"I'm Writing a Sermon…"

Reference and Instruction Services for Alumni at Pitts Theology Library

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ABSTRACT "I'm writing a sermon…" prefaces most of the questions that come to the Pitts Theology Library Reference Desk from alumni. Candler School of Theology alumni regularly return to the library to inquire about the resources and databases that remain available to them through Emory University Libraries in their new ministerial settings. In addition to these one-off reference interactions, Pitts librarians also engage with alumni through a variety of means, including outreach and events, instruction, and graduation preparation and celebrations. During the academic years of 2019–20 and 2020–21, however, alumni needs and requests increased and transformed as public libraries closed in-person services and university campuses were limited to currently enrolled students and faculty. This paper will explore the evolving needs of seminary alumni brought about by the COVID-19 pandemic, during which Pitts witnessed and managed an uptick in requests for access to collections, library spaces, and online databases.

INTRODUCTION

It is not unusual for theological libraries to have robust relationships with their institutional alumni. The professionalization that results from formal theological training necessarily results in close relationships between certain alumni, like clergy and community leaders, and their alma mater library. This relationship comes from the information needs these users face as a necessity of their education, work, and increasingly, the chronic lack of funding for educational resources in ministerial and non-profit settings. Often the types of needs look something like the below:

- "I am preaching this Sunday for a Blue Christmas service and I need some Commentary and/or context information." Dec 15, 2020.
- "How do I do biblical research online?" Feb 25, 2021.
- "Would it be possible for me to borrow books for a preaching class through the UMC?" April 13, 2021
- "When will the library be open to alumni (fully vaccinated)?" May 3, 2021

None of these questions are necessarily unique or surprising, but they all can be framed within different aspects of the services that a theological library might provide. Several of the questions pertain to the actual collections and circulating materials that someone might require. Others focus more on needs related to navigating the realm of information literacy or accessing space to read, do research, exist, etc. Under "regular" circumstances, these types of requests would have been handled like any other request that came in from students or community/affiliate visitors (i.e., requiring a visit to the library for access). Access restrictions due to COVID-19, however, inspired a new approach to alumni benefits not as resources they would lose, but as accessible tools they would gain post-seminary.

This paper will discuss the former standard alumni services that were offered at Pitts Theology Library, identify challenges that arose during the COVID-19 pandemic, and offer a few reflections on what Reference and Instruction Librarians have learned and how we expect to move forward in the coming weeks and months. Our hope is that this discussion will open avenues of conversation for us today and beyond these proceedings by suggesting that in order to meet their own missions, theological libraries ought to begin thinking about alumni users—and not just their own alumni—as a distinct user base and resource within their own communities.

FORMER PARADIGM

In previous attempts to support alumni, most of the library's approaches were anticipatory and prescriptive. That is to say, librarians spent most of their time preparing currently enrolled students for the transition to alumni status as commencement approached. This included warning them of access restrictions (especially as it relates to online resources), but also preparing them to think about

what their own needs might be based on their trajectories outside of seminary. Ultimately, the goal here was to prepare graduates to function independently, apart from library support, while gently and subtlety reminding them that their library privileges extend beyond their graduation. This anticipatory support showed itself in three primary ways: through spring workshops, promotional material for graduation, and the subscription-based library newsletter that would advertise events, exhibits, and other library related news in addition to social media.

The first workshop offered was not promoted at future alumni directly, but instead focused on ways that students and alumni can build their own personal libraries reasonably. Historically, this workshop focused on building a theological library for less than $200 dollars, but more recently focuses on training students to think about what types of materials they will need in the future (commentaries, primary sources, pastoral care handbooks, etc.), and offering them strategies to go about building this library *before* they graduate. This includes making judicious use of syllabi, assigned and recommended readings, sharing purchases, learning to identify their public libraries and services, finding alternatives to cost-prohibitive items, evaluating web-resources, and best practices for finding used books. Increasingly, however, students are interested in finding cheap or no-cost online alternatives, building professional networks to share resources/costs, and identifying avenues for finding good deals directly from publishers. Several have recently asked about the book review process and what it takes to get review copies through publishers.

Increasingly we use this as a time to discuss a variety of open-access journals and repositories, and to discuss other resources like *Working Preacher*, *politicaltheology.com*, *syndicate.network*, and our own LibGuides. This is also an opportunity for us to remind students about the necessity of thinking critically about online resources.

The library's "Accessing Alumni Resources" session is specifically designed for graduating students with the intent of generating enough interest and questions to continue drawing the users back to the library. In this session, we introduce students to the electronic resources and databases that will be available to them as alumni, explain borrowing privileges and processes, and, perhaps most importantly, explain the Kafkaesque process by which students get assigned an alumni number and card. Finally, we emphasize the

limits of alumni privileges and encourage them to come use our services in person as often as possible.

Additionally, Pitts provides promotional material to graduating students via the graduation packet given to each graduating student. This includes a postcard with instructions and websites for setting up their alumni account, accessing electronic resources, and getting materials from the library, in addition to a simpler bookmark with Pitts branding, images, and the main URL. These cards are also available in the library throughout the year, and we incorporate them into our in-person workshops and freebie giveaways.

Finally, throughout the year, but especially during the buildup to commencement, we encourage newly minted alumni to stay in touch with the library by subscribing to our weekly newsletter, the Pitts Prospectus, and following the library on social media. This newsletter is one of the major ways that Pitts communicates to non-enrolled patrons and community members regarding upcoming events, new acquisitions, user services, and other library-related news.

COVID RESOURCES

It goes without saying that the last year of pandemic lockdowns, restricted campus access, and the safety of library staff and patrons forced us to rethink our traditional alumni services.

First, during the shift from in-person to digital platforms, we had to decide how to best preserve and reformat the two previously mentioned workshops. Immediately after spring break when students did not return to campus, we had a little under two months to sort, strategize, and redeploy this information. Knowing that it would be necessary to rethink our entire instructional approach as the pandemic heightened helped us to rethink not only what to do, but why, and to reconsider our instructional audience. With this in mind we revamped the entire workshop and focused on supporting the needs of all alumni and not just those recently graduated. This resulted in a distinct paradigm shift of moving from what resources alumni would lose to highlighting what they could gain through digital options, open-access resources, and other non-traditional workarounds.

Pitts spearheaded the adoption of a new, more robust webinar software, BigMarker, as an alternative to Zoom classes (from which the students were fatigued). When we first ran the (live) "Alumni

Access" webinar, we had 80 participants registered, of which 35 were graduating seniors for 2020. Because we set up the webinar to be as "evergreen" as possible we were able to run it again this academic year. Between the first time we ran the webinar and the second time, the page itself has had 191 views. The most recent version of the webinar, which can be accessed on demand, had 20 registrants and 9 participants. The webinar is also available on YouTube, which allows us to distribute the webinar widely with a Creative Commons Attribution.

Previous in-person workshops on alumni resources were limited by space and busy schedules, meaning participation never exceeded more than 10-15 students. The dramatic increase of participants in our 2020 virtual workshop revealed that alumni around the nation and beyond could be a viable part of the instructional programing at Pitts if we could only figure out a way to bring the program *to them* instead of "welcoming alumni" back to campus. With this in mind we began to prepare all of our events with alumni in mind as a user group and became cautious of just assuming that alumni would participate as general "community members," a point to which I will return momentarily.

Finally, we'd like to note two additional resources that became increasingly important in providing services to our alumni during the pandemic. First, the number of alumni requests that came to the reference desk through LibAnswers or LibChat remained at comparable levels to the years before the pandemic, but when adjusted for the overall numbers, they became a much larger percentage of our virtual support scaffolding. While we are still seeking evidence to explain the change, we suspect that this higher-than-average turnout was in part the result of closures and restrictions on public libraries, professional isolation, and other limitations.

Secondly, we found that part of what alumni patrons were looking for were guides and information services regarding where and how to find resources instead of just identifying the resources themselves. Having a robust set of resources from LibGuides to live webinars to a video library on YouTube provided us with a quick set of materials to direct patrons to. These sorts of resources helped us to serve patrons when we ourselves had restricted access to campus, but they also gave us a touch point for continued engagement and a new approach to information literacy in the wider community.

LOOKING FORWARD

As we look forward to what library services around instruction and reference will look like in the post-pandemic world, we've come to a number of considerations that will continue to affect our services for alumni users. First, alumni users will likely continue to engage the library from all over the nation and even the world. This presents unique challenges on a number of fronts. While Pitts has been able to secure some rights for e-books and other digital repositories, the alumni and libraries will continue to face significant hurdles in using them. Not only are e-books limited through publisher-determined access and high cost, but they're also difficult technically to provide via proper authentication. Second, alumni face challenges navigating the information landscape as church budgets are tightened, the perception of "free" online resources proliferate, and ministerial and non-profit contexts continue to evolve in the gig economy. Third, the work facing faith and community leaders, the alumni of many of our institutions, continues to take place in the midst of growing religious and information illiteracy. Many leaders are simply not prepared to address the information concerns that they will face in their communities.

We don't intend for these issues to sound dire or overly dramatic, but to instead view this as an opportunity for theological libraries and librarians to meet head-on. As we at Pitts Theology Library think through these issues and what they mean in an era of austerity and dwindling library budgets, we accept the challenges as an opportunity to demonstrate to our institutions and communities the mission and skill that we hold as libraries. In short, we believe that the challenges alumni face provide a unique opportunity to which seminaries must respond, and libraries might be the best-primed wing of our institutions to contribute.

SOLUTION

There are four essential areas that we want to address in terms of a library response to the needs of our alumni patrons. As reference, instruction, and outreach librarians, we believe that the challenges that the last year raised to the surface are best met by expanding a vision of our work and service beyond the needs of our immediate

students and faculty and to imagine our alumni users as a defined user group with distinct needs.

1) Short of a miraculous windfall, either on the side of unlimited institutional funding or extensive changes from the publisher and access side of materials, there isn't much that libraries can do to address the digital and electronic resource shortage available to alumni. However, we *can* engage in teaching alumni, current students, and faculty about resources that may be available to them. Much of this work many librarians already do on a weekly, if not daily, basis. Here, we can focus our efforts on publicizing open-access works like the journals *Religions, Metatron*, and *The Journal of Hebrew Scriptures*. Likewise, we can find ways to incorporate open, scholarly websites like *BibleOdyssey, Ancient Jew Review, syndicate.theology*, the *Marginalia Review of Books*, and *Practical Matters*. Additionally, as we engage with alumni, we can point them toward open-access digital repositories like the *Atla Digital Library*, *OADTL*, OA works through the *ACLS Humanities Ebook* project, and *the Internet Archive*. By prioritizing these resources and embedding them within our teaching and instruction, we can continue to normalize their role beyond the seminary campus. Connected to this issue is the importance of continuing to champion OER projects with teaching faculty and to promote their open-access publications when we can. At Pitts, we are currently in the process of assessing and building a single depository of alumni resources that contains open-access resources alongside curated digital tools and electronic resources that alumni continue to have access to through Emory University.

2) We believe that one of the best things we can take advantage of after the pandemic is our attention toward digital webinars and online events. Both instances of our digital Alumni Access webinar were among the best-attended workshops in our records, and the first event with 80 registered attendees is our highest-attended "regular" event by a mile. Though it seems quite obvious now, we believe that one of the most effective ways to engage alumni is by continuing to offer digital events and services catered toward their needs. We are even in the process of exploring an occasional synchronous event as a way to provide the mutuality that comes by studying together

in a library. Outreach is inherently anything we do to reach beyond the walls of our institution, and our product is not books but people, expertise, and service (Ford et al. 2009). In order to provide our product, we must first reach our users. This requires fostering relationships and building community beyond the seminary campus.

3) Expand our definition of user groups to include alumni, and potentially alumni from other institutions, as a distinct set of users with particular needs. While they may not be students, seminary alumni are also a distinct group of users from a general community user group. Whether or not an individual attended Candler School of Theology, they likely have some recourse with theological research, a level of professionalization that will likely require more than a Google search when accessing information, and an ability to navigate the deep world of theological study. But alumni also have needs distinct from those of our enrolled students. For instance, they may be several hundred miles from the nearest college or university library, let alone a theological library, and, if they serve in a rural area or small town, they may also be in need of a point of contact with the many resources beyond books that libraries provide. By turning our attention to alumni as distinct user groups and working with advancement offices, alumni groups, and area denominations and clergy, libraries may find additional areas to justify their existence outside of relatively small student bodies. This, however, requires that we begin to reimagine our user groups and work actively to build connections beyond the instructional classroom.

4) Finally, as we rethink the user groups, areas for collaboration, and our own instructional and reference practices, we would do well to remember that many of our alumni, by definition of their time in seminary, careers, and needs, are lifelong learners. Rather than being like community visitors who may use the library space in a more informal way for personal research needs, alumni are like adult virtual learners who require support for the learning and research process from places or in situations that limit their abilities to come through the library doors. One way is to think of our alumni is as lifelong learners, by which I mean adults within a workforce who are constantly adapting to a changing world

(Nordin, Embi, and Yunus 2010). The needs of such individuals are not incidental, but relate to the deliberate attempts to access, understand, and synthesize knowledge. By connecting lifelong learning to "mobile learning" (Nordin, Embi, and Yunus 2010, 132), the process of learning as it is mediated by computers or other machines, we understand that we must rethink how alumni access library resources and what they expect when they come to us. In other words, it's not enough to simply treat their needs in the same mode as serving our enrolled students. By positioning our alumni as learners within a learning process, we can begin to understand how we have been responding to their needs (in the case of Pitts, formerly engaging in knowledge-centered instruction) and move toward other potentially better responses—a learner-centered approach for instance (Nordin, Embi, and Yunus 2020, 132-33). As digital learning continues to reform theological education and provides access to those who would have otherwise been left out of higher theological learning, we must also rethink our strategies to engage those beyond our immediate on-campus populations. Technology can help with this, yes, but as we heard in this year's Atla keynote address, from Dr. Safiya Noble, we aren't going to click our way out of the challenges that we face; as people seek knowledge digitally either in the classroom or after it, librarians must also be there to support that learning.

CONCLUSION

In conclusion, it's safe to say that the COVID-19 pandemic forced us to do more than think about how we were addressing the learning needs of our currently enrolled students, but as the pandemic lingered and the traditional resources and supports became increasingly unavailable, we found that we were poised to respond to the needs of a new patron base, namely our alumni, not by adding to our already full plates, but by rethinking what we were doing, for whom, and what the future of alumni engagement post-pandemic could look like.

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