Abstract:

What will be the long-term impact of the pandemic on academic liaison work? Four liaisons for business, data, and social sciences from four different campuses describe issues they are facing and try to predict the future.

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*****Note: Full text of article below**

On the Road but Where Are We Going?

Insights, Predictions, and Questions from Four Liaisons Serving Business, Data, and Social Sciences

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Introduction

What will be the long-term impact of the pandemic on academic liaison work? Four liaisons for business, data, and social sciences from four different campuses describe issues they are facing and try to predict the future.

Steve Cramer, UNC Greensboro

UNC Greensboro (UNCG) began life in the late nineteenth century as the state women's college, since women were not allowed to attend the two older public university campuses (now called UNC Chapel Hill and North Carolina State University). Of course, people of color couldn't attend any of these three schools back then. In 2022, UNCG is a co-ed, doctoral-granting, social mobility campus, with a slight majority of minority students, and a slight majority of first-generation students among the undergraduates. Among the business school student body, many of the students work twenty or more hours each week to support themselves and/or their families while also attending school full time.

Funding of UNC system campuses is based on enrollment. When enrollment drops, state funding goes down. Enrollment did drop a bit during the pandemic. The biggest segment decline was in transfer students, reflecting the huge drop in enrollment at community colleges. The declining population of high school-aged students across the country is also a factor, although at least the total population of North Carolina continues to grow, due to in-state migration to our urban areas.

So far, the UNCG University Libraries (UL) have been able to limit our budget cuts to the operations budget and the labor budget, since we could give up some open positions. Therefore, we have protected collections. We still need to cover inflation, but almost all our vendors—including the "big deal" publishers—agreed to 0% increases in the pandemic year. In general, the UL have been well-served by the big deals, with low cost-per-use and low inflation. In the next fiscal year, however, the UL will probably not be able to fully protect collections.

UNCG already had robust offerings in distance education, including two purely online PhD programs. When the pandemic began, our liaison librarians were well-trained in supporting online classes and degree programs, via online instruction and consulting as well as video tutorials. Our collections strategy had already moved to "e-preferred" with monographs, utilizing e-book packages and our long-established data-driven acquisition programs. We also were early adopters of streaming video and open education resources (OER), which often get embedded in Canvas. The forced ending of physical classes (including my own three-credit entrepreneurship/economic development research class) in Spring 2020 did not seem to have much impact on access to collections.

The pandemic allowed us to accelerate the movement to e-only. For example, we canceled all remaining print subscriptions—even magazines. Meanwhile, firm order budgets for monographs were cut even further to cover the small inflationary increases in e-subscriptions.

Since enrollment and retention are vital concerns, the notion of “student success” becomes increasingly important. Student success is now a major factor in collections decisions. Within business collections, we could distinguish between “undergraduate & MBA resources,” in contrast to “faculty and PhD student resources” or “faculty recruitment resources.” These distinctions have strategic implications regarding funding priorities, since not all fall under “student success.”

The “undergraduate & MBA” distinction includes market, industry, and competitive intelligence databases used to support the community-engaged, experiential learning classes. These are often capstone classes in which the student teams use research and data to solve a problem or make a recommendation for a client (usually a local small business, entrepreneur, or nonprofit). The other two distinctions typically concern very expensive datasets (usually financial) in which the data is analyzed using statistical software.

While our library has always focused on cost-per-use data to justify subscription renewals, a strategy that favors the undergraduate/MBA resources, our campus emphasis on student success justifies an even greater emphasis on those experiential learning resources. This focus has the potential to alienate faculty or business school leaders who might also have a priority on recruiting faculty and growing faculty prestige. Library liaisons in this situation have to be prepared to explain the library’s priorities for subscription databases. Sometimes a library shares the costs of the datasets with the business school, or the business school pays for all the costs (Price, 2021).

In the last two years, my library had a large amount of one-time funds to spend at the end of the fiscal year (May–June). This money came from unspent operations funding after the pandemic shut down, as well as unspent labor costs, from both the UL and the Provost’s office. Historically, our library has used one-time money to purchase journal backfiles, digital history archives and other humanities-centered archives, and e-book packages. And we did buy more of those products in the last two years.

However, my GIS/Data Visualization Librarian colleague and I proposed that our collections team also consider data sources that would support social science and business students and perhaps also natural science students. Some vendors are willing to negotiate multi year access to their subscription products. Of course, there is a question of sustainability for using one-time money to subscribe to products. My colleague and I readily admitted that we can't know what will happen after a five-year deal runs out. Would we have funds to continue the subscription? We argued, however, that we would have usage data and could compare the five-year subscription to other subscriptions. Perhaps the five-year subscription would prove more useful than a database we had been paying for annually. Then we could cancel that annual product to shift its funding to the five-year product for ongoing access. Our collections team agreed to fund a statistical product using one-time money for five years of access, and also a new market and industry database for five years.

Finally, some business vendors do sell products outright. I successfully (and accurately) characterized a collection of business cases as an OER database. OER is a priority at UNCG, as at many libraries. The collections team agreed to that purchase, and I have begun to promote the business plan package as an alternative to faculty forcing students to purchase cases from the Harvard Business School. There are details about our use of one-time money to fund datasets and business databases in a blog post (Cramer, 2021).

So what is next for collections at UNCG, from the perspective of this subject liaison? We expect more budget cutting due to the ongoing pandemic and the national enrollment decline. Our collections budget will probably be hit in 2022, and so I will have to prioritize our current mix of business research databases. Cost-per-use, total use, the importance to specific degree programs, and student success will be my main decision factors.

We received good news in late 2021. Our new state budget provides UNCG with $81 million to expand my library. Of all the sixteen UNC campuses, ours has gone the longest without major capital investment in its main library (fifty years, since our tower was built). The tower will be made ADA-compliant, resulting in a 35%–40% reduction in stack storage space. We will have to weed 250,000 books or more. Like almost every academic library in the country, the circulation of print books has been steadily declining for twenty years at least. Usage of that collection is minuscule and continues to dwindle.

Meanwhile, the library now provides access to far more e-books than print books. Removing a quarter of million print books will not result in a much smaller collection, given the growth in access to e-books. Most faculty will not be affected by this change—certainly not business school faculty. Nonetheless, our collections team is preparing talking points to explain our collections strategy and trends with faculty. The pandemic and the building project seem to be accelerating collections strategies already underway at UNCG.

Summer Krstevska, Wake Forest University

Wake Forest University is a small private university located in Winston Salem, NC. Founded in 1894, Wake excels at providing a liberal arts education to its 8,000+ students. Though reporting to the main campus library, myself and the second business librarian are fully embedded in Wake Forest's business school. We have our own space that we call the Business Information Commons. Our space is modest in size, and fully utilized as study space as our business collections are almost entirely digital.

At Wake Forest University, we are in a unique situation, especially when compared to the other institutions spoken of on this panel/in these proceedings. In regard to our business resources budget, these circumstances are due to early cuts at the beginning of the pandemic. We unfortunately had to cut Euromonitor due to the timing of the contract renewal. We were told if/when the budget recovers, we would have the money, the equivalent of the costs to

Euromonitor, to either resubscribe or spend on other resources. This ended up being a blessing in disguise! When the time came, it was late 2021 and this allowed us the opportunity to reflect on the changing needs of our students and the business world at large. For example, we didn't know last year that Virginia was going to legalize marijuana or how drastic the increased dependence on online shopping would be. We then subscribed to more appropriate resources and reports such as Mintel's e-commerce and cannabis reports and MRI-Simmons digital life data.

Especially after the height of the pandemic and remote learning, our users have come to expect remote access. At Wake Forest, Bloomberg continues to be our one business resource we are not able to provide remote access to. To use Bloomberg, traditionally you have to be physically present at one of their terminals. Bloomberg was offering various models of remote access, none of which we considered feasible fiscally. We did constantly promote the remote access to their training modules, Bloomberg Market Concepts. Otherwise, we ended up promoting a similar product we subscribe to, S&P Capital IQ that allows for remote access via VPN when accessing off-campus. While still providing access, VPN-only access poses another barrier when accessing critical resources and databases. As we continue to navigate providing library resources and services through the pandemic, we anticipate working with vendors to reduce VPN-only off-site access.

Our users' expectation for remote access, as well as for formats they are more familiar with, can be seen with our recent all-campus access subscriptions to the *Wall Street Journal* and the *New York Times*. Though Wake is already subscribed to both newspapers in a variety of ways, users prefer to access them through their websites or apps as they are used to doing.

Recently, at Wake Forest, we have received a lot of requests for large datasets and ESG data. In our case, our only ESG data is on Bloomberg and as a favor to readers I won't go into the challenges we have with access related to Bloomberg again (see above). As ESG data becomes more popular and you can purchase add-ons with this type of content (e.g., Capital IQ has offerings), the lack of standardization in ESG ratings across platforms is frustrating for librarians and our users. Figuring out how they differ between resources is a struggle. There is pressure to create more packages and content, but that does not always align with our budgets! We may not be able to purchase until next year and this topic may not be in demand then. Other emerging content areas for Wake Forest are digital marketing and digital user data, which leads us often to seeking out corporate resources that have providers that don't offer academic subscription terms.

It is more important than ever for business liaison librarians to be able to understand and explain both the real-world application and the interdisciplinary appeal of business resources. Understanding and being able to explain the relevance and value of a resource's real-world application can only help gain faculty champions of a resource and when proposing potential cost sharing with the business school. At Wake Forest's main campus library, we have recently created what we call "superfunds." These are interdisciplinary groups that share funding for monographs, amongst other things. On the topic of business resources, rarely do we get to use "one-time money" because many business resources are on a subscription model. Being able to explain the interdisciplinary use to my colleagues in the social sciences superfund builds demand and leads to business resources to more likely get purchased.

Ultimately, our focus at Wake Forest is to make it worth wild for students to come to campus. At the time of writing this, Wake Forest has returned to in-person operations. This choice reflects our culture, campus, and in-person mission. We have to focus on the benefit(s) of in-person learning that you may not be able to experience online, with the caveat that many business resources are expected to be, and are engaged with, fully online. I believe that many librarians are more concerned than ever with how these online resources may or may not enhance the in-person educational experience and the physical space of the library. These concerns are invariably intertwined with selection and curation decisions as we move forward in these ambiguous times.

Corey Seeman, University of Michigan

Finding a Path Forward—Exploring the joys of budgetary woes during uncertain times.

Every university and college felt an impact during the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic that ranged from disruptive to destructive. For many schools, the problem was not only in the delivery of instruction and library services, but also in a critical budgetary manner that could impact an institution for years. This was the case at the University of Michigan and in particular, the Ross School of Business where the Kresge Library Services operates. Corey Seeman, Director of Kresge Library Services, shared a brief presentation about how they responded to the COVID-19 budget issues and how they were able to work with many, but not all, vendors.

At the Kresge Library, the budgetary woes did not start with the pandemic. Since FY15 (covering 2014–2015 academic year), the budget for resources has been fundamentally flat, with a minor increase moving to FY16, but basically not growing since then. The timing was difficult as it was the moment when Kresge became a digital-only library, relying more and more on electronic resources. So, in an effort to manage with flat budgets, we normally had to cut databases or scale them back. However, the one benefit is that by virtue of moving away from print, we did save some money related to print reference items that were no longer needed. Needless to say, we were not in the best financial shape (in regard to materials budgets) when the pandemic began.

In regard to higher education, especially in the United States, the financial news was mixed. Early on, all the news looked negative and much of it was. In regard to higher education, especially for business schools, we saw a number of problems related to COVID-19. Early in the pandemic—this is all we saw! These include:

- Fewer students meant less revenue. And since most schools operate as a non profit, there was little cushion to ride out a rainy day.
- At the Ross School of Business, while the undergraduate population was stable, the graduate population was down 10%. Fewer international students were able to attend and many deferred the start of programs until it could be more residential.
- At Michigan, we deferred a great deal of maintenance and construction projects.
- On the expense side, we had three areas where we had to spend more. There was more money spent on technology, on PPE (personal protective equipment), and cleaning.

Conversely, there was some positive financial news that came out of the pandemic for higher education. This good news was enough to help reduce our budget in FY22. These include:

- Less expenses overall, especially with hosting (food) and travel. It is not surprising what a business school spends in these areas.
- Hiring freezes were put into place and salary increases were suspended for Fall 2020.
- A very conservative and cautious approach to spending for FY 21, along with enrollment that was actually better than projected, led to a modest surplus at the end of the year, which was put back in to replenish the school's contingency funds.

As our budgetary constraints came into focus, we set aside to control our biggest non-salary expense. Like every library everywhere, that is with electronic and print resources purchased by the libraries for their campus, community, company, or firm. We explored our holdings and made a number of tough and non-so-tough decisions on controlling expenses to remain under budget. This project was focused on right-sizing our resource spending. There are times when the term “right-sizing” can come with political baggage, but this was not really one of those times. Large universities, like the University of Michigan, have the capacity to use almost everything offered. We are reminded of Dr. Ranganathan’s 2nd Law, “Every reader his or her book” as a goal to acquire a broad and comprehensive collection. However, no library can afford or should purchase everything and be good stewards of the university or college resources.

Prior to the pandemic, vendors have not always been keen on reducing spending packages. They wanted to maintain spending levels, sometimes adding content to sweeten the fact that we had to pay more for the resource. We see that over and over again with our own personal subscriptions to resources like cable, satellite radio, or subscription video services. Price increases often coincide with added content—that may or may not be beneficial to you. One element for stability that we have used for years is long-term deals with vendors. These types of deals provide stability to both sides, ensuring that the vendor has reliable income and the library has reliable expenses. These are mutually beneficial deals that can help anytime. But during this quick pivot to the world of COVID-19, we needed more options. Here are four cases of ways that we were able to work with vendors to find a mutually beneficial path to wellness. The names of the vendors have not been included.

Case 1: Slice and Dice

As with the example provided above whereby vendors can offer additional content to offset increases, libraries can end up with content that is not as critical for their collection. In addition, you can determine that some resources are redundant and are not critical for you to support research from your community. Two vendors worked with us to look at our content and usage to make better decisions.

We canceled segments that were not used often and were able to renew at a lower price. As I said in a discussion with vendors, we were not looking for something for nothing. Instead, we were hoping to get less and pay less. This brought us real savings in our budget and kudos to the vendors who supported this process.

Case 2: Flat

A few vendors let us go flat for renewals, a fairly common approach for renewals in the summer of 2020 into the end of that year. Some vendors, also no double to short up reliable income, let us go flat for multiple years. When your budget is flat, any increase can only be accommodated by cuts. So the more resources that are flat enabled us to cut less. Kudos also to the vendors who recognized the gravity of the situation and enabled us to renegotiate existing licenses.

Case 3: Flat and Added Benefit (Content and Cost)

A few long-standing vendors acted with great empathy as we were finding a common group for a new contract. Two vendors deserve recognition as being a bit more generous than those in Case 2 (Flat). One vendor offered us a three-year flat deal and added new content that we did not previously have. For this particular vendor, we had a long relationship and they were looking at the big picture. Another vendor offered a multi year flat deal at a lower cost than we paid in 2020, when we were in the last year of our contract. They looked closely at our usage and decided that they wanted a long-term connection with Michigan and this was a good way to find a middle ground. This was very appreciated by the library for obvious reasons.

Case 4: NMP (Not My Problem)

While I could point to three scenarios where vendors worked with us and acknowledged the financial constraints we were operating under, there were occasion vendors who shrugged their shoulders and were not willing, able or interested in finding a middle ground. One vendor asked to remove content from the contract, but offered very little if anything in return. That was fundamentally all the concession we were going to get. For vendors like this, they were focused on the short-term and not the long-term relationship that could provide year after year of revenue.

Through these four cases, along with cuts to resources altogether, we were able to operate within our budget. Once many of these deals expire, I will expect a more difficult renewal. However, the vendors who worked with us in an empathetic manner enabled us to keep more content for our community. It will be interesting to see where the finances of higher education are next year, the year after and the one after that. These are changing times for sure.

Sara Hess, Pennsylvania State University

The Pennsylvania State University is a public, land-grant, research university with an enrollment of over 80,000 students at twenty-four campuses throughout the Commonwealth of Pennsylvania and globally through Penn State World Campus. Penn State's structure is distinct from many state university systems in that all locations are governed as one university. The UL reflect the structure of the university: while the administrative center of the Libraries is geographically located on the University Park campus, all library locations share a common mission, set of strategic goals, and budget.

Penn State saw a decline in enrollment during the first year of the COVID-19 pandemic. That decline—as well as the loss of non-tuition revenue streams, such as hospitality services—resulted in budget reductions across the university. In addition to suspending hiring for open positions, the Libraries announced in July 2020 that we would need to reduce our collections budgets by about $2.2 million. Some of the remaining funds would be used for new purchases, including the purchase of electronic resources to support remote teaching and learning during the pandemic (Pennsylvania State University, 2020). Each unit across the Libraries was asked to reduce their budget by a portion of the $2.2 million that was equivalent to their portion of the overall Libraries budget.

The Schreyer Business Library, located on the University Park campus, is the primary funding unit for business information resources. To meet our budget reduction obligation, we canceled ABI/INFORM, a ProQuest database that has articles from business publications including newspapers, magazines, and trade journals. While this cancellation was painful in that ABI/INFORM was used across several assignments in core business courses, we prioritized retaining other business information resources that feature market, industry, financial, and other business data that is not easily substituted through our other electronic resources or cannot be obtained through interlibrary loan. In addition, our unit chose to "give back" a significant portion of the funds previously allocated for the purchase of business and economic monographs. Though this was not ideal, the demand for business information that reflects ongoing changes in the world of business from our students and faculty meant that we had this option.

Like many of our colleagues at Penn State and beyond, we have had to make tough choices to protect and ensure continued access to the most impactful resources in our collection. Those choices have been made by considering the needs and expectations of our users; the constraints on how we can use our funds by university and library policies; and the constraints on what information is available from vendors and how that information can be used. As we move through the acute challenges presented by the pandemic and reckoned with ongoing trends in business information and libraries, I find myself continually reflecting on how those needs, expectations, and constraints impact and influence my collection development activities and my broader practice as a librarian.

I am the business and entrepreneurship librarian in the Schreyer Business Library and serve as the library's liaison to curricular, cocurricular, and community entrepreneurship programs on the University Park campus. I also collaborate with my colleagues across the university's Commonwealth campuses. Academic entrepreneurship offerings at Penn State include an undergraduate major and a graduate degree in corporate innovation and entrepreneurship in the Smeal College of Business; an interdisciplinary minor in entrepreneurship and innovation (ENTI) for undergraduate students; several degree and nondegree programs centered at specific Commonwealth campuses; and a minor and graduate certificate offered online through Penn State World Campus (Center for Penn State Student Entrepreneurship, 2022). Students and community members are also able to apply to take part in accelerator programs and other opportunities through Invent Penn State, the university's Commonwealth-wide initiative focused on entrepreneurship, innovation, and economic development (Invent Penn State, 2022). While there are faculty members across Penn State conducting scholarly research related to entrepreneurship, Penn State's entrepreneurship ecosystem is dominated by classes and programs that aim to provide students with a practical foundation and hands-on experience that they can apply to launch their own ventures or in any other career path they chose.

As a result, my focus in collection development tends to lean more toward practitioner-focused resources rather than scholarly research on entrepreneurship. I prioritize business information sources that feature up-to-date, actionable market and industry information as that is most often the type of information that library users interested in entrepreneurship are seeking. Scholarly publications and historical information resources that researchers may be looking for are often contained in core, general business information sources such as Business Source Premier; while it is imperative that we retain those resources, I have found that their broader appeal tends to make it less likely that they will be considered for cancellation in the face of budget reductions. Market and industry databases such as Mintel, BCC Research, SimplyAnalytics, and IBISWorld tend to be pricier and are assumed to have fewer interdisciplinary uses, making them more likely to be considered for cancellation.

It has been crucial to show that these key databases for entrepreneurship do contain information that has interdisciplinary appeal. For example, we have been able to retain SimplyAnalytics—a tool that can be used to map and visualize community demographics, consumer behaviors, and business locations—in part because the interdisciplinary nature of the ENTI minor lends itself to providing examples of the resource being used in nonbusiness classes. For example, I was asked to demonstrate SimplyAnalytics to two journalism classes during the Fall 2021 semester in which the course instructors asked students to use the maps they generated to visualize characteristics of the communities they were reporting on and to generate story ideas. I have had similar experiences in engineering, biotechnology, and hospitality management classes.

Being able to tell stories about how the resources that are important to the subject areas I am the liaison to have proven to be an important aspect of my job amid the uncertainty presented by the pandemic. Moving forward, I plan to continue building that evidence so that I can rely on it—in addition to traditional usage metrics—to make and support collections decisions.

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