

With our Readers through COVID-19: Crises, Recovery, Long-Tail Effects

The pandemic's effect on higher education is likely to be a long-tail event – a disruptive experience that has its greatest impact years from now. The same can be said for the effect of Black Lives Matter and today's social movements on higher education. At the same time, our students, families, and friends are experiencing economic hardship during COVID-19. Data and information already suggest that the effect of economic disparities on higher education is also likely to be a long-tail event.

It is safe to say that the pandemic's effect on teaching and learning, along with the effect of Black Lives Matter and today's social movements and increasing issues of access and affordability, are also likely to be long-tail events – disruptive experiences that have their greatest impact years from now.

Is the 21st century going to be one ginormous long-tail event for higher education? [1] For teaching and learning? What does, or what might, this mean for academic libraries? To put it another way, are you concerned with the direction of the near future of higher education? With the direction of the near future of teaching and learning? Or with the direction of the near future of academic libraries?

Library and information science journal editors and journals are responding.

Tentatively planned for early 2022, a special issue of *portal: Libraries and the Academy* focuses on academic library responses to the current higher education crisis fostered by the pandemic, racial inequities, and economic hardship. The callout states, “*While this is a trying time on many levels, it also offers a chance to question traditional academic library practices and perspectives and to adapt to what is possible (and what works) within individual institutions and the profession. With that in mind, this issue seeks to explore and accentuate positive possibilities – the unique opportunities, creative strategies, and innovative responses – that have emerged in academic libraries because of these challenges.*” The callout casts a wide net. Potential topics relevant to the current crisis include, but are not limited to, inventive provision of both remote and on-site services; remote teaching, learning, and research support; building campus connections and student engagement; creative redeployment of staff and opportunities for growth; innovative technology solutions for remote work; responsive organizational strategies for diversity, equity, inclusion, and access (DEIA) and evidence of their impact; supporting faculty and staff work–life balance and mental health; maximizing and managing collections funds during a budget crisis; and library space planning and utilization in an era of physical distancing.

The myriad ways the breadth and tightness of today's interlinked health, social, economic, and political networks impact academic libraries and the users they serve is very much on our minds. This past year has forced academic libraries and their faculty and staff to be more nimble, adjusting the ways they support student learning and faculty scholarship, and we look forward to this special issue of *portal*. Like our readers, we have already seen how different the 21st century is from the 20th century and how vulnerable the 21st century is to extreme events. Closer to home, we have seen how vulnerable higher education, teaching and learning, and academic libraries are to extreme events. With COVID-19, many individuals, organizations, and institutions have fully embraced the need to think differently, as it pertains to their approach to core functions, operations, and services. Within this context, we are especially interested in the work of anti-racism transformation and in efforts to grow equity in our organizations and institutions.



Many academic librarians and academic libraries are committed to proactively understanding and addressing systemic racial inequities – in their organizations, in their campus community, and the broader communities where their libraries are working. Many of our colleagues and peers have developed tools, launched innovative programs, or refocused services to challenge patterns of power and grow equity. We look forward to providing readers with the opportunity to hear from and be inspired by academic library leaders and practitioners who have committed or recommitted themselves to the work of creating racially equitable organizations, systems and services. As a departure point to this forthcoming special issue in *RSR*, we invite readers to consider what anti-racist work remains to be done and how we can use this time to recommit to anti-racist practices in our organizations writ large. Approaches we would like to see in our forthcoming special issue to addressing these historical and systemic issues may highlight ongoing projects in anti-racism that can address historical bias now and into the future.

In this issue, our authors explore both new challenges emerging during the COVID-19 pandemic and new approaches to familiar library needs. Igbinoia, Okuohnghae, and Adebayo explore the growing concerns over “fake news” in the pandemic, whereas Koloniari, Koulouris, and Vraimaki research how libraries are using social media to reach users when they cannot access the physical library space. Worldwide, authors look for new and innovative ways to build their programs and services to fit the current reality. Dempsey presents important work on the considerations and practices for referring users to subject specialists during an online instant messaging system, a space where more and more librarians are increasingly likely to interact with patrons. These new challenges, or familiar challenges with a new bent, are just a snapshot of what the future holds for libraries and the work of librarians. We invite you to consider these challenges, reflect on your own, and join us in working, researching, and sharing innovative and creative solutions to help libraries better prepare for the inevitable long-tail effects of the multiple 2020 crises.

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Note

1. Here, we riff on J. B. Ruhl's blog post “Is the 21st century going to be one ginormous long-tail event?” published in the Law 2050 blog, a forum for envisioning the future of law, legal practice, and legal education. <https://law2050.com/2014/10/13/is-the-21st-century-going-to-be-one-ginormous-long-tail-event/> (accessed 6 December 2020).