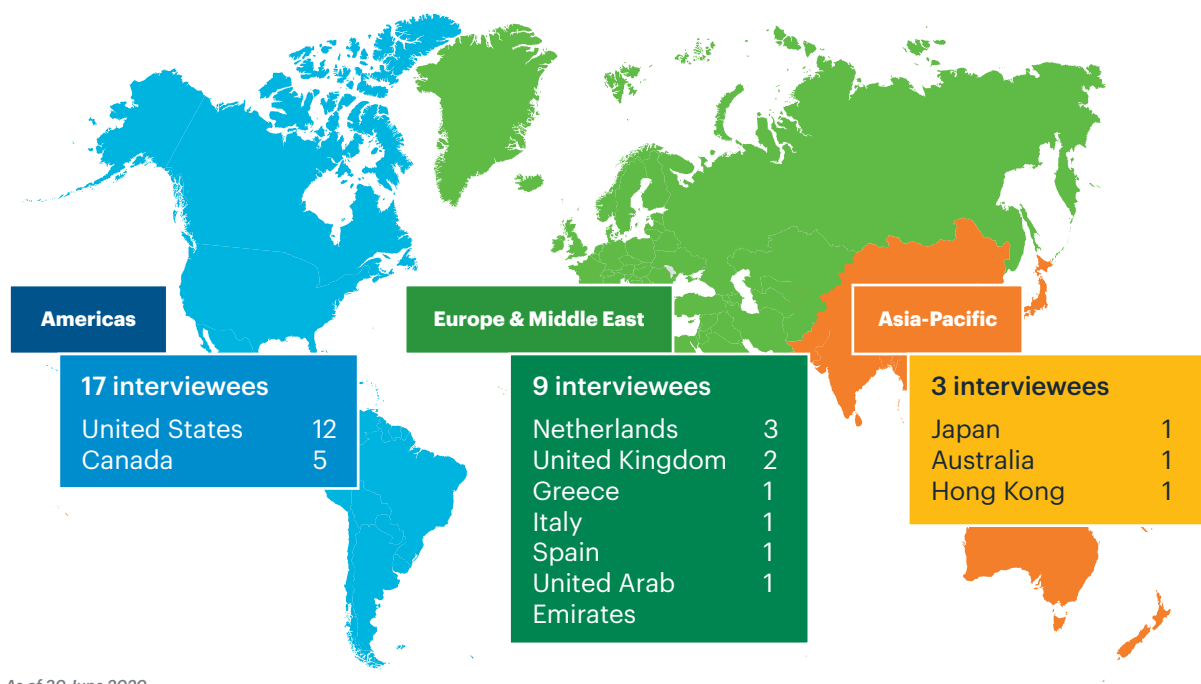
The circumstances under which libraries carry out their missions shifted dramatically during the COVID-19 pandemic. Library leaders adapted to rapidly changing community and institutional needs by quickly re-creating work environments, reassessing collection priorities, and reimagining community engagement activities.

OCLC Research wanted to capture library leaders' experiences during this global event and understand what they envision for their libraries moving forward. Our two key questions were:

- **How did library leaders respond to this new operational context?**
- **What are library leaders' visions for libraries as a result of changing practices and environments?**

From April to July 2020, we conducted semi-structured interviews to gather the perspectives of 29 leaders from one national, seven public, and 21 academic libraries from around the world. Prior to each interview, we asked library leaders to complete a survey and we gathered country and regional data related to the current status of the pandemic. We have synthesized these findings into a high-level briefing that provides insight into leaders' plans for the future based on their experiences during the pandemic.

Perspectives from 29 library leaders

Americas		Europe & Middle East		Asia-Pacific	
17 interviewees		**9 interviewees**		**3 interviewees**	
United States	12	Netherlands	3	Japan	1
Canada	5	United Kingdom	2	Australia	1
		Greece	1	Hong Kong	1
		Italy	1		
		Spain	1		
		United Arab Emirates	1		

As of 30 June 2020

Even though libraries were in different stages of the pandemic during our interviews, findings indicated little or no difference in how the leaders responded, with many commonalities between academic and public library leader responses, regardless of location. When differences between the library types were identified, they have been noted in this briefing.

Throughout this briefing, we frequently reference *library* and *community* generally. An academic library may support a community of campus staff, students, faculty, and other researchers and administrators, while a public library provides services to a broad population within a municipal locality. Where findings are distinct to a certain library or community type, we call these out specifically.

We describe these transformations—how leaders strategically adapted to meet evolving needs and expectations—as movements toward a New Model Library. Although every leader has a unique perspective, we identified many shared experiences, goals, and future directions. We have included a selection of quotes from the interviews in this briefing to exemplify the leaders' experiences and to support our findings. This research aims to help other library leaders find common ground with peers, identify new ideas and possible directions for their own organizations, and develop a shared context for future discussions.

The briefing is organized into three sections.

1 **WORK EXPERIENCES**
Flexible and changing job environments

2 **COLLECTIONS EXPERIENCES**
Physical, digital, and electronic resources

3 **ENGAGEMENT EXPERIENCES**
In-person and virtual connections

Each section highlights recommendations and considerations for action based on the directions and goals leaders reported. Four areas of impact for their New Model Library visions emerged.

AGILITY

Taking quick and innovative action in response to changing circumstances and expectations

COLLABORATION

Working with stakeholders to lead change within libraries, institutions, and communities
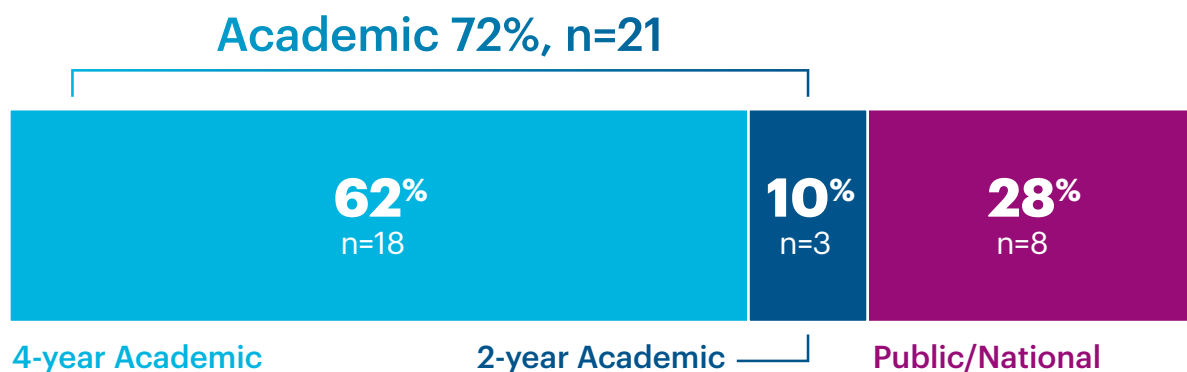
VIRTUALIZATION

Expanding online library experiences for staff and the community

SPACE

Finding new ways to engage within the physical library

Leaders interviewed by library type (n=29)

Academic 72%, n=21

| 62%
n=18 | 10%
n=3 | 28%
n=8 |
|---|---|---|
| **4-year Academic** | **2-year Academic** | **Public/National** |

One of the greatest strengths of libraries is that they are diverse. They each connect to their institutions and communities in distinct ways to respond to local needs. We saw this clearly during the emergence of the pandemic when the world was in the grip of a crisis that shattered many routines. In the waves of change that followed, library leaders formulated local responses based on staff and community needs and expectations. But while all experiences differed in specifics, the direction and intensity of many changes within the library landscape—both during the pandemic and in the previous decade—have been similar. Through our research, we saw how leaders drew on their libraries' existing strengths, accelerating initiatives that were underway prior to 2020.

The sudden shift to an almost entirely virtual world also exacerbated and highlighted many aspects of the digital divide. Many of our library leaders sought to address inequity in access to resources and services, especially during the early pandemic response, and they envision continued work in this area as a part of their New Model Library.

In the time since our interviews, challenges to democracy around the world, racially motivated attacks and killings, and subsequent protests have moved issues of racial and social justice to the foreground. Given the timing and focus of our interviews, library leaders' responses to these issues were not discussed. We expect to hear more about changes and challenges relative to these important issues as we facilitate conversations using the New Model Library framework developed here.

This framework is designed to continue to adapt and evolve. We hope it facilitates reflection —and recognition—as leaders share how the skills, strengths, connections, and conclusions they developed during the pandemic will align with their libraries' futures.

Work experiences

The disruptions caused by the COVID-19 pandemic created challenges for library leaders and staff as they shifted to accommodate remote work and staffing changes.

Barriers many library staff had to overcome included:

- Reliance on library systems that they could not access remotely
- Working from home without adequate space, technology, and connectivity
- Family obligations that conflicted with work responsibilities
- Increased training needs to support new work environments and service delivery models
- Dealing with workload imbalances
- Loss of in-person contact with their colleagues and the community

The emotional toll of so much happening so quickly cannot be underestimated. Leaders discussed the need to be attuned to staff's reactions to change, as well as their own, and to be better prepared to coach staff to embrace new ways of working.

Moving forward, leaders see the need to be flexible not only in working arrangements, but also in the division of roles and responsibilities. They envision new approaches to professional development in which staff are trained to share job functions and responsibilities and to anticipate emerging needs and trends.

Agility

Bringing agility to work experiences requires continuous learning to prepare for planned and unplanned changes. Leaders learned that, under the right circumstances, staff who work remotely are at least as **productive as their colleagues who work in a library location**, and both groups want to **create more flexible work arrangements moving forward.**

As staff adapted to new work environments and service delivery models, leaders reported a surge in learning through:

- Formal, institutional programs
- Peer-to-peer learning with colleagues
- Outreach to personal networks
- Discussion groups and online courses

"Three of my four library technicians began to train…online as well for a couple of different reasons. Number one, to help them with their workload, but also to expand variance in skill sets of my library technicians. Because more and more—again at least in the organizational sense of my place—we're all under one umbrella."

Four-year college, Canada

Cross-training, in particular, was noted as valuable. In addition to helping staff move between different tasks and responsibilities, it made the library staff more adaptable and improved communication and collaboration.

Upskilling also was mentioned as a means to provide advanced training and cutting-edge skills and technologies for instruction, discovery, and access. Upskilling kept staff prepared for the future and created new options to adapt library operations and services to meet staff and community needs.

Both the enthusiasm and gains recognized from the increased time spent on training highlighted the need for leaders to work with staff to continue to prioritize learning opportunities.

Research and learning resources from other disciplines that could be beneficial include:

- Social workers to help support vulnerable populations
- Education literature to develop pedagogical approaches
- Local nonprofits to identify productive community engagement models
- Business community and associated literature to manage organizational change

More remote work requirements and options change the calculus for development and learning, which are especially important during times that require flexibility.

Implications for leaders in terms of increased remote work, which was the norm for many staff during the pandemic, include:

- A need to communicate expectations clearly to staff
- Greater commitment to continuous learning and professional development
- Ensuring that all staff, regardless of environment, have access to training time and resources

Embrace work flexibility

Train for the future

"We think that working from home and working in the office, the mix of that, part-time at home and part-time in an office building or a library building, will be the new normal. So we're looking at how can that work… And also of course, the impact on the people."

Research university, Netherlands
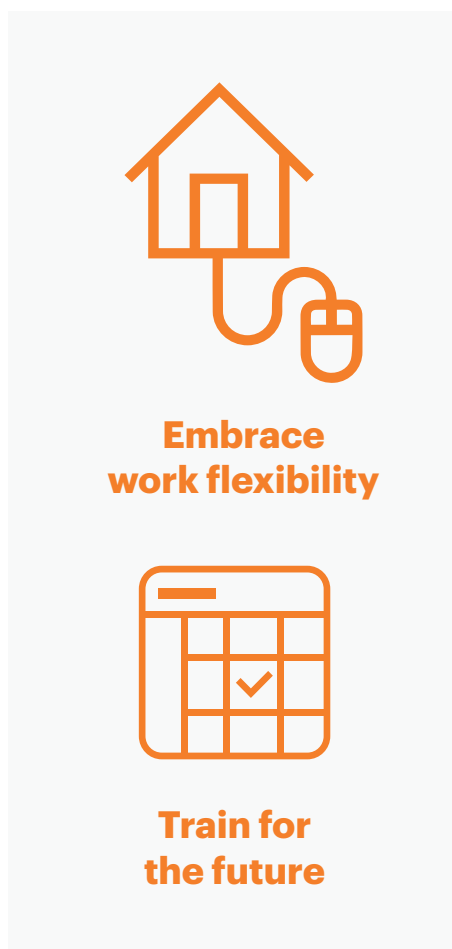
Although not everyone thrived in a remote work environment, leaders and staff alike saw the benefits of increased flexibility.

In many cases, staff were more effective and able to work modified schedules to extend service hours, which made virtual services even more convenient. Staff also could more easily accommodate personal and family obligations into their workdays.

Leaders anticipated staff would want to maintain flexibility moving forward, including:

- Remote and hybrid work options
- Flextime
- Compressed work weeks
- Expanded leave

These efforts need to be balanced, however, by an understanding that some library work requires in-person activity. At the height of the pandemic, remote work often was necessitated by local or institutional health and safety requirements. It is important to consider potential inequities between staff roles that allow for more flexibility and those that do not. Going forward, these opportunities need to be considered within the context of other benefits and flexibility options.

Flexible work options will always require balance between staff's needs and the library's mission and operations.

This means accounting for:

- Individual requirements, preferences, and work styles
- The nature of library work, including required work during traditional operating hours
- Staff's connections to each other, the library, and the community

There is no single arrangement that will ensure productivity and work-life balance for everyone. Choices about flexible work options are most effective when they do not negatively impact workplace opportunities, visibility, relationship-building opportunities, and access to information and technology.

"We started learning like crazy...getting online, doing tutorials, getting onto LinkedIn...And of course following everything that is going on, the discussion forums, the round tables, the ones that OCLC offered and also our consortium that I belong to, but [also] reading the *Chronicle of Higher Education*, going out there and looking at what everybody else is doing and trying to bring in the good things."

Four-year college, Greece

"We have a curriculum for our librarians and they have to complete...six courses a year from that curriculum, in five different categories...We are giving our librarians that training and continuing education for longer-term librarians...to keep our staff trained and upskilled because we are operating in a massively changing environment."

Urban public, Canada

"I think it's proved a lesson to a lot of colleagues that they can do their [jobs] perhaps even more effectively by being more flexible in the way that they're working...We'll start to see a lot more staff requesting flexible working, and how will we deal with that? Because we have a typically formalized structure where that happens."

Research university, United Kingdom

Collaboration

The pandemic forced immediate changes to staffing that often necessitated **new forms of collaboration across departments and with other institutional and community partners.** Due to layoffs and furloughs, remote work environments that were not always productive, and increased demands for new and existing services, staff had to take on new responsibilities.

As leaders faced these ongoing challenges, they considered long-term structural changes as a means to:

- Balance staff workloads
- Modify, expand, and create new services
- Improve efficiencies
- Demonstrate the value of the library to both the community and partners

"You're going to see the best and the worst of everybody right now... And seeing the worst, being gracious about that and being generous with other peoples' faults is going to help us through those times."

Urban public, United States

Collaborating in new ways is a complex undertaking, often requiring library leaders to:

- Create or combine departments to better align activities (e.g., integrating reference and instruction functions)
- Restructure to align more closely with the parent institution's strategy
- Reduce departmental boundaries and empower staff with broad knowledge and skills to work across functional areas
- Have staff available to organize on a project-by-project basis
- Assign support staff to duties traditionally reserved for librarians, such as reference, technology support, and storytimes

Having staff collaborate across their typical boundaries proved effective at meeting community needs regardless of staffing changes and fluctuations in demands for services. Working in concert, staff improved communication and coordination needed to support consistent messaging and services.

Focus on staff's well-being

Challenge traditional divisions of labor

"On a personal level, the organizational structure I currently have is a hindrance…The university is doing a large exercise over the summer… effectively looking at the size and shape of the institution as a whole…I proactively put myself forward and said, 'I want to restructure…to align with the institutional strategy.'"

Research university, United Kingdom

"I think that this pandemic has given us an opportunity to break down some walls where we have kind of departments within libraries that traditionally stay within their department…in [their] duties. 'This is what we do, we don't go beyond this.'…Now, the lines are blurred, and the walls are down so we all kind of do the same thing. And I think that that's a good thing because we can get more work done that way."

Four-year college, United States

Library leaders also reported other challenges with collaboration on a personal level. The risk, uncertainty, and change of the pandemic impacted staff's mental, physical, and emotional well-being.

Health and financial struggles were common, as were anxieties about what was going to happen in the future.

Library leaders responded by:

- Communicating transparently and frequently
- Modeling behavior they wanted staff to embrace
- Encouraging staff to have compassion for themselves and others
- Creating opportunities for social connection

The effects of the pandemic will be long-lasting, and changes will continue to occur in the library as a result.

Going forward, it will be important to:

- Identify what it means to support well-being in the work environment
- Learn how to be attuned to one's own and others' mental and emotional states
- Align organizational culture, policies, and activities to support well-being
- Use clear communication strategies that minimize ambiguity, while respecting staff privacy
- Allocate funds for wellness workshops and seminars
- Create private spaces in the building

Although the pandemic created a shared struggle, everyone has histories and experiences from both their work and personal lives that influence how they approach their jobs and react to change. Leaders recognize the need to ensure the work environment remains supportive as they move beyond the pandemic.

"Change is hard for a lot of people…We will feel unsafe, scared, and nervous for years…It's been a particularly tough year…we had [fires and smoke, hailstorms, and rain and water damage in three libraries, followed by the pandemic]. So you have to understand that at a certain point… we will have to go and have a break. So you need to have a process that recognizes that…we're really needing to recoup in a different way to build that internal resilience."

Research university, Australia

Recommendations for improving
WORK EXPERIENCES

Communicate frequently, clearly, and compassionately, and be transparent about decision-making, particularly in times of uncertainty and change.

Develop equitable policies and practices that respond to staff's varying needs, preferences, and circumstances.

Continually reevaluate the balance between local constraints, the community's needs, and staff's needs when adapting to change.

Dedicate and protect the time and resources needed for staff's professional development and well-being, despite budget constraints and demanding workloads.

When library training does not exist for new and emerging skills, work with other libraries to develop training materials and learning activities.

Develop the library's culture, policies, and activities to clearly and consistently demonstrate the library's commitment to staff development, collaboration, and well-being.

Give staff ownership in the planning and implementation of changes.

Collections experiences

The COVID-19 pandemic amplified many shifts in library acquisition, discovery, and fulfillment practices that already were underway. However, pandemic health and safety requirements that limited in-person visits and the acquisition and circulation of physical resources meant leaders had to find new ways for the community to access needed resources.

In many cases, the responses to these challenges led to an increase in digital and electronic offerings—particularly the delivery of e-books and open content—and contactless options for physical resources. Library leaders also addressed digital divide inequities through, for instance, the increased lending of laptops and Wi-Fi hotspots.

Leaders made short-term changes during the pandemic that they expect will intensify long-term shifts in library collections, including:

- Offering convenient options for mediated and contactless interaction with digital and physical collections

- Prioritizing discovery and access of open content

- Negotiating with e-book and content providers for more affordable licensing terms that better account for library use

- Increased desire for and use of digital content that publishers made available to libraries at a lower cost due to the pandemic (and how to pay for it when prices go back up)

- Investing additional resources for loanable technology to support internet access and online activities

Space

Most library leaders reevaluated acquisition and circulation of physical materials during the pandemic. In an effort to protect staff and library users, **leaders quickly made dramatic changes to procedures for handling physical library materials**.

This includes:

- Creating new options for contactless delivery with only a small number of staff on-site
- Getting physical resources to people without online access by bringing them to schools and shelters or placing them in food bank hampers
- Offering virtual readers' advisory services for discovery of physical materials

"I think we should have to rethink what we are doing, the budget we invest on printed collections, and also things like withdrawals and to create a policy for the collection management [that is] more precise, more accurate, to the needs of our users."

Research university, Spain

In many cases, leaders reported that their communities took full advantage of these services, demonstrating that physical collections continue to be highly valued.

Based on the changes implemented during the pandemic, leaders can build on these initiatives to:

- Convert contactless services from a necessity to a convenience, including popular curbside pick-up options

- Reconsider lending policies, such as fines and fees, that disproportionately impact vulnerable populations—people without adequate devices and people in areas with poor connectivity—and present obstacles to access

- Enable on-site staff to browse and interact with physical collections on behalf of the community who can't visit in person

- Improve ways to browse and engage with physical collections online, such as through video conferencing

- Expand user-driven acquisition of physical materials so more items can be delivered to homes and offices before being added to the library collection

Create new connections to physical collections

Leaders will continue to face the challenges of housing physical materials while supporting the community's needs for physical space. For example, public libraries need space for physical collections and resources as well as for activities like storytimes and other community gatherings. Public libraries also provide in-person access to materials and technology for vulnerable populations. And in academic libraries, students expect on-site access to physical materials, technology, and study space. Some academic faculty and researchers prefer working with physical materials and want access to technology and services, such as data visualization labs.

"We're reaching especially people who...don't have a computer to [put] holds on books. They just went in and whatever is on the shelf, that's what their choice was. We're putting holds on things that we know are good, and when it comes in, then they pick it up. I think that's a really good service for people, especially older. I've got younger people, like somebody who reads sci-fi and they didn't know what to read, and I'm like, "Oh. I've got such good things for you."

Suburban public, United States

Virtualization

The pandemic called more attention to the digital divide as those without internet service, devices, or technology struggled to access digital resources. Nevertheless, **the utility of digital resources during this time helped to change staff and community mindsets**.

The pandemic led to a surge in demand for digital materials, which demonstrated the value and necessity of digital access. To meet this demand, library staff:

- Increased digitization of physical resources
- Found free and/or open alternatives
- Worked with groups and consortia to increase access to digital resources

"I think that is the critical part—things have to be seamlessly available to them. If any of the courses require resources, they need to be accessible through the LMS [library management system]. They can't be directed to physical resources they can't get access to or be blocked by [a situation where] there's only one user license."

Four-year university, Canada

The challenges leaders faced to meet the surge in demand included:

- High costs of licensing and maintaining digital resources in the face of budgetary or access restrictions, especially e-books

- Difficulty finding and accessing digital resources

- Users who can't or don't want to access digital resources

Addressing the high cost of digital resources in the face of access restrictions and potential budget cuts will require leaders to consider:

- Leveraging consortial relationships for better pricing and less duplication of effort

- Prioritizing finding, evaluating, and incorporating high-quality open content, including open educational resources (OERs)

- Digitizing local resources, particularly special and historic collections, and connecting them to personal, research, and teaching interests in the community

- Supporting the community in the creation of open content by offering training and providing technology; public library staff could create programming and interest groups while academic library staff could increase efforts to highlight new and existing research support services

- Forming partnerships with open access publishers
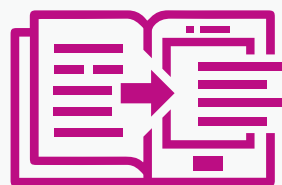
Acquire digital and open content strategically

Prioritize resources that close the digital divide

"We are aggressively negotiat[ing] with the publisher…And then Japan has a national consortium of electronic resources. We individually and as a nation…negotiate with the publisher to open more e-book content."

Research university, Japan

Leaders emphasized that fully realizing the potential of digital resources meant improving the overall environment in which discovery and use takes place. This is not a new observation but one that was intensified by the pandemic.

These considerations need to be made, not only by library leaders and staff, but also in collaboration with content and system providers:

- Preserving the features of the physical experience that users value, while offering the benefits and convenience of the online experience (e.g., ensuring physical cues used to identify resources such as newspapers, books, and journal articles are incorporated into search engine interfaces)

- Simplifying access to digital resources by reducing the number of systems in use, ideally creating a single point of entry

- Integrating digital resources in users' workflows, like including course materials in learning management systems

While we discussed many efforts to increase access to and use of digital and electronic collections, leaders also acknowledged that none of those solutions will help people who are unable to connect to them. The pandemic's abrupt shift to fully online experiences exacerbated the impacts of the digital divide as library buildings closed and communities lost public access to Wi-Fi, computers, and other technology. For vulnerable populations, the ability to meet basic needs was greatly reduced. As digital resources became essential leaders recognized the urgency of finding ways to support those who do not have the tools and/or skills to operate online.

"I would love to see the platforms use the library as the gateway into their services. I understand there's branding but it's such a pain and confusing for customers to have to go to Overdrive and create an account and Libby and create an account...You go into [the library portal], you can use your [library portal] password and that process is seamless. That would be a wonderful, magical event."

Urban public, Canada

Leaders can continue to address the digital divide by:

- Expanding the library's Wi-Fi and computer access, both within and outside the library buildings
- Teaching digital literacy skills for discovering and critically evaluating online information and using technology
- Advocating for broadband as a public utility
- Prioritizing the circulation of laptops and portable hotspots

These solutions require efforts to understand local and community-specific needs, especially when working with diverse communities. To address digital divide inequities, leaders prioritized specific needs instead of seeking a one-size-fits-all response. This strategy often involved changes to policies and ways of providing access to resources and technology.

"I think [a] best case scenario is open. And I hope libraries will play a huge role into navigating this [open content] environment, explaining this environment, playing a key role in this environment."

Four-year college, Greece

"And trying to find ways to reach people that were not able to use the online services as well. How can we reach these people, that was a great concern for us. [Because] that's a large part of our patrons, people who are without a home or people who are alone. We sense that's the role of the libraries in the community and break the isolation."

Urban public, Canada

"Hybrid is firmly embedded, works and delivers…in all different spaces from accessing special collections through to…general [collections]. So I think that would be the…significant shift. And I think that's the…trajectory we're currently on. And in five, 10 years' time, hopefully we will have managed to find solutions and deliver on that particular element."

Research university, United Kingdom

"They [individuals experiencing homelessness] want to be able to use our computers to stay in contact with families. Those are the things that they look for the most and just a sense of community."

Urban public, United States

"We need to have information access. We need to have free access to information. That's the rule of the library traditionally...Because of the digital divide, I want to address this issue with the library...This is my mission for [the] coming five years, and also this is the biggest challenge...especially after this pandemic."

Research university, Hong Kong

Recommendations for improving
COLLECTIONS EXPERIENCES

Invest in providing the skills and tools, such as laptops and hotspots, that help the staff and community to participate more successfully in digital life.

Leverage consortial relationships to negotiate more strongly for broader and more affordable access.

Work with the community to develop a range of options for accessing physical materials to support diverse needs, such as remote viewing or just-in-time digitization.

Facilitate the use and production of open content, such as Open Educational Resources (OERs), research data, and local and special collections.

Engagement experiences

During the COVID-19 pandemic, library leaders adapted to meet immediate community needs, despite no or limited access to library buildings.

Common strategies included:

- Collaborating with local agencies to address pandemic issues, such as making and distributing face masks, food, and physical materials
- Partnering with local businesses to provide needed resources, such as cleaning supplies, technology, and personal protective equipment
- Virtualizing critical in-person services for teaching, learning, and reference offerings through multiple formats (e.g., phone, email, chat, social media, or video)

While there was an uptick in attendance for some virtual activities, not everyone was amenable to a virtual experience, at least not as a stand-alone or on a permanent basis. Although online activity often was consistent and available, leaders and staff frequently were asked when the physical library would reopen. People wanted to engage in person or just be in these physical spaces.

The community's reaction to library closures inspired leaders to think about a more holistic approach to creating engagement experiences, whether in the library building, online, or out in the community. The pandemic prompted leaders to partner to expand services outside the building to reach more people. Having seen the strengths and weaknesses of virtual engagement and the power and limitations of the physical building, leaders saw the need to shape strategic, complementary engagement opportunities going forward.

Collaboration

Leaders and staff partnered quickly to address changing circumstances during the pandemic by leveraging existing relationships.

These included:

- Professional associations and consortia
- Local governments and community agencies
- Other departments and areas within the parent institutions
- Personal networks

The ongoing value of these relationships cannot be overstated.

Moving forward, leaders plan to be more intentional about new and existing partnerships to ensure that they add mutual benefit.

"We have a dual role… because there's not a public library within a 10-mile radius. So, that's why we built that partnership with the [public library]. That's our primary role, serving the students."

Two-year college, United States

Some ways partners can provide value include sharing:

- Complementary services and a willingness to coordinate integrated responses to community needs
- Facilities in different locations to host activities to reach more people
- Common goals and cross-communication opportunities

For instance, leaders of public libraries that provide expertise and resources to job seekers recognized the value of partnering with employment agencies and interview coaches to help people find employment. Leaders of academic libraries with expertise in instructional technology proved the value of partnering with student services, the IT department, and faculty to support student success.
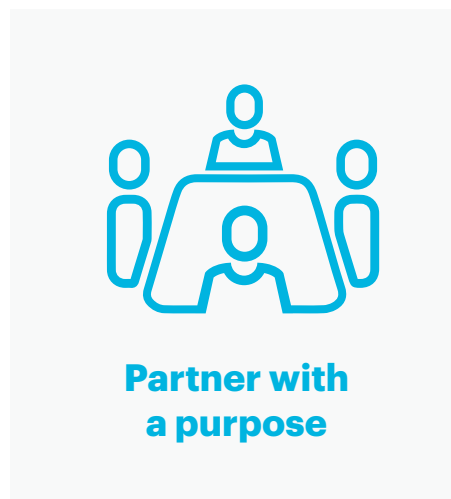
These collaborations can provide several benefits, such as:

- Creating more opportunities to listen, learn, and understand how the library can contribute to the community
- Extending the library's reach beyond current locations and communications channels
- Improving visibility with underserved or less engaged communities
- Offering a more extensive, integrated set of services to more fully meet the community's needs

Expanding networks of successful partnerships and establishing community trust during the pandemic provided the foundation for leaders to create ongoing engagement opportunities with a wider reach.

Partner with a purpose

"We established these really great partnerships with these food banks and they understood the library and we understood food banks way more. They're way more complicated than we ever understood, and now we have two food banks that continue to be distributed to two of our branches, [because] there are such gaps in those communities…We saw so many of our regular library customers…and they said,…'I don't have to walk into a place that says it's a food bank. I'm walking into a library to get my food.'…The other thing we did with our food banks is we started putting children's books in the [food bank] hampers."

Urban public, Canada

Virtualization

Library closures and restrictions on physical gatherings pushed many community engagement experiences online. Replicating the value and success of in-person events online, however, was not as straightforward.

Challenges reported include:

- Limited experience and skills with technology
- Lack of face-to-face interaction
- Poor or no Wi-Fi and lack of technology
- Virtual fatigue or preference for in-person engagement

Despite challenges, leaders saw the need to engage with their communities virtually as they move forward.

"I think one of the key things for us is to put ourselves into that digital space in the same way that we exist in the physical space, into people's minds, so that they really get that we're part of the clicks and mortar, as well as the bricks and mortar, if you like… That's got to be a direction of travel. I think there's lots of opportunity there, where we can build on hopefully the goodwill of what we've achieved."

Research university, United Kingdom

Considerations for leaders who want to provide a more strategic, hybrid approach to virtual and in-person experiences should include:

- Potential barriers to virtual and physical access for specific users

- Time to train and familiarize users with features and etiquette of virtual and in-person interactions

- The need to supply both staff and community with the technology required to participate

- Resources that can be shared across libraries when creating virtual and in-person content, such as storytimes in different languages, résumé writing workshops, and information literacy instruction

- The value of offering one-to-one experiences (such as personalization and relationship-building) and one-to-many experiences (such as community learning and a broader reach)

- The benefits of offering asynchronous experiences (that offer convenience and self-paced learning) and synchronous experiences (that offer instant feedback and personal assistance)
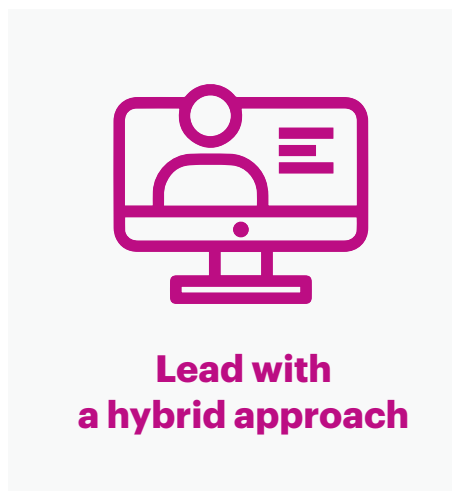
Overall, successful strategies will draw on the strengths of both physical and virtual experiences, rather than creating virtual activities in isolation.

Lead with a hybrid approach

"But in five years I think we will be delivering digitally much more, not just the content, but the services. I think we will grow virtual reality, augmented reality. I hope we'll begin to be showing up in our service areas…I'd love to see some of that start to happen so that my librarian could be anywhere…And libraries using more recordings, more of that asynchronous so that we can reach a wider audience or more of our audience, especially in small places like mine. I have one librarian. She can't teach every class that comes past."

Four-year college, Canada

Space

The pandemic **reaffirmed the value of libraries' physical spaces** as library leaders were pressured to stay open, reopen, and reduce building restrictions.

The closure of physical spaces meant that the community lost:

- In-person access to Wi-Fi, computers, and other equipment and devices
- Community building, networking, learning, studying, socializing, and research opportunities
- Safe spaces for vulnerable populations

Despite increased use of digital resources, online services, and virtual programming, leaders strongly emphasized the essential role of physical spaces for their communities. They planned to redouble efforts to make spaces more welcoming for people to gather.

"I think the physical library, the library building, it will still exist, but in most cases will have transformed more into a place to be, to study, to come together, to discuss with other people. [It] will be used more and more as a platform for the community by and for all."

Suburban public, Netherlands

Building closures highlighted the importance of treating library spaces as a service that supports people coming together to use the library for different purposes.

This includes:

- Conversations around local and timely issues, such as city planning, campus changes, or racial and social justice issues
- Group recreation (e.g., children's area, teen space, makerspace, or student study areas)
- Reservable group meeting rooms
- Spaces for quiet and solitude that are meaningfully integrated with the rest of the library

To do this, consider strategies that include:

- Policies that meet diverse needs; for example, computer sessions that give people enough time to complete their tasks
- Codes of conduct that guide how people engage in different library spaces
- Universal design principles for spaces that all people can use, regardless of age, accessibility needs, or other factors
- Modular, rather than static, spaces that invite different uses

To create authentic, purposeful experiences both in-person and online, leaders need to hire, support, and train staff who can address diversity, equity, and inclusion needs as well as lead staff in developing cultural humility. Learning about different cultures, making connections with community members and leaders, and studying how privilege impacts library work helps to decenter their own cultural perspectives and embrace an open, respectful attitude toward difference.

Invite engagement in physical spaces

"I think students will continue to want a physical presence on campus for learning and for studying…if anything, we're going to build a new library. The physical presence is not shifting away. And I think this pandemic clearly demonstrates that, yes, have online services, yes, provide them, but we also want this. We also want the physical."

Two-year college, United States
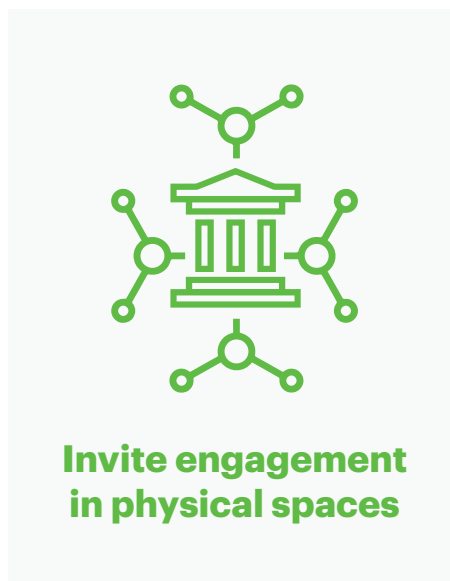
Recommendations for improving
ENGAGEMENT EXPERIENCES

Support holistic responses to community needs by partnering with organizations that have shared goals and complementary services.

Communicate the value of partnerships to decision makers, funders, and the community.

Create a suite of virtual experiences that draw on and complement in-person experiences to maximize reach, engagement, and access to resources.

Invite participation from all by engaging with community members where they are, whether in the library building, the online environment, or community partners' spaces.

Treat library space as a service, making clear to the community and partners that the availability of various shared, freely available in-person resources, spaces, tools, and materials, is a unique part of the library's value.

Reevaluate use policies and the design of library spaces to encourage the community to gather in different ways for different purposes.

CONCLUSION

Many library responses to the societal changes we've all experienced during the pandemic, while dramatic, have roots or parallels in earlier technological advances, generational shifts, and educational movements.

As a snapshot in time—in which the COVID-19 pandemic is a singular, shared experience not just for libraries, but for all individuals and organizations—we hope this collective view serves as a benchmark to more precisely plot future library directions.

The research informing this briefing was gathered during the height of pandemic lockdowns from April to July 2020, capturing a moment in time for different types of libraries. Forced into unexpected shutdowns and other contingencies, libraries experienced an urgency for change that lowered barriers to innovation, shifted attitudes, and catalyzed action.

Now, more than a year later, we are seeing library leaders implement new ways of working and engaging with the community as vaccines become more widely available, COVID-19 variants continue to emerge, and many local institutions reopen more broadly.

In this time of transition, leaders are using the momentum of recent, abrupt changes to move selectively in New Model Library directions. Even with the uncertainty of budgets and staffing, social and economic changes, and evolving community and stakeholder expectations, it is clear that some of these changes will continue to intensify.

As experiences of library work, collections, and engagement continue to change, so will the four areas that impact New Model Library visions:

AGILITY **COLLABORATION** **VIRTUALIZATION** **SPACE**

These experiences and areas of impact will continue to affect every aspect of the library. The themes touched on in this briefing only scratch the surface. We plan to continue convening library leaders and staff around these topics and applying what we've learned to help categorize and contextualize further discussions.

No model can predict the future. But our hope is that in continuing to support ongoing conversations around New Model Library trends, we can all better prepare for what comes next.

For more information please
visit **oc.lc/new-model-library**

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